

People power in Watford's Sustainability Forum

Watford Borough Council
Thursday 29 August 2024

Summary

The climate emergency cannot be solved alone. Watford Council knows that, which is why they have created a Sustainability Forum to bring residents, community groups, councillors and council officers together to explore the council's climate ambition and develop future plans so they work for everyone.

The Forum allows the council to strengthen established relationships whilst also building new relationships with residents and groups who haven't typically been involved in sustainability and climate action.

The Forum helps raise awareness, challenges the council to reconsider strategies and projects in a different light so they work for all residents, and builds trust in the community.

Cllr Ian Stotesbury, Portfolio Holder for Transport and Sustainability, says:

'We are thrilled with how the Sustainability Forum is bringing Watford's residents into the heart of the Council's direction and ambition on climate change. Having meaningful discussions with residents directly and regularly keeps us accountable and proactive. As the net zero deadline gets closer and closer, these Forums will become even more important to the Council's approach.'

The problem

Watford is a vibrant and diverse borough, with a population of 102,000 covering just 8.3 square miles making it the most densely populated local authority area in England.

Like many councils, in 2019 Watford declared a climate emergency and committed to achieving net zero in our own operations, as well as doing everything in our power to help the district to reach net zero by 2030.

By setting a district wide target, we recognised that as important as it is for the Council to lead by example with the emissions in our direct control, greater emission reductions can be achieved through the Council's ability to influence wider society – in Watford, public sector emissions made up less than 5% of our overall borough emissions in 2022, according to the latest government figures.

Our first Sustainability Strategy 2020-2023 set the scene for the Council's climate ambition, a key theme of which was People Power – facilitating engagement and action from everyone across the borough including residents, businesses and other organisations, community groups and visitors, to achieve the necessary change.

As a council, we want to ensure that local climate action in Watford is as inclusive as possible, empowering people not previously engaged, and providing equitable solutions to problems people face daily, such as cold homes and polluted streets.

We also saw it as a useful tool to prevent and mitigate climate misinformation, which began to increase when the Ultra Low Emission Zone (ULEZ) was being rolled out nearby in London.

Watford residents are very engaged with the Council's activities, and we knew that if we provided an opportunity for residents to engage with us on climate change, they would do so. The Sustainability Forum helps us to broaden our engagement, so we were talking to a wider section of the community.

The solution

Our first sustainability strategy was launched in 2020, and we wanted to deliver this with residents, to build support and ensure it worked for everyone.

However, whilst two online meetings were hosted with residents in Autumn 2020, due to disruptions caused by the pandemic, additional resources were put on hold. As the effect of the pandemic reduced, and with the appointment of a full-time Sustainability Officer in Autumn 2021, we were able to revisit our Strategy and a public forum.

We wanted to relaunch the forum as an in-person event to encourage greater discussion both with the Council and between attendees, gain attendees' insight on the issues raised and provide a place for questions on climate change, because the council recognised that not everyone was already engaged in the climate movement.

Therefore, in November 2022, we hosted our first in-person Sustainability Forum, open to all members of the public, as part of the consultation process for our new, revised sustainability strategy.

The primary aim for the Forum was to enable the public to discuss the Council's progress and approach to sustainability, providing feedback and ideas. The Forum works as follows:

- **Collaborative agenda setting:** The agenda for the forum meetings are set collaboratively by our Portfolio Holder for Sustainability, Director of Partnerships, Sustainability Officer and Assistant Sustainability Officer, who also attend and run all the meetings. We also always circulate meeting minutes to those on the mailing list afterwards so that they can keep track of what was discussed and suggest future ideas.
- **Format:** The Forum has typically followed a format of presentations and a Q&A around a topic, followed by roundtable discussions with specific questions from the Council for attendees to consider.
- **Attendees and marketing:** Attendees sign-up either online or by emailing our sustainability team. We advertise the event on our website, social media channels and via our sustainability mailing list. We typically have between 30 and 40 people sign-up and then between 20 and 30 people attend.
- **Length and frequency:** There are three Sustainability Forum meetings every year, typically held the week after our Climate Emergency and Sustainability Forum (CESF) for councillors. The CESF was set up after the climate emergency declaration to bring cross-party councillors and officers together to discuss local climate matters. The forum lasts two hours on average, taking place in the evening and rotating between Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. When we hold them on a Wednesday, we tend to get a larger crowd of people (over 30), but we keep the rotation because we have noticed that different people attend different days.

Timeline

The ambition to have a Sustainability Forum began with councillors after the climate emergency declaration in 2019 and, despite a pause due to Covid, it was this ambition from councillors that made the Sustainability Forum a priority for officers, particularly as our first Sustainability Strategy 2020-2023 was coming to an end.

In March 2023, we published our 'Environmental Strategy: addressing the climate and ecological emergency 2023-2030', covering emissions, nature, waste and adaptation for both the Council and the Borough. Given the long timeframe and comprehensive subject matter, we knew public engagement was even more important than

before to discuss the Council's progress and approach to sustainability, providing feedback and ideas.

Our first in-person Sustainability Forum, post-Covid, was hosted in November 2022 to coincide with launching the consultation for our Environmental Strategy and within Great Big Green Week (GBGW). The Forum provided the perfect opportunity to gain feedback on our long-term vision for Watford, whilst using GBGW to broadcast the event to a wider audience.

We have since hosted five more meetings at the Council offices, on a variety of topics, such as waste and recycling, home insulation, green groups and volunteering in Watford, and our Green Spaces Strategy. Our next Forum will present our first Environmental Strategy Annual Report to residents.

Stakeholders

Watford Council has a strong history of engaging with community groups and project partners, including local green, environmental and cycling groups, such as Friends of the Earth, Green Gym, local 'Friends Of' park groups, Butterfly Conservation, the Cycle Hub, South West Herts Cycling Group (Spokes), Hertfordshire County Council and many more. It has been important to us to actively encourage their participation in these Forums, enriching the discussion with their practical expertise on local issues.

However, the primary stakeholders for this Forum are the residents, who may not be part of an existing group or previously haven't had the opportunity to engage with the Council on these issues.

Initially, with the consultation on the Environmental Strategy, we spoke to several local groups such as the local college, secondary schools, the Deaf Association and our local Business Improvement District to name a few. In this process, we also advertised the renewed Sustainability Forum, to a more diverse group of residents to attend.

We also ensure that all those who have signed up to an event are invited to future events. We currently have almost 200 signups on that list.

Impact

This project does not focus on calculated emissions reductions or savings, it helps raise awareness of the Council's sustainability ambition and commitment, puts us in contact with residents we haven't engaged with before, challenges us to consider strategies and projects in a different light, and builds trust in the community. And it is delivering on this.

In our discussion on Home Insulation, for example, a number of residents raised concerns that we weren't promoting more sustainable retrofit materials. Subsequently, in discussions as part of a cross-county effort to assemble a Hertfordshire retrofit guide, we consistently and successfully pushed for more information on sustainable retrofit materials. Our Green Spaces Strategy consultant emphasised how helpful they found the Forum for getting feedback from residents who know and use our green spaces. The Forum has also provided space for attendees to present their own ideas and engage with other like-minded residents.

Lessons Learned

We've found the format of the Forums to work really well, in terms of generating useful and stimulating discussion between councillors, officers and residents. Allowing plenty of time for roundtable discussions so that we're able to really explore a wide range of issues without feeling rushed, has been particularly helpful. Having these discussions follow-on from presentations has helped to inform the direction and content of debate, as well as enabling it to be tailored if the forum discussion is part of a consultation process.

There is always room to reach new audiences and make the Forum more representative. It remains a priority that we will review on a yearly basis, and going back and reaching out to non-green groups is something we will likely do in the future.

An unexpected purpose of the Forums has been their potential to tackle climate change misinformation, typically spread online, about issues such as 15-minute cities, the Ultra Low Emission Zone (ULEZ) and even the existence of man-made climate change. Whilst this can sound intimidating, giving residents a space to voice concerns in-person and giving councillors and officers an opportunity to speak to those concerns helps at least temper misinformation, and provide an alternative viewpoint.

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Fortunately, the financial implications for the project are limited with the only costs of running the Forum being officer time and refreshments. So, this is a low-cost project, with high impact because it strengthens our climate work and enables us to go further and faster.

Next steps

The Forum is linked to the delivery of the Environmental Strategy and so we plan to continue holding them up until 2030, at least. As we review the Delivery Plans for the Environmental Strategy, we will continue to engage with residents on the Council's direction on climate change.

Since the Forum began, our travel and transport team have set up a specific cycle forum for local people to hear about some of the improvements to make Watford a more cycle friendly town, and what is planned next. These works are part of the council's ambitious 'Transforming Travel in Watford' strategy, developed in partnership with Hertfordshire County Council, which sets out practical steps to make it easier and greener to get around the town.

While we review the success of each forum, we also have a regular, more strategic review to ensure that it is meeting its aims and objectives. We will be looking at how we can extend the attendance of the Forum, and how the Forum can work effectively as it grows.

Links, contacts, and credits

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