CHAPTER 10: COMMUNITY SERVICES

10.1 Community Services encompass a wide range of facilities from health, education and emergency services to local facilities such as churches and community centres. There are numerous agencies providing such services, including the County Council, South West Hertfordshire Health Authority, individual schools, voluntary organisations and Watford Borough Council. Whilst the Council is not directly responsible for all of these facilities, it supports their retention. Some services are essential to the community’s well being while others, through social and sporting activities, add greatly to quality of life. The needs of community service providers for land and premises, and the accessibility of services to the communities they serve, will be taken into account when considering development proposals.

Community Services Objective

10.2 To support the provision of a range of high standard, accessible community facilities, suitably designed and located to meet community needs.

Community Facilities

10.3 CS1 Location of Facilities
The Council will seek to ensure that the local needs for the development of community facilities are met in such a way that facilities are well located, with respect to their users, without causing significant loss of amenity to nearby occupiers, or conflicting with other policies in the Plan.

10.4 CS2 Existing Facilities
The Council will encourage the retention and full use of existing community facilities and, where possible, maximise dual use of educational and leisure facilities for community activities.

10.5 CS3 Loss of Community Facilities
The Council will not permit development resulting in the loss or downgrading of existing community facilities unless:

a) demand for such a facility is no longer sufficient to warrant its retention in its existing use, or as an alternative community facility; or

b) appropriate alternative accommodation is provided with comparable access to passenger transport.

10.6 The Council encourages links between various service providers to maximise the use of facilities and benefits to the community. Community centres are being identified as resource centres and provide training opportunities, support for voluntary organisations and health and advice services. The SRB scheme in West Watford is implementing Westfield School’s community schooling policy. This brings together the school and the community it serves, with a commitment to raising the standards of achievement of all learners throughout the community, and encourages the local community to make full use of the activities and facilities on the site. The Council will also encourage links between the provision of health and leisure services.

10.7 Where community facilities need to be rationalised, it is expected that the community’s need for services is met with alternative provision in accessible locations. The type of alternative provision will largely depend on the nature of the service provided. Local shopping areas and the Town Centre may be suitable locations for community facilities (see Policy CS11).
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10.8 Public houses often provide a function as a Community Facility in residential areas. The Council will seek to protect these and will not allow any loss unless there is evidence provided that reasonable effort has been made to retain the use of the building as a pub.

Access

10.9 CS4 Access to Community Facilities
The Council will ensure access to community facilities for people with disabilities, young children and the elderly, in terms of the external layout of new development and proposals including extensions, conversions, temporary buildings and changes of use.

The Council will ensure the upgrading of existing community facilities and buildings to meet accessibility needs (see Policy L3: Sports and Leisure Facilities and Policy U1: Quality of Design).

10.10 A disabled person is anyone with a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long term adverse effect upon their ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities as defined by the Disability and Discrimination Act 1995. This act requires all businesses and organisations which provide a service, offer facilities or supply goods to the public, whether paid or for free, to ensure access to people with disabilities.

10.11 The Council is committed to securing a more accessible environment for everyone. Access needs must be catered for in all developments, particularly those open to, or frequently visited by members of the public, such as community facilities. Whilst Building Regulations can ensure access to new buildings or those being altered, the external layout of new development including the relationship between buildings, car parks, nearby bus stops and public access points must be considered. As well as being accessible to people with disabilities, community facilities should incorporate adequate toilet and washroom facilities to meet their needs and provide adequate toilet/changing/feeding and crèche facilities for people with young children. (See SPG 11: Childcare Facilities and SPG 13: Accessible Environments.)

10.12 CS5 Community Transport
The Council will promote and support the provision of Community Transport facilities, in partnership with other local councils, the County Council, and local voluntary organisations.

10.13 A new area based community transport scheme is developing as a result of the work of Three Rivers, Hertsmere and Watford Community Volunteer Schemes. The project will seek to co-ordinate and strengthen voluntary transport provision for rural residents of the Districts. Funds for Watford will be provided by the County Council, Watford Borough Council and from the Volunteers’ time working with the established Community Transport scheme already operating in the Borough. The voluntary organisations in the local partnership recognise the role of Watford as the major centre for social, leisure, retail and health services and facilities.

10.14 The West Herts Community Transport Steering Group has prepared a development plan for the three-year scheme. A partnership involving Community Volunteer Services (CVS), Three Rivers and Watford Community Transport schemes, Watford Racial Equality Council and Mencap will see the use of four minibuses being co-ordinated. Several other Voluntary Organisations with, and requiring transport, have indicated that they are interested in joining the wider scheme.
10.15 **CS6 Childcare Facilities**

Proposals for crèches and nurseries will be permitted where they will have no adverse impact on the character of the surrounding area in terms of appearance, noise, traffic generation and general disturbance, and accord with the relevant policies of this Plan.

In the case of proposals for day nurseries in residential properties in primarily residential areas, the following criteria must also be satisfied:

i) one unit must be retained in residential use and the property must revert to residential use upon cessation of the nursery use (the Council will use conditions to ensure this and may make planning permission personal to the user);

ii) there must be easy access to passenger transport; and

iii) car parking must be provided in accordance with the standards at Appendix 1B of the Plan, as well as ‘drop-off’ facilities.

10.16 The Council recognises the importance of adequate provision of childcare facilities particularly for parents who wish to shop or take up employment opportunities, and will therefore encourage the following types of proposals:

- large development schemes which offer services, facilities or employment to people with young children;

- drop-in crèches in the town centre, North Watford shopping centre and local shopping frontages; and

- ancillary day nursery facilities in places of work for employees with children.

The Council has proposed Supplementary Planning Guidance (SPG) in the form of SPG11: Childcare Facilities, to provide more detailed guidance on provision of the facilities addressed in Policy CS6.

10.17 The SRB project has identified a clear lack of good quality affordable childcare in West Watford which is to be addressed by the provision of a nursery/crèche within the One Stop Shop at Westfield School. The Watford Borough Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership has also carried out a needs audit to co-ordinate public service provision.

10.18 Moreover, the National Childcare Strategy may increase demand for privately operated nurseries, crèches and playgroups through increased investment in childcare as part of welfare reforms. Concerns over noise and traffic generation in residential areas will be carefully assessed, taking into consideration Government policy in ‘Circular Letter: Pre-School Education’ (March 29 1996) and the potential for staggered playtimes and arrival and departure times. Applicants are also advised to contact the County Council’s Education Department for advice on setting up and running a crèche or nursery.

**Education**

10.19 **CS7 New Facilities**

Development for education and training needs will be supported subject to the other policies of this Plan. Wherever possible, new facilities will be located with particular regard to the aims of reducing travel need and car usage and encouraging walking, cycling and the use of passenger transport.

10.20 Development control relating to schools is controlled either by the County Council or Watford Borough Council depending on the scale and nature of development, and whether the schools are under the control of the County Council or whether they are foundation or voluntary aided
schools. Watford Borough Council will continue to liaise with the County Council as part of its review and monitoring process, in order to assess future land requirements.

10.21 The Council recognises that changes occur in local needs for training and education and a range of new facilities may be required. Watford Borough Council’s Community Economic Development Strategy suggests suitable locations for Information Technology (IT) training and skills development.

10.22 New housing developments create additional demands for primary and secondary education. Where there is a shortage of local school places to meet demands, developers of family accommodation (2 or more bedrooms) will be required to contribute, under Section 106 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990, to the provision of new schools (see Policy H10).

10.23 **CS8 Change of Use/Redevelopment**

When considering proposals for the change of use or redevelopment of school buildings or other educational sites no longer required for their original purpose the Council will:

a) encourage, in principle, the development of community facilities;

b) seek provision of replacement community facilities within the development where there is a demonstrable need for them and where they cannot be relocated satisfactorily elsewhere in the vicinity; and

c) in relation to open areas and sports facilities, take into account Policies L2, L3, L5 and L6.

10.24 Any future restructuring of school service provision could result in some existing school sites and buildings becoming surplus to requirements. The loss of school buildings and land could, however, have a detrimental impact upon a wide range of activities associated with schools. For example, schools often provide meeting facilities for clubs and organisations and they provide important recreational opportunities through the provision of open areas and sports facilities. As a consequence, they often act as centres of community activity. The Council considers it important to protect this role and will enter into planning obligations with developers under Section 106 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 as amended, to secure the provision of community facilities including, for example, primary schools, meeting halls and health facilities, as needed.

10.25 Cassio College has been identified as a site that may become surplus to the requirements of West Herts College. A planning brief has been approved to provide a planning policy framework for future redevelopment of the site. This is available as Supplementary Planning Guidance.

**Health provision**

10.26 **CS9 Health Provision**

The Council will assist all health care providers to make provision for local health care facilities. Development proposals, providing health care facilities, will be acceptable in principle:

a) on existing sites or adjacent to existing premises providing health care or social services;

b) in other locations in close proximity to existing community facilities or local shopping facilities, which are easily accessible by passenger transport; or

c) within the Town Centre, according to Policies S5 – S8.
10.27 Health care services are provided at various points of service delivery, for example at Watford General Hospital, health clinics, general practitioner surgeries, drop-in clinics in the town centre or directly in the community. It is essential that sufficient land and premises are made available and retained to meet the health care needs of the community.

10.28 **CS10 Residential Social Care**

The Council will support the provision of residential care homes where there is a local need, providing:

a) proposals are appropriately designed and located, particularly for those with poor mobility, close to local community facilities and shops, and easily accessible by passenger transport; and

b) they do not produce an over concentration of care facilities that would be detrimental to the character of the area; and

c) they are consistent with Policies H13: Conversions, H22: Housing for Older People (Sheltered) and H23: Special Needs Housing.

10.29 The Council recognises that there is likely to be a growth in the number of elderly residents living in the Borough. Changing standards in the level of care may require extensions or adaptations to existing buildings or residential properties. Community care legislation aims to ensure people remain in their own homes for as long as possible, and Policy H20 requires new development and conversions to be designed to lifetime homes standards wherever physically possible (see SPG2: Lifetime Homes).

10.30 In addition, ‘Care in the Community’ aims to disperse care homes for people with physical and/or mental disabilities into the wider community. Residential accommodation is increasingly provided in the form of smaller groups of homes as well as smaller accommodation units and should emulate ordinary residential provision as much as possible. See Policy H22 and Policy H23 relating to special needs housing and Policy H13 on conversions.

10.31 **CS11 Religious Meeting Places and Community Halls**

Religious meeting places and community halls will be permitted:

a) in residential areas, provided the development does not have an unacceptable effect on the amenity of nearby residents, in terms of the criteria contained in Policy H15;

b) in local shopping centres, in line with Policies S5-S9;

c) where in the case of facilities serving the wider community, they are accessible by passenger transport; and

d) where they meet the car parking standard for the area (see Policy T22: Car Parking Standards and Appendix 2).

10.32 Religious meeting places and community halls need to be located in areas which are easily accessible by the local communities which they serve, especially by passenger transport. Such uses can, however, create a nuisance when located close to housing because of unsociable hours of operation or through traffic, car parking and noise generation.

10.33 It is important to recognise that for many people or groups of people, a religious meeting place often represents more than freedom to worship but forms an integral part of the social fabric of the community. Premises may not only be places for prayer or worship but also for education, festivals and ceremonies, social and recreational occasions. It is therefore essential to understand the nature and frequency of religious activities likely to be carried out, as these will determine the likely effect on the amenity of nearby residents and the highway.
Local shopping centres may be acceptable locations for community meeting places particularly if serving local groups in areas identified as deficient in community facilities or groups with special access requirements. Such locations should be easily accessed by passenger transport, cycling and walking.

10.34 Proposals for an Islamic Community Centre in Tolpits Lane for social, community and recreational purposes are identified on the Proposals Map.

10.35 **CS12 Emergency Services**

The land and locational requirements of emergency services such as fire and ambulance services will be taken into account when considering development proposals. Essential services must locate outside areas at risk from flooding (see Policy SE27: Flood Prevention and PPG 25:Development and Flood Risk). The Council will assist the County Council and other providers of emergency services, in identifying and protecting sites as necessary.

10.36 It is important that the land use needs of the emergency services continue to be met in the Borough. To this end, the Council will assist the County Council and other emergency service providers in identifying alternative sites should the need arise during the plan period.