

# Winning the Watford way

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# Contents

- 4 Foreword**
- 6 Introduction**
- 7 The weak link**
- 11 Dorothy's breakthrough**
- 12 Our first bid for power**
- 15 Official opposition**
- 18 The tide turns**
- 22 Cleaning up Labour's mess**
- 26 Second term: a better town and a better council**
- 29 Making Watford even better 2010-17**
- 32 Setback and fightback**
- 35 A new era**
- 42 In defence of elected mayors**
- 44 Lessons**
- 46 Acknowledgements**

# Foreword

I think it is very appropriate that the Lib Dem Local Government Association (LGA) Group have chosen to celebrate Watford's achievements. Dorothy Thornhill carried out an unprecedented four terms as Mayor, and Mayor Peter Taylor is now on his second term.

I am also delighted that they have asked me to write the foreword. I was the Lib Dem Parliamentary Candidate for Watford in both 2005 and 2010 and I still live in the town.

What struck me about the Watford team right from the start was that their aspiration was to get a Lib Dem elected to Parliament. It was, and still is, the key goal for their campaign team.

As this booklet reveals, Watford's team have had their highs and lows and there have been many lessons learned. My own two parliamentary campaigns were not without their difficult points – from being reported to Special Branch, to offensive anonymous leaflets and criminal damage to our supporters' property, all of which was part of a campaign of harassment and intimidation which resulted in the Conservative candidate being reported to the police and convicted. It is typical of the Watford team that this did not deter us from campaigning.

At the moment I think it is encouraging to remind ourselves that there are still beacons of Liberal Democracy in the country and that it is still possible to win against the odds.

Watford's success owes itself to the team's ambition, leadership and a clear sense of political direction.

Right from day one, Dorothy, Peter and their teams have had a clear Lib Dem agenda for Watford, from regaining control of the town's finances to transforming the town centre into a family friendly environment for all to enjoy. Based on strong liberal values of inclusivity, empowerment and entrepreneurship, strong political leadership has transformed Watford, in Dorothy's words; 'from a declining town into a thriving town'. People are now proud to say they are from Watford.

This strong sense of purpose and political leadership at the town hall has been echoed in the strength and success of the Party's campaigning.

Over the years the campaign team including Iain Sharpe and Stephen Giles-Medhurst have built up a great deal of expertise and continue to innovate, experiment and improve its campaigning techniques – and ssh, don't tell them, even sometimes against the instructions of LDHQ! But they know what they're doing and they get on with it.

Our achievements in Watford can give us all hope for the future as we set about rebuilding our local government power base. When Dorothy was first elected she was one of only four Lib Dem councillors. By leading by example, being credible, being visible in our communities and keeping our promises, people will put their trust in us. And from the humblest of beginnings, with the right vision and leadership, we can build on that trust to transform and empower our communities.

Be ambitious, be bold and keep campaigning. Good luck!

**Baroness Sal Brinton**

Liberal Democrats

# Introduction

In May 2002 Watford Liberal Democrats sprang one of the surprise results of local election night when Dorothy Thornhill won the election to become the town's first directly elected mayor, thus ending more than 30 years of Labour rule at the town hall.

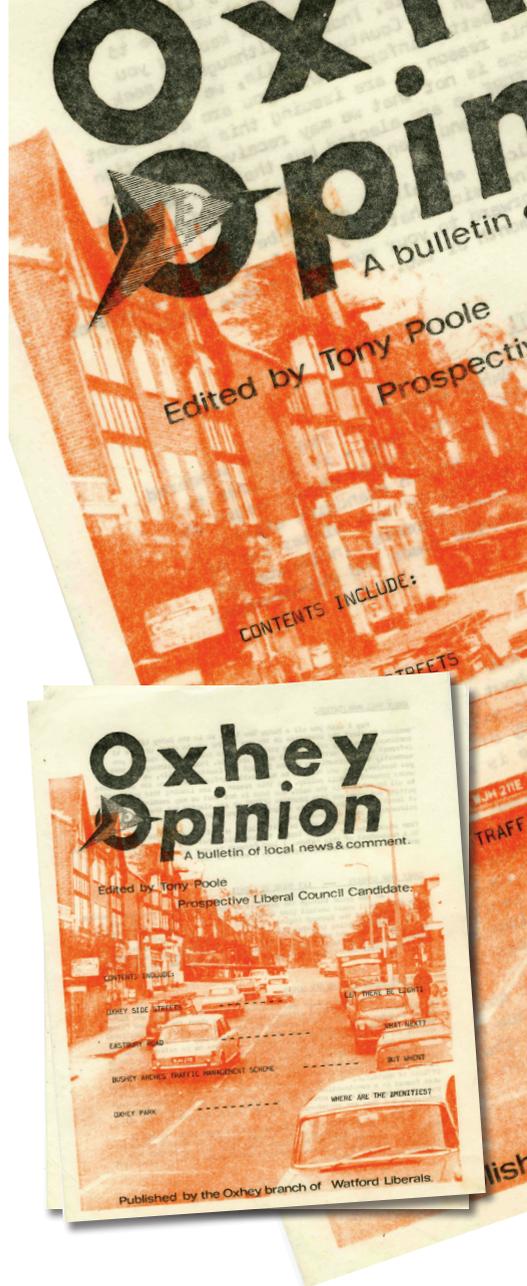
At the count, as Labour were smarting from defeat, one of their leading figures told Dorothy she wouldn't last six months. Years later, Dorothy completed four full terms as Mayor, in the process transforming Watford Council from being one of the worst in the country to being shortlisted for the MJ 'Council of the Year' awards.

A new Liberal Democrat Mayor, Peter Taylor, won a landslide victory in the May 2018 election, starting a new chapter for the town and the local Liberal Democrats.

# The weak link

In many ways, the borough of Watford is not natural Lib Dem territory. The only free-standing town inside the M25 but outside Greater London, Watford is untypical of the rest of Hertfordshire in being an industrial centre, notable in the past for the brewing and printing industries. These declined between the 1960s and the 1990s, since when the town's economy has been based on being a regional shopping centre and the home for a number of corporate headquarters. Its importance as an economic and cultural centre (including its well-known football team and professional theatre) belies its population size (now over 100,000).

In the period after the Second World War the Watford parliamentary constituency was marginal between Labour and the Conservatives and control of the borough council also swung between the two main parties.



The first Focus-style newsletter in Watford, published in 1970.



Dorothy with her 2002 manifesto 'Go for Gold', encouraging Watford residents to make a fresh start after 30 years of Labour rule.

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Even the national surge in Liberal support in the early 1960s, at the time of the Orpington by-election, did not bring any Liberal representation to the town hall.

In January 1970, however, Liberal campaigner Tony Poole launched the first 'Focus' style newsletter in Watford. The first edition of 'Oxhey Opinion' was produced on an old Roneo duplicating machine in two colours and on two sheets of paper stapled together. It was perhaps more discursive than today's version with its big bold headlines, but perhaps it also offered a warmer, more personal tone.

Success in Oxhey ward did not come until the following year, when a new candidate, David Griffiths, narrowly gained a seat from the Conservatives to become the first ever Liberal on Watford Borough Council – at least in recent times. The key to David's victory in 1971 was his involvement in a community campaign to get a footbridge built over the main railway line. Conservative opposition to the campaign ensured their candidate's defeat. (Longer-serving Liberal Democrat activists may remember David, who was to go on to prominence in the

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Party nationally as well as being a successful election agent in both Three Rivers and Aylesbury Vale districts).

Under David's leadership Watford Liberals expanded their strength on the council to six seats out of 36 by 1973. But it was to prove a false dawn. In 1976 David stood down and with the Liberals nationally at a low ebb (this was the era of the Thorpe scandal) the Party was wiped off the council. It would take ten years before the two party-stranglehold at the town hall was broken again. During that time Watford was a weak link for Liberalism in the area, since in nearby areas, such as Three Rivers, St Albans and Hertsmere, we had a strong council presence.

The breakthrough came in 1986, when a young student and SDP member Mark Oaten (who would become much better known!) decided to target Stanborough ward in the north of the borough. The familiar combination of regular local newsletters, a candidate who knocked on doors throughout the year and took up local issues, and an energetic election campaign, saw Mark to victory.



An early achievement was to improve the council's streetcare services with measures such as quicker graffiti removal.

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The following year the Alliance parties gained a second seat in Stanborough and one in Oxhey, raising their strength on the council to three.

But the Liberal-SDP merger was bad for Watford. Key campaigners and activists either remained with the SDP or took a step back from frontline politics. The 1988 elections saw continued SDP candidates standing against the merged party, with neither winning a seat. There was also no breakthrough in the 1989 county council elections when the party's vote slumped. We faced the prospect of being wiped off the council over the next two years once again. Yet this was to prove the lowest point – after energetic campaigns we held on to our three council seats when they came up for re-election in 1990 and 1991.

This is when I became involved in Watford Liberal Democrats. I had returned home to Watford in 1989 after studying at Leicester University. It had been an exciting time to be a Liberal activist in Leicester. Chris Rennard, then a rising star of the party as the East Midlands area agent, was developing the campaign techniques that were to lead to the party's success in the 1990s and 2000s. Having learned much in Leicester about winning elections, I was determined to put it into practice back in Watford. My hope was to be a leaflet-writer and backroom organiser. But I was prevailed upon to stand in Oxhey, where campaigning had largely ground to a halt, and our vote had collapsed despite our still having a councillor there. I started producing regular newsletters, local members and helpers got behind me and in 1991 we managed to retain the seat comfortably.

# Dorothy's breakthrough

At this stage we could have opted to secure the remaining seats in our two target wards. But we felt it was important to be ambitious and aim to run the council one day, as our colleagues had done in nearby Three Rivers and St Albans. So we targeted another ward.

Unfortunately, in the 1992 local elections, which followed hot on the heels of the General Election, we ended up winning only one of the three wards we targeted. That one was rather important, however. In what was a strong Conservative year nationally, Dorothy Thornhill gained a seat in Oxhey, defeating a long-serving Conservative councillor, who basked in being seen as 'Mr Oxhey'. This was an important psychological moment. In the past the local party had been a bit scared of taking on high profile opponents. Beating a well-known local name gave us confidence.



All in a day's work for an elected mayor: Dorothy taking part in a charity abseil from one of the town's high rise blocks.

# Our first bid for power

Although the setback in the 1992 elections might have been attributed to targeting too many seats, in the longer term being bold paid dividends. In 1993 we gained two of the borough's six county council seats (county divisions consist of two borough wards), a big step forwards. By this time our campaigning capacity had received a boost in the form of Andy Canning, a former Southwark councillor and election agent for Simon Hughes, who moved to Watford to become our parliamentary candidate.

He (and we) believed that Watford was a good long-term parliamentary prospect, with the Conservatives too far ahead for Labour to beat them, but not so strong as to be impregnable. The aim was to overtake Labour then beat the Tories (although it didn't quite work out like that). By this time the Watford constituency included

parts of neighbouring Three Rivers district, including areas of Lib Dem strength.

At first things went very well. In 1994 we won the four wards within the two county council divisions we now held. We were now up to a group of seven with



Successful delivery of new leisure centres – on time and within budget – provided excellent local facilities and restored public confidence in the council's ability to deliver.

Labour having 20 seats and the Conservatives nine. More than that, under Andy Canning's influence we were emboldened to be ambitious in expanding into new wards. As a densely populated borough, with large areas of terraced housing, it was easy for a squad of volunteers to deliver to whole wards quite quickly, which we did in addition to our target ward campaigns. As a result, we topped the poll across the borough in 1994, finishing second in all but one of the wards we didn't win. We seemed well set to take enough seats the following year to overturn Labour's majority on the council.

It did not prove so simple. The sudden death of John Smith, the Labour leader, and his replacement by Tony Blair, changed the political situation so strongly as to make it impossible for local campaigns to buck the national trend in Labour's favour. In addition, the local Labour party understood the threat they faced and upped their game, encouraged further as national Tory meltdown offered them the chance to gain the parliamentary seat that otherwise seemed out of their range.



The introduction of doorstep recycling collections was a popular success.

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In 1995 we mounted our strongest ever campaign, targeting six wards and producing a detailed manifesto in preparation for the balanced council which would have happened if we won them.

Our hopes were boosted by scandals affecting the council's housing and highway repairs services, where poor management had led to financial losses and one instance of fraud leading to a manager going to prison.

At a local level it felt like time for a change. But all this was swamped by the national situation, and for us local election night saw the disappointment of making no gains at all.

# Official opposition

At the time we felt devastated, and even a bit silly for thinking we could buck the national trend. But we had to dig in and wait for better times. In 1996 we overtook the Tories to become the official opposition. All-out-elections in 1999 following boundary changes saw us advance to 10 seats. The following year the council technically went into no overall control after the Conservatives gained a seat from Labour. But in practice with half the councillors and the guaranteed casting vote of the then civic mayor, Labour seemed to have a narrow but nonetheless secure grip on the council.

Yet their situation was more precarious than they realised. Over time, Watford had developed the failings associated with the worst Labour councils. Council Tax was high and while the council seemed to provide more services than similar-sized authorities, the emphasis was too often on how much the council did rather than how well it did it. It went to great lengths to protect in-house teams from outsourcing, even when this seemed to stand in the way of improvement. Key facilities lacked investment, the council's attitude towards partner organisations, in particular the county council, was unnecessarily confrontational and the awarding of voluntary sector grants seemed more like distributing largesse to interest groups rather than a way of achieving measurable outcomes.

The council was keen to volunteer for the various pilot schemes put forward by the Labour government after 1997. The end result was an 'initiative-itis' – lots of apparently exciting new projects but a lack of focus on improving core services and a lack of attention to measuring performance let alone improving it.



A high standard of basic services such as street cleaning is at the heart of Watford's Lib Dem regime.

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So how did we go about opposing and exposing all this? Each year we put down a budget amendment highlighting areas where the council could save money, putting forward alternative spending priorities and proposing a lower council tax increase than that agreed by Labour. We criticised poor performance on key services such as street cleaning and lack of progress in developing a kerbside recycling scheme. We opposed a management re-organisation that was intended to empower staff to innovate, but which led to chaos through a lack of basic accountability. Although we were no pushovers, looking back I often feel we could have been harder and tougher in calling the Labour administration to account.

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One challenge was intrinsic to those faced by Liberal Democrats opposing Labour councils. Many of the activities that kept the council's costs high sounded worthy enough, even though they were often ineffective or poorly managed. Such things were hard to oppose without making us sound like the Conservatives. We lacked confidence in the council chamber. Labour had a few confident and even bombastic speakers and we had no obvious bruisers in our team to match them.

In addition, the council had a good publicity machine. It adopted the slogan 'Watford – Way Ahead', the Labour leader was a prominent figure in local government nationally, chairing the Local Government Information Unit (LGIU), and the council's keenness to volunteer for national pilot projects meant it was projecting a strong image as a forward-looking, modernising New Labour authority. While this often belied the reality on the ground, it made it harder to challenge the Labour narrative without appearing begrudging and petulant. We also knew there were few enough votes to be had in the council chamber and there was a need to balance being an effective opposition in the town hall with keeping up our campaigning on the ground.

# The tide turns



Imagine 2015: Events such as the Big Beach and the Imagine Watford festival have linked leisure and culture to regenerate the town centre.

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In 2001, when they held the Watford parliamentary seat comfortably, Labour still saw their position at the town hall as impregnable. Yet things changed dramatically as both Labour's problems and our campaigning strength increased.

The Labour council leader, Vince Muspratt, wanted Watford to be among the first councils to have an elected mayor – and saw himself in that role. Keen to be seen at the forefront of New Labour innovation and no doubt also to sideline obstructive forces in his own group, this ambition seemed to dominate the council's agenda in the couple of years before the mayoral referendum in June 2001.

Yet it was based on a misreading of Watford's electoral geography. Labour had benefitted from ward boundaries that enabled them to win a majority of council seats on a relatively low vote share (in 1992 they won seven out of 12 wards despite having only 33 per cent of the popular vote). So they were more vulnerable in a borough-wide mayoral contest than in a traditional council election. In the 2000 local elections we topped the poll across the borough, despite being active in only five wards and this gave us confidence that we could win a mayoral election, especially as mayoral elections are fought under the alternative vote system.

Yet Labour didn't see this, and with their strong commitment to a mayoral system managed to secure a narrow victory for a 'Yes' vote in the referendum on 12 July 2001.

This was to be their last council-related success for many years. By now the signs of the failure of their administration were becoming publicly apparent. After a disastrous change in IT systems the council found itself unique in the country in being unable to produce proper accounts – they were disclaimed by the district auditor as essentially a work of fiction. A swimming pool complex that had been open for less than 10 years had to be demolished due to faults in its design and construction. Performance indicators on key services were poor and not improving. The council also struggled to deal with day-to-day problems – failing to take effective action against a growing problem of abandoned cars, for example.

At the same time things were looking up for us. Our campaigning was strengthened by the addition to our team of Stephen Giles-Medhurst, a councillor in neighbouring Three Rivers, with years of experience as a councillor in the London Borough of Harrow. Stephen successfully contested the Oxhey and Central Watford county council seat in 2001, and is a dynamic campaigner with limitless enthusiasm for election campaigns, especially leaflet production and delivery. Stephen has been our driving force ever since.

Our campaign was further boosted in the autumn when Dorothy was chosen as our mayoral candidate.<sup>1</sup> There were a number of reasons why she was a strong candidate. First, being an elected mayor requires a combination of skills that not many possess, in particular the people-friendly local champion role that all our successful MPs have had, together with the strategic sense needed to run a successful local authority. It helps to have some ability to transcend the party political fray and be able to speak up for the town.

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<sup>1</sup> As her husband I would say that but there are few who would disagree.

Not everybody has all these qualities. But Dorothy, who was Assistant Head of a local comprehensive school and a popular local councillor who had twice been re-elected with more than 60 per cent of the vote, very much did.

It helped that Labour underestimated her. This was partly because she lacked the detailed knowledge of local government jargon that tripped off the Labour leader's tongue. But it was also because Dorothy was a practical person who wanted to get things done and as a result did not enjoy the Punch and Judy politics of the council chamber – especially in opposition where even the fieriest of speeches achieve little in practice. Dorothy had an enthusiasm for meeting and talking to voters and she was able to articulate clearly and simply how she would like to run the council differently and better. And a dislike of petty political point-scoring may reduce your impact in the council chamber but it goes down well when meeting real people.

We stepped up our campaigning, delivering literature across the whole borough, including editions of our tabloid newspaper. We targeted enough wards to deprive Labour of a majority and give us the third of seats needed to stop the other two parties overturning our budget and policy framework.

We were determined not just to win the election but to make a good job of running the council. We published a detailed manifesto, entitled 'Go for Gold', which was drafted following a workshop with our members. While we knew that this would not be read by most electors, it was important as a blueprint for what our administration would do, and to bring in our councillors and candidates. In addition the fact that we had produced one at all gave us credibility, and, after winning, it provided a vital framework for the council to follow and highlighted what we expected to be delivered. We had heard horror stories of Liberal Democrats elsewhere taking control of councils without knowing what they wanted to do once in office, and we were determined not to fall into that trap.

In the end the results exceeded our expectation. On 2 May 2002, Dorothy gained 49 per cent of first preference votes, rising to 71 per cent when second preferences were counted. We won six of the 12 council wards and were within 50 votes of getting two more. At the count, Labour were stunned and had clearly not seen the result coming at all. They had counted on the mayoral contest being more like a General Election with people voting on national party lines. Instead, people had voted for the best party and candidate to be in charge at the town hall.

# Cleaning up Labour's mess

Our top priority was to sort out the mess in the council's financial systems that had left us the only council in the country unable to produce accurate accounts. More widely, we wanted to refocus the council on core services and facilities, in particular street cleaning, refuse collection, recycling and parks. Our own borough-wide residents' survey carried out in preparation for the election campaign had shown these to be the public's priorities too. Our agenda meant the council abandoning the Labour administration's weakness for fringe activities – what Dorothy called the 'frilly bits'.

Before we had had time to get our feet under the table, the council faced a very sharp shock. Concerned at the lack of progress against the New Labour Government's performance agenda, the Audit Commission had decided to carry out a 'Best Value' inspection to find out why the council continued to have high costs combined with poor services that were not improving. The ensuing report more than confirmed our own diagnosis of the council's problem. It dubbed Watford 'one of the worst-performing district councils in the country'. While we knew it had been badly run with the wrong priorities, the inspectors confirmed with a vengeance what Dorothy was already discovering as mayor – it was actually dysfunctional. There were way too many priorities and the council had failed to be clear about what really mattered and how to drive change. This was directly impacting on staff performance and accountability.

The feedback to the inspectors was particularly damning, with one manager commenting:

**‘We are like a Spanish galleon with a gold flag at the top ...but with lots of holes below the waterline’.**

Source Audit Commission

BVCI 2002 p.13.

The report undermined Labour’s defence of their past record and gave us confidence to make the changes we believed were needed. Since Liberal Democrats opposed the overbearing inspection regime that the New Labour Government had devised for local authorities, there was some irony in us being the beneficiaries of it now. But it did help us. It meant that there was no alternative to the kind of changes we were making – if Labour disputed this, we could point to the conclusion of inspectors working to their own government’s agenda.

We appointed a new managing director and adopted a new structure with clear lines of accountability. We made it clear that unlike Labour, we were going to take performance measurement seriously and use it to judge the success of the authority. In addition, we made it plain that while we had no ideological outsourcing agenda, we were more concerned about the quality and cost-effectiveness of services than who provided them. For us the important thing was that services were effective and accountable to councillors and ultimately to the people of Watford.

Our first task was to make sure the council could produce proper accounts. We mended fences between the council and the district auditor and we saw immediate progress with a much improved audit report. In addition, we pressed ahead with the key elements of our manifesto, including:

- introducing doorstep recycling collections
- increasing the amount of street cleaning by 15 per cent – reorganising the service to make it more effective
- a programme of improvements to parks and green space
- high profile campaigns against fly-tipping, flyposting and graffiti.

We also began working on longer-term plans, for example to replace the council's outdated swimming pools and leisure centres and for investment in the town's community centres, alongside a programme of encouraging local voluntary groups to take over the management of them.

In addition, we set about improving the council's planning service, which had been ranked among the worst in the country in terms of time taken to approve applications.

At the same time, campaigning did not stop. We kept up the output of newsletters, tabloids and other literature, explaining clearly how we were sorting out the mess Labour had left behind and also our own positive plans. We were awarded with landslide victories in the 2003 and 2004 local elections, giving us an overwhelming majority of council seats. The changes we made were also being recognised by external inspectors. In 2004 we faced inspection as part of the Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) programme that all councils had to undergo.

Although it was too early in our improvement programme to get a favourable rating, inspectors praised improvements in key services and recognised that: 'The council is being strongly led, both politically and by senior officers and the overall picture is one of improvement.' In 2006 Watford was shortlisted in the 'Most Improved Council' category of the Local Government Chronicle Awards.

# Second term: a better town and a better council

In 2006, Dorothy was re-elected with 51 per cent of first preferences, an impressive achievement after four years of difficult decisions and rapid change. We also reached our highest ever number of councillors, 28 out of 36.

Yet there were signs that Labour at least were starting to fight back, successfully retaining a ward they had lost in 2003 and 2004, while running us close in another. The reality was that we had won a number of seats thanks to Dorothy's popularity. Our number of councillors had expanded very quickly. In many cases relatively new recruits turned into excellent councillors, making sure that our achievements in managing the council went hand in hand with effective action at ward level. Sadly in some wards, our teams were not so effective and vulnerable to a determined fight back by other parties. From 2007 we gradually started to lose seats, but retained a comfortable town hall majority.

In Dorothy's second term, the work we had done to get the council back on its feet enabled us to make progress with wider plans.

The council built two new leisure centres (both with swimming pools) to replace outdated facilities that were nearing the end of their life. This did involve a difficult and controversial decision to close one pool, but we were determined not to follow Labour's mistakes – a smaller number of quality facilities was better than more but inferior.

We began consulting tenants about the future of the town's housing stock. Although we would have preferred not to consider stock transfer, under government rules a housing association would have access to funds for necessary improvements that was not available to the council. Rather than try to impose stock transfer as a 'top down' policy, we set up a tenants' steering group, with expert support to make proposals about their preference for the management and ownership of council housing. They opted for the creation of a local housing association with a 'gateway' model that gave tenants a greater degree of control. A successful ballot and the successful transfer of housing stock to the new Watford Community Housing Trust has led to massive investment in improvements to tenants' homes that would never have been possible under the council.



Celebrating our achievements: kick-starting the Liberal Democrat campaign for the 2016 local elections.

Our programme of parks improvements gathered pace, with Cassiobury Park, the town's main public open space, gaining the national 'green flag' award in 2007 – today 39 per cent of the town's green space is managed to green flag standard.

The change in the council's fortunes was validated by external inspections. With financial management systems restored, once again we had accurate accounts to work with and guide our priorities. We asked for an early comprehensive performance assessment to improve on our 2004 score and demonstrate that the council was improving. This time we were rated 'Good', a massive leap forward in such a short time.

It was important to go beyond sorting out day-to-day services, to deliver real improvements to the fabric of the town. Our planning policies focused on regenerating areas of derelict or underused land, while protecting residential neighbourhoods. We worked to attract new businesses, which had been gradually declining, impacting on the town's role as an employment centre. We addressed problems that were deterring businesses from locating here – such as the lack of hotels. We also began the process that is now leading to the redevelopment of the ugly and run-down 1970s Charter Place shopping centre.

The idea of shaping a place rather than simply running council services is important to us and is perhaps more incumbent on an elected mayor than a council leader. As an ex-teacher Dorothy uses the following analogy to describe Watford – that if it were a school we would want it to be the best possible comprehensive. We are not a chocolate box heritage town, nor do we have the problems or advantages that go with being a major city. But we are a diverse town, and, like anywhere, we have our more affluent and less well-off neighbourhoods. We recognise that all of them make a contribution to the town. By contrast Labour liked to talk up how deprived Watford was – I called it 'deprivation chic' – and often sounded like they were talking the town down.

# Making Watford even better 2010-17

The 2010 mayoral election took place on General Election day. Dorothy was elected for a third term, taking 46 per cent of the vote. With the austerity measures of the Coalition Government and Secretary of State Eric Pickles volunteering local government to bear more than their fair share of the cuts, we realised early on that significant savings were going to have to be made. We embarked on an agenda to reduce spending – if possible by being more entrepreneurial and finding ways to provide services differently, rather than by cutting services. After a tendering exercise, the contract was awarded to Veolia, who have so far proved an excellent partner to work with, providing a quality service at a lower cost than the council could have managed. Throughout our outsourced contracts we have embraced a partnership philosophy rather than a strict client/contractor relationship. This has delivered dividends in the added value we achieve through



Providing a new access road helped to save acute hospital services in Watford.

our contracts where we find our private sector partners take a lead from us in taking real pride in delivering for Watford and the local community.

At the same time we were determined to continue with our programme of improving the town's fabric and wider reputation. There was a focus on arts and culture as we recognised the critical link that they play in regeneration and local prosperity. We carried out a major restoration of the Art Deco concert hall, known as the Colosseum. We also played a key role in attracting Warner Studios, famous now for its Harry Potter Experience, to the area (the site is just over the border in Three Rivers). Warner executives were initially sceptical, having heard horror stories about the unhelpfulness of British local government.



Campaigning for re-zoning of Watford stations to get a better deal for Watford rail passengers. We are determined not to become the establishment and to continue fighting for Watford residents.

But with our Three Rivers colleagues, we persuaded them that this was the right location for them, and it has gone on to put the area on the map for all the right reasons.

Other projects included a major town centre improvements scheme to create a big outdoor events space. This was in a part of the town known for its nightlife. It had developed a reputation (not always deserved) for late-night rowdiness. Part of our vision was to create a family-friendly town centre – not just a place for shopping and nightclubbing but somewhere that offered other reasons to visit. The new events space has hosted an outdoor theatre festival, an urban beach and outdoor film screenings in the summer, and an ice rink in the winter as well as sports days and literary and art festivals. The demographic profile of Watford is getting younger, with many families moving here from London and this events programme has proved extremely popular as well as helping to attract new visitors to the town.

Electurally the coalition years were hard as Labour were resurgent, the coalition giving them extra motivation to take us on. Yet we maintained control of the council, and by May 2014 we still held 23 out of the 36 council seats, with Dorothy being re-elected for a fourth term, again taking 46 per cent of first preferences. But electorally our toughest challenge lay ahead and our resilience was to be tested as never before.

# Setback and fightback

In 2015 Watford had good local election results, combined with Dorothy's willingness to stand led us to hope that we had a real chance of making a gain. But it was not to be, as in so many other places, our local strength was not enough to overcome national unpopularity.

With voters focused on the national picture, the higher General Election turnout also hit us in the local elections. We held only three of the eight wards we were defending, and for the first time since 1992 both Labour and the Tories won more wards than us. We now had just 18 of 36 councillors, technically the council was under no overall control, although since the elected mayor has a vote in the council chamber we had an effective majority of one. Election night was devastating. There was a further threat as we faced a full council election in 2016, thanks to boundary changes. Labour had won five of the 12 wards in 2015 and were confident that they would become the largest group on the council as a springboard to winning back control of the town hall. They began talking confidently in terms of us being on our way out. But it was also an opportunity, because we did not have to wait for four years for a chance to regain the seats lost in 2015.

Morale remained strong in our team and the fightback was in full swing soon after the 2015 elections. The boundary changes turned out to be favourable to us, with many of our proposals being accepted by the commissioners. We were helped by new (often young and energetic) members becoming activists. One of our newer councillors, Peter Taylor (now our new Mayor) led the way in terms of organising all-year-round canvassing. We had most of our candidates for target wards in place by the autumn.

We campaigned on our councillors' record at ward level, our management of the council and our ongoing commitment to keeping Watford thriving and successful. We made greater use of electronic communication, including Facebook advertising, Twitter and e-newsletters. We reminded voters of Labour's past failures and that their councillors appeared to have learned nothing from their mistakes and offered no constructive agenda. Although Watford now has a Conservative MP, they remain weak at local level and uninterested in council elections. Although they had made unexpected gains in council seats on General Election night, they seemed unenthusiastic about defending them.

The outcome of the council elections in May 2016 was in many ways our greatest success since Dorothy's original victory in 2002. Fourteen years into a Liberal Democrat administration, after the difficult coalition years and the disaster of 2015, we now won a landslide victory with 25 of the 36 council seats, including winning one from Labour in a ward where we had never had a councillor before. For the first time, ever, the Tories had no councillors at all. The disappointments of the previous year were all but forgotten.

After the euphoria of election success, there followed the real business of running the town and the council successfully. We continued to be ambitious for Watford and, although she was intending to stand down in 2018, Dorothy's commitment to making sure things continued to move forward remained as strong as ever. Key elements of the agenda in her last two years in office were:

- **Delivering new homes and new jobs.** In Watford, as in the case almost everywhere, development is controversial. However, we were determined not to hide our heads in the sand but to go for smart, planned growth and to work with partners to deliver the necessary infrastructure to ensure we create successful new development.
- The opening in October 2016 of **a new access road to**

**Watford General Hospital**, which was essential to making sure A&E services were retained in Watford and enabling future improvements to the hospital campus. The next step of agreeing and securing funding for new clinical facilities remained subject to the slow pace of NHS and government decision making, but we can say with confidence that we have done all within our power to secure a positive future for the hospital.

- With the Government’s revenue support grant coming to an end in 2019/20, we recognised the need to be **more entrepreneurial** in our approach to generating revenue, particularly through property holdings and acquisitions.
- In 2018 **our new shopping centre opened**, replacing what had become a tired and run-down 1970s retail development. The new centre included iMax cinema, a bowling rink, restaurants and bars, as well as leading high street retail brands. It reflected the changing and more diverse role of town centres in the era of online shopping and our continuing efforts to ensure we had a thriving town centre.

We continued with the programme of **public realm improvements**, some of these in partnership with Hertfordshire County Council to make Watford an attractive and welcoming town that businesses will want to invest in and where people will want to live in, work in and visit.



A winning team – celebrating Peter’s election and winning nine out of 12 wards at the count in May 2018.

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# A new era

We were aware that winning with a new candidate in 2018 was going to be a test of whether our past success had been due to one well-known and popular personality or a genuine team effort in which Dorothy was first among equals. We passed the test with flying colours, with our new candidate Peter Taylor being elected with 49 per cent of first preference votes and finishing with 61 per cent after second preferences were included. We also won nine of the 12 council wards, our best result in a decade, gaining a seat from Labour in the process.

There was no magic formula beyond continued campaigning and a willingness to learn new tricks. Throughout the whole period of Dorothy's mayoralty, we made it clear that we are a team and promoted a strong Watford Liberal Democrat brand, which is about a vision of the town, a way of running the council and engaging with people.

It was important, though, that our new candidate had plenty of time to build a profile among Watford residents before the campaign got properly under way. Too often new Liberal Democrat candidates who are taking over from a well-known predecessor are not given the time and space to establish their own reputation. As part of our succession planning, two years out from the election, Dorothy ensured that the two most likely candidates were given high profile roles to allow them to make an impact.

When chosen as Mayoral candidate Peter Taylor was already council group leader and deputy mayor as our new candidate. In our campaigning we struck a balance between using Dorothy's achievements to highlight our strong local track record and giving Peter more of the limelight. That way we showed that while Peter had Dorothy's support and confidence, he was his own person and capable of doing the job in his own right.

Peter also led the way in transforming our social media campaigning, whether through short films, regular posts on all the key platforms and some paid advertising. We were aware it could never be a case of leaflets, door-to-door or online campaigning – we needed all three.

From there our campaign gathered momentum. Peter, through his own energy and enthusiasm, was good at motivating us to knock on doors and deliver leaflets, thus getting our campaign off to a flying start. We continued to champion the achievements of the council under Liberal Democrat leadership, helped by receiving a positive report from our Local Government Association (LGA) peer review and being shortlisted for The MJ Council of the Year awards.

Our 2018 manifesto ‘Watford: a great town for everyone’ was developed with involvement from the council group and party members and continued our bold and ambitious approach. While there was a good deal of continuity between our 2018 manifesto and past priorities, there were differences in emphasis to reflect changing circumstances. While we had done a lot of work to encourage investment and jobs to ensure a thriving local economy, Peter emphasised providing the infrastructure necessary to cope with being



Peter with local cyclists – he is moving ahead with plans for a public cycle-hire scheme in the town.



Improved bus services to tackle traffic congestion is one of Peter's key priorities.

a successful town. Key manifesto pledges included bringing a bicycle hire scheme to the town, improving bus services and more affordable homes.

It was a great advantage to our campaign that neither of the other candidates appeared to offer a positive alternative. The Conservative candidate had stood the previous year to become Mayor of Doncaster and had little credibility in Watford.

As the official opposition on the council, Labour were always going to be our main challengers. But their candidate was a long-serving councillor who had been a cabinet member in Labour's pre-2002 administration and could easily be linked to the bad old days.

Once elected Peter pressed ahead with delivering manifesto pledges. Work began on the flagship project of a cycle hire scheme as part of the drive to provide healthy and environmentally-friendly transport alternatives. The council chose Beryl Bikes to run the scheme, which began operating in early 2020. By the end of Peter's term, more than 20,000 people had used the bikes, travelling almost 600,000 kilometres. At the same time a new on-demand Arriva Click bus service was launched to provide public transport alternatives in the town.

We moved forward with public realm improvement schemes. This included a makeover for Clarendon Road, one of the town's key employment areas, which that connects Watford Junction Station to the town centre. Similarly, an enhancement of the St Albans Road secondary shopping area aimed at creating a more attractive environment and help local traders attract new customers.

Progress was made on Peter's commitment to making Watford a dementia-friendly town under the Dementia Friendly Communities initiative run by the Alzheimer's Society. This was a commitment Peter felt very strongly about and involved ensuring that people living with dementia are respected, supported and able to contribute to community life.

The council also stepped-up work on reducing the number of rough sleepers in the town. This meant taking a multi-dimensional approach, not only ensuring that accommodation was available for those in immediate need, but supporting people to tackle the issues that had led to them living on the street pathways to finding a home and living independently.

Some problems were more challenging and long-term, including the search for an alternative to the Metropolitan Line extension, which had been cancelled in 2018 by London Mayor Sadiq Khan and the ongoing battle to secure new hospital investment.

What could not have been predicted at the start of Peter's term of office was how everyone's lives would be changed by the COVID pandemic, lockdown and the restrictions on all aspects of our lives that went with it.

The role of elected mayor requires being a figurehead for the whole town and Peter ensured that the council played its full role in supporting people through the pandemic. This included efficiently managing the additional responsibilities given to councils such as the efficient distribution of government grants to support businesses. Beyond that, Peter as Mayor, launched the 'Watford Helps' campaign

to encourage and coordinate volunteer effort to help those in need during the crisis. He and Liberal Democrat councillors also telephoned residents to identify those who needed additional support. Part of the town hall was used as a vaccination centre.

Peter led the way in trying to keep people's spirits up during this difficult time. He organised a weekly virtual pub quiz, with local celebrities such as Watford football legend Luther Blissett sometimes acting as quizmaster.

While COVID inevitably disrupted work on other priorities, it was important not to lose sight of these. Indeed, the town's parks and green spaces took on a particular importance during the pandemic, so we were delighted when in 2021 seventeen of them achieved 'green flag' status. This included the new Oxhey Activity Park, a multi-purpose facility with a skate park, BMX track, and 'adventurous' play facilities, along with the planting of hundreds of new trees and measures to improve biodiversity.

During lockdown further progress was made on tackling rough sleeping, with a dramatic reduction in the number of people sleeping on the streets. Efforts to ensure make sure that everyone had shelter during the pandemic were followed by a commitment to numbers did not rise again once lockdown was over.

While council finances continued to be a challenge, with government grant now withdrawn, Watford was in a better place than many other councils because we had acted quickly to make up for reductions in central funding. While it also remained necessary to make year-on-year savings to the council's budget, we were able to maintain Peter's pledge of below-inflation council tax increases in each year of his first term of office.

Not everything was plain sailing. We agonised over the decision to move away from weekly refuse collections, something we had hitherto resisted as we wanted Watford residents to have a 'Rolls Royce' service and we were concerned that fortnightly collections could have

a negative effect on the general cleanliness of streets. As a result of consultation with residents about the options, we were able to introduce a new refuse collection system during lockdown that offered an enhanced, weekly service for food waste, together, with fortnightly collections of residual waste and charges for green waste collections. While this provoked criticism from opposition parties, it was accepted without much controversy with voters who realised that Watford continued to provide a better service than most nearby councils.

Development continued to be controversial. The government's housing algorithm means that urban areas in the south of England bear a particularly heavy burden, meaning that many towns and cities are having to accept higher density development than in the past, including new tall buildings. Watford has been no exception to this, but we have been clear and consistent in explaining the reality of the national planning system, government targets. We have called for greater local control of the planning process, while acknowledging that Watford does need to provide for housing need. By repeating our message as often as we can, we have been successful in shielding ourselves from attack on this issue. In the meantime, we succeeded in getting our local plan approved, maximising our control over development.

Once elected, Peter ensured that there was regular monitoring by his cabinet team and senior officers of progress on manifesto commitments so that nothing fell through the cracks. By the time he came up for re-election in 2022 he could go to the electorate justifiably claiming to be 'a Mayor who keeps his promises.'

This positive record has been rewarded by the electorate. The 2021 elections, which took place with some COVID restrictions still in place and after a year where we had been unable to engage in much of the traditional community politics style campaigning, saw us win eight of the boroughs' twelve wards, narrowly missing out on two gains from Labour.

For the Mayoral election in 2022 Peter rightly wanted to involve as many stakeholders as possible in developing our agenda for the next four years. We had a good system of listening to different sections of the community when agreeing our themes and priorities. This involved a number of sessions with different groups - business leaders, representatives from charities and faith groups, local residents and party members. There was a clear consensus on our successes and how we wanted to improve the town. This formed the basis of our manifesto and our priorities for the future.

While both Labour and the Conservatives concentrated on attacking us over development, the former referring to 'Taylor's Towers' in almost every leaflet, in fact we found people had understood our message and were aware that neither of the other parties offered any alternative to our planning policies. Neither offered much in the way of a positive agenda and could hardly claim that the council is being badly run. By contrast we focused on plans to keep the town economically successful, environmentally sustainable and to keep up the fight for new hospital facilities.

Our targeting policy was ambitious but realistic, aiming at winning ten wards while ensuring that all parts of the town received some communication from us. In the end the results were beyond our most optimistic expectations. Peter won the mayoral election with 55 per cent of first preferences, the best result for any of the contests since 2002. In addition, we won all ten target wards, something we had not achieved since 2004.

Few of us could have hoped or imagined when Dorothy first won in 2002 that twenty years on, Liberal Democrats would have won six successive mayoral elections and that our leadership of the town would be set to continue up to 24 years. The combination of continuing to campaign, having a clear agenda for the council and the town and never being complacent on either front is delivering continued electoral success and positive results for the town.

# In defence of elected mayors

Although the Liberal Democrat local government family has never shown anything but pride in the Party's elected mayors – Dorothy, Peter and Dave Hodgson of Bedford – nonetheless the Party's hostility to the mayoral system continues. So I wanted to take a little space to argue why we should at the least soften our line.

Much of the objection to the principle of elected mayors comes from fear of personal rule and abuse of power – mayors unlike leaders can't be removed. Against this I would point out that the leader and council model is also far from perfect. One particular problem is that electors never get a chance to vote on who leads their local authority – that is decided by the majority group behind closed doors after the election has happened. More than that, all too often local election campaigns become either a referendum on the national government or focused on ultra-local ward issues. A mayoral system means that an election is about who runs the council and what policies they are putting forward – giving the electors clear choice.

Many Liberal Democrats point to examples of high-handed rule by (usually Labour) elected mayors in various parts of the country. But plenty of council leaders behave in exactly the same way. Under either system it's not much fun being in opposition, knowing that the ruling party is going to win every vote in the council chamber.

There is also a sense in which the leadership, direction and clarity of purpose provided by a mayoral system is understood by staff and public alike. And being elected mayor of a place rather than just being leader of a council provides a platform to influence other bodies in the area.



Mayor Peter Taylor and the Lib Dem team were proud to see Oxhey Activity Park opened.

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There is also a bigger picture about the decentralisation of power to local government from Whitehall and Westminster. It is clear that national politicians and civil servants are mistrustful of local government and are more willing to devolve power to areas with mayoral systems than to those which continue to use more traditional models. In addition, elected mayors have a substantial mandate in their own right from an electorate at least of similar size to, and in some cases much bigger than, that of an MP, which gives them greater moral authority in dealing with central government.

Liberal Democrats should beware of being too hung up on the shortcomings of Labour (or indeed Conservative) elected mayors that we end up being de facto opponents of stronger powers for local government.



Mayor Peter Taylor and the team secured public realm improvements at Clarendon Road.

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# Lessons

Every area is different and Liberal Democrat teams trying to win more council seats, gain and retain control of their council will all have their own distinct challenges. But here are my ten top tips, which I would want to pass on to colleagues.

1. **Be bold** – no matter how far you are from a majority on your council, always aim for that goal. Once you have won one ward, try to win another; don't rest on your laurels.
2. **Have a clear idea how you would run your council differently from, and better than, the current administration.** There have been many horror stories of areas where active local Focus teams have won a majority on the council, without knowing what they would do once in power. Then things can quickly fall apart.
3. More than that, **have a clear vision** for your town, city, county, borough or district. How will the Liberal Democrats make it a better place?
4. Once you win, **pursue your policies** and don't be 'house-trained' by council bureaucracy. You have earned a mandate from the voters and need to implement it.
5. Remember there is no substitute for delivering core services to a high standard. Whether you have in-house or outsourced service providers, **never make excuses for poor performance.**
6. **Be self-critical** – don't assume the council is great because the Lib Dems run it – always be looking to find ways it can improve the service it delivers to local people.

7. **Never become the establishment** – keep campaigning once in power. There will be plenty of things you want to change that aren't in your direct control that you can change by mobilising public opinion.
8. **Tell people how a Liberal Democrat-run council is making a positive difference** – some local campaigners think voters won't read Focus stories that are not local to their ward, but this is not true. A key part of our success in opposition was about Labour's failings and since 2002 we have constantly highlighted the benefits to Watford residents of having a council under Lib Dem leadership.
9. And also **tell them why it would be worse if another party regained power**. In Watford Labour have helped us by remaining in denial about what went wrong under their leadership and give every sign they would make the same mistakes again given the chance. We regularly remind the electorate of this – and to good effect.
- 10 Lastly, **there really is no substitute for councillors keeping in touch** all year round through regular newsletters, emails, social media and mailshots, for dealing with casework and campaigning on local issues. Even the best-run Lib Dem administration won't survive for long if councillors are not doing the right thing in their wards. It helps us to know what is important and relevant to local people.

# Acknowledgements

In the interests of readability, I have tried to avoid making the above narrative a roll call of the Watford Liberal Democrat team. But if Dorothy has been the political leader and public face of the Lib Dems in Watford, our success has always been based on a much wider group.

So, other than those I have mentioned, already, I would like to acknowledge the following people who have made a distinct contribution to our success in Watford. The cabinet team for most of our very challenging early years of turning the council around were (as well as myself and Dorothy) Shirena Counter, Derek Scudder and Andy Wylie. Others who have served in Dorothy's cabinet are: Rabi Martins, Keith Crout, Mark Watkin, Andrew Forrest, Steve Johnson, Karen Collett, Bernadette Laventure and Peter Taylor.

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I would also like to acknowledge the hard work and professionalism of Watford Borough Council officers who have worked to carry out the policies and vision we have set out. Thanks in particular are due to Kathryn Robson for help and advice in producing this booklet.

On a personal note I should mention the encouragement and inspiration of my political mentor, the late Professor Robert Pritchard, former city and county councillor in Leicester, from whom I learned so much about Liberalism, local government and how to be a good councillor.

And lastly, can we say a big thank you to the LGA Liberal Democrat Office and Group for their encouragement in us documenting our story and sponsoring the publication of this booklet.

The annual 'Imagine  
Watford' festival of  
street theatre has been  
a popular innovation





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