

Introduction

Since I last wrote my report, the political landscape has changed, particularly on a national level. With big infrastructure projects being cancelled and the government signalling a roll back on net zero commitments, it might be tempting to ignore the long term and focus on the short term. Fortunately, this is not the attitude that Watford Council is taking. We know that there are immediate issues, such as the cost-of-living crisis and we are doing our best to support residents through these tough times, but there are long term issues that we cannot shy away from. This includes adapting to climate change and creating a local economy for the future where people are employed in high quality jobs and have the right skills to be successful. My cabinet and I will continue to do what is needed to do the right things for the future.

Standing up for Watford

Watford General Hospital

Since my last report to full Council, Watford Council has given outline planning permission for Watford General Hospital. This is a huge milestone in the journey to build a hospital that will be fit for 21st Century healthcare.

I have backed investment at Watford General for many years and this has involved difficult decisions to improve access to the hospital and creating space for new facilities. I now hope that the government follows through with its promise to provide the funding for the project. Both patients and hospital staff deserve modern facilities that will continue to provide healthcare for decades to come.

Neighbourhood grants 2023

Building on the success of last year's Neighbourhood Grant programme, we have made £300,000 of neighbourhood CIL funding available to empower community groups to pay for projects.

The purpose of these "neighbourhood grants" is to support local projects that address the impact of new development and ensure local people benefit from sustainable growth in the borough. Last year's projects included environmental conservation projects, arts and culture activities, and accessibility improvements, amongst others.

To have a chance at securing funding, organisations must submit their project proposals which will then be reviewed by a panel of officers at the council. If you are aware of groups that would benefit, please direct them to <https://watfordgrantform.commonplace.is/> to complete the application form. The bidding process for this year ends on 8th December.

Big Events

Since the last full council meeting, our big events programme has taken place. This included our popular big screen events in the Woodside Playing fields and for the first time in years, in the town centre. Unfortunately, we did see a dip in attendance at some showings as the weather this year was particularly bad. We will, however, be bringing this back next year and will hope for sun.

On Saturday 9th September we held The Big Sports, which turned the top of the town centre into an outdoor fitness centre. The event was very well attended and is getting bigger year by year. By making sport into a family fun activity we can increase fitness across the town and improve health for residents well into the future.

The big Jiveswing festival also returned to Cassiobury Park this year, taking part near the bandstand. This is one of the biggest swing jazz festivals in the UK and always goes down well with attendees. Cassiobury Park was also the site of Colourscape which once again brought wonder and joy to young and older residents alike.

Throughout the summer holidays young people were able to take advantage of the Wat's On programme. This provides activities for children who are off from school and allows them to have fun and in some cases learn new skills. Many of these programmes filled up almost immediately, showing that they are valued by parents and guardians in Watford.

Most of these big events are free which gives residents and visitors the chance to meet with friends and spend time with family without incurring a cost. This has become invaluable during the cost of living crisis and we will continue to fund these events and similar for as many years in the future as we can.

The next large event will be the Cassiobury Park fireworks. This is the largest free firework display in Hertfordshire, and it promises to be a great opportunity to come together with friends and family to share in the magic and wonder that firework displays bring. I understand that a growing minority of residents are frustrated about a proliferation of domestic firework displays that take place around and on the 5th November. It is our hope that a large bonfire event reduces the number of personal displays and also improves safety. I know from talking to people how popular this event remains and I look forward to seeing residents there.

Watford Fringe

The Watford Fringe has come to the end of its programme for this year and it has been a success once again.

The Watford Fringe Festival is one of the highlights in the Watford Cultural Calendar and this year included over 85 performances ranging from drama to musicals spread across 11 venues. The festival makes a real contribution to our town and supports the creative industries locally and nationally. We know from the expansion of Warner Bros studios that this area is a strength in the UK and I hope that by continuing to support the Fringe and culture in Watford generally, we can take full advantage of the opportunities the creative arts provide.

A Greener Town

Solar together and climate change commitments

Solar together, our Solar bulk-buying scheme, is running again this year after a successful round last year. In 2022, hundreds of local residents signed up for the Solar Together scheme, which enables them to get cheaper solar panels in the short term and save long term on energy bills.

Despite national government reducing their emphasis on climate change and net zero targets, I remain committed to Watford achieving net zero by 2030. I believe that we have a plan in place which will enable this to happen. I will also continue to support programmes which improve biodiversity and protect our green spaces for future generations.

We have a good track record on talking climate change. For example, earlier this year we completed work at the Town Hall which retrofitted the building to reduce energy use. This will save taxpayers hundreds of thousands of pounds a year through reduced bills. We are also working with Waford Community Housing to retrofit homes to improve energy efficiency.

Biodiversity works at Cassiobury Park wetlands

Work has started to revitalise former watercress beds and create a wildlife sanctuary. The previous beds stopped being actively managed in 1991, and subsequently silt and excessive vegetation have built up. This project will restore this habitat with the hope that it will promote biodiversity, enhance water quality, and preserve the flood plain functionality of the watercress bed area. This is important given the context of climate change.

Watford Council is leading the restoration, but the work would not be possible without an entire team of organisations working together. The wetland project involves work by Friends of Cassiobury Park, the Environment Agency, and Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust and is being supported by funding from Grundon Waste Management Ltd via the Landfill Communities Fund and a permit granted by the Environment Agency. I would like to thank all of those involved in this important project.

Water fountain in Callowland Rec

I am pleased that we have now installed a new water fountain at Callowland Rec. This is part of our work to reduce the use of single use plastics and litter. More water points are planned and they will help to keep people enjoying our great parks hydrated. The water point in Callowland Rec has three outlets – one for drinking directly, one for filling bottles, and a third for use by pets who can often struggle with warm weather.

A Caring Community

Supporting rough sleepers this winter

With funding from Watford Council, the local homelessness charity, New Hope, will be running a winter shelter from 1 December to 31 March.

The winter shelter will provide a hot meal and a safe place to sleep, and will be able to accommodate 15 people each night. As part of the project, support workers from New Hope will help people access appropriate, longer-term accommodation.

I am committed to ending rough sleeping in our community. Projects like the winter shelter can help provide that short term support but also provides an opportunity to access longer term help which can move people from the street to a stable housing situation for good. I am grateful to the staff and all the volunteers who make this possible and I know that New Hope are always looking for more volunteers. I have advertised this opportunity in my newsletter and social media and I would encourage all councillors to do the same. Please direct people to visit New Hope's website at newhope.org.uk/volunteer or ask them to call Eamonn on 01923 210 680.

Fundraising

A fun but important part of my role as Mayor is supporting local fundraising efforts. Since my last report I have taken part in a fire walk for Herts Inclusive Theatre, the Watford Memory Walk in aid of Alzheimer's UK and the great big walk for Herts in aid of Hertfordshire Mind, as well as others.

Taking part in these events is a reminder of the remarkable work that is done by charities across our town and the huge efforts that many people take to organise and take part in fundraisers such as

these. Without raising these funds, many charities would cease to exist and the work they do would not continue. Many of the events I attend will have hundreds of people participating, all doing their bit to ensure that those who are supported by charities can continue to receive that.

New Polish memorial in Watford

I was pleased to attend the unveiling of a new memorial in North Watford Cemetery to commemorate All Saints Day, an annual national holiday in Poland. The memorial, which was a collaboration between the Watford Polish Saturday School, PCM Local Polish Catholic Mission and Watford Borough Council will provide a place for the local Polish community to honour their loved ones who have passed away. All Saints Day held yearly every 1 November holds profound significance to the Polish community as it is a day when Poles visit the graves of their family and friends to light lanterns in their memory, offer prayers, and share memories. For many Polish migrants residing in Watford, the journey back to Poland for this important day can be both logistically challenging and costly. The installation of this memorial will create a space for the community to carry on this tradition.

World War II memorial

It was great to attend a ceremony to celebrate the completion of renovation works to the World War Two Sandringham Road Memorial at North Watford Cemetery.

This memorial commemorates the 40 lives lost during a German bomb attack on Sunday 30 July 1944. 64 people were injured and extensive damage was caused to the local area.

The work was completed by Kenward & Son Ltd and the overall project was spearheaded by the local Greenhill family. Thanks to them, the memorial, originally erected in 1950 has now been renovated. This means that the story of Sandringham Road, and the community spirit shown in times of adversity and terror, can be told to future generations.

Watford Lottery win

I am delighted that we have had our first significant winner in the Watford Community Lottery. Georgia Gain, an employee at charity Home-Start, won £250 and joins many across Watford who have won smaller prizes since taking part.

The Watford Community Lottery has so far raised £10,000 for local causes and continues to go from strength to strength. The Watford Community Lottery was established to provide a platform for residents to support local causes while also having the chance to win. I hope that other Watford residents will take part in the future and I would encourage all councillors to advertise the lottery to residents who may want to play or charities who may want to register to receive funds

Vicarage Road stadium receives dementia friendly status.

I want Watford to be a dementia friendly town so that it can be an inclusive place for people of all ages. To fully achieve this, more places across the town will need to make changes to support those with Alzheimer's and dementia.

Because of this, I was delighted to join representatives from the Alzheimer's Society and Watford Council at a Watford FC game to celebrate Vicarage Road stadium gaining its dementia friendly stadium status. I want to congratulate and thank them for their work to make Watford a better place for all to live.

A Safer Town

CCTV and Lighting

Nothing is more important than feeling safe in your community, which is why we are continuing to invest in safety measures in the town.

Cassiobury Park is set to benefit from better lighting from the car park to the park's hub which is a well used area. This should enhance the safety of those who walk and cycle through Cassiobury Park. In 2024, Watford Fields will benefit from new security cameras along the path from the High Street Station to Ladies Close being installed.

These projects are being funded by the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, which has previously helped to fund CCTV in Victoria Passage. I hope that these projects will give residents and visitors more confidence and deter anti-social behaviour.

A Competent Council

Watford Museum transformation

Benskin House is now closed to the public while the project to create a museum fit for the 21st Century takes place. Over recent months residents have been taking part in engagement activities to help shape the new museum and all of these valuable contributions will be taken on board so that we have a new museum of which we can be proud.

While these plans take shape, the museum team will be taking their collections on tour to engage the community and showcase local history and stories. I hope that this will allow more people to see our collections and build excitement for our new museum offer.

A Thriving Local Economy

UK Shared Prosperity fund

Watford Borough Council has been granted £1 million up to 2025 as part of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund. This funding will be used to support the local economy into the future and will help local residents to access good employment opportunities in the long term.

The projects funded by the Shared Prosperity Fund will help us to deliver our Economic Growth Strategy priorities. Around a third of this funding will go to support Hertfordshire-wide economy, business support, and skills projects in conjunction with other districts who will also be inputting funds. The rest will go towards Watford-specific projects, including business decarbonisation, a gaming training hub, and support for local businesses hoping to scale up operations.

I know Watford is a great place to work and do business and by investing in workplace skills now we can ensure that Watford can continue to thrive in the future.

Warner Bros expansion

I am delighted that plans to expand Warner Bros Studios have been approved and look forward to the benefits this will bring.

The expansion of Warner Bros will add 10 new sound stages and 400,000 sq ft of production space, boosting the UK economy by more than £200 million.

Although Watford Council's Development Management Committee approved only a small part of the site, we can be proud that we played a part in bringing about this nationally important investment.

The UK in general and Hertfordshire in particular is a great environment for arts and creative industries. I hope that this and similar investments continue to provide new opportunities for young people in our area.

Business connect and meet the buyer events.

We continue to support the local business community and have recently organised two events to provide valuable business support and guidance on winning procurement contracts. These events are part of the ongoing efforts to promote the growth and success of small and medium-sized enterprises within the town.

The "Meet The Buyer" event gave local businesses the chance to speak directly to decision-makers from both public and private sector organisations and provide an insight into how they could engage with procurement opportunities in the future. The second event "Watford Business Connect", provided networking opportunities to local businesses and give them the chance to hear from a range of partners about business opportunities, Watford Council's plans for the future and advice on how to achieve business success. Both of these events were well received and I hope we can do similar events in the future.

Watford Business Park

To create spaces where future businesses can thrive we have invested in Watford Business Park. This investment will support jobs and boost the local economy by £20 million.

These improvements will create workspaces fit for the future by building flexible units. These will be suitable for a whole range of vital sectors including film, life sciences and manufacturing. It is estimated that in total, this investment could see up to 180 new high-tech jobs and allow businesses to expand or set up in Watford, leading to many more employment opportunities.

I hope that this investment will ensure that Watford remains a destination for business for years to come and highlight the importance of planning for the long term.