

## **Elected Mayor's Report – January 2021**

I had hoped that we would be in a better position than when we last came together for Full Council, but unfortunately we find ourselves in the third national lockdown of this pandemic, having had various degrees of freedom over the course of the last year. Therefore, as I am sure you would expect, much of my report is focused on the council's response to COVID-19 and how we have focused on maintaining services throughout the pandemic. I would once again like to extend my thanks to everyone here at Watford Borough Council for all their hard work during this difficult time and to everyone in the community who has contributed their time to supporting others.

### **COVID-19 Response**

#### **Community Protection and Support**

We have continued to support the Covid-19 response in Watford, Hertfordshire and more generally. The work of our environmental health team has been outstanding and I would like to thank them for stepping up to take on additional work and responsibility over the last year. They have been working closely with the NHS and Hertfordshire County Council to roll out the vaccination programme across the borough through GP surgeries, hubs and a mass vaccination site in the town. Along with plans for an increase in lateral flow testing sites we are doing everything in our power to support the NHS and overcome this virus as soon as possible.

We have employed several Covid Marshals who have been a consistent presence in the most populous parts of the borough, encouraging people to follow the government guidelines and stay safe when out in the town. We have also ensured messaging is being conveyed in a variety of different ways including using Ad Vans across the boroughs and ensuring that communications are translated from English into multiple languages which are prevalent in Watford.

#### **Supporting Local Businesses**

Our Revenues and Benefits team have been working really hard to implement government grants as quickly as they can and given the constantly changing landscape have been doing a really good job of getting support to those who are in need. To date we have paid out over £22m of grants to over 1200 businesses. Our Environmental Health team have also done a great job of working with businesses to make sure they can operate safely within the law and guidelines.

This year local businesses have been some of the hardest hit parts of the economy, historically relying on foot traffic to keep afloat. We have worked with businesses to provide help and support on how they can adapt the way they work. By partnering with Social Enterprise Organisation, Wenta, to create the Business Recovery and Growth Programme

we have been able to offer small businesses in Watford training and help in keeping their businesses open and thriving through the pandemic.

Prior to Christmas we also launched a borough-wide 'Shop Local' campaign to promote Watford's diverse offerings and encourage people to buy from local shops and suppliers. This initiative is something we hope to continue in the future and make people realise the fantastic retail opportunities on their doorstep.

### **Community Engagement**

Throughout the pandemic I have spent a lot of time ensuring that residents are still heard and engaged in all aspects of the Council's work. I have kept up regular Facebook Live Q&As with various guests including Jim McManus, Director of Public Health at Hertfordshire County Council, Head Teachers from local schools and representatives from charities and organisations across Watford who have provided support in the community.

I have also introduced new ways of talking to residents in the form of Ward Councillor Q&As on Facebook and private Virtual Surgeries. These have proved very useful in finding out the issues of importance to our residents and ensuring we can answer any questions that people have.

We have continued the great work of raising funds for our Watford Helps Covid Appeal through various initiatives including 'Laps to Lapland', a Big Bold Quiz and a Raffle. The Laps to Lapland initiative asked people to get out on their bikes, or a Beryl bike, to collectively cycle the distance from Watford to Lapland and back, raising over £8,000. I would like to thank the continued support we have received for these fundraising appeals including Beryl, Camelot, Berkley Homes, W3RT and many others. To date the Watford Helps Covid Appeal has raised £161,673 which has supported 48 different local charities.

We have also worked with Metro Bank to install a Tap Donation Point in their High Street premises meaning it is now easier than ever for people to make a donation when they are out and about. The money donated at the tap point goes directly into the Watford Helps Covid-19 Appeal and if successful could mean that other tap points are rolled out across the town.

We have also been making sure to recognise those within our community who have gone above and beyond to help others during this difficult time. At the end of last year I helped deliver the first three of our 'Unsung Hero' Awards: Georgina Cooper did a fantastic job of keeping up people's spirits through lockdown by touring her local area dressed in a full body dinosaur suit and raising £2,500 to buy PPE for local care homes. Bob Haggerty, a local taxi driver, spent lots of time during the pandemic checking on elderly and isolated residents in the community and helping them with errands. Catherine Agnihotri founded and coordinated a volunteer support network in March covering the whole of Park ward,

connecting residents who needed support and keeping them informed as lockdown progressed. I would like to thank all three of our Unsung Heroes for helping Watford and their local areas and everyone else who has gone above and beyond to support their communities in the last year.

## **Delivering my Manifesto and Working for the Town**

### **Protecting Watford's Heritage**

In October I had the pleasure of visiting Vicarage Road Cemetery where a local artist has reimagined the Chapel into a creative space where local artists can originate and exhibit their work. Along with working artists, 'Amanartis at the Chapel' hosts a gallery, shop and co-working facility for the community. It is great to see the space being used innovatively and I look forward to seeing more spaces like this popping up around Watford in the future.

### **Improvements to leisure facilities**

After our previous success of securing Green Flag status for 12 of Watford's parks, I am delighted to report that we have further successes to celebrate in the form of Cassiobury Park being voted in the Top 10 of Green Flag parks in the UK and Oxhey Park in the Top 25. It is great to have our parks recognised in this way and I hope that we can continue to see more of our parks winning awards in the future. I would like to thank Veolia and the local communities who work so hard to keep these parks maintained for everyone to enjoy.

We are fortunate to have secured a sponsorship of our Beryl Bikes from operator of the National Lottery and key local employer, Camelot. They have signed a three-year sponsorship deal which includes the introduction of a new Beryl bay at their head office on Tolpits Lane to encourage their staff to cycle part or all of the journey to work. I am thankful for Camelot helping us to make Watford a more sustainable town to live and work in.

### **Protecting our Local Environment**

One of my main manifesto commitments was to protect our local environment and since getting elected this has become even more poignant as we see interest and pressures increase to save our planet from the climate crisis. In Watford we have been undertaking various projects to ensure we are playing our part in protecting the environment and increasing biodiversity, while encouraging people to make use of our open spaces in safe and respectable ways.

Lea Farm Recreational Ground has recently had some investment in the form of a new circular footpath which was instigated by a local resident who has mobility issues. This is on top of the tennis court refurbishment completed a couple of years ago. We are planning some further improvements here including enhancing the horticulture with tree planting and shrub bed improvements over the next 12 months.

Whippendell Wood is currently undergoing some improvement works with much needed woodland management. As this is a site of special scientific interest, all work is carried out under the careful watch of our Cassiobury Park Manager who is a chartered forester.

We are also very aware of the importance of the rivers that flow through Watford and the corridors they pass through. The river Colne in particular passes through many of our open spaces and over the next 3 years we will be looking at how we can improve accessibility, wildlife habitat, interpretation, water quality and invasive species. We will be working with a large number of partners on this including Groundwork and the Environment Agency.

### **Investing in our town**

I am pleased to report on the completion of the improvement works to St Albans Road. Improvements included replacing the pavements to remove the patchwork of paving materials and remedy the poor surface water drainage. The removal of redundant street furniture, guard-railing and unnecessary signage reduced street clutter and the over-provision and poor sighting of traffic signs. New strategically placed street furniture improved the surroundings whilst helping to stop illegal on-pavement parking. The project also includes creating new small 'squares' of high quality public realm and community space on Hatfield Road, Victoria Road and Bruce Grove.

As you may already be aware, as a council we have been considering plans for how we secure the future of the Town Hall, Colosseum and surrounding area. This project, called the Town Hall Quarter Programme, aims to refocus how we use the assets already available to us in a more efficient way to bring better value to residents and businesses in Watford. This past year has taught many of us that we are able to work in a more flexible manner and innovating how we operate can increase productivity and output. As part of the programme we are looking to rejuvenate the Town Hall and Colosseum, review the museum and heritage offer in the town, explore the development of a new innovation and incubation hub for new businesses and create a vibrant new neighbourhood. I will endeavour to keep everyone updated as these plans progress.

### **Defending the interests of our residents**

I have recently written to the Mayor of London about the news that they are looking to introduce charges for motorists entering from outside the Greater London area in an attempt to raise much needed funds for Transport for London. If introduced these charges would have the largest impact on Watford and other neighbouring areas as we have lots of residents who travel into London to work, study and visit friends and family. I wrote to the

Mayor of London to express my opposition to this proposal and will continue to defend the interests of Watford in any future consultations that may arise on the topic.

I have also written to Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, Robert Jenrick, regarding the latest consultation on permitted development. The latest proposals from the government are to introduce new permitted development rights to allow changes of use from commercial, business and services uses to residential. This would mean that buildings usually home to industries among some of the hardest hit by the pandemic would be affected. Not only does this proposal have the potential to create poor quality homes, with little input from local authorities, it would actively disincentivise landlords from offering properties as commercial opportunities knowing that they could get higher revenue from residential properties. Therefore, in writing to the Secretary of State I have expressed my opposition to the proposals and will continue to oppose any changes to planning laws which take power away from local authorities who are best placed to make decisions which impact the local area.