

Elected Mayor's Report – March 2021

Since we last came together for Full Council we find ourselves in a more hopeful position, following the successful start of the vaccination roll out and numbers of coronavirus cases dropping significantly. But, as to be expected, the bulk of this report is focused on the impact of Covid-19 in Watford and the steps we have taken over the last couple of months to aid the town's recovery from Covid-19.

Covid-19 Response

Community protection and support

We have continued supporting the Covid-19 response in Watford through making the Town Hall available to open as a vaccination centre. Council officers worked with the NHS to adapt part of the building for its new role and ensure safe and secure access to the building for medical staff, volunteers and attendees of the centre. I would like to say a big thank you to everyone who has made this possible, including the medical staff and the volunteers who have been helping to operate the centre since it opened.

We have also worked with our partner ArrivaClick to offer free rides within the borough for anyone who is going to get their Covid-19 vaccination. The vaccine rollout is a key part of the fight against Covid-19 so to aid the success of the programme, we need to ensure residents who have been invited for a vaccine can attend their appointment. This offer provides residents with the opportunity to easily and safely access the vaccination centres at no cost during this economically challenging time and supports the council's sustainability strategy.

The Council has also continued work to encourage everyone to take up their vaccinations by working with Public Health and community engagement teams to dispel myths and answer people's questions or concerns.

Supporting local businesses

As part of our continued support for Watford Market works are underway to revitalise the current space and trading units to attract a new generation of customers to the marketplace which has been a key part of the town's history. We have agreed £250,000 to help with the renovations.

The Council continues to promote the partnership with Wenta and the Business Recovery and Growth programme that is being offered to residents of Watford. We have also been leading the Town Centre working group to collaborate with partners including the BID and Police, among others, to ensure a safe and successful reopening of businesses when the time comes.

In addition to the £6.3 million we have paid out under the Local Restrictions Support Grant scheme, we have also paid out £560,000 in Additional Restrictions and Home Based Grants to businesses until the end of March.

We have also paid out £88,500 under the Standard Test and Trace scheme and £56,000 under the Discretionary Test and Trace Scheme to support people who are forced to self-isolate as a result of Covid-19.

Community Engagement

I have continued to engage with residents, albeit in a socially distanced and mainly virtual manner. Since the start of the year I have held a number of Facebook Live Q&As on topics such as vaccinations and wellbeing with guests including Jim McManus, Director of Public Health for Hertfordshire, and Maggie Pacheco, Lead Nurse for Patient Experience at Watford General Hospital. I would like to thank all of the guests that have appeared on my Facebook Live Q&As, I know they are very well received and provide a great opportunity for people to ask specialist questions on various themes.

I have also hosted a number of online residents' forums and virtual surgeries which have been really insightful and show the issues that are important to the people of Watford.

The Council has continued to promote the Watford Together initiative through the recent lockdown, providing people with ideas for events to get involved in and ways to keep in touch with others at this difficult time. In February we piloted the 'Watford Word Trail' encouraging people to explore some of Watford's hidden gems and get out of the house with their families in a safe way. More recently we have also started holding weekly Watford History Talks featuring special guests and focusing on a different aspect of Watford's history each week. We are also relaunching our 'One Town, One Book' initiative in the coming weeks after its success last year and will be running book clubs as well as linking up with Watford Writers to offer workshops. I would like to thank everyone that has contributed to Watford Together and supported us in reaching out to everyone in our community at this difficult time.

Delivering my manifesto and working for the town

Sustainability in Watford

Following a successful bid to the Government's Office for Low Emission Vehicles (OLEV), and as part of our mission to make Watford carbon neutral by 2030, we are introducing new electric vehicle charging points around the borough. The new installations by our partner and electric vehicle infrastructure experts Electric Blue are being focused in areas where there is little or no off-street parking. Work is also being undertaken with Ringway to install 15 lamp column chargers.

We have also secured £3.7 million funding to install insulation to houses across the borough through two successful bids. With this money we expect to install measures in over 200 homes with the aim of raising EPC ratings to a band C*; 105 Watford Community Housing Trust properties with external wall insulation (and they are funding smart controls in conjunction with this); 50 private properties for external wall insulation; and 60 private properties for solar PV and smart heating controls. Additionally, we will be using the funding to target specific areas in Watford concentrated on the more vulnerable households.

Protecting Watford's heritage

A number of Watford's Victorian cast iron street signs are currently being repaired and restored to preserve the heritage of Oxhey Village. The area has numerous historic signs which have fallen into disrepair and are no longer easily legible. This work will ensure we are able to protect a piece of our heritage and will hopefully last longer than newer plastic versions which require more frequent maintenance and replacement. I would like to thank the borough and county councillors who have put their locality funding towards this important project.

Protecting our local environment

I am pleased to report that Watford residents are now recycling more than they throw away for the first time in the borough's history. Recycling in Watford has increased under our new food waste recycling service and changes to the non-recyclable waste service introduced in September 2020. I would like to thank council officers and Veolia who have worked hard on this strategy and the residents of Watford for making use of the new waste and recycling schemes.

Investing in our town

The Council has now approved plans for the redevelopment of Watford Business Park. The proposals aim to create a business park fit for the future that will provide a modern, cutting-edge home for business. The area is one of Watford's key employment hubs with over 100 businesses employing over 1000 people, but a significant proportion of the existing buildings are tired and not geared up for the current business needs of the area. Working with local partners to redevelop the site we have secured a £5 million Local Growth Fund investment from Hertfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) which will go towards modernising the facilities and hopefully creating more jobs for local people.

Supporting the most vulnerable

Since becoming Mayor ending rough sleeping in Watford has been a priority for the Council and thanks to the fantastic work of our housing team and charities such as One YMCA, New Hope and Grow, in January we managed to achieve 0 verified rough sleepers in Watford. Following this we have also had confirmation of a successful bid for a further £416,000 funding to support our existing programmes for rough sleepers, focusing on providing not just shelter but longer term support to help people turn their lives around.