

Elected Mayor's Report – July 2021

As I write this report, I note that we were in a similar position this time last year, coming out of lockdown, with businesses starting to open again. However, the difference this year is that a lot of our community has now been vaccinated and the government believes this is the final time we will be exiting lockdown. While it is a positive position to be in, we must remain cautious as we get back to 'normal' because Covid-19 has not gone away and even though restrictions are lifting there are still risks.

On 5th July, I was pleased to be able to celebrate the work of the NHS, Social Care and Frontline workers for an inaugural celebration and service of remembrance. Joined by people who have worked on the frontline in Watford throughout the pandemic, we were able to reflect on the events of the past 18 months and say thank you to all those who have worked so hard to keep our community going. I would like to once again thank all the doctors, nurses, teachers, carers, retail workers, waste operators, bereavement services, and many more who have carried on throughout the pandemic, as well as those who have had to close to protect the country.

Covid-19 Response

Community protection and support

Our Town Hall Vaccination Clinic has now been open for 5 months and has been doing an amazing job helping to get our residents vaccinated with the support of pop-up clinics within the community such as at Watford Mosque, Wellspring Church, Stanborough Park Church, and various GP practices across the borough. We were also able to hold a mass vaccination clinic at Vicarage Road last month to escalate our vaccination effort. I would like to thank council officers, the NHS, Watford Football Club and the Chamber of Commerce for their support in organising the event in such a short time frame and for making the day such a success. In Watford, we have now delivered over 110,000 doses of Covid-19 vaccinations.

Supporting local businesses

The Council has been very supportive of all of the town's businesses throughout the pandemic and has made an effort to come up with a variety of ways to provide both financial and practical support to local companies. Most recently, we have launched a new scheme to provide expert advice and support to small businesses adversely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic; the Watford Business Growth Grant Scheme is delivered in partnership with Hertfordshire Growth Hub and has the potential of allocating grants of up to £5,000 to small businesses in Watford.

We have also continued to promote our 'shop local' campaign as restrictions have lifted and encouraged people to visit their local shops, cafés and restaurants.

Through the government's restart grants scheme we have supported various businesses in the town to reopen upon the easing of lockdown restrictions. We have so far paid out £792,029 to 197 non-essential retail businesses and £3,674,000 to 352 Hospitality, Leisure, Personal Care & Gyms.

Community engagement

As restrictions have started to ease, I have made an effort to start getting out and seeing people once again face-to-face alongside continuing virtual communications and engagements such as my regular Facebook Live Q&A, virtual surgeries and sending my weekly newsletter to residents. One of the ways in which I have been able to engage with residents is through a new initiative we launched during Mental Health Awareness Week where I went for 'walk and talk' sessions in our parks. The Mental Health Walks were a great opportunity to reflect on some of the mental health implications of the pandemic and also to speak to residents about ideas, concerns and questions they had.

We have continued to distribute 'Unsung Hero' Awards to people within Watford who have been particularly inspirational over the last 18 months and have gone above and beyond to support their local communities. I would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who has volunteered in Watford over this period and look forward to meeting more unsung heroes in the upcoming months.

Delivering my manifesto and working for the town

Sustainability in Watford

We continue to promote sustainable transport methods in the town and have once again seen an uptick in use of our Beryl bike hire scheme and Arriva Click on-demand bus service as lockdown restrictions have started to ease. There have now been over 122,000 Beryl Bike journeys since it was launched just over a year ago.

It has also been great to see both Beryl and Arriva Click teaming up with the council to offer free rides for people getting vaccinations.

As part of our commitment to make Watford a more environmentally friendly place, the Council has been supporting residents to make their homes more energy efficient through grants to install energy saving measures including external wall, underfloor and roof insulation as well as smart heating controls. Not only will the work improve the sustainability of homes, but it will also help residents on lower incomes to reduce their energy bills.

Protecting Watford's heritage

To further highlight the heritage of the town and the importance of Watford FC within the community, new commemorative artwork featuring the club's players from the 1919-1920 season has been installed at the entrance to King George V Playing Fields. The memorial created in partnership with the football club and Watford Museum features most of the Watford FC players from that season, and was chosen as it was the team from the early years of George V's reign.

Protecting our local environment

Work is now underway in parts of Cassiobury Park to promote further biodiversity in Watford. In May, we launched a new rewilding project to introduce wildflower meadows into the park next year. Working with Hertfordshire & Middlesex Butterfly Conservative Trust and Friends of Cassiobury Park we have planted seeds which will encourage more butterflies, bees and insects and plays a big part in our ambition to be carbon neutral by 2030.

The other area of Cassiobury Park that we have just started working on is the wetlands. We are working with the Friends of Cassiobury Park, Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust, and Community Connection Projects CIC to restore the nature reserve and transform the area into a wetlands habitat for wildlife. The restoration works will not only improve biodiversity in the area and help to reduce flood risks, but will also create learning opportunities for the public with new boardwalks introduced to make the site family friendly and accessible.

I have also had the pleasure of participating in some of Watford's activities for the Great British Spring Clean. Organised by local community groups, there have been a number of litter picks taking place throughout Watford, including those on Ebury Way and Boundary Way which I was able to take part in. Thank you to everyone who is helping to keep Watford clean and tidy by organising and participating in litter picks.

Investing in our town

After working hard with West Herts Hospital Trust to find space for a new multi-storey car park at Watford General Hospital, works are now underway on this project which will hopefully be of great help to patients, visitors and staff at Watford General. This will not only support the hospital as it currently stands, but should be in place for years to come as the redevelopment of the hospital becomes a reality.

Supporting the most vulnerable

The latest round of the Mayor's Small Grants Fund (MSGF) has been distributed to a variety of charities based in Watford. The MSGF is a great opportunity to work with some fantastic charities and organisations in Watford to ensure they can continue to support the most

vulnerable in our communities. This year we have been able to award over £40,000 to support Random Café, Watford Workshop, StrongMen, Watford & Three Rivers Refugee Partnership, Everett Rovers Football Club, Watford Jazz Junction, Disability Watford, West Herts Amateur Boxing Club, Dignify, Herts Inclusive Theatre, Ngorli CIC, Octagon Music Society, Watford Salvation Army, Small Acts of Kindness, Playskill and Mencap.

The Council has also been able to support Watford Mencap to find a new home so they can continue to provide vital services for the local community. The charity has completed the purchase of 92a Langley Road and will be completing refurbishment works to the property over the next few months. The new home marks the start of an exciting future for the charity, providing scope for more facilities and services and offering a hub for similar activities run by other groups and organisations.

The Council, along with partners Cathartic, Home Instead and West Herts College celebrated this year's Dementia Action Week with a number of events, fundraisers and training sessions throughout the town. A key part of Watford's goal to be a more dementia friendly town, Dementia Action Week was also seen as a fantastic opportunity to restart the town's programme of activities that were severely curtailed due to Covid-19. I'd like to thank everyone who worked so hard to make the week a success. We are always looking for more businesses and community organisations to support this project and I look forward to the programme continuing to expand over the coming months and years.

Improvements to leisure facilities

One of my key manifesto commitments was to help bring a brand new family friendly facility to Woodside Playing Fields. The first phase of the development project was approved last year, and good progress has been made with planning and design work. The first phase focuses on creating the Woodside Community Sports Village, with a range of developments to improve the sports facilities on site, promoting an active lifestyle and encouraging greater use of the park by residents and visitors. I would like to thank officers who have been working hard to make this project happen and deliver yet more fantastic leisure facilities for our residents. Construction is scheduled to start in early 2022.

To further expand on our offering of free facilities available for residents, we have installed two new table tennis tables outside the library. This follows the success we have seen in similar facilities at Oxhey Activity Park and Cassiobury Park. I hope we will begin to see even more people enjoying the sport, getting fitter and making friends. Long-term, our hope is that we can encourage communities and local table tennis clubs to get involved and support the project by volunteering and providing group social sessions wherever possible.

Events in Watford

It is fantastic to be able to see live events returning to Watford and people having the chance to enjoy different experiences once again. In May, the Council welcomed the

successful Magical Maze to the town centre for the first time, offering family friendly fun for free over half term. More recently we have also seen the return of our big events start with Big Dance, and other arts and cultural offerings in the town such as Imagine Watford, organised by Watford Palace Theatre. We are also looking forward to welcoming the Stage in the Park to Cassiobury Park which will be putting on a variety of live performances during the summer with many special guests. These fantastic events help bring Watford residents together, and after so long of being unable to see one another, it's important that we can come together in safe ways. Thank you to everyone in the council and our partners who is helping to make these exciting events happen.

Defending the interests of our residents

The Government has made it clear that they intend to press ahead with making changes to the planning system, including increasing permitted development rights and removing the power of local authorities to have a say in the way their areas develop. When I was elected as Mayor of Watford, I made a commitment to our residents to stand up for their interests. Therefore, I have recently written to the Minister for Housing, Communities and Local Government to ask that the housing target for Watford be reduced as this is what is in the best interest of our residents. Current targets are unrealistic and don't take into account space that is available to build on, meaning that places such as Watford which are already relatively built up are forced to build taller buildings, something which I know our residents don't want to see more of.