

Elected Mayor's Report – October 2021

Covid-19 Response

Community protection and support

The vaccination effort is continuing throughout the borough, with booster jabs now being rolled out to those who are eligible and thousands have been vaccinated at our very own Town Hall vaccination centre. The end of August saw another successful Super Sunday vaccination event in partnership with the NHS and Watford Football Club. I would like to thank everyone who helped make this day a success and get even more people vaccinated in Watford. I would also like to thank our sustainable transport partners ArrivaClick and Beryl Bikes for continuing to support travel to and from vaccination centres in the borough.

Community engagement

I have continued to deliver 'Unsung Hero' Awards to people who have supported Watford over the last 18 months. This has been a great way to honour the people who have kept our local communities going through such a difficult period and I would like to once again say thank you to all our award recipients and everyone else in the town who has gone above and beyond to keep Watford going. Looking forward, we will be further recognising our community heroes with the Audentior Awards which will be making a return in Spring 2022. Councillors are encouraged to make nominations for these awards and all the details of the categories can be found at www.audentiorawards.co.uk.

I have continued to engage with local residents online and in person as the circumstances have allowed. Recently I hosted a Facebook Live with Chief Inspector Ian Grout to answer residents' questions about policing in Watford which provided a great discussion on topical issues. I have also met with lots of local people to discuss queries and concerns they have about things going on in Watford.

I have also been fortunate over the last few months to visit lots of fantastic community groups and organisations based in Watford including The Bobath Centre, Guideposts, London Girls Development Academy of Football, Goods for Good, The Peace Hospice and many more. Seeing the work that these organisations do first hand is always eye opening and a great way to see how caring and generous the people of Watford are. Thank you to everyone who continues to support our town for everything you do.

Delivering my manifesto and working for the town

Sustainability in Watford

We recently launched our draft 'Transforming Travel in Watford: The Strategy for 2021-2041' and opened it up to public consultation. The strategy looks at how we can make it easier and greener for people to travel around Watford and is a key element of our plan to make Watford net zero carbon by 2030. Proposals have largely been well received and we have received over 1000 responses from people all across Watford. Results from the survey will be used to direct how we take this strategy forward.

Protecting our local environment

In September, Watford Council teamed up with Three Rivers District Council and Friends of the Earth Watford and Three Rivers to take part in the UK's first 'Great Big Green Week'. The week-long celebration featured events including nature walks, litter picks, movie nights and food demonstrations with an aim to draw attention to the climate and biodiversity crisis. The hope is that this will become an annual event which both educates and allows people to enjoy the best that our natural environment has to offer.

In September, the council and Veolia rolled out a collection of new 'BigBelly' bins in Cassiobury Park. The new bins are capable of compacting 960 litres of litter meaning they can stomach more waste than a standard bin, and have smart sensors to alert parks staff when they are nearing capacity. I'm delighted to see these new additions to Cassiobury Park, making it easier for people to look after and enjoy our local environment. The new bins have been made possible by the WRAP Binrastructure Grant which awarded the council £25,000 to purchase the new bins. I would like to extend a thank you to the officers who have worked tirelessly on developing our waste strategy and Veolia for their continued hard work to keep our town clean and tidy.

The Cabinet has recently approved plans to restore the local River Colne. The 'Rediscovering the River Colne' project, which has been jointly developed in partnership with environmental organisation Groundwork, will now move into its first phase of delivery between 2021 and 2024. The river will undergo an extensive range of improvements with a view to attract back the original biodiversity of the river and its habitats, including plants, fish, birds, insects and other vital species. A big focus of the project is about engaging local people to help revitalise the area, including opportunities for water monitoring, population counts and more. Throughout the project the council will focus on education around the climate and biodiversity offering outdoor wild-play sessions, riverfly monitoring and wellbeing sessions.

Thriving local economy

Since the start of the year, unemployment figures in Watford have continued to fall so that there are now over 1000 fewer people having to rely on financial support to stay afloat. The

council has continued to work really hard over the last few months to support local businesses through various grants and advice services. Working with partners including the Hertfordshire Growth Hub, W3RT and the Chamber of Commerce, we have been able to ensure that local people have all they need to grow their businesses as we enter the 'new normal'. I would like to thank all of our partners and council officers who have worked really hard over the last 18 months to ensure we are continuing to provide the best support to Watford's businesses.

Alongside supporting existing businesses, we have also seen a number of new businesses join the Watford family and I have had the pleasure of visiting some including Escape Hunt, Refillabell and Heavenly Desserts, to name a few. The Council also recently hosted the first 'Market Lates' event which saw over 600 visitors attend the Market after hours. The event was a great opportunity for people to discover some of the market's popular traders, whilst enjoying a night out with friends and family. The evening was a huge success with thanks to our partner Market Asset Management and is going to become a regular event with the next one scheduled to take place on 29th October.

Works have begun to improve the streetscape of Market Street. Improvements to the area will include the introduction of better cycle parking facilities, safer cycling routes and new modern street furniture, as well as pedestrian friendly measures including renewed footway paving, improved drainage and strategically placing bollards to prevent illegal parking. The changes that are being made here will make a real difference to the look at feel of the busy shopping area, making it more attractive for business owners and shoppers alike.

In September I attended the opening of Watford Chamber's Business Festival which offered local people opportunities to network and get advice about how to expand and grow their businesses. I would like to thank Watford Chamber for their hard work in pulling together such a fantastic programme of events for the week and everything they do to support businesses in Watford.

The Council has continued to provide grant funding to local people as we come out of the pandemic and has now paid over £6m to local businesses and individuals to ensure business can get back on their feet after a really tough 18 months.

Supporting the most vulnerable

Dementia Friendly Watford has been shortlisted for a Local Government Chronicle Award in the category of Diversity and Inclusion. Since becoming Mayor in 2018, making Watford more inclusive of those living with dementia has been a key priority of mine and the Council has undertaken a variety of activities, with the support of key partners in the town, to achieve this, including:

- Helping 14 local businesses become more dementia friendly
- Training over 3,000 people to become dementia friends
- Hosting 3 online events, 4 dementia restaurants and 8 memory cafes

It is great to be recognised for the work we have done to make Watford a more dementia friendly town and I would like to say a huge thank you everyone who has helped us on this journey. We couldn't have achieved this recognition without the great partnerships we have formed locally and, of course, the guidance and support we have had from the Alzheimer's Society.

Improvements to leisure facilities

In an effort to continue to improve the leisure facilities we offer as a council, we introduced a booking system for the Cassiobury Park paddling pools over the summer. This came after a number of residents got in touch to discuss the long wait times at the paddling pools and the risks that this posed to health, particularly on very warm and sunny days when people are most likely to be using the paddling pools. We have seen a good uptake in the booking system and hope that this has meant more people have been able to safely enjoy the facility.

Events in Watford

Over the summer the Council put on a fantastic programme of events for the 'Summer of Fun' including family favourites such as Big Screen, Big Beach and Big Bandstand. We also welcomed to Watford this summer a few new events including Colourscape and Stage in the Park, both of which were hugely successful and provided further opportunities for everyone in Watford to relax, unwind and enjoy being out and about again. It has been great to see people enjoying the culture and arts that Watford has to offer and I would like to thank all our partners who have helped add a little entertainment to Watford over the last few months. I am looking forward to seeing many more of our events return over the coming months, including the famous Cassiobury Fireworks display in November.