

Elected Mayor's Report – January 2022

2022 is an important year for Watford in that it marks 100 years of securing our Borough Charter. This is a fantastic opportunity to celebrate all of the people and things that make Watford a great place and I hope you will all be able to support us in the Centenary celebrations we have got planned.

I was sorry to hear of the recent death of former leader of Watford Borough Council, Mike Jackson and my thoughts go out to his family and friends at the current time. While we did not always agree politically, I have no doubt that he cared deeply for the people of Watford.

Covid-19 Response

Community protection and support

Thank you to everyone who has received their vaccination over the last year, and been boosted over the last few months, to keep yourselves and others safe. This is one of the most important things we can do at the current time. Over 50,000 Watford residents have received a booster vaccination and I am very grateful to everyone who has made this possible.

While we have seen case rates in Watford rise, this has been in line with the rest of the country and is hopefully only a temporary state. Our Environmental Health team continue to do fantastic work to monitor the situation and work with local businesses, schools and organisations to do everything possible to limit the further spread of Covid-19.

We have put on a number of vaccination clinics across the town over the last few months to enable people to get their covid-19 vaccinations in locations that are convenient and comfortable for them. I would like to thank everyone that has made these clinics possible including Attenborough Surgery, Manor View Practice, Atria Watford, Bridgewater Surgeries, Meriden Surgery, Vine House Health Centre, Sheepcot Medical Centre, Café Latino and many other organisations too.

I continue to advocate for greater support for businesses and wrote to the Chancellor of the Exchequer calling for an emergency package of financial support for businesses amid the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic and recent emergence of the Omicron variant.

I would like to thank the revenues and benefits team at the Council for their continued hard work in distributing grants for businesses and individuals as the pandemic continues. There are a number of ways in which people can get support and I would encourage all those in need to reach out to the council who can advise on the help available.

We have also been successful in our prudent planning for the longer term impacts of Covid-19 by ensuring that our renewal fund still has money in the pot which can be spent wisely as the current situation develops. By not distributing all of this fund from the offset it has

meant that we will be able to support businesses and individuals for much longer than we otherwise would have been able to.

Community engagement

Over the last few months I have had the pleasure of delivering a number of Unsung Hero awards to local people who have made significant contributions to the Watford community over the last couple of years. As we progress through our centenary year we will be honouring more of Watford's heroes with a special centenary award.

I continue to reach out to the community by conducting interviews on radio shows, sending out my weekly newsletters, and holding my virtual surgeries.

Delivering my manifesto and working for the town

Sustainability in Watford

We have been doing a lot locally to encourage people to recycle more, including by making changes to the waste and recycling collections in September 2020. I am really pleased to see that the hard work has been paying off as Watford had the fifth highest recycling rate increase in England last year. With thanks to Veolia, Watford Borough Council's recycling and waste provider, we have seen recycling rates increase to 50% over the last year, helping us reach our goal of being carbon net zero by 2030. We will continue to work closely with Veolia and to help residents make choices that are better for our town, and for the future of the planet.

Protecting our local environment

Our project to revitalise the River Colne is now underway with a number of public engagement activities taking place throughout January to enable local people to get involved with the project. The partnership we have with Groundwork East has meant that local people of all ages have been able to get active in helping us restore the river and protect this vital biodiverse habitat. Further details on this work can be found at www.rivercolnewatford.co.uk.

Thriving local economy

In December, our Cabinet agreed the business cases for our Town Hall Quarter project. The project will secure the long term future of two of the town's landmark historic buildings and transform them for greater community use while creating savings and profit opportunities for the council in the future.

As a part of this project we are also looking at creating an innovation and incubation hub which can support emerging local businesses and help to improve the local economy on a wider scale. I look forward to seeing how this progresses and am sure the project will be of interest to lots of people in the town.

Supporting the most vulnerable

In December I took part in a fantastic event organised by Watford Women's Centre, Watford Football Club and Watford FC Community & Sports Education Trust to discuss women's safety in Watford as part of the 16 days of Action Against Domestic Violence. The event was a great opportunity to talk to local people and organisation about what can be done to improve safety for women and girls and to start an open conversation with men about how we can all help this campaign. I look forward to continued work on this issue and hope that you will all join me in condemning violence in all forms.

Specially adapted trishaw bikes funded by Watford Council hit the town centre in December as they toured around our wonderful Christmas lights display. The rickshaw-style device which comfortably seats two people, connected those no longer able to ride for themselves with their community and the outdoors, by giving them free rides from volunteers at Watford Cycle Hub. It was fantastic witnessing the joy of the elderly residents from our local care homes on the trishaws and I would like to thank Watford Cycle Hub for this fantastic initiative.

At the start of the year Deputy Mayor, Aga Dychton, and I conducted a walk to all 17 of Watford's Green Flag Parks to raise money for local charity Home Start Watford & Three Rivers. This was a great opportunity to not only pay a visit to our fantastic green spaces, but also to raise important funds for a charity which does so much to support local vulnerable families. Thank you to everyone who supported us on this walk.

I am delighted that my sponsored Christmas card this year raised over £7,500 for local charities Random Cafe and Playskill. Thank you to Kristian from Beechfield School for designing the festive card, and to all of the local sponsors including Camelot Careers, Wenta, Watford FC, Murrill Construction Limited, Everyone Active, Warner Bros. Studio Tour London, West Herts Golf Club, Veolia UK and Sigma Pharmaceutical Ltd who donated to support two really important charities in Watford.

Improvements to parks and leisure facilities

We have had another fantastic year for our parks and open spaces, securing a record number of Green Flag Awards this year; we now have 17 Green Flag Parks which is up from 12 in 2020. Thank you to everyone who has made this happen including the Council's Parks team, Veolia and of course the 'Friends of' groups who do so much all year to keep our parks great. We also had 3 parks in the People's Choice Top 15 parks in the UK which is a huge testament to the value that local people place on having quality green spaces to enjoy.

I would like to say a huge congratulations to Central Watford Leisure Centre who have been awarded an outstanding rating by a mystery inspection. This is a fantastic achievement and they are 1 of only 2 leisure centres in the whole country to receive this status. Thank you to all the staff at Everyone Active who are great partners to work with. This award is testament to the great job the staff do to help us all keep fit and healthy in Watford.

To help people cycle safely and confidently, Watford Borough Council, Sport England, British Cycling and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) via the Places to Ride programme will be building a new learn-to-ride cycling facility in King George V Playing Fields over the next few months. The learn-to-ride space which includes miniature roadways, traffic signs, markings and model buildings, will allow cyclists of all abilities an opportunity to gain practical skills and understand how to cycle on today's roads.

Protecting Watford's culture and heritage

2022 is a landmark year for Watford as we celebrate 100 years since we were awarded our borough status by royal charter. The charter was granted on 18 October 2022 in recognition of the town's increasing importance as a centre for industry, business and as a home for a growing community. To mark this milestone year, there will be a range of activities and events held throughout 2022 to involve the whole Watford community, including commemorating those celebrating a 100th birthday, running various competitions, and hosting a big celebration to coincide with the Queen's Platinum Jubilee weekend in June.

Watford Museum have successfully purchased a watercolour painting of Oxhey Park by famous local artist Beatrice Parsons (1870 – 1955), thanks to support from the Hertfordshire Heritage Fund and the Friends of Watford Museum. One of the leading English painters of gardens, the addition of Beatrice Parsons' work to Watford Museum's art collection will be the first painting of Oxhey Park owned by the museum and improve the representation of female artists.

Events in Watford

We had a fantastic night at Cassiobury Park in November for our annual Fireworks display which returned after a hiatus because of Covid-19. On the night fundraising efforts meant that over £11,700 was raised for local charities through generous donations. Thank you to Watford Rotary Club and Watford Lions Club for organising the fundraising effort and to all of the volunteers who collected donations on the night.

Once again this year we were able to put on a fantastic display of Christmas lights in the town and we were even able to extend our festive decorations out beyond the town centre including St Albans Road, Clarendon Road, and more. Thank you to Watford BID for working collaboratively with the Council to make these Christmas lights happen.

In December we also held another successful Market Lates event with a Christmas theme which was another great opportunity to showcase the best bits of our market and see people enjoying the food, drink and entertainment that was on offer.

Standing up for Watford

Housing Targets

I have written to the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities to ask for a re-think to the way that housing targets are calculated. Since 2018 the government have tripled Watford's housing target with no regard for whether we actually have the land to build new developments on. We need drastic changes to make the system fairer and I will continue to work for these changes.

Watford General

We continue to support plans for a redeveloped Watford General Hospital and have been working closely with the Hospital Trust to do everything we can to make this possible for our residents and the staff and volunteers at the Trust. In December there was positive news that funding is now in place for architects and others to take this project forward. It is essential that the government provides full funding so that we can see bigger and better hospital facilities in the town as soon as possible.

Boundary Tax

I have also written to Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan to express a number of concerns regarding ongoing talks about new proposals for Transport for London which would negatively affect the residents of Watford. The Mayor of London at present hasn't ruled out axing all Met Line tube services, slashing funding for buses between London and Hertfordshire and introducing a boundary tax for non-London residents to drive into the Greater London area. I will continue to keep residents informed of any updates that I get on this matter.