

Elected Mayor's Report – March 2022

As I write my report we are one week into the Russian invasion of Ukraine. On behalf of the whole of Watford I would like to say that our thoughts and prayers are with the brave people of Ukraine who are facing unimaginable suffering as their country and lives are shattered by the impacts of war.

Many of us want to respond to the humanitarian crisis that is unfolding in Ukraine and to support those neighbouring countries who are reaching out to offer support and aid to those in such dire need.

A great way for us to help is to support Goods for Good, a local charity that sends donated goods to vulnerable communities around the world and who have mobilised to send much-needed supplies to Ukraine.

Covid-19 Response

Community protection and support

Vaccination remains one of the most effective ways of protecting yourself and others against Covid-19 and I would like to thank everyone who has gone to get their first, second and booster doses of the vaccine in Watford. As a council we continue to support the roll out of vaccinations in Watford and have now vaccinated almost 200,000 people in the borough. There is also a fantastic amount of work being done behind the scenes by our environmental health team to try and reach the sections of the community who still haven't had their vaccinations. To those people, I would just encourage you to reach out, ask any questions you have and, when you feel comfortable, get vaccinated – it's not too late and it may save your life.

Community engagement

As restrictions have eased and we 'learn to live with covid' I have begun to meet with residents face to face once again, hosting my surgeries both in person and online to meet the variety of needs of local residents. I also continue to reach thousands of residents through my weekly newsletters where I update on the current news, events and opportunities in the town.

Delivering my manifesto and working for the town

Sustainability in Watford

Our cabinet recently agreed plans to cut congestion in Watford through Watford's Sustainable Transport Strategy. The strategy will make it easier for people to choose cleaner

modes of transport, such as walking and cycling. It also includes commitments to increase cycle parking and the number of cycle lanes; support bus services; and develop a new Croxley to Watford public transport link, after London's Labour Mayor stopped plans to extend the Metropolitan Line to Watford Junction.

Over the last 2 years it has been great to see some improvements to our active and sustainable transport offerings. In particular, our Beryl bike share scheme has been incredibly popular with almost 200,000 journeys since the launch last March. Our new strategy builds on the work we have been doing since declaring a climate emergency in 2019 and the top priority is to reduce the congestion around Watford and make our air cleaner.

Protecting our local environment

We have kicked off work for our 10 year plan to revitalise the River Colne in Watford. A large part of this work is about community engagement and getting local people to learn more about the biodiversity we have right on our doorstep. So far we have seen a successful number of community events including an art exhibition focused around the river and its wildlife, consultation events and a family festival in Knutsford Playing Fields. It has been wonderful to see so many people taking part and engaging on such an important project for our town. For details of upcoming events please visit www.rivercolnewatford.co.uk

We have committed to planting 10,000 trees in Watford in 2022, and the work towards this is well underway. I have participated in a number of tree planting events with local organisations and schools over the last couple of months. In February we also held Watford's first tree giveaway event in Cassiobury Park which was a huge success and saw over 7,000 sapling trees being given away to local residents to plant in their gardens. As we try to increase Watford's tree canopy from 18% to 20% it is great to see so many local residents getting involved and supporting our ambitions. I would also like to say a huge thank you to Veolia who have been very supportive in both the tree planting and giveaway events.

Thriving local economy

We have seen a number of new shops and businesses pop up across Watford, and I have been fortunate enough to visit a number of them including Ngorli Community Interest Company, Fusion, Dream Optic Eyeglasses Boutique. It is great to see businesses choosing to make Watford their home and I know local residents will make sure they feel welcome.

We have continued to provide a variety of support to our local businesses as we come out of the pandemic and get to grips with the post-Covid business world. A number of initiatives have been on offer to local businesses and entrepreneurs including a young entrepreneurs programme, sustainable business programme and various support grants.

As part of our work on 'Designing Watford Town Centre for the Future', I recently launched Watford's first Urban Room designed by West Herts College student Heba Hussain. The room is designed to give people who work, live and visit the town a place to share their views on how the town centre should develop and grow over the next 20 years. The design which competed against 45 other fantastic submissions by WHC students was built by architects New Practice with materials sourced by the Watford and West Herts Chamber of Commerce and the space provided by Atria. Featured in the room are a range of places and spaces to sit and discuss issues, read the comments and views of others and post your own vision of what the town centre should be like in the future. Elements from the designs of the two runners' up Kimberley Falconi and Christina Summa have also been incorporated into the final build. I would encourage everyone to pay a visit to the Urban Room and post your views on the town centre and how it should evolve in the future - be it new green spaces, more town centre homes, more focus on pedestrians, more civic spaces and art, better accessibility, more independent retailers or sustainable modes of transport.

Supporting the most vulnerable

On 14th February 2022, Valentine's Day, Morrisons supermarket together with Dementia Friendly Watford hosted their first cafe dedicated to people living with dementia and their carers. Christine Smith from Morrisons Watford wanted to provide a space in the supermarket where people living with Dementia could come and have some refreshments and entertainment, whilst their carers had some time to themselves to do some shopping or just have a cup of tea and some cake in a relaxed environment. I would like to say a huge thank you to Morrisons for providing the space, the refreshments and the entertainment and to the Dementia Friendly Watford steering group who organised the volunteers and supported the event.

In February, the first Pensioners Forum of 2022 was held in collaboration with Watford and Three Rivers Trust at Watford Colosseum. The pensioners forum, which takes place multiple times a year, provides residents of pension age with support and advice on topics including energy saving, wellbeing and key local services. These are great events that I would encourage all of our pensioners in Watford to try and attend.

I had the pleasure of visiting the National Bobath Cerebral Palsy Centre last month for their 65th anniversary celebrations. They do fantastic work to support people living with cerebral palsy and similar neurological conditions, and we are lucky to have them in Watford. It was wonderful that Her Royal Highness The Duchess of Gloucester was also able to visit the centre to see the important work that they do.

Improvements to parks and leisure facilities

It was fantastic to welcome Alan Shearer to Watford Leisure Centre Woodside in January for the launch of a new state-of-the-art fitness concept, FORTIS. Not only does this provide

another fitness option for local people, but it shows the quality of Watford's facilities and the ability we have to draw people from outside the area.

We have also seen improvements made to King George V Playing Fields with the completion of our learn-to-ride facility which will be valuable for those wanting to become more confident cyclists and understand road safety. We have also installed new outdoor gym equipment at King George V Playing Fields, building on the council's commitment to help people live a more active and healthy lifestyle, while keeping the costs to do this down. The equipment is accessible for users of all abilities with diagrams to explain how to use the equipment properly.

Protecting Watford's culture and heritage

Plans are well underway for our Centenary celebrations this year. We have launched the website and are inviting residents to get involved in a number of ways including competitions, events and our joint centenary and Queen's Jubilee celebration on the bank holiday weekend in June. For more information please visit www.watfordcentenary.com

Watford Football Club has played such a huge part in the lives of so many people in our town, and like us they are celebrating a big birthday this year, having been based at Vicarage Road for 100 years. To celebrate this, the Council, Hertfordshire County Council and the football club commissioned MurWalls to paint a Hornets-themed mural by the stadium. This has been received with high praise by residents and is a great way to recognise the impact that the club has had on our town over the last 100 years and more.

Standing up for Watford

Housing Targets

For the second year running Watford has failed to meet the housing target set by central government, delivering only 48% of the new houses expected of us. I continue to campaign government ministers for a reduction in our targets and more power to be given to local areas to make decisions about planning.

Watford General

After the good news in December that the hospital trust had received confirmation of the funding needed for the new hospital facilities at Watford General, there have unfortunately been rumblings coming from the MP for Hemel Hempstead which once again threaten this project. I continue to have regular meetings with the hospital and are keeping abreast of progress to ensure the council can do everything possible to help get Watford residents the hospital facilities we have been promised for so long.

Transport

A number of residents have been in touch with me over the recent weeks and months to express concern about the future of buses and trains in Watford and Hertfordshire. I have written to the Leader of Hertfordshire County Council to seek assurances that our bus services are not under threat of cuts. I have also been in contact with the Secretary of State for Transport and local train operators to call for a review to the train services available for Watford residents. I will continue to work with partners to ensure that public transport facilities are of the quality and efficiency expected by our residents.

Recognising Watford's community heroes

We have recently held the first Audentior awards since the start of the pandemic. The awards evening provides an opportunity to reward the best of our community for their dedication to making the town a fantastic place to live. Congratulations to all the nominees and winners this year, there was a high calibre of nominations and we are grateful to every single one of you who has made such a significant contribution to our town.

As part of our Centenary celebrations we are honouring some of the people who have made Watford what it is today through a social media campaign and awards titled '100 people who made Watford'. We are encouraging nominations from the public for these heroes via the centenary website.

We have also recently given out our first Centenary Hero award to the League of Friends at Watford General Hospital. The Centenary Heroes enable us to recognise the positive contributions made by people and organisations in Watford and will be part of the centenary legacy for future generations of Watfordians to look back on the town as we are in 2022. It was a real honour to join the League of Friends on their last day at Watford General and I don't think there are any more worthy recipients of the first Watford Centenary Heroes award. Most of us won't remember a time when the League was not on hand when we visited Watford General but we may not be so familiar with the real difference they have made to so many parts of the hospital through the money they have raised.