

Elected Mayor's Report July 2022

As I write my report, residents and businesses in Watford are increasingly dealing with a cost of living emergency. Families are experiencing large increases in their household energy bills and facing fuel and food price hikes. As a council, we are working hard with partners and in our town to provide what support we can to help minimise the impact of the cost of living crisis. We are also making information available on the council website to signpost people to other help where it is available. The Liberal Democrat group will also be raising a motion to full council addressing the crisis and calling on the government to use its powers to improve the lives of local residents.

The summer holidays can be a difficult time when money is tight and the council has done what it can to provide free events including our popular Wat's on programme. Wat's On takes place in July and August and provides sessions in areas as diverse as photography, acting and coding as well as various sports opportunities. I know that many of us are also looking forward to other free events such as Imagine Watford and our big screen events in Knutsford Playing Fields and Woodside Playing fields this summer.

Standing Up for Watford

My Liberal Democrat administration is ambitious for Watford and I am working hard with my cabinet to deliver my manifesto and invest in our town, creating a Watford that has thriving businesses, a strong community and a council that continues to innovate to provide excellent services for residents.

My cabinet recently approved plans to create a Town Hall Quarter which will boost jobs, create spaces for the community and help meet our zero carbon targets. When complete it will create a vibrant and thriving hub in the heart of the town, and contribute to our town's prosperity and success.

The key focus of these plans is the transformation of the Town Hall and the Colosseum. Both of these buildings are important parts of the town's heritage. It is a priority of mine to protect our heritage, while building a town fit for the future. The plans for the Colosseum will see the much loved venue undergo a comprehensive refurbishment, allowing it to be used by local performers and creative and arts groups. As we undergo the building work we will also be looking for an experienced operator to work with us to make the project a success, support local jobs and create volunteer opportunities when it reopens in 2023.

The Town Hall improvements will see the council make the most of the changes in work habits following the pandemic to reduce its footprint and use the opportunity to create a community and business hub. The plans for the scheme will protect and enhance the art deco history of the building and create a wonderful location for Watford's museum. It will also see the creation of the dedicated space for entrepreneurs and business start-ups, helping to increase local job opportunities and provide additional spaces to support local cultural organisations and charities in the town.

Standing up to unfair housing targets

I have continued in my efforts to lobby the government for a cut in Watford's unfair housing target and at the end of May wrote to the then Minister for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, the Rt Hon. Michael Gove MP, to impress upon him the danger of government continuing with its plan and the need to consider existing population density statistics when setting these targets.

As Watford is already a dense borough and has relatively little land to develop, a high target from central government will inevitably lead to more high-rise developments instead of delivering the homes we need in order to meet the hopes of families in the borough. In my letter I conveyed my strong objections to the current methodology for calculating targets. At the moment the system is unfair, placing the burden of fixing the housing crisis on the shoulders of places that are already well developed, with no regard for the size of the area or the availability of land.

The upcoming change in government is an opportunity for ministers to reset their relationship with local authorities and create a fairer system that allows development to happen sustainably. I will continue to push government to respect Watford's identity as a Hertfordshire town and set more realistic housebuilding targets.

Standing up for businesses in Watford

After such a difficult and challenging time during the pandemic, it has been reassuring to see most parts of Watford's economy well on the path to recovery. Throughout the crisis, we put great focus on targeting grant funding, tax reliefs and other support towards the businesses in Watford who needed it. We are very pleased as a Council to hear from businesses that this really helped them keep afloat during the pandemic.

Over the last year we have also been able to target funding to business support projects that will have a long term positive impact. This support includes the Watford Business Growth Grant which helped over 300 small businesses with their expansion plans and two Watford Young Entrepreneurs Projects which will help over 80 young people start up their own businesses in Watford. In addition, we have supported businesses on neighbourhood parades as well as the town centre, charity and voluntary organisations, creative organisations and women in business. Overall, over 1000 businesses in Watford have benefited from the wide range of projects we have put in place.

As we continue to see growth in town centre footfall and spend, albeit not yet at pre-pandemic levels, we can be proud of the investment the council has made and the offer Watford presents to residents and visitors. Places like Cineworld, Hollywood Bowl and Put shack, along with our great range of cafes and restaurants, are bringing people back out into the town centre, which helps retailers too. Investors see the town centre as attractive for investment, and we have comparatively low vacancy rates and good demand for units. It's also great to continue to see more new businesses coming into the town centre. Moving forward we will be using the Shared Prosperity Fund to help ensure that previous EU funded business support and skills services, which help Watford businesses and residents, are maintained, as well as provide some funding for new local projects.

Standing up to provide support for refugees

Watford continues to provide refuge for those fleeing the war in Ukraine and we are working with our partners and the County Council to ensure that the resettlement of refugees is as successful as possible.

I am grateful for all those families in Watford who have given up space in their homes to provide a safe and supportive place to live. I am also grateful to all of those who registered to provide support but who have not yet matched with refugees. Many of these volunteers are now agreeing to take in refugees where the initial placement has come to an end for whatever reason. The council and its partners are working closely with sponsor families to ensure that they feel supported throughout the process with the aim of making sure as many placements are as successful as possible.

Providing accommodation is only the first step in ensuring that our new Ukrainian neighbours feel welcome in Watford. The Council, Hertfordshire County council and the voluntary sector are working closely together to make sure that all the necessary support is available. One area of growing need is ongoing mental health support to help deal with their traumatic experiences over the last year. Where this is needed people are being signposted and where gaps in available provision are identified, the council is being proactive in working with Hertfordshire County Council to make this available.

Building a Sustainable Watford

New Neighbourhood Grants

As a Liberal Democrat council we believe that local residents should be empowered to make a difference to their local area. That is why I am pleased that we have had great engagement in our Neighbourhood Grant consultation. We worked with one of our partners, Commonplace, to create a new consultation platform which allows residents to give their views in innovative ways.

The Neighbourhood grant offers residents the opportunity to access funding ranging from a couple of hundred pounds to up to £20,000. The funding, generated from CIL, is aimed at local projects that will improve the local area and benefit residents. This may include environmental improvements such as landscaping or enhancing open spaces, funding new or improved play facilities, public art or street theatre.

To increase engagement by local residents, the council are working with commonplace, an online platform that uses interactive maps where local residents can engage in polls, and give comments and feedback on other people's ideas. This will ensure that we are funding projects that are supported by residents and puts the power to shape the local area in their hands. The public consultation will be repeated annually and we will continually review the engagement strategy so that we can ensure we hear from all residents. There is more information about this at <https://watfordneighbourhoodgrant.commonplace.is>

Supporting businesses to become more sustainable

As we give support for business to grow, be successful and help our local economy thrive, we cannot forget the climate emergency.

We will work with businesses to access any funding opportunities the government provides to help with this, and we will continue to focus on sustainability across our town, helping businesses connect with the guidance available as we all take the path towards a net zero carbon future.

Locally, we have funded projects to help Watford businesses become more sustainable. For example, working with Sustainable X we have supported 95 local businesses, with a reach of over 2800 employees. To achieve accreditation from Sustainable X, businesses nominate a sustainability officer, receive training on how to create a sustainability plan, and then are guided through the implementation of the plan to enable the business to reduce their environmental impact. This could, for example, include reducing waste, improving energy efficiency and creating more sustainable supply chains. We will continue to do the best we can to support business but we will also need more funding from government to ensure that the whole of Watford can achieve its climate change goals.

Investing in our parks and facilities

Last week I opened a new storage hub in Oxhey Activity Park. The building was joint funded by Watford Borough Council, Sport England, British Cycling and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and will improve what is already one of the best skate parks in the UK.

The new facility will enable the council to ensure it effectively utilises all available resources, bringing an offer together to provide facilities and services that make it easier for wheeled activity participants.

ABC Skateboarding will be working with the council to improve and expand their service to visitors at the site, as well as being a base for minor repairs. With the hub becoming a focal point in the park, it will also raise awareness of the many sessions that the team run for people of all ages and abilities, to help people become more skilled riders.

News and Events

The new Elton John mural at the Library unveiled

I am pleased that the council was able to support the painting of a new Sir Elton John mural at the side of the library and was honoured to unveil it to coincide with Sir Elton John's Farewell Yellow Brick Road tour. This new mural, which features the iconic "rose tinted" photo will be a draw for residents and tourists for years to come.

Sir Elton has contributed so much to our community, especially his work with Watford Football Club but has also raised millions for charitable causes across the world. This mural is our way of showing Sir Elton that he will forever be a part of Watford.

I would like to thank the talented team at MurWalls, Cllr Stephen Giles-Medhurst, and Hertfordshire County Council for working with Watford Borough Council for making the mural happen.

Celebrating the service of Her Majesty The Queen

In June we were able to celebrate and pay tribute to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II's reign which has been a foundational part of our national life for 70 years. The Queen has served tirelessly for our country and has been an inspiration to many in public life, including myself.

It was wonderful to watch some of the coverage of the events near the palace on the BBC but what made me particularly happy was seeing the number of street parties and small celebrations organised by residents here in Watford. At national events such as these, I am reminded of the great community spirit in this town and it makes me immensely proud to be able to represent Watford as Mayor.

Events for our Centenary Celebrations

We have also been celebrating our centenary year since being awarded borough status by Royal Charter. The day started off with a brilliant community-led parade through the town centre, complete with a group of colourful dancers and performers. We were then treated to great local musical and dance talent at the bandstand in Cassiobury Park and local businesses showcased their work in the arts and crafts village. To finish the day, we held our centenary concert featuring a DJ and a range of Watford artists.

Thank you to our partners and sponsors One Local, Watford Area Arts Forum, Stage in the Park, The Pump House, Murrill Construction, The Chamber of Conscience, Berkley Group, and Warner Bros. Studio Tour for making this event possible. I would also like to pay tribute to the volunteers who helped to organise that day and the team who worked tirelessly to ensure that the park was clean throughout the event.

Armed Forces Day was an opportunity to thank those who serve

I was honoured to pay tribute once again this year to Britain's service men and women during Armed Forces week. This important week reminds us of the risk many people from across our country take to defend our nation and protect our interests abroad. We also remember those who have made the ultimate sacrifice while serving their country.

This year, I was particularly pleased that Deputy Mayor Cllr Aga Dychton was able to represent the Watford Borough Council at a ceremony at Hertfordshire County Council where she signed the Hertfordshire Armed Forces Covenant signalling our commitment to the armed forces community here in Watford all year round.

In Watford, I raised the flag on Armed Forces Day on the 25th June and attended a special event at the town hall, organised by Luther Blissett, Lauren Fox and Elizabeth Burns.

Celebrating Pride in Watford

As June approached we were pleased to raise the pride flag outside the town hall to show support to our LGBTQ+ community here in Watford. Every year we join residents and companies across the town to celebrate the many advances in LGBT rights that have been secured in recent years, but also recognise that there is more that needs to be done for all

people to be treated equally. We are also looking forward to supporting Herts Pride in Cassiobury Park on 20th August this year.

New Sunday markets are off to a successful start.

I am already proud of the great market we have here in Watford but it has recently become even bigger and better with the introduction of our Sunday Speciality markets. This latest initiative builds on some of the other improvements to the market including the introduction of Market Lates.

Each of the Sunday Markets have a specific focus and provide the opportunity for residents and visitors in Watford to experience a wide range of products and services. The first Sunday Market was held on 22 May and specialised in providing space to new businesses, young traders and start ups. Upcoming markets will specialise in antiques and vintage (24 July), vegan and green (21 August) and Continental (18 September). Following that we will have a market to coincide with the Great Big Green Week (25 September).

I hope that the Sunday markets continue to go from strength to strength and provide a boost to both existing and new traders, as well as the surrounding shops and venues.