

Elected Mayor's Report October 2022

Introduction

As I write my report, the cost of living crisis is continuing to cause problems for residents across Watford. Although the council has been successful in ensuring that all those entitled to £150 support received it and the government has announced help with the cost of energy going forward, residents will still see a rise in their energy and other bills. This will be exacerbated by ongoing food inflation and the consequences of the government's budget announcement increasing the cost of borrowing and mortgages. My administration continues to provide support for the most vulnerable both through the direct provision of services, providing funding for the community and voluntary sector and through signposting to other relevant services.

Since my last report, we have witnessed the sad death of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. The response in Watford is set out in more detail below but I want at the outset to thank the officers at Watford Borough Council who worked tirelessly over that difficult period to deliver a fitting tribute to the queen and support the borough to mourn the loss of Her Majesty properly.

Death of Queen Elizabeth II

Along with the whole of Watford I was shocked and saddened by the passing of Her late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. She dedicated her life to our country and the Commonwealth, and played such a huge role in our lives for over 70 years as monarch.

As with the death of any significant figure in public life a number of protocols had to be followed, some of which changed throughout the days between The Queen's death and the end of the period of mourning. I am truly grateful to the team of officers at the council who went above and beyond during that period to ensure that all protocols were followed, including those around communication, which allowed the town to grieve in an appropriate way.

In the days following the death, the council arranged for members of the public to be able to pay their respects to the queen by leaving a floral tribute at the Peace Memorial. On behalf of the council flowers were laid by myself, the Chairman of the Council and the Chief Executive. A book of condolence was also opened at the Town Hall and the Watford Museum. I am grateful for the staff at the museum for working with the council to ensure that as many residents as possible were able to sign the book and I would also like to thank the Lord Lieutenant of Hertfordshire for all the work he did, including opening an online book of condolence to widen the opportunities for residents to sign.

On the eve of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II's funeral, a multi-faith service of commemoration took place at St Mary's Church in Watford. The service was very moving and included a one minute silence to coincide with the national silence. It was powerful to know that at that time across the country, millions of people were paying respects to the memory of someone who had done so much for the country.

I and the Council Chairman also took part in the ceremony for the public proclamation of the accession to the throne of His Majesty King Charles III. It was such an honour to be part of this ceremony, which has a history stretching back hundreds of years. I was able at that ceremony to extend to our new king our best wishes for a long and successful reign

Standing up for Watford

Watford General Hospital

The future development of Watford General Hospital and improvements to other local hospitals is an important issue to residents in Watford and the surrounding area. The hospital provides a great service to residents and is valued in the community. However, for the hospital to be fit to serve residents into the future, it is vital that the modernisation and redevelopment takes place and that we receive the funding from the government's hospital building programme. Following the appointment of the new Prime Minister Liz Truss, I wrote to her to ask for reassurance that this funding would be guaranteed despite any other policy priorities. A response is yet to be received but I am hopeful that one will be received soon.

Housebuilding targets

The new Prime Minister has made announcements that she intends to reform planning laws to increase housebuilding across the country. As a longstanding critic of the previous housebuilding targets for Watford I will be monitoring any upcoming policy announcements in this area and will continue to challenge the current unrealistic targets set by government.

In recent months, consultation on the South West Herts Joint Strategic Plan has taken place. This has been created by Watford Borough Council as well as St Albans City and District Council, Dacorum Borough Council, Hertsmere Borough Council and Three Rivers District Council and is supported by Hertfordshire County Council. The plan has been developed following a consultation in early 2020 and has used this feedback to create a single vision for the region that will make it an even better place to live, work and visit. This plan will be particularly important for Watford as it will allow us to ensure that we have the right infrastructure to provide high quality services for residents and make long term decisions that allow the town to grow sustainably. It is also important to give local residents their say on how the town is shaped in the future rather than dictated centrally from government

Watford – Croxley link

In my manifesto I committed to working with Hertfordshire County Council to press for the disused Croxley link to be brought back in to use to improve transport links in the town. I am pleased to report that significant progress towards this commitment has been achieved.

Three leading travel and transport consultancies were commissioned to explore a wide range of proposals to bring the disused stretch of railway back in to use. The project is a partnership between Watford Borough Council and Hertfordshire County Council, Three Rivers District Council and Network Rail. It is our hope that this process will create a shovel-ready proposal that can be costed and submitted to government for funding when opportunities arise.

The benefit of this scheme will be that it will improve connectivity within the area and link important areas of Watford such as the town centre, hospital, Watford FC and provide connections between Croxley Green and Watford Junction and the travel network beyond. The project could unlock huge potential for economic growth in the area as well as contribute to our commitments to reduce congestion, provide alternative, greener methods of travel and contribute to a zero carbon future.

Cost of living emergency

The cost of living emergency continues to cause significant problems for residents in Watford. In the last full council meeting, Watford Borough Council declared a cost of living emergency and called on the government to instigate a windfall tax to pay for energy help and to provide extra support for those on low incomes and benefits. In response to that council motion I wrote to the then Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to ask her to meet these demands. A reply was received from David

Rutley MP, the then Minister for Welfare Delivery. He stated that there are no plans to reinstate the temporary uplift to Universal Credit and summarised the support that had been given up to that point for households struggling with bills.

In response to the cost of living crisis, the council have convened a forum of local organisations to work together to understand and coordinate the support available to local people facing financial difficulties. The forum will also bring together data and information to build understanding of the extent of the crisis within Watford and make sure Watford is coordinating with county, regional and national support and campaigns.

One issue raised with me by a number of residents, local charities, and community organisations is the cost of school uniform. With the cost of living crisis this could push many more families into serious financial difficulty. Last year, the government provided guidance to schools asking them to limit the number of branded items and find ways of reducing the cost of uniforms. Local charities and community organisations asked me to raise this issue with the local education authority, Hertfordshire County Council to find out what had been done with local schools to ensure they are following the guidelines and keeping prices low.

Police in Watford Town Centre

Following a number of high profile incidents in the High Street, I have become increasingly concerned with the low level of police resources deployed on the High Street and surrounding area.

There are a number of ways in which the council work with the police to keep crime low and support victims including taking a lead in the use of the community trigger but I still feel that the number of police need increasing to deal with crime and anti-social behaviour effectively. I want to work closely with the Police and Crime Commissioner and make the case for prioritising resources where they are needed most and will continue to push for this going forward.

Tree planting schemes have been a success

Two years ago, the council unveiled its ambitious Tree and Woodland Strategy, which included the goal of planting 20,000 trees over the next four years and increasing the town's tree canopy cover from 18% to 20% - which is above the national average - over the next ten years. Over the last few months a number of initiatives to increase the number of trees have been launched.

The first allows residents to identify areas in our town where they would like trees to be placed. The online system allowed residents to select places either where trees had been previously or areas that had not had trees before. The deadline for the consultation was 30th September and all suggestions will be reviewed over October to allow planting of trees during the planting season between November and March. Other suggestions received after the deadline will instead be assessed for the planting season next year.

The second, run in partnership with Hertfordshire County Council is aimed at helping individual residents to claim free trees as part of the 'Your Tree Our Future' scheme. Across Hertfordshire 100,000 trees will be given away over the next four years with 4000 trees available to Watford residents this year. Residents can choose from 8 native species or select a hedgerow pack on a first come, first served basis. Take up has been positive so far and it is encouraging to see so many local residents playing their part in the fight against climate change.

Riverside Road development wins Award

I am proud to report that the Riverside Road Development has won the prestigious Richard Feilden Award at the Housing Design Awards. Riverside Road was developed by the council and designed by Bell Phillips Architects and provides high quality, energy efficient homes for local families.

The homes are designed to meet levels of BRE's Home Quality Mark, an independently assessed certification scheme for new homes. This has been achieved with high levels of insulation, PV panels on the roof which produce energy to power electrical appliances and an air source heat pump which ensures the homes are well heated and warm in the colder months. The new homes are also well connected to local schools, public transport and other key infrastructure, which encourages use of more sustainable modes of transport.

Beryl Bike update

I am pleased that last month Watford's Beryl Bikes scheme hit another milestone. Since the scheme was introduced, over a quarter of a million journeys have been taken with them, covering over 750,000km. The Beryl Bikes were one of my key manifesto commitments and they are playing key part in making Watford a carbon-neutral town.

The scheme currently has 200 pedal bikes and 100 e-Bikes available from 76 bays located at key points around the town. Since its inception, the scheme is estimated to have saved 27 tonnes in carbon emissions. 86% of residents within the service area are now within a five minute walk from a Beryl bay and further bay locations are under review. A number of promotions to encourage more Beryl bike usage have taken place since last full council including for car free day on 22nd September. Another free ride promotion is planned for the day of Watford's Centenary celebrations.

News and Events

Star of Herts

One of the honours of my role is attending events to celebrate the great people who make our town the place it is. That was particularly true at the **Star of Herts event**, organised by West Hertfordshire Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust.

The event was held at the Watford Palace Theatre and was an opportunity to thank individuals and teams from across the local health service for their incredible service. It was also humbling to see the extent to which they celebrated the success of each other and were positive despite the difficult and stressful jobs they undertake to keep us happy and healthy.

Most residents, if not all, in Watford have benefitted from the skill of everyone who works or volunteers for Watford General Hospital and other hospitals and services across the Trust and I pay tribute to the hard work of all staff.

Watford Fringe

The Watford Fringe was a success yet again this year with over 70 performances at 10 venues across Watford.

The Fringe is packed full of great theatre, music, comedy, dance, magic and family fun-filled shows. The headline act this year was the award-winning comedian Rosie Holt who performed a great show. It is testament to the ambition of the council and local arts venues that Watford is able to attract this level of talent annually.

I was lucky enough to open the Fringe at the launch at the Watford Palace Theatre which featured amongst others, the fantastic Watford Rock Choir which also highlighted how events such as the Watford Fringe provide opportunities for local talent to get exposure to large audiences and be successful.

Fundraising walks

Since the last meeting I have taken part in a number of fundraising walks to raise money for local charities.

On 10th September, I took part in the 25km Thames Bridges Trek to raise money for New Hope, the Watford-based charity supporting people currently experiencing homelessness in the town. Tackling homelessness is a priority of mine and New Hope play a large role in helping to help those who are rough sleeping or in danger of becoming homeless.

I also took part in the Great Big Walk for Herts on Saturday 24th September to raise money for Playskill, a local charity which supports children with physical delays and disabilities and their families. I was joined for the 15.4 mile long route with the founder and director of Playskill, Andrea Clarke and a team of other volunteers. She and her team do excellent work and are an example of the brilliant voluntary sector that support local residents and provide extra help above that which is otherwise available.

Ukraine Day

Ukraine celebrated its national day on 24th August and I was proud to raise the Ukrainian flag at the town hall to commemorate the day. As the war in Ukraine continues it is important for the town to show solidarity with the Ukrainian people as they defend their country and stand up for the values of democracy, self-determination and rule of law.

Merchant Navy Day

On 3rd September I raised the red ensign at the town hall to commemorate Merchant Navy Day. The merchant navy are often unfairly forgotten by many but played a huge part in both world wars and in modern life.

Merchant Navy is run by The Seafarers' Charity and honours those who kept the UK supplied in wartime and the merchant seafarers who sacrificed their lives to keep the country safe. In World War 1 and 2 over 50,000 merchant seafarers died. It also celebrates the modern Merchant Navy, who are still responsible for over 90% of UK imports.

Herts Pride

We were proud to host Herts Pride, Hertfordshire's largest LGBTQ+ festival, for another year in Cassiobury Park. I attended the event, as did a number of Councillors from all parties and I raised the Pride flag at the Town Hall during the weekend of the event. The event was a success but would not have been so if it wasn't for the work of all the volunteers who helped organise it or took part in it.