

Elected Mayor's Report January 2023

Introduction

As I write my report, the cost of living crisis is continuing to cause problems for residents across Watford. We are working hard to provide support to those who need it by signposting to services and through our network of welcoming hubs across the town which provide a place for residents to go, stay in a warm space, meet others and save on their energy bills. We know that over the next year there may be more challenges ahead with a potential recession and continued inflation having an impact on our residents. We are committed to protecting the front line services that people rely on in the borough and will continue to support outside agencies such as Citizens Advice Watford who provide such vital support to residents in Watford.

Standing up for Watford

Watford General Hospital

In December I wrote, alongside the Leader of Three Rivers District Council and the Leader of St Albans City and District Council to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care calling on him to move quickly to release the funding that West Hertfordshire Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust needs to begin the improvement works at Watford General Hospital and the hospitals at St Albans and Hemel Hempstead.

In that letter we highlighted the strong case for the improvements to Watford General Hospital, including the significant ongoing costs to the NHS of repairing the old unfit buildings and the fact that the development at Watford General has already received outline planning permission.

It is my clear view that there have already been too many delays and we have seen during the recent winter crisis that Watford General is finding it harder and harder to effectively treat patients and meet government targets for waiting times without new facilities at the hospital. My administration has worked hard with the local Trust over recent years, including granting planning permission and building the award winning car park to free up the land for the hospital to fulfil its plans.

I will continue to put pressure on the government to deliver its promise of new facilities at our local hospital so that patients receive the care they need and local hard-working NHS staff are supported to deliver that care in a modern hospital fit for the 21st Century.

ULEZ

I have written to the Mayor of London Sadiq Khan to ask him to phase in, delay or abandon plans to extend the ULEZ to the outer London boundary. The expansion will have a negative impact on residents in Watford who commute in to London for work and yet Watford residents will not benefit from the scrappage scheme that Londoners can.

The ULEZ will expand into the borders of Greater London in August 2023 giving residents very little time to source and pay for a compliant car and avoid the charge. Additionally, those most likely to have a non-compliant car will be drivers on the lowest income which will add to that difficulty.

In the letter I made these issues clear, as well as asking for Watford residents, who pay into TfL's budget, to have access to the scrappage scheme that will help Londoners make the switch to cleaner cars. I also called for the rezoning of Watford stations into London Transport Zone 6 to reduce fares and further encourage the move away from the most polluting vehicles.

Housebuilding targets

I was pleased that following a long-running campaign against unfair housebuilding targets, that the government finally listened and announced that these would end. This change, coupled with the strong protections provided by our newly-adopted Local Plan, should mean that we will have more power in Watford to control our future.

I have been campaigning against our unfair housing targets, which are too high, for many years and I am glad that the government has finally made the commitment to scrap them. Of course it is important that we wait to see what replaces them before we can be confident of real change. I hope that the government now takes the time to develop a proper plan for new homes to be built in all parts of the country, with the services and infrastructure needed to create new communities. It was never right to try to force so much development in places like Watford, with residents given too little say.

Levelling up fund

In January we found that Watford Borough Council was unsuccessful in its bid to receive funding for the second round of Levelling Up funding. This followed on from another unsuccessful round in 2021.

Our bid for £16 million was to be split equally between the Colosseum refurbishment project, a business innovation and incubation hub and a new home for the Watford Museum. Feedback on our first submission was very positive and the government commented on the strength of the bid and encouraged us to make an application in the second round.

The proposals had the support of myself, the council, local businesses and our local Conservative MP. Unfortunately this broad support and strong bid did not lead to a positive outcome. We will need to wait for feedback from the second round before deciding how to proceed when the third round of funding becomes available. In the meantime we will be assessing the implications for our own capital programme.

I have raised the problems with the funding model employed by the government for its levelling up agenda in my correspondence with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing, and Communities. The competitive process, which pits councils against each other, has also been criticised by the Conservative Mayor of the West Midlands Andy Street.

This is the second time that we have bid for Levelling up funding and the second time it has been unsuccessful, despite us responding to all of the points raised by civil servants to ensure that we had the best chance of success as we could. These bids take a considerable amount of officer time and an associated opportunity cost, and are often unsuccessful. In fact, nearly 80% of all bids across the country failed to achieve the funding they asked for. I feel that this model of funding is wasteful of taxpayers' money, demoralising for officers and a hugely inefficient way for the government to deliver services. I have called for this model to be revised so that local councils have more power and decisions are no longer left to Whitehall.

Warm Spaces opened

I was pleased to announce at the end of last year that we were able to open a number of welcoming spaces across the borough. This was the result of many months of working with local community

groups and organisations to ensure that we had a large network of these spaces for those in need of the service across the town.

As the cost of living emergency deepened, many residents were forced to make difficult financial decisions and, in the worst case, some are forced to decide if they can afford to heat their home. These warm spaces offer a helping hand to those who might struggle with energy bills over the winter and colder months. They give people the chance to come together, stay warm, enjoy some company and perhaps a cup of tea and a biscuit.

There are over 20 of these warm spaces across Watford and all of these are eligible for support from a warm spaces grant. I was lucky to visit one of these warm spaces run by the Salvation Army at the end of last year and am grateful to all of the groups that have come forward to set up one of these spaces.

Support for people experiencing homelessness

As the temperatures started to drop, we activated our Severe Weather Emergency Provision (SWEP), providing temporary shelter for rough sleepers in the town in partnership with our local homelessness charity partners New Hope and One YMCA.

The SWEP means that every night until 31 March 2023 people in need will be provided with food and shelter in New Hope's Sanctuary Emergency Accommodation, and at One YMCA's Charter Place Hostel. This means that there will be emergency accommodation in place free of charge for people sleeping rough in town. This should ensure that no one is sleeping rough in Watford when the weather is cold.

The Severe Weather Emergency Provision is in addition to the work we do all year round to support people experiencing homelessness and rough sleeping in Watford. Our single homelessness pathway, which has benefitted from significant funding, is a pioneering approach to tackling rough sleeping and was featured on BBC news.

Anyone who finds someone sleeping rough is encouraged to call New Hope's 24/7 helpline on 0300 012 0168 or report their position with the Streetlink app on their mobile phone. You can also find out more www.newhope.org.uk and oneymca.org.

Neighbourhood CIL grants

In November, Cabinet approved £160,000 of funding to local groups, including schools, charities and sports clubs, to support initiatives that will make a real difference across the town.

The funding, which was made available from CIL contributions to the council, is the first time that residents have been directly involved in voting for projects. This means that we are able to make sure that the projects that attract these grants have widespread support. Each project could apply for up to £20,000 and had to meet the criteria set out by the council.

Over 2,000 local residents took part in choosing the successful projects which were:

Sport and wellbeing - 3G artificial grass pitch at Everett Rovers FC, fully enclosed nets at Watford Town Cricket Club, defibrillator at Glen Rovers GAA, creation of community artwork by Cathartic C.I.C and a get active programme at Veterans Support Group Watford & District.

Green spaces and sustainability - Biodiversity garden at Cherry Tree School, school allotment at Beechfield School, New Hope memorial garden at St Marys Church and interpretive signs within Cassiobury Park nature reserve.

Community spaces - Improvements to Holywell Community Centre, including the kitchen, main hall and entrance facilities, as well as Meriden Community Centre car park, which includes fixing potholes and painting white lines.

Supporting local facilities and infrastructure – CCTV at Victoria Passage, investment for better toilet and wash facilities at Watford Workshop, general improvements to the Pump House Theatre, including better disability access and Random Café to improve accessibility, add a patio, and install solar panels.

Watford Lottery

I am pleased to announce that at the last Cabinet meeting, we agreed to support a new lottery that could make £35,000 for local causes in its first year.

The Watford Lottery, which will cost £1 per ticket, will provide a long-term opportunity for the community to support local charities and organisations, especially those that have seen funding fall as a result of the cost of living crisis. 60% of ticket sales will go to these causes, with 20% set aside for prize money and 20% for administration and operational expenses.

This lottery will support local good causes while also giving a chance for residents to win weekly prizes. Watford has many charities doing really important work in our community and I want to do everything I can to support their work and this is one more way we can help to fund their activities.

A Greener Town

Sustainability and Climate Change Strategy consultation

Since the last full council meeting, the consultation on our ecological and climate change emergency strategy was concluded. We received over 300 responses and were pleased to see that the vast majority of responders support our target to reach net carbon zero by 2030. Following on from the consultation we will be revising the strategy to take into account the representations we received as well as creating a delivery plan to ensure that we have concrete steps that we can take to achieve our targets.

Climate change is a clear danger to the future prosperity of the world and will have negative consequences here in Watford and across the UK unless action is taken. I hope that through our net zero strategy and the extensive investment we are making in improving our local environment and boosting biodiversity we will be able to do our part to tackle this issue.

Three parks in the top 10

After over 18,000 voters across the country voted for their favourite local park as part of Keep Britain Tidy's annual People's Choice Award. I was pleased to report late last year that three of Watford's 17 green flag parks were voted in the top 10 in the country.

Cassiobury Park, Oxhey Park and Oxhey Activity Park are well deserved winners and are well-loved green and open spaces here in Watford. The jewel in Watford's crown, Cassiobury remains our most

loved and used space, and it is great to see that Oxhey Park's fantastic new facilities are being recognised.

I would like to thank Veolia staff and the 'Friends of' groups who do so much to keep our parks in a good condition. This recognition is an acknowledgement of the hard work of the teams that make them such great places. Sadly, many councils have made big cuts to funding for their open spaces, but they will remain a top priority for us here on the council.

Improvements to Meriden Park

One of my manifesto commitments was investing in improvements in Meriden Park, so I am delighted that work has started on the project. I want everyone in Watford to have access to and enjoy high quality, well maintained parks and green spaces and this is part of that work. I want to thank the local councillors for Meriden who have worked so hard to make these works happen and engage the community by meeting local residents and hearing their views.

The project will include an improved and extended footpath around the whole park. The spoil from the footpath will then be used to lay the foundations for the landscaping mounds, which will be landscaped and seeded in spring this year. There will also be improved accessibility to the park for those with mobility issues through the installation of a number of dropped kerbs along Garsmouth Way. Additionally, we will be planting more trees and creating a new wildflower meadow and more benches for seating and picnics. As well as making the park even more attractive for residents, this work will support biodiversity, and improve the soil, climate and the environment.

4,000 trees given away and Street tree planting

As part of the "Your Tree Our Future" scheme, over 4,000 people took home a tree for their garden in December. My manifesto commits to planting 20,000 trees across this term in office and these 4,000 will make a substantial contribution to this. Working with Hertfordshire County Council, Districts across Hertfordshire will help to plant over 100,000 trees across the county in the next four years.

In addition to the giveaway of 4,000 trees, more than 120 street trees will be planted within Watford over the winter period, the highest number ever for this type of planting scheme in the town. The locations for these trees were suggested by residents who responded to our online process earlier in 2022.

These tree planting schemes will mitigate against climate change, and reduce the impact of flooding. Trees also help to cool areas in the summer and have a positive effect on residents' health and mental wellbeing.

News and Events

Remembrance Day

On Sunday 13 November, I commemorated the service and sacrifice of the town's armed forces in the two world wars and up to the present day by laying wreaths at Watford's Peace Memorial outside the Town Hall. A two minute silence was also observed led by myself and the Chairman.

This year's tribute included a parade, the first remembrance parade in Watford for 50 years and involved hundreds of marchers, led by the Lord Lieutenant of Hertfordshire from St Mary's Church. This parade also included flag-bearers from the Royal British Legion and local scout groups. I am

grateful to the Lord Lieutenant and all of those who attended the event. It is important that we never forget the sacrifice that so many have made to protect our freedoms and defend democracy. This year in particular, as the war in Ukraine continues, we are reminded of the cost of maintaining the rights we hold so dear.

White Ribbon Accreditation

On Friday 25 November, I raised the White Ribbon flag on International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women alongside the Chairman and Deputy Mayor. This followed the news that Watford Borough Council has received accreditation from White Ribbon UK for its commitment to end violence against women and girls.

White Ribbon is a global campaign that encourages people, especially men and boys, to change the behaviour and culture that prevent women and girls feeling safe and equal at home whilst simply going about their daily lives whether at work, school, college or out and about in Watford.

As part of the accreditation, I will act as a White Ribbon Ambassador as well as a number of male members of staff. We will advocate for ending violence against women and girls and help raise awareness of issues within the local community. The Deputy Mayor, as well as some female staff will act as White Ribbon Champions, and work to encourage men to take action and build wider understanding and awareness of the impacts of violence against women and girls.

The council will now develop, and deliver, a three year action plan, working closely with key partners and voluntary and community sector organisations across Watford to tackle behaviours or attitudes that excuse or enable male violence against women and girls.

Shop local campaign

This December, I once again launched my borough-wide shop and eat local campaign.

Watford has some great businesses, many of them independently owned, and it was great to be able to celebrate some of these businesses and the fantastic opportunities they provide to local people to keep money in the local economy when they buy Christmas presents or go out for Christmas lunches.

We know that many businesses have struggled over recent years with COVID and the subsequent inflationary pressures affecting customers' spending power. The risk of recession which is looming means that we need to do as much as we can to support local business and the shop local campaign is one of the ways to do this.

Christmas lights switch on

On Saturday 19th November I was pleased to attend the Christmas light switch on at The Parade. The free event began with a fantastic marching band and included some great live entertainment. The red button was pressed by The Voice contestant Clare Cordell.

It was great to see so many people from across the town attend to share in the joy of Christmas and spend time together ahead of the festive season. Events like these make Watford such a great place to live.