

Elected Mayor's Report March 2023

Introduction

As I write this report, the cost of living emergency is continuing. This has now been the case across many of these reports submitted to full council over the past year. As ever, 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. This network has expanded recently and I am pleased that so many of these spaces are now available for residents who need them.

One of the multiple causes of the cost of living emergency, is the ongoing war in Ukraine and since I last reported to full council we have unfortunately commemorated the one year anniversary of the invasion. The increased fuel costs from this war will continue for some time and we remain committed to supporting those who are struggling with their fuel bills. We will also continue to ensure that we remember those who have died or lost loved ones in the conflict and ensure that Watford remains a welcoming place for all those fleeing war.

The past month has seen a number of our Neighbourhood Grant projects begin and I have been fortunate to be able to see some of these take shape. This scheme, which will open for a new round of applications later this year, gave out over £150,000 of funding across 16 projects. These projects ranged from supporting sports and well being to improving community spaces and protecting our natural environment.

Standing up for Watford

ULEZ

The potential impact of the rushed and unfair expansion of the Ultra Low Emission Zone continues to feature heavily in the press and in my inbox. Many residents are worried about the prospect of having to pay £12.50 per day to see loved ones in London or even to access life saving cancer treatment or provide care for vulnerable family members.

I continue to press for Watford residents, who pay into TfL through fares, to be included in the scrappage scheme organised by Sadiq Khan. Unfortunately, this has been rejected, as have calls to include all Watford stations into zone 6, ending the absurd situation where stations within the M25 are placed in a higher zone than some deep within Essex. I hope that by the time ULEZ is implemented that our reasonable requests will have been agreed and that the implementation date of ULEZ is postponed, allowing all residents to switch to compliant vehicles or public transport are able to do so. At the moment, however this seems unlikely.

In addition to lobbying Sadiq Khan, I have also written to the Department of Transport to ask them to commit to a nation-wide scrappage scheme. This is necessary as more cities look to reduce air pollution in the most densely populated areas. Unlike areas like Watford, which have a case for being included in the London scrappage scheme, many towns on the edge of schemes will not. If the government were to agree to my plan, Watford would also be able to benefit from it. In the letter I made the point that many Watford residents feel as if they are caught in the crossfire between the Conservative government and the Labour Mayor of London. Both sides should be looking to support residents rather than attacking each other.

Warm Spaces expanded

Over 20 organisations and businesses across Watford have registered to become a Welcoming Space since the scheme was launched and Watford's network of Welcoming Spaces has grown recently. All Welcoming Spaces can receive funding through the Watford Community Fund and will connect with the wider network of Warm Spaces across Hertfordshire.

Welcoming spaces are there to support local people through the ongoing cost of living emergency, but also offer an opportunity for residents who are lonely or isolated to go and meet new people. After a successful launch, Watford is now home to 21 Welcoming Spaces including Watford Cycle Club, the Luther Blissett Hub and North Watford Library.

The council's sports and leisure provider, Everyone Active, recently launched a new hub at Watford Woodside Leisure Centre. The space offers soft play session for parents and toddlers and I was privileged to be able to visit one of their sessions and meet some of the families using this great facility.

Neighbourhood CIL grants

Over the past month I was able to visit some of the sites that were successful in receiving funding from the Neighbourhood Grant Fund. This funding, approved by Cabinet in November, will provide over £150,000 of funding to 16 projects.

Random Cafe

In the last month I have visited Random Café, who received over £7,000 to make improvements to its community garden on the Meriden Estate. Random Café is a local community group who have sustainability at their heart. Not only does it offer food that would otherwise go to landfill, it also serves as a meeting place for the community, providing social events that bring people together.

The funding will be used to make the garden more accessible for wheelchair users, less mobile visitors and families with buggies. It will also help fund the creation of a patio area to provide a pleasant seating area.

Everett Rovers

I was also able to visit Everett Rovers Football Club who were awarded £20,000 funding from the Neighbourhood Grant Fund. This funding will contribute towards a £1million full-size, floodlit 3G artificial grass pitch.

Working in partnership with the Football Association (FA) and Football Foundation, who are also funding the project, it will create an all-weather football pitch at Leggatts Playing Fields that can be used for match play and training by local clubs, community groups, and organisations.

Everett Rovers are a very community-minded club and I know that they are keen to ensure that these new facilities will be used to inspire people from a diverse a range of backgrounds and abilities to engage with football. I am really looking forward to working with Everett Rovers in the future.

Cherry Tree Primary School

One of the many benefits of the Neighbourhood Grant Fund is the ability to support projects that teach young people the importance of protecting the environment and improving biodiversity.

It was a pleasure, therefore, to visit Cherry Tree Primary School who have been awarded £4,500 from the Neighbourhood Grant Fund to create a biodiversity garden. This outdoor learning area will be used by all students and will attract birds and pollinators and will have wildflowers and homes for a wide range of invertebrate species.

The project also includes sensory equipment with a nature theme, which will provide an opportunity for peace and reflection and help children to manage anxiety. The outdoor space will be available to children during the school day and will also be accessible to families and residents during school events, including summer fairs.

I look forward to visiting the other local projects as they progress. The next round of funding for the Neighbourhood Grants will be open for applications again in summer 2023. However, residents can email NCIL@watford.gov.uk to find out more in advance.

Watford Colosseum operator to be appointed

In my manifesto I committed to reopening the Colosseum following its refurbishment. At the time of writing, a recommendation has been made that we appoint AEG as the venue's new operator. This decision will be voted on at Cabinet on 13th March.

AEG is a global venue operator and concert promoter which manages more than 120 arenas, stadiums, and theatres across the world, including the O2 arena. Their experience means that we will be able to attract world-class artists to the Colosseum when it reopens. I believe that this is an exciting opportunity for our town and wish AEG success so that we can all get the chance to see great performances in the future.

I know how much local people have missed the Colosseum and so, like me, will be looking forward to next year. With our new partner on board and much-enhanced facilities, the venue will be better than ever before, with plenty of big names and performances heading to Watford.

Dispatches programme on Watford General Hospital

Along with many people across Watford I was shocked by the footage from Watford General Hospital which formed part of the Channel 4 Dispatches programme recently. Unfortunately, the footage showed what we have been saying for a long time – that the NHS as a whole needs more funding and a drive to recruit the correct number of staff, and our local hospital needs the money to be able to upgrade its facilities. I know from many years of visiting Watford General Hospital that the staff there work incredibly hard and always put their patients first. I am truly grateful for the work they do. Unfortunately, they are being let down by not having the equipment and facilities they need to provide the healthcare residents deserve. I will continue to urge the government to bring forward the investment we need.

A Greener Town

Beryl Bikes turn 3 years old

At the beginning of March, the Beryl bike hire scheme in Watford turned three years old. Since we launched our partnership with Beryl over 300,000 journeys have been completed and nearly 900,000Km have been travelled by those using the bikes. Since sharing the news on social media channels, a number of residents have contacted me to say how much they value the scheme.

A cycle hire scheme was a commitment from my first manifesto so I am glad that so many residents, workers and visitors across Watford have used a Beryl bike. Every journey by Beryl bike helps reduce congestion in our town and improve air quality, making our town a healthier and greener place to live and work.

Improvements to Meriden Park

One of my manifesto commitments was investing in improvements in Meriden Park and I was pleased to be able to visit the park recently to see the progress that has been made so far. 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 works, which include better access to the Community Centre were in my manifesto and are part of the work we are doing to enhance our parks and open spaces across Watford. Later in the year we will see more car park enhancements and more projects to improve biodiversity in the park, as well as work to improve landscaping and plant a new wildflower meadow.

I am particularly pleased that there will be opportunities for the community to assist with bulb and tree planting, and a Friends of Meriden Park will be set up to ensure that the park continues to provide for local residents. I would encourage anyone who is interested to contact parkconsultation@watford.gov.uk.

News and Events

Ukraine – One year on

Watford Council commemorated one year since the barbaric Russian invasion of Ukraine by joining in the national one minute silence. Deputy Mayor Cllr Aga Dychton and Luther Blissett OBE DL also raised the flag of Ukraine at the Town Hall.

Following this ceremony, the town took part in a range of events and services which had been organised by Lauren Blissett, the Sunflower Social Club and its members. The group was set up in the wake of the invasion of Ukraine to support those who had been affected either directly or indirectly by the conflict. I am grateful that we have such generous-spirited people in this town who are dedicated to improving the lives of those in distress and creating a community which is supportive and affirming.

In the afternoon of the anniversary, the Sunflower Social Club organised a conference and exhibition in Watford Central Library. This event allowed members of the community in Watford to find out more about the real world impacts of the war in Ukraine, beyond the headlines. These conversations are vital to ensure continued support for engagement in the conflict and maintain public support for the actions Western powers are taking against Russia.

In the evening I was privileged to take part in a Service of Unity at the Peace memorial followed by a service at St Mary's Church. At the event I was able to thank those in Watford who had supported Ukraine over the last year and made it clear that no matter what happens we would stand in solidarity with the people of Ukraine for as long as is needed.

I made it clear that we would never forget the suffering of the Ukrainian people and would stand in solidarity with Ukraine until they achieve victory over Vladimir Putin's regime. I also reiterated to those Ukrainians who have since made Watford their home that they would be welcome and always a part of our town if and when they return to Ukraine following the end of the war.

Forget Me Not Café relaunch

I was really pleased that the "Forget Me Not" Café is being relaunched this month. By the time we meet at Council the relaunch event will have already taken place and I hope will have been attended by a large group of people. There will be further events on the 21st April and 19th May from 11:45 to 2pm.

The Forget Me Not Café, which is a collaboration between Watford Council and West Herts College, aims to create an inter-generational Dementia-Friendly dining experience, delivered by students at the college. To ensure diners have a relaxed and pleasant experience, the students have taken their time to become Dementia Friends. This means that they provide dementia-friendly customer service and understand the challenges facing people with dementia.

Fairtrade Fortnight

I am very proud that Watford is a Fairtrade town and that we were able to celebrate Fairtrade Fortnight from the 27th February – 11th March this year. Fairtrade Fortnight is a great opportunity for people to learn about the positive impact that their buying decisions can have on the world. I was pleased to be able to visit the West Herts Community College Restaurant for their Fairtrade lunch and also spent time meeting Fairtrade campaigners at their stall in Atria. It is so important that we are able to take opportunities such as this to spread the word about the fairtrade movement and the huge difference it has made to farmers and producers in the developing world since the Fairtrade Foundation was founded in 1992.