

Introduction

As I write this report, the national cost of living emergency and poor economic outlook is affecting residents across Watford. High interest rates and inflation have undoubtedly placed a strain on local families, impacting their financial well-being.

Despite these challenges, I am committed to delivering on my promises to residents and supporting them through this difficult period. Just as last year required tough decisions, so too will this year and the next. At every stage my priority will be protecting front line services and supporting the most vulnerable in our town.

Over recent months, we have made good progress towards meeting my manifesto commitments. As we move to the summer we will once again be providing our exciting and varied events, most of which are free to attend. As the cost of living emergency continues, it is important that we provide these events so that as many people as possible feel part of the community and can take part in Watford life. These are set out in more detail later in the report.

Standing Up for Watford

Watford General Hospital announcement

I was very pleased to hear the recent announcement from the government about the funding being made available for Watford General Hospital. This announcement came following lots of lobbying over many years and I am glad that we may finally see the improvements that our local NHS needs to provide care fit for the 21st Century.

I am proud of the work that we have done to help secure this investment. This includes lobbying but also includes significant investment locally and close partnership work with the NHS trust. Without this work, the announcement would probably never have happened.

The journey to the new hospital began when the previous Liberal Democrat Mayor of Watford, Dorothy Thornhill, secured the building of Thomas Sawyer Way. Since then we have also given outline planning permission for the new buildings and freed up land to accommodate the new hospital by building our award-winning multi storey car park.

Residents in Watford deserve high quality healthcare in modern facilities that support our local NHS workers to do their jobs successfully. I hope that we see this funding soon and work begins at the earliest opportunity.

Local Plan wins an award

In my manifesto I committed to doing everything in our power to ensure that we have the right homes in the right places. I also committed to ensure that properties meet high standards of design, protected the environment and were in keeping with the local area.

This will be achieved in the main by our new local plan, which we passed last year. This document puts power in the hands of our planning officers and local residents and protects our decisions if they are put before the Planning Inspectorate.

I am proud that our local plan was recognised in the “Best plan” category at the East of England RTPi Awards for Planning Excellence. The award rightly highlighted the importance we have placed on sustainability and adapting our town to deal with the effects of climate change. I want to congratulate the team at the council who worked so hard to put the plan together.

Extra protection for employment land

Watford is home to thousands of businesses, small to large, which is a good thing for our town. I want to make sure that we have the space to support new and existing businesses in the future. To do this, we have protected employment land at key areas of the town by enacting article 4 directions. This will limit the ability to use permitted development rights at these locations.

By ensuring that planning permission is required to develop at these locations we put powers back in the hands of local people and means that we maintain the character of our town. It is important to ensure that we have enough space in Watford for businesses to thrive and grow and enough for the businesses of the future to choose Watford.

In total, twelve distinct Article 4 Directions have been made. These protected areas include Clarendon Road Primary Office Location, Greycaine Road, Odhams and Sandown Road, Imperial Way, Colonial Way and Holly Industrial Estate, as well as Wiggshall Road, Fishers Industrial Estate and Trade City.

LGBTQIA+ Pride Month

June marked Pride month in Watford and a number of events were held to celebrate and show support for the valued LGBTQIA+ community in Watford.

We raised the inclusive pride flag at the Town Hall and hosted the launch of Proud Watford, a new community organisation that seeks to ensure that everyone feels safe and included in Watford, in our annexe space.

Atria Watford also supported Pride month and it was great to be able to officially open their new installation supporting Proud Watford and the LGBTQIA+ community. Although great progress has been made to advance LGBTQIA+ rights in the UK, there is still a way to go until equality is truly achieved.

Visibility for the community is so important to tackle stereotypes, break stereotypes, and provide affirmation to those who are questioning their sexuality and gender identity, and tackle prejudice. That is why we are proud to raise the flag, support events and host Hertfordshire Pride in Cassiobury Park which this year will take place on Saturday 19th August.

Windrush Day

I was proud that Watford council honoured Windrush Day on 22nd June. This day celebrates the contributions made by our British Caribbean community by commemorating the date on which the HMT Empire Windrush arrived in Britain. 2023 marks the 75th anniversary of this occasion. Watford is fortunate to be home to an incredible community of individuals from the Windrush generation, whose contributions have enriched our town.

To mark this significant anniversary, I raised the commemorative flag outside the Town Hall on Windrush Day. I also attended a wonderful event at Watford Museum which was organised by Community Game Changers. At the event, the Hertfordshire Archive and Local Studies team gave a riveting talk about researching family history. I hope that the many people who attended make use of this information to find out more about their family and the contributions they have made to our diverse town and country.

A Greener Town

Town Hall energy improvements will save thousands

I was pleased to be able to see the completion of the environmental improvements at the Town Hall. These works were made possible through a successful £3.2 million bid to the government and will deliver large savings on energy bills for the council going forward.

As part of this scheme, the council has installed 144 state-of-the-art photovoltaic panels on the roof of the Town Hall and 36 on the Colosseum to harness renewable energy. This is expected to save 24 tonnes of carbon dioxide per year.

Thermally energy efficient improvements have also been carried out in both heritage buildings to minimise heat loss. The restoration of the windows with new technology will reduce energy transfer by 75%. In addition to these changes, insulation has been improved and lights were replaced with energy efficient LEDs. It is estimated that this should save 166 tonnes of carbon annually.

Taken together these changes are expected to lead to a reduction of 50% on our gas bill and 32% reduction on electricity. Furthermore, the project was managed in a very sustainable way with 99% of the waste materials being diverted away from landfill.

Watford Council recognised at Energy Efficiency awards

I was pleased that the council was recognised as one of the best-performing local authorities at the Energy Efficiency Awards. At the awards ceremony Watford Council was “Highly Commended” in the Regional or Local Authority Body of the Year Award’ category.

We were shortlisted for our Carbon Community Assistance scheme which has helped to improve the use of energy in buildings and reduce carbon emissions, and supported householders to save energy and money.

This has been made possible thanks to successful multi-million-pound bids made by the council to the Department of Energy Strategy and Net Zero and the council’s own grants and loans. The money has been used to fund over nine different schemes and make improvements to 252 homes in the town. In total, the works to properties will help to save 84,000 kilograms of carbon dioxide per year and provide residents with around £27,000 yearly savings on bills.

Expansion of Electric Vehicle Charging

To improve air quality and support the fight against climate change it is important to support people to move to less polluting vehicles as well as move to other types of active transport. A key part of this mission is supporting the switch from petrol and diesel cars to electric by providing charging points.

We are moving forward to implement our successful On Street Residential Chargepoint Scheme funding bid. This funding will enable the installation of 79 on street charging points. This will bring the total number to 102 across the town significantly improving the accessibility and convenience of EV charging for both residents and visitors.

In addition to this we are also supporting the private sector to provide charging points. A key example of this is the recent sale of a small garage site in St Alban’s Road to enable Leap24 UK to install public charging points.

More Solar panels across Watford

Over 300 solar panels have been installed across the borough thanks to a bulk buying scheme. This initiative in which Watford Borough Council works with Solar Together, allows residents to sign up to be part of a solar panel bulk buy. By doing this, they save money. By the end of the year, this scheme will install 1000 solar panels making a big contribution towards our target of being a net zero borough by 2030. The installation of these panels is expected to save the participating households a combined total of £50,000 per year on their energy bills, as well as reducing their carbon footprint by an estimated 4,867,200 kg of CO2 emissions over a 20 year life span.

I am delighted to see such a strong response to this scheme. It shows that residents are keen to support the environment and is an excellent example of people coming together to make Watford a greener place to live. I hope that we will be able to bring schemes like this forward again in the future.

A Caring Community

NHS 75 year anniversary:

In July we celebrated 75 years of the NHS. Over those 75 years, the NHS has been loved and has provided amazing care and support for families across the country and here in Watford.

In recent years, particularly during the pandemic, the NHS has shown its resilience and commitment to patients even in the toughest times. We will be forever grateful for all of the doctors, nurses and other healthcare workers who kept us safe during that time and continue to keep us safe.

I will always support our precious NHS and continue to fight for the resources our community and NHS workers need. I would like to take this opportunity to thank all those who work in our local NHS for all they do for our community.

Lottery has a successful beginning:

The Watford Community Lottery has experienced a successful start. At the time of writing, 1216 tickets have been purchased for the coming week, with a projected £37,939.20 heading to local charities and organisations by the end of the year. A number of people have already won cash prizes and I am hopeful that people will continue to maintain their ticket purchases going forward. To incentivise more sign ups, Gatherwell have held prize draws for those who sign up before a certain time. In the first week this was a £250 Watford voucher and for anyone who enters a draw during July, they will have a chance to win a £1000 Air BnB voucher.

We have also been successful in signing up local groups to receive funding. At the time of writing we have around 50 such organisations registered as good causes. When people play the lottery, they have the opportunity to select a specific organisation who will receive 50p for each £1 ticket. 10p will then go to the Mayor's Community fund, with the rest of the ticket price going towards admin and prize money. I hope that the lottery will become a key part of our community fundraising offer, providing local organisations with the vital funds they need to support residents in Watford.

Memory Café and Carers retreat relaunch

I am pleased that we have been able to relaunch the 'Memory Café and Carers Retreat' at Cheslyn House and Gardens. This initiative is a partnership between Home Instead, a leading provider of home care services, and the council.

The Memory Café and Carers Retreat is designed to create a welcoming and supportive environment for those living with dementia and their carers. They are drop-in sessions which provide a safe space where attendees can share their experiences, make new connections and enjoy a range of activities. The Carers Retreat helps carers connect with others facing the same experiences and allows them to gain insights and learn how to access the resources they need.

The first session took place in June and subsequent sessions will be held on the last Wednesday of each month from 10:30am – 12:30pm.

Community visits

As Mayor I often have the opportunity to make visits to the community. Some of these are covered in other parts of this report but there are some other recent visits which I would like to highlight.

First, I attended the Summer BBQ at the Lancaster Court Senior Living Home earlier this month. The staff provided a warm welcome and it was great to speak to the residents there. I want to take this opportunity to thank the staff and residents at Lancaster Court for fundraising £500 for Hertfordshire Mind.

I was also privileged to attend the passing out ceremony for the local chapter of the St John Ambulance Youth Badgers. Youth Badgers is a scheme run by St John Ambulance which encourages young people (ages: 5-11) to develop their social and first aid skills. It was really inspiring to meet so many young people who wanted to develop the knowledge they would need to provide support for other members of the community. It truly is one of the strengths of Watford that we have a community spirit and a large number of people want to contribute to make other lives better.

Another group who have dedicated themselves to supporting our community is the Friends of Cassiobury Park, who recently celebrated their 50th anniversary. This community group do vital work in protecting and maintaining our most popular park in Watford. I am really grateful for the dedication of so many Friends of the Park over the last five decades and for the work they continue to do with the council and other partners to ensure that Cassiobury Park stays the jewel in the crown of our 17 green flag parks.

A Safer Town

Antisocial Behaviour Week

The council took part in Anti-Social Behaviour Awareness Week, which took place from 3rd July to 9th July. ASB Awareness Week aims to increase public understanding of ASB and how those affected can get help. On Wednesday 5th July, members of our Community Safety Partnership, Safer Watford, organised an event in Atria Watford to raise awareness of the work they do on a daily basis to tackle issues affecting people's quality of life and to give residents the opportunity to raise concerns.

Anti-social behaviour is an important issue and is a priority for Safer Watford all year round. I have lobbied for a bigger police presence in the town centre to help deal with the problem and the council works hard with its partners to support residents who experience ASB, including through the use of the community trigger which has successfully helped victims and their families.

CCTV update

The council operates a CCTV network of around 300 cameras covering street surveillance as well as the wider public realm. The cameras, which include those with automatic number plate recognition technology (ANPR) are monitored and recorded 24 hours a day, 365 days a year by contract staff

based in a purpose-built control room currently co-located with the police operation in Watford Police Station. This resource is a vital tool in keeping residents safe, tackling flytipping and other anti-social behaviour, and supporting the police to bring people to justice.

As the local police station moves to its new premises, a new home for the CCTV suite is needed. The council is currently exploring options so that a new suite can be up and running by the time the former one is decommissioned. I am confident that this will be achieved so that we can continue to keep residents protected.

In addition to these fixed CCTV cameras, we have also been piloting mobile CCTV cameras in fly-tipping hotspots. The current sites are Francis Road, Queens Road, and Queens Avenue. Mobile CCTV cameras offer particular challenges around power sources and requirements for appropriate infrastructure and this project has required extra work by officers to make the sites suitable for CCTV. I am glad to say that this work has been successful and all three CCTV cameras are now operational

A Competent Council

Big Events return for another year

As mentioned above, I believe that it is important that we provide events for residents and visitors to Watford so that as many people as possible feel part of the community. Our events also help to make Watford a destination for visitors who can support our local economy. While most of these events are free, some, such as Colourscape do attract a cost.

For the first time in three years, The Big Screen will take place in the Town Centre, bringing business to local shops. This will take place from 24th-30th July. From 31st July-6th August, The Big Screen will move to Woodside Playing Fields. The full programme has been published and can be found at <https://www.watfordevents.com/big-screen-town-centre>

The Big Jiveswing Festival celebrates its 10 year anniversary this year on 30th July. Jiveswing is one of the largest Jiveswing Jazz festivals in the UK and this year promises to be bigger and better than ever. The festival is able to attract some of the best Jazz musicians in the UK and is very popular with those who attend.

Also returning this year is The Big Beach which transforms the parade into a seaside resort. This year, The Big Beach will take place from 12th August to 27th August. I know from previous years how many people attend this event and it is particularly used by young people who are on school holidays.

The Big Sport will take place on 9th September. This event provides sporty activities in the town centre and the opportunity for residents and visitors to learn more about keeping fit and healthy.