

Elected Mayor's Report- January 2020

I would like to take this opportunity to wish everyone a very happy new year. This year will see the launch of my key sustainable transport initiatives, the completion of new facilities at Oxhey Park North and the start of long awaited improvements at Watford Junction station. However, we are also grappling with impact of a £4 million a year reduction in funding from central government as well as the impact of the tripling of our annual housing targets.

Partnership Work

Everyone Active

Our partnership with Everyone Active continues to deliver exceptional services to people in our town. Both Woodside and Central Leisure Centres were awarded an 'outstanding' in their recent nationally recognised QUEST review. Our leisure centres are in the top sixteen centres nationally, out of around nine hundred in the entire country to receive this recognition. This puts our leisure centres in the top 2% performing in the country. I would like to congratulate staff from Everyone Active and Watford Council for this phenomenal achievement.

I would also like to thank our staff and management at Watford Central Leisure Centre for their work during the recent NATO summit at the Grove Hotel, where they hosted the world's media just a week before providing the facilities for the recent General Election count. I am pleased that the new sauna and steam room at Watford Central Leisure Centre is now for residents to use after investment from Watford Borough Council.

Our leisure centres continue to provide affordable ways to get fit, including free swim and gym sessions for under 19's during school holidays. They also work to get people from all groups in our town fit. They run classes for over 60's, work with our Watford FC Community Sports Trust to support the 'This Girl Can' campaign and have introduced a Dementia Friendly Toning Suite at both their leisure centre sites.

Veolia

I am pleased that Cabinet have agreed to extend Veolia's contract to continue to provide our waste services for the next eight years. Veolia provide a service that is good value for council tax payers and is one that people in our town can rely on.

As part of our contract extension with our waste collection company Veolia, we have agreed to make the following changes to our waste collection services:

- Weekly food waste collections
- Fortnightly general waste collections
- A charge for the collection of garden waste

A move to a weekly food waste collection as well as a weekly recycling collection should help drive up our recycling rate in the town. At the moment, around a third of what we put in our general waste bin could be recycled, so with less frequent general waste collections hopefully more residents will choose to recycle.

We are balancing the need to tackle the climate emergency whilst also receiving a £4 million a year loss in funding from central government. . Three quarters of councils already have fortnightly general waste collection, including all of our neighbouring councils and two thirds of councils already charge for a garden waste collection. In neighbouring Harrow, residents are charged £75 for a garden waste collection, around double of the proposed charges in Watford.

Watford residents will continue to see a first class service which is more frequent and reliable than many other parts of the country.

Working with Veolia, we have started work on improvements at Garston Park and increasing the number of Green Flags we have in the town. These improvements include a new play area, tree planting, work on new paths and improved entrances to the park. I would like to thank the local Meriden councillors for their support on this project.

Community Events

One of the best thing about my role is the opportunity to support our fantastic community groups who do so much for our town. People do so much to make Watford the fantastic place it is to live and work in.

I have been helping to support Hertfordshire's Year of Culture at a recent Beacon Lighting at Watford Museum, attended by key cultural figures in the town and the Audentior Symphony Orchestra. This is part of many events across the year in both Watford and Hertfordshire, which include garden tours, music festivals, cultural celebrations and live street performances. This is to help promote Hertfordshire as a visitor destination. You can find out more about the year here: <https://www.visitherts.co.uk/visit-herts-blog/hertfordshire-year-of-culture-2020/>

Since being elected, I have helped over 3000 local residents with their issues. I am keen to be accessible to people in our town, and I have started regular drop in sessions across

Watford so people are able to speak to me about their problems. I hosted an event at Watford Central Library, a drop in at Leavesden Community Room and will be hosting events in different parts of Watford over the next few months.

I was honoured to attend recent celebrations for Chinese New Year, organised by our local Chinese community, at the Intu Centre. They celebrated the 'Year of the Rat' through various dances, songs and martial arts demonstrations. They will be performing at Watford Palace Theatre on 1st February.

It was fantastic to join everyone at Watford & Three Rivers Family Centre Service based at Westfield Family Centre this month. The staff and volunteers do so much to support local families. It was great to learn more about the way they help with training for their volunteers and hear about how much people enjoy being part of this incredibly important service.

Just before Christmas, my office was contacted by Harry Graupner currently living in Canada who had fled Nazi occupied Czechoslovakia on the 1938 Kindertransport. He had lived in Watford and was hosted by Mrs Kathleen Freeman, who lived on Hempstead Road at Nascot Wood House, near to where West Herts College is today. Not only did Mrs Freeman helped to organise parts of the transport but she also took in 12 refugee children from 1939-1945. We were able to put Harry in touch with Watford Museum for him to share his memories of living in Watford and put him in touch with members of Mrs Freeman's family. In 1964, Mrs Freeman was awarded an OBE for her actions during the Second World War. This story shows the generosity and sacrifice people made in our town during World War Two. I hope people remember Mrs Freeman and the lives of the children fleeing the Nazis who she made welcome in our town.

I had a very successful Christmas card appeal, raising £6400 for fantastic local charities. DRUM Watford and Watford Women's Centre. I would like to thank all the local businesses who generously supported this appeal this year. The card was designed by DRUM user Angela, who won my competition this year with her superb design.

It was a privilege to attend the deeply moving Lights of Love service put on by the Peace Hospice this year. Because of the weather, we had to host the event in the Town Hall. It was a very moving service, which demonstrated the dedicated support that the hospice provides to cancer sufferers and their loved ones in the most challenging of circumstances.

I joined Watford Interfaith Association to plant trees in their Peace Garden in Cassiobury Park to mark the 150th Anniversary of Ghandi's birth. I also joined the Interfaith Association on their annual pilgrimage through our local Mosques, Temples, Synagogues and Churches.

Our town is so lucky to have so many different faith groups who work together and make such a contribution to Watford.

A real highlight of my job is going to visit some of our local schools. I recently visited Laurence Haines in west Watford to find out more about their Erasmus programme. I visited Stanborough School to help with their tree planting and visited a fundraising event for our wonderful Polish School, run by Cllr Aga Dychton, for their St Andrews Day celebrations.

Finally, I would like to offer my congratulations to Watford born Anthony Joshua for regaining his heavyweight champion titles in December. The whole town is incredibly proud of his achievements.

Delivering my Manifesto and Working for the Town

Budget

I would like to commend the Budget proposals that will be put to you tonight.

In this Budget, we have:

- Invested in improving our town, including deliver new bus and bike schemes, new facilities at Oxhey Park, new facilities at Watford Cycle Hub and improvements to Watford Junction.
- Protected the most vulnerable people in our town by extending the support we provide for those rough sleeping and by committing to building new council houses for local families.
- Despite a 70% reduction in our funding from central government, we have kept council tax low for another year and protected front line services.

We will continue to work to keep our town moving forwards.

Sustainable Transport for Watford

Delivery on a new a Bike Hire Scheme, On Demand Bus service and Transport App, which are all key manifesto commitments of mine, will be this year.

Our Transport App will go live at the end of this month after significant product testing with West Herts College students, who are a key target audience for the App. The App will pull together live transport information from our taxi services, bus operators, rail operators and the new bike and bus schemes when these are running. The operator for this new scheme will be Molten Mouse, who have run other successful schemes in Yorkshire and Gateshead.

Our new bike hire scheme and On Demand Bus service launch in the spring. Our bike hire

scheme will be run by Beryl, who currently run this in various London boroughs whilst Arriva will be operating the Bus service. Arriva run this scheme in Leicester and Liverpool. In Liverpool the scheme has been so successful that within the first six months Arriva have had to double their bus fleet.

As our town grows and we also see the impact that climate change is having across the world, we need more schemes like these that encourage people to get out of their cars, easing congestion on our roads and making our town a greener place to live. I'm really proud that we are leading the way in this.

Challenging Government Planning Rules

I have been calling on the government to give local councils more powers when it comes to development and planning in our town.

Councils like Watford have never been under such pressure to build more homes. The government have tripled Watford's housing targets. They have put pressure on our town, which is largely made up of brownfield land with fast transport connections to London, to help them meet their target of building 300,000 new homes a year. A government spokesperson told us, just last week, that it is 'not an option' for Watford Council to reject planning applications like that at the Range. It is not just Watford where this has been happening. In Croydon, planning permission for a 68 storey tower block has been given whilst in Woking, a 39 storey tower block has been approved.

It is clear that across the country we have a housing crisis, with young people being priced out of the housing market. We must build decent, good quality and affordable new homes. However, local councils must have more power to say 'no' to development that is not appropriate for our town. Last year, we rejected 260 planning applications but many of these were overturned by a government inspector on appeal, including plans from a developer for windowless flats in our town centre.

It is astonishing that government rules do not allow councils to reject planning applications because they lack affordable housing or because of the impact on local infrastructure. I have written to the Housing Minister to call on him to review what control councils have when it comes to development. We need to power to insist on infrastructure, decent affordable housing and get what is right for Watford.

Tackling poor train performance

Like many people, I have been concerned about the poor performance of train operator London Northwestern. Commuters from Bushey and Watford Junction have suffered frequent delays and cancellations after May's timetable changes. This has been particularly bad for commuters who at Bushey station, who have seen a loss of peak time services and

short trains as the rail company attempted to 'fix' problems for commuters at bigger stations like Milton Keynes.

Train disruption can have a very serious effect on commuters lives and at the moment the performance of LNWR is simply not good enough. I have written to the Secretary of State for Transport to express my concern about this and have called for the government to intervene to ensure Watford passengers get a better service. We have already seen the government intervene to remove the rail franchise from underperforming Northern and unless we see rapid changes, they should consider doing the same with London Northwestern. Watford passengers deserve better.

Tackling Homelessness

No one in our town should have to sleep rough. That is why I am determined for us to do all we can to tackle homelessness in Watford. I am delighted that once again we are able to provide an extended night shelter, SWEP, from November through to March for anyone who is sleeping on the streets. I would like to thank New Hope and the YMCA for their support with this.

However, it is not just about providing shelter, but also housing to people who are currently without a permanent roof over their heads. That is why I am pleased that we are committing to continue our Hart Home programme of providing new social housing to local families across our town. I am also pleased that we are continuing to get families out of temporary accommodation, seeing a reduction of over half since 2017, with the number continuing to fall. We are one of the only councils in the south east of England to see this transformation.

Oxhey Park North

Work on new facilities at Oxhey Park has started in earnest and is going from strength to strength. We will provide a new café, a new children's play area, skateboarding facilities and facilities for cyclists and BMX enthusiasts. I am really excited to see the completion of this, which will hopefully transform this part of the park and provide something for everyone in our town.

The work here is due to be completed in May. I am pleased to be delivering on one of my key election promises.

Watford Cycle Hub

As part of my commitment to more sustainable transport in Watford we are investing in a new building for the Watford Cycle Hub.

The Cycle Hub is a non-profit community based cycle centre located at The Pavilion, Chaffinch Lane, next to Holywell Community Centre. It has been providing a range of essential cycle related services to support Watford cyclists, including cycle repair and maintenance courses and cycle training since it was formed seven years ago.

A recent survey carried out on the building concluded that it was no longer fit for purpose so the council agreed to replace it with a larger bespoke modular building which will enable the Cycle Hub to expand its core services to the community.

The new building will provide:

- A community café and social space
- A larger workshop
- Dedicated office
- More room to showcase reconditioned bikes
- An expanded range of accessories

The work is expected to be completed in March 2020. While the works are taking place, the team are housed in temporary accommodation on-site and the Cycle Hub continues to offer cycle repairs, cycle training and guided rides but for bike donations during this time please contact the team on 01923 223 994.

Mayor's Small Grant Fund

Recently, I launched a Small Grants fund to support local community groups, groups of neighbours or local charities in Watford. This Small Grants Fund has been very successful, with many groups benefitting from the support it brings. These groups include:

- Peace Hospice Care
- Watford Fields Residents Association
- Ganesh Chaturthi Utsavam Watford
- Watford and Three Rivers Refugee Partnership
- Watford Deaf Community
- Holywell Festival Watford
- North Watford Allotment Association
- Friends of Lanchester Primary School

Many other groups have also benefitted from this funding. It's great to be able to give a helping hand to community projects that bring benefit to our town.

In April, we are re-opening this fund to local community groups. I will be assigning £10,000 of this fund specifically to projects in the town that promote sustainability.

Dementia Friendly Watford

I was delighted that Watford was given Dementia Friendly Community status by the Alzheimer's Society, a real testament to the hard work put in by our Dementia Friendly Steering Group. This means that Watford is now officially a Dementia Friendly Community but there is clearly a lot more work to do.

I would like to thank the many organisations and businesses in the town who have already become part of our Dementia Friends programme, teaching their staff and volunteers about how to assist someone living with Dementia to use their service. I would like to particularly thank the Abbey Line Community Rail Partnership, who are working for the Abbey Line to become one of the first 'Dementia Friendly' rail routes in the country.

If you would like to get involved with our Dementia Friendly Town scheme or find out more about what we are doing, you can follow this link:

<https://www.dementiafriendlywatford.com/>

Staff Changes

Finally, I would like to wish our outgoing Director of Finance Jo Wagstaffe the best of luck as she moves onto her next role as Chief Executive of Three Rivers District Council. Jo has been a fantastic and diligent Director of Finance and I look forward to continue to work with her in her new role at Three Rivers.

I would also like to pay tribute to our departing Managing Director Manny Lewis at his last Full Council in his ten years in the role. He has been a superb Managing Director and he has given a huge amount both to this council and to the town. Manny will remain in the role until March to oversee a smooth handover with our new Managing Director, Donna Nolan.