

Elected Mayor's Report – March 2018

As this is my last Mayor's report I am going to use it as an opportunity to put on public record what I believe to be the current state of play with regards to the town and the council and perhaps, more importantly, for a new Mayor outline the current challenges that we face .

Watford is in fact a medium size town and a small district council but we think big. The late Graham Taylor once said to me, whilst discussing the club's aspiration to the premiership "The problem is one of size Dorothy we are a Championship town". My response – "I know Graham but we aspire to the Premier League!"

That is almost our mantra now from a town that was ill at ease with itself and certainly the butt of negative comment and jokes to one where in our last residents' survey 80% of respondents said they were proud of Watford and 84% think that people from different backgrounds get on well together.

That has been quite a journey. We certainly do punch above our weight and try to live up to our town's motto of Audentior or most recently translated into English - Be Bold!

Our recent local government peer challenge recognised that "Watford Borough Council is a high performing, bold and progressive council with a lot of ambition for the future."

It is essential to have a shared vision for the town and the role of Mayor is to be the person who has the democratic right to articulate that vision and be the glue that binds people together to achieve it.

But on its own this is not enough; a Mayor and council also need to actually deliver the goods. Which is why we were particularly pleased that between 77-84% of our resident responders agreed that the council is making Watford a better place to live, are satisfied with the way the council runs things, believe that we provide value for money and are working to make Watford economically successful.

The tension between all these things is a constant challenge. This is most acutely shown in the demonstrable need to provide homes of all types and tenures and our residents legitimate concerns about congestion, parking and quality of life issues leading to an opposition to development.

As I am regularly saying to residents " If you want to live somewhere where parking is free and there is no congestion then you probably wouldn't want to live there". All

popular places grapple with these issues. I would much rather be the Mayor of a town that is surviving and thriving not one that is declining and dying!

One thing we are not is a dormitory town. Which is why our focus has, in recent years, been on the economic prosperity of the town and the importance of local jobs. You only have to stand at Watford junction at 8:30am to see that the flow of people is 50-50. This is an achievement I am proud of and one we must strive to retain. Therefore losing employment land to housing is something that we need to keep track of although it is getting increasingly difficult to prevent such loss; especially with the government's change in policy to allow conversion from offices to residential without planning permission. Jobs are important in a sustainable town.

That is why we have good networks with our business community from our developer forum to our Big Business Connect and several others. It has taken years to convince the business community that we are a town that welcomes them and with a council that will work to overcome their issues and challenges. This work has been ably led by a Managing Director with the requisite skills not usually found in the Head of Paid Service of a district council. Businesses can pick and choose where they go so we were delighted when TJX, having realised their need to move to larger premises, having looked all over the country, decided to stay in Watford. Their new, prestigious European headquarters is being built now- providing many jobs and hopefully an iconic building visible as soon as you walk out of the station.

It must be said as a matter for the public record that I am grateful for the magnificent work of all our staff. Also those of our partner organisations and of course our voluntary sector. Attracting and retaining good staff will always be a challenge for those of us on the outskirts of London. Our capital city can and does offer higher wages and incentives and with our excellent transport links into London it is easy to live here and work in London. Thus our hospital, police and ourselves have to offer something else to attract and retain good people which being part of a smaller, well-motivated, aspirational team can do.

Our recent Investors in People, where we got the Gold level award, reported "This is without doubt a progressive and bold organisation, staff are responsive and receptive to change, and they are supported in many ways to give their very best. They punch well above their weight and staff recognise what a great place it is to work." A comment that is a credit to everyone who works for us.

Our future challenges as I see them are these.

Meeting our housing targets.

These we predict will double using the new government methodology of assessing housing need. We will struggle to meet them and we are deeply concerned about the impact on our town. This will be impossible without the right infrastructure which not only includes public transport but doctors and schools. Which is what is so frustrating and short sighted about the Mayor of London's recent announcement that Transport for London will not support the Metropolitan Line Extension (MLX). This is after the previous Mayor's agreement, many years' work, significant government funding and private sector support.

The most recent statements from government give me no hope that the situation to improve. It seems that government policy is designed to protect the green belt at all costs and push even higher densities on to towns like ours. We are already facing regular speculative developments of 20 plus storeys of tower blocks which we are powerless to refuse, under the current regime. So its town cramming for us whilst preserving the views of those who live in the countryside. There has to be a middle way. Not all green belt is the Snowdonia National Park!

To enable us to move forward we need to work with our neighbours and consider new settlements of significant numbers of homes, in order for them to be sustainable and attract funding for infrastructure. These settlements will also no doubt be controversial too.

The really serious challenge, however, is the provision of social affordable and supported housing. As housing becomes increasingly expensive those on low wages are struggling the most. The details of why our country is in this lamentable state is well documented but I predict it will remain a number one issue for the town despite our own efforts to build and support such housing it is nowhere near enough.

Maintaining community cohesion.

There is no doubt that our population is growing and we will soon hit 100,000 population. It is also a changing population. We are a truly multi-cultural town with residents of many faiths and of none, of Watford and of the world.

We are a younger than average population, a "brighter" than average population (based on measured qualifications.) We are clearly seeing a movement of people

who are “Down from London” (the DFL’s as they have been called) and we have seen a significant number of Eastern Europeans move to Watford. We are positive about this and indeed our major institutions would not function without such people. But community cohesion is, and will always be, a priority for any Mayor. It is so easy to disturb that equilibrium which we currently enjoy and we want to maintain. Our residents play a great part in this and I thank them for their positivity and generous spirit.

Due to our urban setting, our mixed demographic and our proximity to London, crime and anti- social behaviour will always be an item on the agenda. We have spent many years getting us from being labelled “Ibiza on acid” to the proud purple flag town we are now. This has meant real partnership working not just talking the talk but very definitely making change happen. Our relationship with the Police Chief Inspectors of Watford past and present have been crucial in making these changes. As has the support from the Police and Crime Commissioner who recognises Watford’s unique position within the county. Ensuring that residents feel that if they report things something will be done is crucial to maintaining trust and good order between us all. Bad things happen in any town but its how we respond to it that matters .The Mayor’s job is to ensure we don’t lose focus on what matters to residents and that things get done.

Keep getting the basics right

Our residents deserve and pay for good public services. Clean streets, quality public spaces and excellent parks are what residents tell us matter. That is why we have been open minded about who delivers a service (in house \outsourced\shared with neighbouring councils) we have focussed on outcomes which matter to people not who provides it. Regular engagement with residents and listening to them has shown that people appreciate such services, it makes them feel better about where they live and about the council.

This is also why we have our Watford 2020 programme to make sure we are living up to the expectations that people have of how we should deliver our services. We should be using new technology to make things better for our residents. We now have an ambitious programme that will really move us into the 21st century.

Funding pressures in the future.

Leaving the worst till last - the money! I hope that no council member is under any illusion that we have had some lean years. It is acknowledged that local government has taken the biggest hit under the Austerity years. Government funding is set to

reduce to nil next year. New Homes Bonus is uncertain and the transfer of business rates to the sector is untried and unpredictable. We are no nearer knowing what this change next year will mean for us specifically. We live in uncertain times but this council is in a good place compared to many.

We have already taken tough decisions and changed the way we do business. We have become more efficient in the use of our resources, and more commercial in our dealings with others. BUT because we took the decision to become self-sustaining several years ago, by being far-sighted and shrewd, we have avoided many damaging cuts to services, though we recognise that if you have been made redundant this is indeed damaging to you personally. We have also laid the foundations for future financial dividends of which a Mayor in the future will be grateful. The Health Campus project is an example of this.

I instigated the Mayor's Report, Mayor's question time and the regular production of our magazine "About Watford" in order to be more accountable to Councillors and to the public. This is an area I think can be modernised and improved upon.

I passionately believe in truly local government and our ability to transform the places and the lives of people living in our town. In retirement at the House of Lords I will continue to fight for the independence of local government and a decentralisation of power. Be assured councillors I will be a loud and proud ambassador for our sector and a staunch critic of those in government who still see us as the child in the parent-child relationship we have currently. The times they are a-changing with the current challenges in society local government is part of the solution but we need to be left alone to get on with it!