

Elected Mayor's Report- October 2019

As ever, it has been a busy few months as Mayor. I have helped 2,700 local residents with their issues, visited some of our wonderful community groups and delivered on many of the items listed in this report. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank those of you who have supported the Audentior Awards this year.

Partnership Work

Everyone Active

Both of our leisure centres were recently accredited with an Outstanding at their most recent QUEST review. A QUEST review is a Sport England Award scheme which is designed to monitor the performance of leisure centres across the country. There are only 16 leisure centres nationally that have been given this accolade and it is a testament to the hard work and professionalism of staff at both Woodside and Central that two of these centres are in Watford.

Everyone Active are continuing to encourage people from underrepresented groups to get active, something which is very important. This includes running their Kids Go Free programme over the school holidays, their support for the This Girl Can campaign and their Dementia Friendly Toning Suite which encourages people living with Dementia and their carers to stay active.

Veolia

With the support of Watford Borough Council and local County Councillors, Deep Cleans were completed in a number of different places across the town. The only way that these can be carried out is to clear the road of traffic and although this can be disruptive for local residents, it is important so they can have cleaner streets.

Veolia have helped support the Watford BID with their popular and eye-catching floral displays across the Town Centre, which really help to enhance the High Street and have rightly received many positive comments from local businesses and visitors to the town. As well as this, they have supported our efforts in enhancing Cassiobury Park, creating new landscaping and planting around the entrance to Cassio Common.

Community Events

Over the last few months I have been to many different community events. I am always struck by the dedication of people in Watford who do things big and small to make our town an even better place to live and work.

I am delighted to be hosting my first ever Audentior Awards as Mayor. Although, at the time of writing the event has yet to take place, we have received hundreds of nominees for awards, all of whom have done remarkable things for our town. We have introduced a new way of deciding the Mayor's Award, it has voted on by over 5,000 members of the public. The Audentior Awards were introduced by my predecessor Baroness Dorothy Thornhill when she was first elected 17 years ago. A lot has changed since then but one thing has stayed the same; Watford's residents so often show their Audentior Spirit and aren't afraid to 'Be Bold'. Watford is full of people who care for others. These awards give us a chance to recognise the big and small acts that make our town an even better place for everyone.

Although it now may feel a long time ago as we enter the autumn months, we held many successful Big Events over the glorious summer months, including our Big Beach, Big Screen, Big Sports, Own the Stage and Big Bandstand series. These were very well attended and enjoyed by all ages. I am pleased that at a time where councils are under significant financial pressure from the government that we are able to put on events like this free of charge. Work is already underway preparing for our Fireworks event in Cassiobury Park, one of the largest free firework festival displays in the country.

Recently I joined Cllr Tim Williams at Beechfield School to help open their wonderful new outdoor play facilities. It was great to meet staff and pupils at the school who were very engaged, in particular quizzing me about my plans for the environment. The new facilities looked first class and I hope they are able to enjoy them for many years to come.

I really enjoyed visiting Watford Day Service and supporting their Macmillan Coffee Morning, one of many happening across the town. The Watford Day Service are a group who help support adults with disabilities and learning disabilities to get active and socialise together. They hold activity days, dancing sessions and provide vulnerable people with volunteering opportunities.

I hosted the 'Londis Ladies', Asmita, Daxa and Jay for afternoon tea in the Town Hall with local Central ward councillors. The ladies were retiring from the Queen's Road Londis after nearly 40 years of service, going out of their way to help the community in central Watford. One thing that really strikes me as Mayor of this town is our strong sense of community and these sisters sum that up completely. It was lovely to hear some of their stories about their

time on Queen's Road and I am sure there are many people in the town who have met them over the years. I wish them all the best in their retirement!

I joined the Ask for Clive campaign with Cllr Ian Stotesbury and spoke to local businesses about supporting the initiative. Ask for Clive is a campaign that started next door in St Albans but now covers over 3,000 venues across the country. It allows anyone in that bar, pub, restaurant or cafe to be able to report discrimination towards the LGBT* community by simply going to the bar to 'Ask for Clive'. I'd like to thank Bodegas, Platform Café, the Flag, Bosley's, the Prince George and the White Lion who have already supported the initiative. I am proud to be Mayor of such a diverse and tolerant town.

It has been wonderful to have so many school groups visit the Town Hall recently. We have had groups from Laurence Haines, Cassiobury Primary School, Alban Wood Primary School and Bromet School come to the Town Hall. It is always great to see how engaged they are about what is going on in the town and their concern about important issues such as climate change. If you know of a school group who would like to come to the Town Hall, please get in touch at themayor@watford.gov.uk.

I had the honour to be part of a special memorial ceremony to commemorate the loss of life in the bombing of Sandringham Road 75 years ago. I am really grateful to everyone who made this event possible. Meeting one of the survivors from the bombing really brought home the impact of this event on our town; and the phenomenal community spirit and resilience of those who survived. We must never forget the devastating impact that these wars had on our town.

I attended the Watford Women's Centre's 30th birthday celebrations, finding out more about the remarkable work they have done transforming the lives of vulnerable women in our town and offering a safe haven to those facing crisis. Domestic Abuse is rightly high on the political agenda at the moment and I hope the Women's Centre can remain a key part of our town for years to come.

Delivering my Manifesto and Working for the Town

Local Plan

Recently we launched a consultation on our Local Plan. The government have tripled Watford's housing targets. Government policy has established a target of building 300,000 new homes every year across the country. There is a particular emphasis on building on previously developed land within existing towns and cities. Every council, including Watford, is obliged to plan for significant housing growth to help achieve the government's targets for

new homes. The government have been clear that saying 'no' to new homes is simply not an option. That is why this plan is really important. A plan gives us more control, helps us protect our fantastic parks and green spaces and support our businesses. Most importantly, it makes sure we get a range of different housing for everyone, from retirement accommodation to more council houses for local families who really need them the most.

Without a Local Plan government inspectors would have the final say about development rather than local people. In a worst case scenario, the government could even write the Plan for us. This means that they would make the decision about where new housing would go to 2036 and the local community would have even less of a say about how the town will grow and change in the future. It is so important that we make sure these decisions about the future of our town are made here in Watford and not by anyone else.

There are no easy answers, however, residents' views in this process are key to getting this right. Residents can find out more about the Local Plan and fill our consultation via the website <https://www.watfordlocalplan.co.uk/> or by going to one of our many drop in events happening across the town.

Sustainable Transport for Watford

When I was elected, I promised to improve our public transport and make it more sustainable by introducing a new On Demand Bus Service, Cycle Hire Scheme and Transport App for people in the town. I'm really pleased that after hard work and diligence from council officers, looking for the best scheme for Watford, that we have agreed on operators to run these programmes.

Beryl, who have operated highly successful Cycle Hire Schemes in Bournemouth, London and Hereford, will be running our scheme in Watford that is due to launch next spring. The scheme will connect key parts of the town and encourage more people to take up cycling as a form of transport, something which will make Watford more sustainable.

ArrivaClick will be running our new On Demand Bus Scheme. ArrivaClick currently run schemes in Leicester, Liverpool and Sittingbourne with more areas looking into working with Arriva. In Liverpool, the scheme has been so popular that they have gone from operating seven buses in the town to over twenty in less than a year. ArrivaClick will also be launching in the spring, with a six month marketing campaign to encourage people to use the scheme. The new bus scheme will be bookable via an app and will pick you up no further than a five-ten minute walk from your location.

Both of these schemes have the potential to transform the way people travel in our town, encouraging more people out of their cars to use other greener forms of transport. As our town grows, it is so important to make sure our public transport improves. I cannot wait to see these schemes launch in the spring.

Watford General Hospital Investment

Recently, the Government committed £400 million investment in new health facilities for West Herts, including long awaited improvement work at Watford General Hospital. This includes new ward buildings, improved clinical facilities and an increase in capacity at the hospital.

This is brilliant news for the town. I am pleased that we have been able to make the tough decisions to make these improvements possible, including building a new access road to the hospital and providing the NHS Trust with the land to make these changes.

However, we need to know that this is not just an empty pre-election promise being made by the Prime Minister. The NHS Trust must be provided with this funding as soon as possible and patients, staff and visitors must start to see new modern facilities.

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.

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.

We have been working with local businesses, local community organisations and individuals across the town to make Watford a more Dementia Friendly Town. We have surveyed carers about what they feel could be improved and have worked with St Mary's Church to set up a new Dementia Café at the church on the first Friday of each month. There's more

details about many other services available on our new website,
<https://www.dementiafriendlywatford.com> .

I enjoyed joining volunteers for the Alzheimer's Society Memory Walk in Cassiobury Park. The walk aims to raise awareness and much needed funds to help tackle Dementia and hundreds of walkers came to join in, raising thousands of pounds. I also had the privilege of supporting Watford Football Club's Community Trust 'Golden Memories' programme recently. The programme aims to use the power of football to stimulate memories in people living with Dementia. The project has received funding from the Premier League and attracted national press coverage from the BBC.

Oxhey Park North

After working closely with the Environment Agency, work now has started on this site to build new bike facilities, skate facilities, café and a play area for local families. The work is due to be completed in the spring of next year. It will be great to repurpose this part of Oxhey Park with fantastic new community facilities which can be used by people of all ages. This also fulfils one of the commitments I made when I was elected in May 2018.

To make this work possible, it has been necessary to remove some trees, however, these will be replaced in the plans of the current project.

Rediscovering the River Colne

In my manifesto I made a commitment to make the River Colne cleaner and more accessible. We have launched a new 10 year project that will improve 8 different sections of the River Colne so residents can access the river and enjoy riverbank walks and a range of water based activities, pastimes and educational programmes.

The river, which is a tributary of the Thames, will undergo an extensive clean-up and a key goal is to attract back the original biodiversity of the river and its banks including plants, fish, birds and insects and other species. Key to the project will be harnessing a strong 'citizen science' volunteer force who can carry out a range of support activities including out water monitoring.

Environmental charity Groundwork has been appointed by the council to lead on the first phase of the project which is called Rediscovering the River Colne. In the initial development phase it will create a habitat and access improvement strategy for the following public sites:

- Knutsford Playing Fields
- Radlett Road Playing Fields
- Timberlake Allotments

- Waterfields Recreation Ground
- Oxhey Park
- Riverside Recreation Ground
- Riverside Park
- Lairage Land (Local Nature Reserve)

We have so many fantastic green spaces, rivers and canals that provide public space in our town. However, the Colne which flows through key sites in Watford has been neglected. I promised during my election campaign I would take positive action to restore the river and its habitat back to how it once was. I look forward to seeing people enjoying the river and cycling on the riverbank in the not too distant future.

Town Centre Task Group Update

Last year, I set up a Town Centre Task Force, including Herts Police, Watford BID, New Hope and Watford Borough Council for us to work together to deal with crime and anti-social behaviour. The council are working hard with partners to help those vulnerable individuals who may require assistance, whilst dealing with any ASB/criminal activity that may be going on in order to make the town centre a place that everyone feels safe in and continues to enjoy visiting.

We have done this by:

- Increasing high visibility police patrols in the town centre targeting the hot spots identified to disrupt the activity as much as possible
- An improved outreach programme that targets rough sleepers
- Looking at what simple changes could be made to the town centre that would prevent the opportunity for crime.

Croxley Park Update

After all councillors voted in favour of the Council purchasing Croxley Business Park, officers have been involved in negotiations with Colombia Threadneedle (CTN) about getting the best value for money deal for local taxpayers. I'm delighted to say that Watford Borough Council are now the owners of the site after negotiations completed with CTN. The council is committed to a 40 year lease, securing an additional £1.5 million for the town every year.

I'd like to thank officers for their hard work and commitment in securing this deal. It's so important that at times where councils have received a 70% reduction in funding from central government that we look at all ways of finding income in order to protect our front line services and continue to invest in the town.

Permitted Development Rights

Many people will be aware of plans submitted to the Council to convert a textiles unit in Wellstones into 15 studio flats, 7 of them without windows. The flats did not have adequate fire escapes and were half the size of the government guidelines on small living spaces. Despite government legislation requiring councils to approve any conversion from a business unit to a residential dwelling, we refused the application because we simply did not recognise this plan as a residential dwelling due to its size. This was appealed and outrageously approved by a government inspector, who said the council has no choice but to approve these schemes under permitted development rights.

I think this is an outrage. I am clear that anyone who is living in our town should have the right to live in accommodation which is of a decent standard and that provides people with dignity. It is clear that these plans do not do this and the accommodation is simply not fit for human habitation. I have written to the Secretary of State to urgently review Permitted Development rules so situations like this can never happen again in our town.

Appointment of new Managing Director

Subject to ratification at tonight's meeting, I am delighted to announce that following a well-managed and thorough recruitment process, we have made a successful appointment to the role of Managing Director. Councillors, staff and partners were all involved in the recruitment.

Following a two day interview process, the unanimous decision of the interview panel was to offer the role to Donna Nolan, who is currently Deputy Chief Executive at Mendip District Council. Donna has subsequently accepted the appointment.

Donna will be joining us in February 2020 to allow for a smooth handover from Manny. She'll have big shoes to fill but I'm sure she will build on the many achievements that Manny, and all of us, have made.

She brings a wealth of experience from her career at Mendip and other roles in both the public and private sector.

I am very much looking forward to working with her to deliver our ambitious programme for the council and for Watford.