

Elected Mayor's Report- March 2020

I am delighted that new sustainable transport schemes that I promised during the 2018 Mayoral elections have been launching this month. These bike share and on demand bus services will help tackle congestion and make air cleaner in our town. As well as this I continue to be busy supporting local community groups and helping local residents. Since being elected, I have helped over 3500 people in our town.

Coronavirus

There have been reports of a small number of cases of Coronavirus in Hertfordshire earlier this week (*week commencing 2nd March*), along with an increase in cases across the country.

We have been in regular contact with the Public Health Director for Hertfordshire Professor Jim McManus and are following advice from Public Health England.

Remember to thoroughly wash and dry your hands as often as possible and avoid touching your face; carry tissues and always cough or sneeze into them and then dispose of them into a bin – washing your hands afterwards. We all need to play a part in reducing the spread to those people who are more susceptible to viruses such as the elderly or those who are already ill.

The government and Public Health England are very closely monitoring the situation and we will follow any expert advice provided by them. We will always act in the best interests of the health and wellbeing of people in our town.

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.

We recently improved facilities on offer at both Central and Woodside Leisure centres, including extending the gym space available, making new toning suites and providing new

sauna and steam room facilities. These have been in use now for several months and have been very successful.

We have made changes to parking arrangements at Woodside Leisure Centre to encourage more spaces to become available for people who use the centre and to discourage visitors from leaving their cars at the Centre all day. We have also installed new 20 minute pick up and drop off bays on the approach to the centre. These will make it easier for those who use the centre to find parking there.

Veolia

I am pleased that Cabinet has agreed to extend Veolia's contract to continue to provide our waste services for the next eight years. Veolia provides 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

I am delighted that we have also agreed, working with Veolia, a new tree planting strategy for the town. We aim to increase by 10% the number of trees in our town by 2030. Trees help support our environment and make Watford a greener place to live and work. It is also a practical way of us delivering on the commitment we all made to making Watford a carbon neutral town by 2030.

Community Events

One of the best things 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.

Recently I attended the launch of an invaluable new domestic abuse service with Cllr Bilqees Mauthoor and the Lord Lieutenant of Hertfordshire. The service is run by JKC Lawyers in conjunction with Watford Women's Centre and the Hertfordshire Domestic Abuse Helpline. It gives free and impartial legal support to anyone woman suffering from domestic abuse and runs as a drop in service. The service runs every Wednesday from 12:30 pm. Domestic abuse is sadly all too common and I want everyone to feel safe in our town from what is a dreadful crime.

I joined volunteers and services users from Cathartic C.I.C at the Pump House. Cathartic C.I.C is a brilliant local organisation who runs arts projects for people living with Dementia, adults with special educational needs and people living through chronic illness, among other groups of vulnerable people aged 2-103. The projects aim to provide therapy as well improving the quality of life for people who use the service. I am also delighted that Cathartic C.I.C has joined our Dementia Friendly Town initiative.

I went to the Watford BID Service Excellence awards at Watford Colosseum. The awards celebrated the fantastic individuals and businesses that work so hard to make our town centre the vibrant and successful place it is. Many high streets across the country are struggling but we have seen an increase in footfall into ours. I want to continue supporting our town centre so it can continue to be as successful as possible.

I attended two deeply moving events in our town to commemorate Holocaust Memorial Day. I met Holocaust survivor Hannah Lewis who told of her harrowing story about watching her mother being murdered in a death camp to groups of pupils from Watford Boys Grammar School and West Herts College. We also conducted a memorial event in the Town Hall, organised by the Chairman and attended by the Watford Interfaith Association. It is important that we never forget the horrors of the Holocaust and man's inhumanity to man.

I have been to support a number of fantastic events at local schools. I joined pupils at Central Primary School for their arts showcase event, showing what a talented group of pupils there are at the school. I went to Bromet School to see their wonderful Talent Show and I visited Knutsford Primary School to talk about my role as Mayor. If you know of a school in your ward that wants to visit the Town Hall or wants me to visit, please do get in touch.

I joined Watford Interfaith Association for the AGM where I spoke about the importance of celebrating what a diverse and tolerant place Watford is. It is so important that people from all faiths and none can come together and live side by side happily. Watford is a town for everyone and I am determined for it to stay that way.

I wrote to all EU nationals in Watford to encourage them to take part in the government's Settled Status Scheme to ensure they can stay in our town after the transition period ends. There are over 8,000 EU nationals living in Watford, many of whom work in our public services and perform a really important role in our town. I want EU nationals living in Watford to continue to feel welcome and hope they carry on making an important contribution to life in Watford.

Delivering my Manifesto and Working for the Town

Sustainable Transport for Watford

I'm delighted that new sustainable transport initiatives are launching this month. At the beginning of March, our new bike share scheme operated by Beryl came to Watford. We have 70 docking stations in different locations across the borough, with 300 bikes available to use. So far usage figures have been high, particularly in our high profile docking stations in the town centre and outside local stations.

The new On Demand Bus service, Arriva Click, will be launching in Watford on 23rd March. Their new buses may well be spotted driving through the town at the moment as Arriva are test running the technology to make sure it is perfected for when these go 'live'. The new programme will include 7 mini buses driving throughout Watford and the surrounding area bookable via an App. The buses will cost between £1 a mile at off-peak times and £2.50 a mile at 'premium' times.

Along with the new bikes and buses, our new Transport App is now available to download. This helps promote local bus, taxi, cycle and train services in the town and provides a platform where our new transport schemes can be booked from.

These were all key election promises I made to the people of Watford and so I am pleased to be able to deliver on them. We need to have schemes that tackle congestion in the town and make our air cleaner. I want us to change the way we travel around Watford.

Challenging Government Planning Rules

I continue to campaign for 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 has 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. 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.

Last month, I was shocked to receive a letter from the Secretary of State for the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government Robert Jenerick telling Watford that we had failed to build enough homes in the last three years. It is clear that we, along with many other councils in this area, cannot reach the arbitrary targets set by the government. Not

only is there not enough available land on the town, but it could have a serious effect on our roads, doctors surgeries, train stations and schools.

I will continue to press for more powers so that we can reject unrealistic housing targets and deliver decent quality homes for local people.

Supporting an alternative to the Metropolitan Line Extension

Like many people in Watford, I was devastated when the current Mayor of London pulled the plug on the Metropolitan Line Extension in 2018. This was despite his Deputy visiting Watford the month before to see how the scheme was ready to go.

I have written to the Prime Minister asking him to revive the Metropolitan Line Extension after he expressed support for 'shovel ready' transport infrastructure schemes. When the Prime Minister was Mayor of London he was very supportive of the MLX, having agreed for Transport for London to deliver it. He also visited Watford to see for himself the benefits that the MLX would bring to the town.

The MLX could bring £2 billion into our local economy and create 6000 new local jobs. It is vital that we make big improvements to local transport to support our growth and provide people with more choices to use sustainable modes of transport. Nobody disputes that extending the Metropolitan Line to Watford Junction would create a really import link – supporting new jobs and would be good for our environment too.

This scheme was fully funded and is ready to go. It was halted because the current Mayor of London was not prepared to cover any of the risks associated with the scheme, even though the funding included generous contingencies and Transport for London would have been responsible for delivering the project.

If the Prime Minister is serious about improving the country's transport infrastructure, he should restart this project. By reopening five miles of disused rail track, we can link the Metropolitan Line to Watford Junction, Hertfordshire's busiest train station.

Tackling Homelessness

I'm delighted that we've secured nearly half a million pounds in additional support for people in our town sleeping rough and experiencing homelessness. This funding will go to provide new outreach workers for New Hope who will work with people sleeping rough to get the specialist support they need to come off the streets for good. This is on top of the existing support we already provide New Hope annually. We are working closely with New

Hope to support them develop a new 'Hub', which will act as a one stop for all homelessness services in the town.

As well as supporting our rough sleepers, we are working to build new council houses. I am delighted that work is beginning at Centrepont to build new houses for local families without a permanent roof over their heads. We will also be working with Watford Community Housing to protect and enhance the existing community space, so this will be a facility for everyone in the area.

Oxhey Park North

It was good to visit with Cllr Tim Williams recently to see the work progressing here on delivering new facilities for local people. 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.

Improving Garston Park

I am pleased that work has started on improving Garston Park. This includes providing new footpaths, new play areas, a new wildflower meadow for bees and butterflies and improved signage. As well as this, the Meriden ward team have helped set up a new Friends of Garston Park organisation with the aim of having a group of local volunteers to protect and enhance the park.

We already have 12 green flag parks and open spaces in Watford, the highest in Hertfordshire. However, I want that number to be even higher and I want Garston Park to become our latest Green Flag Park in Watford.

Restoring Frogmore House

Recently I visited our project to help restore the Grade II listed Frogmore House. Frogmore House is one of the oldest existing buildings in Watford and was built in 1710 as a family home. It was purchased by the National Grid and sadly has fallen into a state of disrepair and been added to the Heritage at Risk Register.

The restoration project will help the building enhance the original features of the building and replace the current roof. I would like to particularly pay tribute to Watford Museum and

Sian Finney McDonald, our Listings Officer, who have been working hard on this project and using original designs from the building to make sure it is as close as it was to the original design from 1710.

The space will be used as office space but we are currently working on plans to have Community Open Days when the project is finished in order for people in our town to see the completed design.

Whippendell Woods Project

Work has started on restoring and protecting the beautiful Whippendell Woods as part of a project with the Forestry Commission and the Woodlands Trust. The project involves removing invasive species of tree from the woodland, create better links to the park, help introduce new wildlife to the area and protect this Site of Special Scientific Interest for the future. Protecting and enhancing this beautiful woodland is so important and I am pleased we can work with experts to do this.

Watford Cycle Hub

As part of my commitment to more sustainable transport in Watford we have invested 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

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.

We continue to do fantastic work engaging our whole town with this project. I recently visited the Forget Me Not restaurant in West Herts College, run in conjunction with Watford Borough Council. This is Watford's first ever Dementia Friendly restaurant, with specially trained staff and a restaurant area designed specifically for people living with Dementia and their carers. We are also running regular Dementia Cafes at St Mary's Church, as well as support groups for carers.

It is often difficult for people living with Dementia to do every day activities, such as go to a café, catch public transport or go shopping. This project is about making small changes in order to make it easier for these individuals to live a normal and fulfilled life.