

Elected Mayor's Report – October 2020

I was saddened to hear last month of the passing of former councillor for Holywell, Jackie Connal. Jackie was a wonderfully warm and friendly person who cared so much for this town. She worked hard supporting the Fair Trade movement, Watford Museum, and was part of our Dementia Friends group. I will miss her and my thoughts and prayers are with her family and many friends.

Similar to my report for the last Full Council in July, this one will likely be heavily focused on our town's ongoing recovery from Covid-19, and how we balance this against meeting the more general targets we have set ourselves for this term.

COVID-19 Response

Community Protection

Throughout the summer months cases across the country appeared to be relatively stable, but we have seen a slight increase in cases in recent weeks, with other areas of the UK facing local lockdowns. As I write we are fortunate that case numbers in Watford and Hertfordshire more generally, remain relatively low, but given the current national trend it is vital more than ever that we continue to follow guidelines around maintaining social distancing, wearing face coverings and ensuring we thoroughly and regularly wash our hands. There have had a few cases of positive tests in local businesses and each business has worked closely with us to contain the virus and thus don't pose any ongoing risks to residents.

I am so proud of Watford being chosen to pilot the local track and trace scheme in support of the National track and trace scheme. The Environmental Health Team in Watford has done such a great job throughout the pandemic of keeping our communities safe and being granted this pilot scheme illustrates the confidence that we can all have in their work.

I am pleased to report the introduction of Watford's Confidence Mark for Taxis and Minicabs, an initiative which has since been picked up by Hertfordshire County Council and is being rolled out across the County. The scheme provides free online training for specialist infection control to ensure that taxi and minicabs continue to provide safe services for residents during the ongoing pandemic. Over 50 people have already taken part in the training in Watford which is great to hear, and I sincerely hope that it will make people feel more comfortable when travelling and confident that every precaution is being taken to maintain their safety. The taxi and minicab business, like many others, was hit hard by the

lockdown measures earlier this year, so by providing this extra training we are able to help this industry get back on its feet as people return to some form of normality.

Community engagement

Throughout the pandemic I have continued hosting regular Facebook Live Q and A sessions with guest panellists helping me to answer questions from local residents. These sessions have been well received in the community and it has been a great way of maintaining a presence even with the various restrictions that have been in place.

Unfortunately due to Covid-19 we saw the cancellation of this year's Herts Pride, which is an annual celebration of LGBTQ* life and a great opportunity for our County to celebrate diversity and equality in the community. But with the help of Cllr Aga Dychton, we were able to show the pride spirit of the town can withstand even a global pandemic and we raised the pride flag outside the Town Hall in August. While I know that there would have been disappointment from many about the cancellation of Herts Pride, I am glad that so many across the borough took the opportunity to celebrate in new and innovative ways this year, including by participating in the Herts Pride Zoom Quiz which was aiming to raise money to put on an even bigger Pride event when it returns next year.

Throughout the pandemic we have seen a great sense of community in Watford, with people coming together, forming new volunteer groups and supporting the most vulnerable in our Borough. In August I had the pleasure of visiting Hand on Heart to see the great work they have been doing as a part of their Back to School Campaign. School children were among some of the most adversely affected during the pandemic, so with the help of a group of volunteers Hand on Heart prepared and delivered hundreds of backpacks containing school supplies to some of the most vulnerable children in Watford. It was great to see the work that Hand on Heart have been up to, and meet the families that have been volunteering their time to help others.

Whilst so much charitable work has been ongoing during these difficult times, there was one person who stood out for her hard work in raising money for Mount Vernon Hospital. In August I was joined by Chairman Cllr Aga Dychton to award local resident Olivia Alcorano, aged 7, with a certificate of commendation for raising over £3000 for Mount Vernon Hospital. Olivia learnt to cycle during lockdown, and since has been cycling 5 miles a day to raise money. This was an outstanding contribution to the local community and it was great to meet Olivia and present her with this award. Olivia is a true inspiration to our community and a reminder that we are all capable of meeting personal challenges and supporting others during these difficult times.

Delivering my Manifesto and Working for the Town

Sustainability in Watford

Last year at Council we unanimously passed a motion to declare a climate emergency, committing us to be net carbon neutral by 2030 and there has been lots of work going on in that area since. However, conscious that this is not something the Council can do by itself, with the help of Cllr Ian Stotesbury and Cllr Tim Williams, we launched the Sustainability Forum. We held an online Sustainability Forum event over the summer and it was a great opportunity to hear from residents about what initiatives they want to see and get their ideas on making Watford a more sustainable place to live.

Since launching the Beryl bikes scheme in March this year we have seen a tremendous amount of support for the bikes and over 60,000 rides have been taken. It is great to see there is a real appetite for sustainable transport in our town, and it is essential if we are to meet our environmental commitments as a borough. We are also fortunate to be the first town in the UK to introduce approximately 60 pedal-assisted electric bikes available to hire, which are great for longer journeys and also make the scheme more accessible to all.

In addition to improving air quality across Watford, the Beryl Bike scheme was a great platform for a new fund-raising campaign, Ride for Watford. We partnered with local software innovator PLM Central Ltd so that every trip on a Beryl Bike during the campaign resulted in a 50p donation to Watford Helps Covid-19 Charities Appeal. Additional donations were also able to be made via text and from Beryl. An amazing 5,676 rides and 18,925km were recorded during the ride-to-donate initiative, resulting in £2,806 being raised for the appeal.

I would like to thank Watford FC Goalkeeper Ben Foster, and Cllr Glen Saffrey for their hard work on making this project such a success.

Protecting our town's heritage

I am delighted that Watford Museum has once again opened its doors, welcoming back members of the public on a limited basis since 1st August. I was lucky to visit for the reopening and saw the fantastic displays they currently have.

A few weeks ago I was fortunate enough to visit Frogmore House, owned by St William Homes LLP, where restoration works have now been completed by Giles Quarme Architects. The project was particularly difficult because it was not on Council land, but we are committed to preserving and enhancing Watford's heritage, meaning all partners involved have worked incredibly hard to ensure this Grade II* listed building is preserved for years to come.

I am also pleased to report the completion of the All Saints Church Wall restoration project along Horseshoe Lane, Leavesden. The restoration was carefully planned and executed, taking into consideration use of appropriate materials, styles and appearance to make sure the original aesthetic of the wall was preserved. The church holds great historical importance, being designed by renowned architect Sir George Gilbert Scott in 1853, and it is wonderful to see the wall's full glory restored. It is extremely important that we look after our heritage so that future generations can continue to enjoy it, and figures like Sir George Gilbert Scott can be remembered and celebrated.

Watford Junction

Works are nearly complete on the first stage of improvements to Watford Junction Station; refurbishing the forecourt outside the station aims to create an improved 'gateway' to the town centre. With the refurbishment we are looking to create a safe, pedestrian-friendly environment, with more open, multifunctional space featuring new paving, lighting, planting, seating and signposting. There will also be the start of a heritage trail through the town centre and a new Beryl bike-share bay for the front of the station.

Over the summer one of the more noticeable changes was introduced in the form of freestanding letters spelling out 'WATFORD'. These new letters provide a focal point in the forecourt and will hopefully encourage people to take photos and promote the town widely on social media. In order to facilitate these improvements, bike parking has been moved from the forecourt to a secure, 300-capacity facility, just off the car park entry road.

Improvements to leisure facilities

One of my key manifesto commitments when I was elected in 2018 was to support the continued improvements of leisure facilities in Watford. The opening of Oxhey Activity Park and Tasty Bean Café at the end of the summer was a resounding success, especially vital this year as it became apparent that people need opportunities to get outside and enjoy nature now more than ever. There is a whole range of new facilities at Oxhey, with something for everyone to enjoy, including a state of the art skate park, a bike trail, an adventure playground and new habitats aimed at improving biodiversity. Given the external circumstances at the moment we have also hired marshals to make sure that people are being responsible when using these facilities, including maintaining social distancing and not gathering in large groups.

I am also pleased to report back on the improvement works at Garston Park which, although smaller than Oxhey, has some equally great new facilities. We have updated the children's play area, including accessible equipment, built a new skate park, installed table tennis facilities and improved walkways and entrances for enhanced access. It is so important to

have such great free-to-use facilities in our town, and I hope that children and adults alike can continue to make use of these wonderful green spaces.

Watford has, for the fifth year running, been granted more Green Flag awards than any other district in Hertfordshire, with 12 parks and open spaces being recognised by the Green Flag Award Scheme. The awards are a confirmation that the hard work we put into our open spaces is being noticed, with our parks being recognised for meeting the highest environmental standards and having excellent visitor facilities.

The 2020 Green Flag status parks are: Cassiobury Park, Woodside Playing Fields, Cheslyn House and Gardens, Waterfields Recreation Ground, Callowland Recreation Ground, Orchard Park, Oxhey Park, St Mary's Churchyard, Goodwood Recreation Ground, Paddock Road Allotments, North Watford Cemetery, and Harwoods Recreation Ground.

I was delighted to preside over the opening of the West Herts Sports Club Phase 1 Development. The improvement to the facilities include a new multi-use games area, new cricket nets, an extended car park, new grounds equipment and storage shed, as well as an improved irrigation system for the cricket pitch and tennis courts. This facility is an asset to the local community, and is only the first phase of ongoing developments. I really enjoyed chatting with members of the club, and hearing about how well their many teams are doing, including the popularity of cricket among young people in the town.

I would like to thank Cllr Tim Williams for his work as Portfolio Holder for Parks and Sustainability, and Veolia for their continued support on these projects.

Changes to waste collections

In September we saw the start of a new waste and recycling collection service in Watford, including introducing a new weekly food waste collection, moving non-recyclable waste to fortnightly collection, and a small annual charge for green waste collection. The aim of the new scheme is to increase overall recycling in the Borough, and take into account the cuts equating to 70% of central government funding. Whilst garden waste collection is a discretionary service we have taken the decision to introduce a charge as there are many residents who do not actually use the service. On the other hand, feedback from residents showed a willingness to recycle more, on the condition that it was collected more regularly. Having seen that food waste makes up around 30% of the waste previously thrown away in the black bin, the logical solution was to push this form of individual recycling, allowing for it to be turned into either electricity or compost.

While there will always be some confusion and uncertainty when changing recycling collections, the way we have managed this with a grace period has allowed for a relatively

smooth transition. As another manifesto commitment, I am very pleased to report on the overall success so far of this new scheme, and hope that it will continue to improve recycling rates in Watford.

Planning laws success

At the last Full Council I reported that the government had changed planning rules on windowless flats following the campaign of Watford Liberal Democrats. Since then we have seen further success by way of another change in planning rules; the government have now announced that new homes built using permitted development powers must meet space standards. Nobody should be forced to live in cramped conditions, and this is a step in the right direction to ensuring that. However, there is still a long way to go to reform our planning system so that local communities have more power and can decide what is best for their area. We must be able to insist on safe, decent and affordable homes and make sure that people have the services that they need, before new developments are agreed.

Watford Liberal Democrats will be looking to continue the success of challenging terrible planning laws by stopping the current plans to allow an additional two storeys to be allowed on buildings without prior planning permission.

WhatsApp Business Pilot

I am excited to announce Watford Council's partnership with WhatsApp. This partnership aims to support the small business community with the UK's first WhatsApp High Street. The initiative will enable small businesses in Watford to promote their business on the WhatsApp Business app, and help them to easily connect with their customers at this difficult time. This is a first of its kind pilot programme in the UK, working initially with 12 businesses on Market Street to overcome some of the business challenges presented by Covid-19. Local businesses are vital to our economy, bringing jobs and so much character to our town. We are committed to working with them to ensure Watford's economy succeeds as we start to open up after a difficult period of lockdown.

Digital skills and new technology are at the heart of our plans for the borough, which is why we are helping local businesses to adapt their ways of working too.

West Herts Hospital Transformation

I welcome the decision taken by West Hertfordshire Hospitals NHS Trust (WHHT) and Herts Valleys Clinical Commissioning Group (HVCCG) Boards to move ahead with their ambitious plans to transform the Watford General site, and deliver considerable improvements at Hemel Hempstead Hospital and St Albans City Hospital.

I have consistently championed proposals that will ensure improved hospital facilities across West Hertfordshire, and spoke in favour of the plans at the meeting of the Boards on 1st

October. The transformation project will provide better facilities for all across West Herts and much more quickly than any of the alternatives proposed. These last few months have placed huge strain on our health services, and just highlights the urgency in which quality health services are needed.

Big screen events

Despite our social lives being largely upended throughout the pandemic, we have still found ways to have fun within the community. Throughout August, Big Screen Events were held at Woodside, King George V, and Knutsford Playing Fields, allowing families to get together and watch films in the open air. The free event that is usually held in the town centre was well adapted to allow for social distancing measures and make use of our green spaces. I know these have been tough times for everyone, but it was really good to see so many people enjoying the opportunity to get out and enjoy the films being shown.