

**Councillor Gareth Jones**

**Mayoral Speech**

**7.00pm**

**24 May 2021**

**The Borough Gardens**

Fellow Councillors, friends and family guests,

I'd like to start by thanking Cllr Biggs for his kind words in proposing my nomination, and my colleagues for demonstrating their support by voting for my adoption to serve as the Mayor of Dorchester.

I am honoured to accept the role of Mayor, and conscious of the town's mayoral tradition as I become the 393<sup>rd</sup> in a long line of mayors starting in 1629. Together previous Mayors have helped Dorchester and its people through both good times and bad, and I am proud to have been chosen to continue their work.

It is wonderful to see you all here witnessing a centuries-old ceremony that up to now has been held within municipal buildings in their various forms. With today's Municipal buildings undergoing renovation and remodelling, and with Covid restrictions on indoor gatherings, I am very grateful to the Town Clerk and all the Council staff for creating this novel venue within this beautiful Borough gardens setting.

I would particularly like to thank our Outdoor Services team who have kept the gardens in tip top condition and continue to make improvements in the gardens which all can now enjoy. At the moment we can see the lovely blue of the Camassia on the bank near the tennis courts and the recently laid out Tirah Memorial beds. The

gardens also have an area featuring scented roses named after characters both in Thomas Hardy Novels and other famous literary characters and actors.

You will be pleased to know that given the current outdoor conditions, I will keep my speech brief.

When I first put myself forward for election, I was spurred on by my experience of being in a group of fellow residents who wished to have their voice heard by the Local Authorities. This became a desire to be involved in representing the people of the town more widely, and to contribute to making the town a better place in which to live, to work and to enjoy. I am pleased and proud to have been part of a great team of councillors and officers for over a decade, all of whom have worked tirelessly to make that happen.

Dorchester is a lovely place to live and to raise families as I have done, and a place that feels safe and friendly with a sense of community, and where the pace of life seems to allow time to meet and chat to people in the street. Dorchester and its people have however been through particularly tough times with Covid, and even as the town's people and businesses work their way out of the pandemic, many challenges remain to individuals, communities, and the town as a whole. The Town Council has contributed to providing assistance to groups and organisations in the front line of helping those in difficulties, and I hope to use my time as Mayor to support further recovery initiatives.

Although the focus has recently been on the immediate Covid situation, Dorchester faces some major ongoing challenges that have been growing for a while. The most pressing of these are housing and especially affordable housing. I believe that the proposed sizeable development outside our parish boundary to the North of

Dorchester, which this Council opposes, makes it even more essential that we seek alternative housing solutions, and maximise innovative development opportunities within the town - particularly affordable housing to meet local need.

Much of what the Town Council does through its councillors and staff is not particularly glamorous, following the routine but essential processes of managing the things under our direct responsibility and control. This we do well, especially after a programme of review and reform. In addition, for decades the Town Council, often working in partnership with other organisations, has been improving public facilities in the town. This work has not stopped because of Covid, a current example being the repair and reconfiguration the Municipal Buildings (the Corn Exchange) which has been proceeding apace to provide much improved facilities for Dorchester Arts to deliver a renewed offer from later this year.

Even here however we are seeing changes. As Dorset Council struggles with its own funding crisis, Dorchester is experiencing the results of cuts in their provision of services. The Town Council is being faced with options and opportunities to take on delivery of alternative provision. Change can be challenging, but it also gives us opportunities and we must make sure that we are proactive in recognising those opportunities and take full advantage of them so that residents, businesses and visitors can all benefit.

We are all aware of the retail and leisure sector collapse, and whilst we can do little to reverse a national trend, I will draw on my experience in economic development to support those seeking ways and initiatives to restore some of the town's vitality through regenerating the town's retail and leisure offer. It is also important that we develop additional and varied local employment opportunities for young people

particularly in new sectors with new futures, and I will be encouraging growth in local enterprise support.

Of course in seeking solutions to needs and responses to opportunity, the council works with many local groups, communities, and partners with their wide range of knowledge, skills, and people. We are fortunate in that Dorchester is endowed with a great number of voluntary groups, organisations, and helpful individuals working across an astonishing range of endeavours. I look forward to meeting many of them over the coming year and supporting their work.

I am very pleased that this Council both declared a Climate Emergency response, and has pursued two significant renewable heat projects located at the Cricket club and in the Municipal Buildings. As I have been interested in renewable heating ideas since I was a engineering student, I will be using the Council's lead in renewable heat to encourage other organisations to follow our example. We must of course encourage other environmental improvements, including following this Council's lead in greening the town by planting of trees, or encouraging a more climate friendly culture of reduced car usage particularly as the scale of Dorchester means access to the centre is easily walkable and cyclable for many residents.

Dorchester has a wealth of history and heritage stretching back more than six thousand years with fabulous historic sites lying within the town such as the Maumbury Rings Neolithic henge; Roman remains; medieval and Tudor buildings and lovely Georgian and Victorian edifices. Our heritage also includes numerous famous people and notable events, many of these are signposted in the newly renovated Shire Hall and the soon to be open Dorset County Museum. The council, in partnership with heritage organisations, has developed a strategy to raise the profile of all this to a wider public and to attract visitors to our town to enjoy, stay and spend money. I'm

delighted to have been part of the process of giving birth to the new Dorchester Tourism Partnership which will deliver the actions in that strategy, and look forward to the contribution it will make to Dorset's resurgence in vitality.

I now come to my choice of Mayor's charities, both of which are locally based serving local people.

The first is the GAP project based on a community garden area off Lubbecke Way. Spending time in green space or bringing nature into everyday life has been shown to benefit both mental and physical wellbeing. The GAP Project provides practical support in the garden to those with mental health problems, through trained staff and volunteers helping build confidence, self-esteem, resilience and improved quality of life. The project has responded to a rapid growth in demand from local people suffering mental health issues, some lockdown related, and has established a new larger garden. The GAP project now needs to increase the level of support from trained staff to cope with the growing number of beneficiaries. I will be raising funds to help GAP service that growth.

My second charity is a new Community Café and Shop based in Trinity Street which is under development by the local team at Mencap Mid Dorset. Mencap aims to improve the quality of life for local people with learning difficulties by providing goods and services to support and benefit them, their families and carers. The project will provide opportunities for people with learning difficulties to volunteer and work in the community – giving them the opportunity to meet other people, reduce their isolation, and learn skills such as cooking and handling money, to help with their long-term independence. Skills training and accreditation will help improve their chances of getting future paid work elsewhere. At this early stage I will be raising funds to help

with some basic requirements including provision of a disabled toilet facility including a stair lift/stair lift platform for access.

Finally, I would like to say that for me personally, accepting the role of Mayor has a particular extra significance. My Great Grandfather joined the Dorset regiment in 1885 after having been refused permission to marry the Mayor's daughter in Rochester Kent where grew up. After serving in India and concluding his military career here he became landlord of the Cornwall Hotel by Dorchester West Station where both my grandfather and later my mother grew up. I of course brought my own daughters up here. I find it a satisfying symmetry in that a connection with a Mayor marks both the start and now the continuation of my family's association with Dorchester. Anne also comes from a Dorset family and her Great Grandfather was born in Fordington in 1865.

Anne and I look forward very much to the year ahead and to meeting and supporting the people of this town, and helping them succeed in their ambitions.