

## **Orpington 1st Update for Knoll Residents Association AGM 2022**

Good evening, everyone.

As Executive Director of Orpington 1st, I'm pleased to provide you with a quick update from the town centre business community – thank you for the opportunity to do so.

I'd also like to thank you for the many positive comments we've received on town centre events, The Orpington 1st Magazine, and our summer planting programme. Businesses choose to invest additional funding towards all these things to make Orpington a better place to live, work, and visit, so it is good to know they are valued by residents.

In July, businesses voted overwhelmingly in favour of continuing the Business Improvement District (BID) for a third 5 year-term. Turnout was in line with industry averages and compared favourably to our local election turnout, and we're pleased to move forward with a strong mandate through what is likely to be a challenging period.

The BID provides a strong voice for local businesses, and we'll continue to lobby local, regional, and central government on the issues which impact them. On that, one of the more positive aspects of the autumn statement was the extension and increase in Business Rates relief for 2023/24 up to 75% for Retail, Hospitality, and Leisure businesses. Along with BID colleagues across the country, Orpington 1st has long campaigned for the reform of this antiquated and unfair tax, and whilst the chancellor's announcement on this point will indeed come as a relief to some high street businesses - rethinking on business tax is required.

Orpington 1st enjoys a positive relationship with the met police, but we do not hold back on demanding more for our town centre. We look forward to welcoming new officers to Orpington very soon and continuing - and improving on - our constructive partnership with an increased police presence which serves as greater reassurance to residents and businesses, and a greater deterrent to criminals.

The town centre vacancy rate currently hovers around the average for Greater London of 11% and well below the Great Britain average of 14%. However, the coming months are likely to see an increase in the churn rate nationwide as increased business costs and a squeeze on consumer spending power takes further effect.

We're pleased to welcome Taco Bell to the Walnuts (who are hoping to open by the end of the year), and we understand that negotiations are currently taking place between potential tenants and landlord on the former Bella Italia and Wetherspoons units.

We hope that works on the former Poundworld building will begin in the first quarter of 2023 and we have highlighted the significance of this development to the local authority. We hope Bromley Council will do all they can to ensure this goes ahead.

As we wrote in the autumn edition of The Orpington 1st Magazine, the withdrawal of Areli's planning application brings an opportunity for fresh and *constructive* conversation about the future of the town centre. Our business community have indicated support for the general principle of regenerating the Walnuts and we look forward to helping to shape an alternative plan.

Upon hearing Areli's statement, Orpington 1st emphasised to them the importance of providing as much certainty as possible to shopping centre tenants whose units may still be subject to redevelopment, and the necessity of maintaining the look and feel of the shopping centre.

Businesses also want to see a high quality and efficient leisure centre in the heart of the town, and we hope that with or without private investment Bromley Council will ensure the provision of a first-class service.

Orpington 1<sup>st</sup> has long pushed for an overarching guide for town centre development and we were pleased to see Bromley Council publish the draft SPD for Orpington town centre – a document which should support essential inward investment.

This autumn, we were delighted to be awarded Gold in the prestigious Britain in Bloom awards – a testament to businesses' continued investment in the town centre environment. The Royal Horticultural Society judges visited in an extremely dry August and were impressed by the BID's resourceful horticultural efforts, which included the 30 red, white and blue flower cubes, the leisure centre pallet park, and the high street parklets. The achievement brought the opportunity to celebrate our town further afield and I was invited on to BBC Radio Kent's Sunday Gardening show to discuss Bloom with the appropriately named host - Andy Garland.

In October, we autumnised the parklet outside WH Smiths. It has proved a popular rest point and provides an opportunity for additional greening, so we decided to keep it in situ into the Autumn.

Thank you to those of you who submitted photographs in the Orpington Photography Competition 2022. The competition aims to celebrate the people and places of Orpington and hopes to inspire Orpingtonians to look positively at their surroundings. We received some really beautiful shots – many of which highlight the importance which green spaces play in our lives; from the Grade II listed Priory Gardens to Petts Wood, and Sparrow Wood to Derry Downs. Selected entries, including the winning photograph by Andrea Cseke, feature in the Orpington Calendar for 2023.

The calendars are on sale at Orpington Library now, with all proceeds going to Bromley Homeless. The minimum suggested donation is £5 but please do give what you can to help this fantastic charity.

Thanks, too, to everyone who has enjoyed town centre events this year.

In May we welcomed the inimitable Lemn Sissay OBE to perform at our Spoken Word event alongside a plurality of poets hailing from Bromley to Brighton - as part of Orpington Literary Festival.

In June we held Orpington's Platinum Jubilee celebrations in Market Square. What a fabulous occasion that was – it really did demonstrate the best of the Orpington community – which was on display again on Sunday at Light Up Orpington.

As we took down the poppies from the high street's trees following another well-attended Remembrance Service, and installed the festive lights, we started the countdown to Christmas in Orpington.

It was an absolutely incredible turnout! We're grateful to the thousands who came along to celebrate, including Deputy Mayor Cllr. Christine Harris and Orpington ward councillors, and for all your positive feedback. The atmosphere was fantastic, businesses were busy, and several restaurants have reported up to a 100% increase in takings. New for this year's Light Up was the inclusion of the third Orpington Children's Business Fair, following events in March and July. CBF is a fabulous initiative that encourages the next generation of entrepreneurs, and we are proud partners.

Next up we have the Santa Dash on December 4<sup>th</sup> in partnership with Mytime Active. Hundreds of Santas will make their way around the glorious Priory Gardens, down the high street and into Market Square in a 2km festive fun run. If you don't fancy taking part, please do come and support the Santas of all shapes, sizes, and abilities.

Local businesses are proud of our town. We're proud of what we have achieved since the BID's establishment, in sometimes difficult conditions and with limited resources, and we're passionate about Orpington town centre realising its full potential.

These are challenging times but thank you for continuing to support your town centre businesses wherever possible.

Keep up to date by visiting our website, signing up to our newsletter, and following us on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, and to those of you who I will not see before, I'd like to wish you a very merry Christmas, and all the best for 2023.

Chris Travers