

# Mayor's Report – October Council

## Business Improvement District

Ballot papers have now gone out in the town centre for businesses to vote on whether they think Business Improvement District (BID) is right for Watford.

Over 200 BIDs are already operating successfully around the country, including one in every major city. Their success is ascribed to the fact they are focused, cost efficient and entrepreneurial.

The Business Plan for the Watford BID sets out how nearly £3 million of investment, raised via a small proportionate levy charged to every business in the BID area, would be spent across the five year term of the BID. It focuses on activities and initiatives that will enhance the look and feel of the town, secure the future of the town and maintain and improve the footfall, through increased marketing, promotion and events - especially while the Charter Place redevelopment works are underway.

The business plan is available to download online at [watfordbid.co.uk/business-plan.html](http://watfordbid.co.uk/business-plan.html) or a hard copy is available from the Town Centre Manager on 01923 278260.

All votes must be returned by 5pm on 29th October. The result will be announced on 30th October.

## Cemeteries

In September, Cabinet received a report on the service provided at Watford cemeteries. A range of issues were raised in the Institute of Crematorium and Cemetery Management's review and during engagement with local stakeholders. Most of these will be taken forward in a Cemetery Strategy and detailed action plan, but I am glad to say that discussions have already begun with Gardens of Peace about providing weekend and bank holiday services.

## Charter Place

Following Government approval for the Compulsory Purchase Order earlier this summer, work is due to start on the redevelopment of Charter Place imminently, starting with the removal of fixtures and fittings. The demolition is due to start in December.

During the works, Watford will remain open for business. There will be covered walkways in and out of the shopping centre.

## **West Hertfordshire Hospital Trust**

Council will be aware that West Hertfordshire Hospital Trust has been taken into special measures because of concerns about quality of care.

I am in regular contact with management at the Trust and I have requested a meeting with the Secretary of State for Health. Everyone I've spoken to is determined to turn things around. The criticisms in the CQC report about lack of space and facilities that need updating make Watford Health Campus even more important. We still await a decision on the allotments from the Secretary of State. Both council officers and I will continue to offer any assistance we can.

The aim is always to get hospitals out of special measures within a year, and I hope that will be the case in Watford.

## **Tall Buildings Strategy**

Over the last few months the Borough has been approached about a number of proposed new tall buildings, and it's apparent that we need a clear Tall Buildings Strategy that will consider heights, locations, how the building functions as a unit, how it interacts with the existing community, how the building would be serviced, while protecting Watford's best views. To that end, the officers have been working with Design South East and Members to draw up a draft strategy.

Any strategy must consider the needs and ambitions for our borough. Watford is not London, and residents do not want to be surrounded by high-rises. The feedback so far is that very tall buildings should be the exception in Watford, not the rule. Any new buildings must be of good quality that provide desirable housing for local residents and spaces for businesses.

The workshops are ongoing, and we are looking to put a draft strategy out to consultation this autumn. What is clear is that central government is forcing some development on us, and Watford is certainly attracting the interest of developers. New residential and commercial development is inevitable, and it is our responsibility to ensure that that development is suitable for our town and is of maximum benefit to local residents and businesses.

## **Taxis**

Passengers with disabilities make up a significant part of the business for taxi and private hire drivers, as they are quite often the most flexible form of transport available to them.

Earlier this year WBC conducted a mystery shopper exercise with an independent company to see how licensed taxi and private hire drivers treated passengers with disabilities.

The results showed that there are some areas where a better service could be provided, particularly when helping passengers into and out of the vehicles and when communicating with them. The biggest problems related to travel by wheelchair users, and work is needed to train drivers about securing wheelchairs.

The results were considered by our Licensing Committee on 14 September 2015. The Committee agreed to form a working group with trade representatives, passenger representatives and councillors to look at how to improve the services and to inform passengers more about what they can expect from licensed drivers.

I am pleased that drivers and passenger representatives have already volunteered and are working together to provide a better service for passengers with disabilities. Drivers who want to take part in the working group can still do so by contacting the licensing team by emailing [licensing@watford.gov.uk](mailto:licensing@watford.gov.uk) or telephoning 01923 278476.

## **Big Events**

Watford's Big Events this summer were a huge success. Initial feedback from residents and visitors was good, and footfall on the High Street increased significantly.

The next in the Big Events series is Diwali on The Parade. It's set to bring colour, lights and culture to the heart of Watford. The free event takes place from 12pm-5pm on Sunday 25 October and is linked with Diwali at the Palace – a vibrant Diwali dance celebration being shown at Watford Palace Theatre. There's lots planned to make it even more magical than last year, with a host of dance and musical performances, and hands-on workshops. I hope I'll see you there.

## **Budget**

We are already starting to work on next year's budget. Although we are not expecting disastrous cuts, the long-term trend is for smaller government grants and a higher proportion of revenue being raised locally. The Chancellor of the Exchequer has indicated that there will be dramatic changes to the way that business rates are distributed. I would welcome changes that would see the Borough keeping more of our Business Rate receipts and residents benefiting from our booming town. However, we have been down this road before with previous government announcements. As ever, the devil will be in the detail.

## **Queen's Birthday**

September saw Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II, become the longest serving monarch. Her Majesty has reigned over our country since 1952, overseen 12 Prime Ministers and witnessed worldwide change. It was an honour for me to sign and send a letter of congratulations from the borough.

## **Ramadan Fast**

Thank you to everyone who supported my sponsored fast in aid of Tolpits Lane community centre. It raised over £5,000.

## **A Personal Note**

On a personal note, I'd like to thank everyone who sent such warm congratulation about my peerage. It's a great honour. I will continue to put my duties as Elected Mayor first, and I will always work hard for our town.