

Mayor's Report – July 2016

Big Events

Big Word Fest

Our first Literary Festival took place in April and featured nationally acclaimed actors, authors and playwrights. Guest speakers included actor and director Simon Callow, crime writer Elly Griffiths, crime fiction expert Barry Forshaw and writer, broadcaster and politician Michael Portillo.

The festival also featured children's activities, with The Roald Dahl themed events proving particularly popular with all workshops fully booked and hundreds taking part in the Roald Dahl Parade.

Big Dance

The Big Dance Bus returned to Watford again this year and saw hundreds of local people showcase their dance moves in front of a live audience.

Local dance groups from West Herts College, Central Primary School, Act One Arts Base and Hertfordshire Youth Dance Company all performed, as well as professional dancers from across London.

Footfall in the town increased to 23,000 compared with 14,000 the previous two Sunday afternoons.

Imagine Watford

Imagine Watford is now in its sixth year and promises to be bigger and better than ever. I'm delighted that we are able to welcome internationally acclaimed artists to our town centre for two weeks of first class street art.

Few towns of our size are able to host performers of this calibre. Many artists performing in Watford during the festival also perform in major European destinations. It really shows how we punch above our weight as a town and we are lucky to have a first class partner in the Palace Theatre who coordinate the event.

The festival is good news for traders in the town too, increasing visitor numbers and also increasing footfall at the top end of the town.

Big Beach and Screen

I am delighted to welcome back the Big Beach for a second year running. Following feedback from last year's big beach we are extending the duration of the event. The beach will now be on the parade for a month beginning on 24th July.

We're also bringing back the big screen which will show classic and family films, host comedy nights and also screen the Rio Olympics live.

Audentior Awards

Nominations have now opened for this year's annual Audentior Awards. The prizegiving ceremony will be hosted in the Colosseum on Friday 7th October and will honour Watford residents, business and community groups who have made an outstanding contribution to the town.

To make a nomination, search 'audentior awards' on www.watford.gov.uk and fill in the online form. Alternatively contact our Civic Officer Paul Bateman on 01923 278374.

The closing date for nominations is Thursday 7th July

Major Projects Update

Cassiobury Park

Work has started on the new Cassiobury Park hub building which will provide improved changing facilities for the paddling pools, sports changing rooms, a new kiosk and upper floor café, and a flexible teaching and exhibition space.

The council have signed a lease with an operator for the new Cha café which is due to re-open in August.

The fountain which formerly stood in front of the café is also due to be replaced. Along with the bandstand this is another part of the park's heritage which is being restored as part of the £6.6m improvements.

The Bandstand

The bandstand has been restored back to its original condition and painted in the colours of the Capel Family crest. It is being re-sited to its original place in the park over the next few weeks.

Herts County Council have consulted on plans to revamp the former bandstand site outside the library as a 'Town Hall Square' with enhanced pedestrian and cycle routes, landscape improvements, a water fountain and newly planted trees. We are awaiting details from the County on responses, budget, funding arrangements and timescales.

Metropolitan Line Extension

Work is ongoing to reroute gas, water, electric and communication services in preparation for the construction of the new Metropolitan Line viaduct which will carry trains over Baldwins Lane to the new stations at Cassiobridge and Vicarage Road before joining the existing line at Watford High Street Station.

I am looking forward to seeing plans for a new mixed development at the Cassiobridge station site which will include retail, offices, residential and public realm improvements around the new station building.

Watford Health Campus

The Government have granted permission for the Farm Terrace Allotment site to be used as part of the Health Campus project. West Herts Hospital Trust have welcomed the decision.

Work on the new road is progressing well and is on target to open in the Autumn. We will be naming the new road 'Thomas Sawyer Way' in honour of Captain Thomas Sawyer who fell in Afghanistan. Tom was a lifelong Watford FC fan and grew up just a few minutes from the Health Campus site. Dedicating the new road to his memory will serve as a permanent memorial to his life and his service to our town and our country.

Intu Centre

Keltbray have now completed the demolition works on the Charter Place site ahead of the main construction work.

Laing O'Rourke have been appointed as the main contractor to build the intu extension at Charter Place.

Retailers confirmed for the intu extension at Charter Place now include: Cineworld, Debenhams, New Look and H&M . Restaurants will include Las Iguanas, Byron, Cabana, Thaikun, TGI Fridays, YO! Sushi.

Digital Watford

Over 12,000 people have now registered with our Town Centre Wifi scheme which covers the entire town centre, plus Clarendon Road and Watford Junction, Market Street and some sheltered housing schemes and community centres.

The Wifi service is provided and managed by intechologyWIFI and operates at no cost to the council.

The Council's new website was launched recently, with a simplified layout, an improved search function and easier access to the most-used areas of the site such as council tax enquiries, registering to vote, waste and recycling and benefits enquiries.

The Regeneration of Ascot Road

The Council has signed a new 250 year lease with regeneration specialist Orion Land and Leisure who will develop the site adjacent to the new Cassiobridge Station. I am looking forward to seeing plans for the land which will include new retail, office and residential units plus public realm improvements near the new station. Car parking for the station will also be provided on the site.

A planning application is due to be submitted later this year. The developers are hoping to complete the project to coincide with the opening of the new Cassiobridge tube station in 2020.

Partnership Working

BID Launch

Watford now has its first Business Improvement District (BID) which gives local businesses a greater say over what happens in our Town Centre.

The Watford BID is one of over 200 now operating across the country and they help promote and improve our town centre, and have the ability to raise and spend additional money.

The BID have recently installed the floral displays on the high street and I look forward to working with them closely on projects to make our town centre bright, busy and a great place to do business.

Hertfordshire Constabulary

Dave Wheatley who served as Watford's Chief Inspector since 2013 has moved on to a new job with the police. I met Dave to thank him for his service to the town and wish him well in his new Headquarters role.

I have also met with Paul Sandwell who has taken over as Watford's Chief Inspector.

Meriden Community Centre Astro turf

Watford FC's Community Sports and Education Trust are refurbishing the Meriden Community Centre, and I recently visited the site to see how work was progressing.

A 'third generation' artificial grass pitch has been installed, replacing the weathered multi-use games area. The new pitch will make better use of the space, will be easier to look after and can be used in any weather. The project is being partly funded by Watford Borough Council.

Unfortunately a few weeks after completion, the surface was vandalised and the astro turf pitch has been temporarily closed except for bookings. WFC CSE Trust are hopeful that the surface will re-open for general use shortly.

The next stage of the project is the refurbishment of the community centre building. When complete it will provide a modern, comfortable space for sports and social clubs, local residents' groups and childrens' activities – and will become a hub for the local community.

Watford Cultural leaders

I took the Watford Cultural Leaders group on a tour of three historic buildings in the town, Little Cassiobury, Frogmore House and the former workhouse buildings at Watford General Hospital.

Little Cassiobury and Frogmore House are both on English Heritage's 'at risk' register and both are important heritage sites. Little Cassiobury is owned by Hertfordshire County Council and Frogmore House is in possession of St.

William who are developing the former Gas Works site on Lower High Street. Frogmore House as a listed building will be incorporated into the development – I am looking forward to seeing plans come forward for the restoration of both of these important heritage buildings.

Herts County Council – Recycling event

Herts County Council, Three Rivers District Council and Watford Borough Council held a waste recycling event at Wiggshall Depot on Saturday 18th June to encourage residents to dispose of unwanted appliances, whether in working condition or not.

We hope to run similar events in the future.

Supporting Local Organisations

Community Garden

I attended the opening of a new community garden at St Mark's Church on Leggatts Way with Bishop of St Albans and around 100 local people including 30 children;

The garden was opened as part of the Church's 'lift off!' project which sees several churches across the town work together to provide activities and events for local children and their families.

The land was cleared by volunteers and will be available for local people to grow flowers, fruit and vegetables.

Callowland Rec cricketers

A new artificial wicket has been installed at Callowland Recreation Ground after I met with a group of local cricketers who regularly used the Rec and wanted the playing surface to be upgraded.

I was pleased to attend a special North Watford vs. West Watford fathers and sons' match which was played on the new wicket and I was encouraged by the number of young people taking part in the game.

Photographic exhibition

I opened the Watford Photo Artists Group exhibition at the Intu centre, which displayed a variety of work by local photographers.

Swiss Cottage

I joined a team of archaeologists and volunteers to excavate the former Swiss Cottage site in Cassiobury Park. An open day was also held for members of the public to get involved with the project and help with the dig.

St John's School

The new St John's CofE Primary School in Woodford Road will accept its first pupils in September.

Set up by St John's Church and the Diocese of St Albans in response to local demand, the school will take over the former Labour Club building. I have been a proud supporter of the project from the very beginning and look forward to visiting when it opens its doors to pupils for the new academic year in September.

Business News

One Bell Pub

I have met with the new owners of the One Bell pub and their agents for a site visit.

I was appalled by the condition of the interior of the building which was unhygienic, poorly maintained and not fit for purpose – honestly it was one of the most unpleasant building I've ever stepped foot in.

This pub has been a source of trouble in the town centre over the years and I am hopeful that the new owners will be able to turn the One Bell into an asset for our town. I'm looking forward to seeing their plans.

Business Networking

I was delighted to be guest speaker at Peace Hospice's Business Networking Event which was held at Faborjé on the Parade.

Our town's business community are generous supporters of local charities and work hard to raise funds and promote their work.

I enjoyed discussing progress on our major projects and the opportunities they will bring for local businesses.

Market

New screens have been erected at New Watford Market next to the flyover, in response to requests from traders.

Car park refurbishments

The refurbishment of Church, Gade and Sutton car parks by CitiPark is now complete.

The improvements include upgraded CCTV and industry-leading technology such as Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) and a brand new parking management system, altogether allowing for a quicker, easier and more secure parking experience.

All three of the CitiPark car parks in Watford are now open 24/7.

As part of the intu works the Charter car park has restricted access and residents requiring step free access to the intu centre are advised to use the Palace car park.

High Street

The pavement at the lower end of the High Street is being widened to make it easier for pedestrians to get between High Street Station and the town centre. It's the latest stage in a project aimed at improving access to the town by public transport and by bicycle.

A cycle-friendly crossing is also being installed to create better links between the town centre and national cycle routes 6 and 61 to Rickmansworth and St Albans.

In order to widen the pavements, the bus stop for routes 142 and 258 will be relocated to King Street and services 8, 306, 306b, 346, 398, 602, W19 and W20 will now stop further up the High Street outside McDonalds.

The poor condition of the road surface on the paved section of the High Street is a major concern and I have raised this matter at the highest level at Herts County Council. The County have acknowledged the problem and are arranging a site visit with their contractors, Ringway, to look at the damaged surface. I am hopeful that this will be rectified and I will continue to monitor the situation.

Engaging the Community

Lea Farm Play Area dedicated to Cpl Chris Harrison

Lea Farm Play Area has been dedicated to the memory of Cpl Chris Harrison of Royal Marines 41 Commando Regiment, who gave his life serving in Afghanistan. Chris, who grew up in Garston, used the play area regularly as a child and went to school at what is now Grove Primary.

The dedication ceremony was attended by Chris's commanding officer and colleagues from the Royal Marines, his family and Grove Primary pupils.

The dedication will serve as a permanent memorial to Chris's life and the service he gave to our country.

Public Mayor's Surgery

I have held my first public surgery of the new council year in North Watford with Cllr Laird.

I will continue to hold public surgeries and 'Meet the Mayor' sessions in different locations across the town. Residents raised a variety of issues which I have been able to take up on their behalf.

Watford Met Station

I have written to new Mayor of London Sadiq Khan on behalf of residents in the Cassiobury area who are affected by the closure of Watford Met Station.

Recently retired Cllr George Derbyshire has persistently campaigned for the station to be retained and has put forward several suggestions which could see the Met station retained without having a detrimental effect on the rerouted extension. I have informed mayor Khan of his ideas and asked for them to be considered.

Watford Junction Rezone Campaign

I will also be writing to the Mayor of London and the recently elected chair of the London Transport Committee Caroline Pidgeon to put forward the case for re-zoning Watford Junction Station in line with TfL's pricing structure.

Currently passengers using Watford Junction pay significantly higher fares than those travelling similar distances from stations such as Epping, which is further from Central London but in Zone 6.

The Met Line Extension not only improves connectivity for Watford residents but also for residents of North West London who will be able to change trains at Watford Junction to reach Milton Keynes, Birmingham and the North rather than travelling into Central London to travel via Euston.

The petition to re-zone the station now stands at over 3,000 signatures and I am hopeful that the new Mayor and Transport Committee Chair will take a more productive approach than the previous Mayor.

I will continue to lead the campaign for the station to be rezoned as part of the Metropolitan Line Extension to encourage rail passenger growth and offer an affordable alternative to car use to cut congestion.

Council News

Temporary Accommodation

I recently accompanied housing officers to visit our new temporary accommodation in Harrow. The building is a former office block which has been converted into studio apartments for temporarily homeless residents.

As has been well reported, we are facing a housing crisis and the Government's decision to focus solely on homes to buy, at the expense of homes to rent, has exacerbated the problem in Watford.

We do not have a statutory duty to house all homeless residents – many single, healthy men for instance do not have the right to be housed by the council. We work closely with the YMCA and New Hope to help these people find a place to live.