

Mayor's Report – January 2017

Big Events

Big Fireworks

Our popular fireworks display attracted a record crowd to Cassiobury Park on bonfire night – with over £10,000 raised for local charities by Watford Lions.

The event was compered by local radio station Vibe FM and featured performances from local bands and singers.

Many councils no longer hold a public fireworks display, and many more now charge an entry fee. At Watford we are proud to hold this free Big Event which brings people of all ages and backgrounds together to enjoy themselves in our town.

Big Skate

The Big Skate open-air ice rink returned to the events space at the top of the town this year for an extended period – open for the entire Christmas holidays and the first fortnight in January.

The rink has proved popular with adults and children alike, and brings increased footfall to the town, contributing to our thriving town centre economy

Major Projects Update

Thomas Sawyer Way

Thomas Sawyer Way, our new access road to Watford General Hospital opened in November. This major infrastructure project cuts journey times for ambulances, patients, staff and visitors and was crucial to retaining acute provision at Watford General Hospital.

Thomas Sawyer Way is named after Captain Thomas Sawyer who gave his life while serving with the Army in Afghanistan. Tom grew up round the corner from Vicarage Road and went to school locally. Working with Tom's family, the council have installed road signage bearing his regimental insignia and a tribute plaque.

The road was formally opened at a ceremony involving Tom's family and his regimental colleagues from 29 Commando Royal Artillery.

With the NHS now committed to developing the Watford site, this road is a vital piece of infrastructure that underpins the expansion and development of Watford General Hospital but also of the wider Health Campus project, where acres of derelict and contaminated land are being brought back into use to provide space for the Hospital to expand, and much needed new homes, jobs and new public open spaces.

Cassiobury Park

I joined Council colleagues, councillors, contractors and BBC Three Counties for a behind-the-scenes look at the new paddling pools and hub building. Significant progress has been made on site and I am looking forward to the pools and the hub opening in time for the busy summer season.

This building will provide changing facilities, a café, and teaching and learning space – and is part of the £6.6m Heritage Lottery funded restoration project.

The Rickmansworth Road entrance improvements are now complete. A painted metal fence has replaced the previous bollards, new trees and shrubs have been planted, and new paving has been installed in the shape of the footprint of the former Cassiobury Gates.

Trade City

Construction is taking place on our new Trade City industrial zone located at the junction of Wiggshall Road and Thomas Sawyer Way.

When complete this development will provide 180 permanent jobs and will constitute the first completed phase on the Health Campus site.

Metropolitan Line Extension

There has been much speculation regarding the Metropolitan Line Extension after it was not mentioned in a business plan drafted by the Mayor of London last month.

Under the agreement signed by former Mayor Boris Johnson, the majority of funding for the scheme comes from the Government, the Local Enterprise Partnership and Herts County Council (HCC) with TfL only contributing around £16m of the total £284m project budget. TfL have taken over management of the project from HCC and with it have accepted financial risk.

Our understanding is that costs have escalated and TfL are exploring alternative procurement routes, including using smaller contractors to cut overheads.

Preliminary work to reroute utilities in preparation for the installation of a new viaduct have been completed, and a new train has been purchased in order to run the expanded service.

TfL expect the project to be completed by 2020.

Further information can be found at <https://tfl.gov.uk/travel-information/improvements-and-projects/metropolitan-line-extension>

WBC and I as Mayor will continue to lobby TfL as this project is crucial to unlocking economic growth, cutting congestion on Watford's roads and improving connectivity for residents in SW Herts and NW London.

Watford Museum

Watford Borough Council have been awarded initial support for a £1.7m Heritage Lottery Fund grant to redevelop the museum, increase available exhibition space, put more collections on display, fully refurbish the building and increase the museums community engagement.

Housed in a Grade II listed mansion formerly owned by Benskins brewery, Watford Museum is home to more than 30,000 items from prehistoric artifacts to the first trophy won by Watford FC. It is also the official Watford FC Museum.

The first round of funding will enable the Museum team to develop their ideas. Further funding will be awarded once these plans are laid out. This is an exciting project for Watford and along with the HLF funding for Cassiobury Park, it represents real investment into our town to protect and promote our rich heritage.

Digital Watford

Our town centre WiFi service, provided and managed by intechologyWIFI now has over 34,000 registered users. The scheme is free to use and operates at no cost to the council.

A free 'Watford App' is being launched shortly to compliment the WiFi service.

It's all part of our aspirations to create a town with digital infrastructure which will empower residents and businesses to access services in a way which suits them.

Partnership Working

Watford BID

Watford BID delivered their first 'Winter in Watford' campaign which involved a Christmas lights switch-on celebration at the events space by the pond.

Entertainment was provided by Heart FM, street performers dressed as the Snow Queen and Jack Frost, and a children's choir. The event was well attended and was a good addition to the winter programme of events in the town centre.

Meriden Community Centre

I opened the restored Meriden Community Centre in November with Graham Taylor.

This was to be Graham's last public engagement in Watford and I will remember it fondly. It was clear that even after all these years the community ethos which Graham instilled in the club is still important to the players. Heurelho Gomes, Jerome Sinclair and captain Troy Deeney turned up for a kickabout with young football fans on the new pitch.

Now operated by the Watford FC Community Sports and Education Trust, Meriden Community Centre boasts a '4G' astroturf pitch and a modern, comfortable centre for a range of activities for the whole community – including a fully equipped gym, main hall and rooms for community use and for hire. The entire site has been given a Watford FC makeover

This facility is not only an asset for residents on the Meriden Estate but for the whole town, and it provides Watford with one of the best 4G artificial grass pitches in the area.

Working in partnership with Watford FC CSE Trust we hope that the centre will help expand participation in youth sport across the town. Watford FC's Community Sports and Education trust was one of the first in the country – started under the leadership of Graham Taylor and Elton John.

You only have to look around the town to see Graham's legacy to Watford – the Trust's activities have inspired thousands of young people to take up sport. We're so lucky to have a Football Club that isn't just another business, but an integral part of what makes Watford the town it is.

I know that Watford FC's current management will ensure Graham's community ethos remains at the heart of the club.

NHS Sexual Health Clinic

I joined NHS staff to formally open Watford Sexual Health Clinic, which is located in Watford Borough Council's Town Hall Annexe. It's a good example of our 'Entrepreneurial' ethos.

The centre provides advice, support and treatment including free HIV testing. During HIV testing week I took a test to demonstrate how easy and quick the process is.

As a patron of HertsAid I am aware of the huge advances in HIV treatment which have come about recently – HIV can be effectively treated in the vast majority of cases, allowing patients to live a long and comfortable life, contrary to the views widely held in the past.

This vital resource provides a convenient, confidential service and the NHS are encouraging anybody with concerns or worries about HIV or other sexual health conditions to speak to a professional and take a free HIV test.

Veolia recycling

Working with our waste collection partners Veolia, we have introduced new kitchen caddies for food waste.

Many residents had told us that mess and odours were putting them off recycling more food waste in their green bin, so we have introduced a system where biodegradable sacks can be used to line your kitchen caddy and put straight into the green bin – with no mess and no smells.

I am proud that Watford continues to have one of the best waste collection services in the country with a high recycling rate of 44% and weekly collections. I hope the introduction of the kitchen caddies will allow our recycling rate to increase further, and turn our food waste into compost to be reused.

You can use the caddy for peelings, cooked leftovers, plate scrapings, coffee grounds and meat including bones.

Caddies have been distributed to all houses in the borough, and to residents in flats who have requested one. If you live in a flat and would like to request a kitchen caddy and free roll of biodegradable liners, please contact Veolia on enquiries.watford@veolia.co.uk

Supporting Local Organisations

Stanborough Toy Service

I attended the annual Christmas Toy Service at Stanborough Park Church, where the congregation generously gave toys to our families in need.

Watford Bowls Club

Watford Bowls Club's refurbished clubhouse was official reopened on Saturday 12th November. I attended the ceremony with MP Richard Harrington, and viewed the improved facilities which were made possible thanks to a £75,000 grant from Sport England's 'Inspired Facilities Fund'.

This is another local sports club which has first class facilities and members hope the refurbished clubhouse will help increase participation, and will allow them to hire their facilities to other groups and for private functions.

Watford Gujarati School

I presented GCSE certificates to students at Watford Gujarati School, an organisation which successfully runs language tuition courses and aims to provide young people from a Gujarati background with a link to their family's home region, culture and ancestry. I also took part in their Diwali celebrations.

New Hope

Deputy Mayor Cllr Peter Taylor and I visited New Hope's Haven Centre on Whippendell Road to learn more about the work the organisation does to support rough sleepers in Watford.

We spoke to the centre manager and staff about the challenges facing them and our community. Across the South East homelessness is becoming an increasing problem. Councils do not have a duty to house everybody who finds themselves without a home, only those deemed in priority need (mainly families with children, or people with disabilities and health problems) – so there is a vital role for the charity sector in helping homeless residents get back on their feet.

New Hope operate a night shelter and the Haven Support Centre which provides a free daily breakfast, laundry service and professional advice and support to help rough sleepers turn their lives around.

I am grateful for the dedication and commitment New Hope show to supporting people in some of the toughest circumstances imaginable for most of us.

I also visited the YMCA with Cllrs Steve Johnson and Karen Collett to discuss their work with homeless residents in the town. YMCA are a larger organisation who work with a different client group to New Hope, but play an absolutely vital role in our town looking after homeless individuals who don't fall under the statutory responsibility of local authorities.

With housing a top corporate priority for us as a council I will continue to regularly meet with our partner organisations to ensure we do everything we can to provide a safe nights sleep for those facing such hardship – most often through no fault of their own.

Music Gym

I visited The Music Gym, a local business who provide singing and musical instrument lessons to open their new base at the Meriden Community Centre. They are now anchor tenants at the new community centre, having taken on the upper floor of the building.

I wished them the very best of success in training and inspiring a new generation of local singers and musicians who can one day be part of Watford's rich musical history!

Charity Christmas Card

My Mayor's Christmas card this year celebrated the return of our bandstand to Cassiobury Park, featuring a picture of the bandstand in the snow from 1959. The card was generously sponsored by Warner Brothers, Watford FC, intu Watford, Sigma Pharmaceuticals, Everyone Active, West Herts Golf Club, The Prince of Bengal Restaurant and Humphreys Data Management Ltd.

Thanks to the generosity of these local firms the card raised £3800 for Watford Interfaith Association. The donations mean this important local organisation can expand their work, bringing our town's faith communities together. The money will also help WIFA put the finishing touches to their peace garden in Cassiobury Park, which will become a quiet, peaceful and attractive space for thought, prayer and reflection.

WIFA are looking for volunteers to help with the Peace Garden – if you would like to get involved please email wifasec@aol.com

Remembrance Service

I attended our town's annual Service of Remembrance to commemorate our fallen servicemen and servicewomen, and laid a wreath.

Deputy Mayor Cllr Peter Taylor spoke at the act of remembrance which took place inside the Town Hall for council staff, where a wreath was laid in memory of the Watford Borough Council staff members who lost their lives while serving our country.

Pothawari Community

I spoke at an event in Holywell for local people with a connection to the Pothawar region of Pakistan. The event celebrated the ongoing link between Pothawar and the UK through a news website which has been running for 17 years.

Campaigning and engaging with the Community

Southern Rail

Commuters are facing another year of delays, strikes and cancellations on the Southern network due to industrial action from the RMT and ASLEF unions.

I have consistently lobbied on behalf of local commuters and also businesses, who are suffering due to the poor service provided on this line.

The Southern Rail line from Milton Keynes to Clapham Junction and East Croydon via Watford Junction provides an important route for passengers travelling to south and west London, Gatwick Airport and destinations in Surrey and Sussex.

Given the importance of rail transport for Watford's economy I will continue to lobby both Southern, Government Ministers and the unions.

The dispute causing such misery centres on responsibility for opening train doors. On London Overground trains and the majority of London suburban services the doors are operated by the driver with no adverse impact on safety.

Notwithstanding Southern's failure to tackle a shortage of drivers, it is the view of many of my constituents that these strikes are incredibly damaging not only to confidence in the railway network but to the economies of towns and cities across the South of England.

I am aware that services have often been withdrawn at short notice, and I continue to make regular contact with Southern to get updates on the level of service expected at Watford Junction. I will report back to residents if services patterns are changed or if a resolution to the dispute is found.

Watford Junction Rezone Campaign

My campaign to bring Watford's stations into TfL's zone 6 has now attracted 2500 signatures and is growing by the day.

I continue to work with my colleague Caroline Pidgeon AM to raise this issue at the London Assembly, and our campaign has attracted coverage in print, online, on radio and TV.

With the Met Line due to reach Watford Junction in 2020, and improvements to Watford Junction a priority for Watford Borough Council, Herts County Council, Network Rail and local businesses over the coming years, now is an opportune moment to lobby for inclusion in the same zone as stations such as Epping – which is further away from Central London.

If we are to encourage shift between car usage to public transport, getting a fairer pricing structure in place would be a huge incentive to reduce car usage where the train is a good alternative.

Council News

Garston Park

Garston Park's footpaths and cycle paths have been resurfaced, which will provide a smoother ride for the hundreds of cyclists who use the park every day – and also a better experience for the many children who walk through the park to get to schools, as well as the many dog walkers and visitors who enjoy using this great open space.

Ward Councillors are actively seeking to set up a 'Friends of Garston Park' to improve the park, with the aim of winning a ninth Green Flag award for our borough.

Oxhey Park

Having surveyed residents in the local area, a low metal fence is being installed to protect the park from vehicular incursions. Groups of travellers had driven vehicles onto the park on several occasions, and this fence will protect it as a clean, tidy space for all residents to enjoy.

Temporary Accommodation

Watford Borough Council and Watford Community Housing Trust are working in partnership to deliver a block of temporary accommodation at Croxley View.

Housing is a top priority for this Council, as set out in our corporate plan. We now have over 200 families living in temporary accommodation and along with other South East authorities, Watford Council are having to increase spending on providing accommodation for those who we have a statutory duty to house.

We take our duty to provide accommodation for homeless residents very seriously and I hope this scheme will allow us to house more residents in Watford where they are able to access schools and support networks - and reduce out-of-borough placements.

A decision on whether planning permission should be granted was deferred to a meeting of the council's Development Management committee which will take place on 25 January.