

Mayor's Report, March 2017

Herts Police

I have spoken regularly with Chief Inspector Sandwell of Hertfordshire Police, particularly regarding the traveller incursion onto the Bill Everett Centre site and large-scale flytipping which occurred. It is clear that tipping on this scale is not the work of petty criminals but an organised crime gang. I am pleased that police have seized two tipper trucks, and an operation is ongoing to identify perpetrators and bring them to justice.

Health and Social Care

I have met with the Chief Operating Officer of West Hertfordshire NHS Trust and with the Chief Executive of Hertfordshire County Council to discuss the provision of social care, and the difficulties involved in transferring patients from hospital into an environment with the appropriate level of care – either in a patient's own home or in a specialist care home. I raised concerns with both organisations that West Hertfordshire is seeing greater delays in transferring patients from hospital to care than elsewhere in the County, which is impacting on A&E waiting times. I will continue to hold regular meetings with both partners where I will be hoping for improvement.

I have spoken with the Chief Executive of the West Herts Hospital's NHS Trust (WHHT) regarding the Trust's performance, plans for the estate and issues raised by residents with me and my office.

I am continuing to lobby WHHT to make improved car parking a top priority in their immediate plan for the Watford General Hospital estate. Residents rightly complain about the difficulty in finding a space, the poor surface and the steep slope which can be difficult to climb for many patients.

I have regular meetings with Richard Harrington MP, and our hospital and local care services are top of the agenda. I will continue to lobby for a joined-up health and social care system which is properly funded and can look after the needs of elderly patients.

Fairtrade Town – Tenth Anniversary

I celebrated the tenth anniversary of Watford's 'Fairtrade Town' status with councillors and members of Watford Fairtrade Steering Committee.

I thanked Brian Mee for years of dedication and commitment during his time as chair of the Fairtrade Steering Committee, and look forward to working with Cllr Rabi Martins who will take over as the group's chair this year. Celebrations for 'Fairtrade Fortnight' have taken place at several churches and local businesses across the town. Ten years on Watford

remains committed to the Fairtrade project and I hope our efforts to support farmers and suppliers in developing countries continue for decades to come.

Watford BID

I attended Watford BID's first Service Excellence Awards ceremony, which recognises teams and individuals from our town centre businesses who have provided exceptional customer service.

I have met regularly with officers from Watford BID to discuss matters affecting the town centre. Work is progressing well on the intu extension. The first of 5,000 tonnes of steel arrived on site earlier this year and the frame of the new building can now be seen from the High Street.

Family Friendly Town

I attended the opening of the new Harebreaks play area, with around 50 pupils from Beechfield School, teaching staff, the community policing team and our contractors. The new equipment provides a more challenging play experience and is 12 metres high, with two giant slides, bridges, tunnels and rigging to climb. Feedback from the children and teachers was fantastic, and I am looking forward to opening our state-of-the-art new challenging and adventurous play area at Harwoods Rec later this year.

The council will also be expanding our range of holiday activities across the borough during the Easter and Summer holidays, including more activities at Watford Museum and at Cassiobury Park.

In addition our popular big events series returns this year, starting with Big WordFest. The festival kicked off on 11th March with activities at Watford Museum and the return of our WordFest parade through the town with some fantastic costumes as residents of all ages dressed up as their favourite book characters.

I visited Garston Park to inspect some of the refurbished footpaths and cycle lanes which have been resurfaced, painted and given wooden edging as part of a joint project between Watford Borough Council and Herts County Council. Over 2km of paths have been refurbished.

Construction work on the Cassiobury Park project is entering its final stages and I am looking forward to the opening of the new paddling pools and Cassiobury Hub building in time for the May bank holiday weekend.

The council is continuing to invest in sports facilities, and I am pleased that tennis courts across the borough will be resurfaced and improved this year.

Oxhey Park

The council held drop-in sessions at Wellspring Church for residents interested in our plans for new facilities for Oxhey Park North.

We are looking to provide an exciting new off-road cycling track, BMX course and skate park, as well as enhancements to the riverside. These include a new footbridge, new ponds, tree and wild flower planting, improved pedestrian footpaths and a café with a riverside terrace.

Allotments

I am pleased that new plots have now been opened at our extended Paddock Road allotments in Oxhey, as a result of the closure of Farm Terrace. If you would like an allotment, plots are now available to rent.

Housing

I welcomed the approval by the council's Development Management Committee for a new 40 bed temporary accommodation block to be built on council-owned land off Tolpits Lane. The steep rise in property values locally has forced more and more families out of their home through no fault of their own, and the number of families in temporary accommodation stands at over 200. This new development will provide a safe environment for homeless families while they get back on their feet. It is important to me that we provide temporary accommodation within the town where possible to allow children to stay at local schools and for families to be close to friends and relatives who can help support them during this period of difficulty, worry and stress. This project will be delivered by our joint venture between the Council and Watford Community Housing Trust- Hart Homes.

I am also pleased that the council is looking at innovative ways of providing temporary accommodation. A pilot scheme on Balmoral Road will involve building several modular houses for families requiring temporary accommodation. Modular housing units look like traditionally built homes, but are built in a factory and installed quickly and easily on site in a matter of days. They have a similar expected lifespan to a traditionally built house and are subject to the same planning and building control regulations.

I welcomed our successful application for £300,000 of Government funding for a programme to reduce rough sleeping in Watford. The project will be delivered by New Hope, and the additional funding will help us supplement our existing Rough Sleeping Prevention Service by providing additional support around drug and alcohol misuse, mental health care, and legal and financial issues. I met the Chief Executive of New Hope to discuss their excellent ongoing work in supporting rough sleepers and preventing homelessness in Watford and the surrounding area.

I met with the Chief Executive and Head of Customer Services at Watford Community Housing Trust to discuss progress at the Boundary Way development, estate maintenance and to receive an update on boiler and lift repairs at the Meriden. I was pleased to hear that the problems with hot water and heating which affected residents in the high-rise blocks and surrounding flats have been permanently fixed.

Plans are coming forward for the first phase of housing on the Health Campus site, off Willow Lane. The development will be known as Watford Riverwell, due to its location by the Colne and fitting in with historic place names in the area, Holywell and Brightwell. The development will provide much needed high quality housing including homes for social and affordable rent, plus public open space, parking and a new children's play area.

Digital Watford

Our 'Digital Watford' programme continues to develop. Cabinet recently approved plans for telecommunications equipment to be installed at council buildings to provide both wireless business broadband, and a low powered wide area network (LoRaWan) which will enable an 'internet of things' pilot.

This network would enable a wide range of devices to receive and transmit data. For example, bins will be able to transmit a signal when they require emptying, or sensors communicating when a parking space is available.

Changes at our Customer Service Centre have seen an electronic queuing system introduced and more self-serve facilities to allow residents to access the most commonly requested services without having to stand in a queue.

Our town centre free Wi-Fi continues to expand its user base, with nearly 40,000 registered users. Wi-Fi is also now available in the Town Hall reception area.

Graham Taylor tributes

I represented the Borough Council at the funeral of Graham Taylor at St. Mary's Church on 1 February.

Since Graham's death I have been contacted by many fans who wish to see a statue of Graham installed in the town. The Football Club have discussed the matter with Graham's family and are now seeking to install a statue of Graham outside the stadium. The council will work closely with the Football Club and we will inform residents when a location for the statue and details have been agreed.

A memorial fixture between Watford and Aston Villa will also take place in the pre-season.

Engaging with our communities

As ever, a lot of my week involves visiting and supporting our town's community groups, charities and public events.

Over the past few weeks:

I provided a voice-over for the 'voice of God' in the Pump House Theatre's production of Monty Python's 'Spamalot'.

I joined Watford Polish School for their traditional celebrations evening at Holywell Community Centre, which was well attended and raised funds to continue educating Watford's Polish children about the language, culture and traditions of Poland.

I visited Playskill on St Albans Road with Cllr Collett to find out more about their work. Playskill is a local charity that runs parent and child term-time groups for pre-school children with special physical needs. I have supported them since their creation in 2006, and I thanked the staff for their professionalism and dedication, and the high quality support offered to families.