

Mayor's Report – November 2013

Here is my report on information, news and updates relating to the town and my activities as Elected Mayor.

Family friendly town centre

Creating a family friendly town centre has always been and will remain a top priority - and we're really starting to get there.

Purple Flag recognition for town centre

I was pleased to hear that the town centre continues to be recognised as a good destination for a fun and safe night out, with the attainment of a Purple Flag award for the second year running. In order to achieve Purple Flag status, we had to demonstrate that Watford is excellent at managing the evening and night-time economy; that we are welcoming to everyone, provide a good mix of venues and offer safe ways for visitors to travel home. In our renewal application we talked about our taxi-marshals, our PubWatch scheme (which promotes responsible retailing), our trained door staff and complete CCTV coverage.

Charter Place redevelopment

My aspirations for having a much improved Charter Place move a step closer, with Intu having now submitted its plans for the £100 million redevelopment. These include new shops, restaurants, a cinema and another leisure outlet too, such as an ice rink or bowling alley. There will also be a new public square in order to host an events programme, such as street theatre and music shows. This should keep people choosing Watford as the place to come and spend their money. Construction is expected to start during 2015, with the aim of it opening in 2017.

New market plans progress

As a market town, I believe Watford should have a market that we can all be proud of, and want to use regularly. Plans for our new market have now been submitted. It will be situated just off the Parade, with a high street entrance at the side of the TJ Hughes building by the flyover. Members will not be surprised to hear that we have gone for the best option possible: a two storey market, with stalls spilling out onto The Parade – open at least five days a week.

We expect to have obtained planning permission before Christmas, and the market will be open for business by next Summer. We have selected Town & Country Markets to manage the market for us; the company has a strong track record, operating 16 markets across the country. They have led major redevelopments including at Old Spitalfields market, which they also operate, and are working at Shepherds Bush market.

Parade improvements

Our investment in the top of the town continues, with The Parade works well underway, on time and within budget. Over half of the new paving has now been laid, and when you compare before and after photos it is clear to see such a vast

improvement has been made already. Once the trees are planted in early spring, it will look even better. The pond is currently being drained - we have carefully removed the fish and they are now being stored in holding tanks by pond specialists Aquajoy.

Improving this part of town doesn't just finish when the works are completed in Spring. We'll be running anti-littering campaigns, and doing whatever we can to try to tackle the chewing gum problem. This will include stepping up enforcement – chewing gum is after all litter and those caught can be given a fixed penalty notice. We are also looking at ways we can try to reduce the volume of pigeons. While we have little means of stopping them coming to salvage food from the bins, we can educate people to stop actively feeding them.

We'll also be putting money into the budget to run events and specialist markets. There will be more space than before, so we'll have more flexibility about what can be put on. I'd like to see an events space that can showcase local talent – be it dance troops, bands or performers.

Parks & Open spaces

Grand Union Canal tow path improvements

Last month I attended the official gathering of all the partners involved in the Grand Union Canal Towpath Partnership Project. Our investment has enabled the complete resurfacing of the towpath from Cassiobury Park right down to Hunton Bridge. It is now much easier for anyone wanting to walk, cycle or run. The Grade II listed Lady Capel bridge has also been restored. Volunteers from the Waterway Recovery Group cleared debris from the 200 year old bridge and carefully re-pointed the brickwork, then repainted it using specialist white paint, which I am told took some 287 hours to do, as it required three coats of paint!

Green Flag

We continue to invest in our parks, and have once again retained our three Green Flag Awards. It is the fifth year that Woodside and Cheslyn have been awarded their flags and the seventh year for Cassiobury Park. It is thanks to our parks team, who work tirelessly to keep our open spaces looking fantastic, and I am certain that under Veolia's care, the high standard will continue.

Gas Holder site

I'm really pleased that the Gas Holder site down by Bushey Arches is finally coming down. It's been something I've been pushing for ever since becoming Mayor as it's such an eyesore – it has finally made it to the top of National Grid's priority list and will be dismantled imminently. I am looking forward to attending the official demolition event later this month.

Jobs and the economy

More jobs for Watford

There are pockets of good jobs news happening across the town; just this week we heard Wickes has signed on dotted line to have its new HQ in Watford, bringing 250 new jobs to the town and Kodak will bring 150 jobs to Croxley Business Park. The new Homesense store that recently opened on Century Retail Park created 42 new jobs, and there are some 360 plus new job opportunities at the new Morrisons store in West Watford.

Employment figures looking positive

The latest employment figures for Watford are reassuringly positive. We continue to have lower unemployment than the national average and fewer people on job seekers allowance. This tallies with what we're seeing through our economic development work here in the Town Hall. There is no room for complacency and I keep my eye on all the key statistics.

Encouraging town centre business

We have recently created the Watford Town Centre Partnership, which is a group of businesses and organisations from Watford, who have come together to help determine the future of the town centre. They will explore ways to improve the marketing of the town to increase footfall and investigate ways to decrease vacancy rates. They will also look at how to maximise the benefits from the major investments currently taking place including The Parade improvements, the new Watford Market, the Charter Place redevelopment and the rejuvenation of the Lower High Street.

Council events

Fireworks display – another success!

Our annual fireworks display was another triumphant success. It was an important one for us, because it was the first to take place since we outsourced to Veolia. So it was really reassuring to hear both council officers and Veolia staff agreeing that it all went very smoothly and that they had work well together as a team.

Members will recall that when we first became aware of our cuts in government grant, much discussion centred around whether it was still appropriate to host a free fireworks display for residents. We came to the conclusion that events like this one, as well as our other free events: Watford Live and Imagine Watford festivals, put Watford on the map for the right reasons. Even more importantly, they are part of the foundation stones of community spirit, part of why we are “proud of Watford”.

Fireworks night presents us with a great opportunity to raise money for charity too, and the town centre businesses are bound to feel a positive knock-on effect, as many people will decide to make a night of it and go out for a meal post the event. I

firmly believe that it's precisely when times are tough we need to be able to still have fun together and that's exactly what we did

Audentior Awards 2013

In Watford we are blessed by having so many people that willing give up their time to help others and supporting their local community – that was why I introduced the Audentior awards 10 years ago, as a way to show our appreciation. Last month we held our annual event, which I was pleased to see many members attended. Winners included Owen Parry, who's involved with Shopmobility, Elizabeth Timmons a former midwife who is devoted to the Peace Hospice and Barbara Sargent, a volunteer at Watford Swimming Club for over 35 years. Please can I urge members to always be on a look out for those other unsung heroes out there that deserve our thanks, and to put them forward for a nomination next year.

Remembrance service

Along with the Chairman, I led the civic wreath laying ceremony at the newly restored Peace Memorial in front of the Town Hall on Sunday 10 November. We were joined by representatives of many local organisations, in remembrance of those who suffered as a result of war or conflict. All were welcome to the events and I thank those members that encouraged others to attend to remember those who fought to make our world the safer place it is today.

Engaging the community

Independent Living schemes (formerly sheltered schemes)

With so many projects underway to improve the town, it is important that I talk to residents about what is going on and listen to their opinions. I have recently visited a number of sheltered housing schemes to do just that, and the residents have used the opportunity to give me their feedback on what it is like for older people living in Watford.

Schools visits

Last month I was invited to run an assembly for sixth formers at Westfield Community Technology College as part of European Local Democracy Week. The students were all very interested and keen to understand better how local democracy in our country works. I hope that as a result some of them may be inspired to pursue a career in politics or local government.

Church services

For some months now I have been visiting the many churches in our town for Sunday services, again as another opportunity to engage with local residents and hear their views. I also recently met with the congregation of West Watford Free Church to hear about what they are doing. They are a very happy group of people who also run Café West, the community café in west Watford. They were one of the groups that applied to the council's Small Grant Fund, which enabled them to purchase and install new hot water boiler, to help them cater for their increasing number of customers.

Speaking out on night time lighting

Last month the County Council agreed to our request to have an early review of its night time lighting policy, two years after it was introduced. The council participated in the review, and I sent in my own submission on the subject. There seems to have been a mixed reaction to the lights being switched off at midnight here in Watford. It is clear that it is the fear of crime that is the issue, as thankfully there doesn't appear to be any evidence to show that the lights being off has led to an actual increase in crime. However, I believe that as we are the most urban town in the county and have a very vibrant night life and a resident population still active after midnight, 1am would be a more appropriate time for a switch off. I also asked for there to be some local flexibility over which streets may be lit versus those that are not.

Other county council consultations

I would encourage members to have their say in some other consultations the County Council is currently running. It's reviewing its library services, with a view to making them more modern and appealing to a wider audience and they are doing a consultation on speed management, part of which will look at the introduction of a 20mph speed limit for Watford, which members here unanimously backed last year. They are also reviewing children's centres and all the senior citizen provision currently run by Age UK

A fit, active community

New equipment at central leisure centre

We are committed to offering first rate leisure services to residents. Central leisure centre has recently undergone a £200,000 refurbishment, and has had all its gym equipment upgraded. Our centre in Woodside will have a similar revamp in the new year.

Getting Watford fitter

I recently met with a fitness 'guru' that has ideas on how to get Watford residents more fit and active. It reminded me that there are lots of activities taking place in community centres, leisure clubs and outdoor spaces in Watford that anyone can take part in. Many are low cost, or in some cases free, in order to help local residents have an active lifestyle. Concessions are offered to the over 55s on swimming and many other activities at leisure facilities and local community centres. Watford Football in the Community team also offers a programme called Extra Time for the over 60s, offering a variety of activities from carpet bowls, Tai Chi, dance, technology courses and more. Members wishing more information should contact HertsHelp on 0300 123 4044.

Olympic Legacy Games Event

I really enjoyed attending Olympic Legacy Games event last month. Over 600 Watford primary schoolchildren joined the day of activities at Woodside leisure centre, designed to deliver the sporting legacy promised by London 2012. The children had a motivational mass warm-up with GB Olympic swimmer and sports personality Steve Parry, they divided into smaller groups to enjoy a variety of sports, activities and team building challenges to inspire them to lead a healthy lifestyle. I went along to show my support and join in the fun and games.

Efficient & effective, well run council

Tackling fraud

We continue to prioritise tackling those individuals or organisations who behave fraudulently, costing the council money or depriving others from valued services. In a joint investigation with Three Rivers, we have recently allocated a Watford property that had been sitting unoccupied to somebody who was in genuine need of social housing. Following another investigation, a landlord of three Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) has been successfully prosecuted for a range of offences, which were causing a serious risk of death or injury from faulty fire precautions. In another, a local man was successfully prosecuted for falsely claiming Housing Benefit.

Members should encourage their residents to report a fraud in confidence using the council's freephone fraud hotline on tel: 0800 459 9200.