

Mayor's Report – January 2014

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

Rail network and Watford Junction

Croxley Rail Link moves forward

Work on the Croxley Rail Link continues to progress, with planning applications for the two new stations – Watford Vicarage Road and Cassiobridge – as well as the viaduct and electricity substation being submitted this month, for consideration in early Spring. Hertfordshire County Council is continuing to clear overgrown vegetation along the route ahead of construction work, which is due to start later in 2014. Ground investigations to gather geological information are also currently being carried out.

The County Council and London Underground have now advised that the expected date for the new line to be up and running will not now be until 2017. It is disappointing to hear but we always knew that a complicated scheme like this may have some slippage, and it does not impact on our other major projects. Members can keep up to date with all the information about the project at www.croxleyrailink.com

The Watford re-signalling project

Earlier this month I met with senior executives from Network Rail and London Midland, including the Chief Executive, to better understand their plans in relation to their re-signalling project, and how this would impact on Watford residents and rail users. They have confirmed that the station will be closed between 3rd - 5th May, and further closures will occur in August – although as yet they are unable to give exact date as they are still reviewing plans. I have urged them to minimise disruption for passengers and assured them that we will do everything we can to help. This is a big deal for everyone – especially regular commuters. London Midland is looking to acquire a Brownfield site close to Watford to operate as a park and ride shuttle bus service during the line closures. I will keep members up to date with their plans as they are confirmed.

Watford Junction Forecourt

At this same meeting, I raised the 'thorny' issue of the station forecourt and we all reached agreement that the current arrangements are not satisfactory, and that action must be taken. This includes looking at the removal of TFL buses from Woodford Road and the possible creation of a drop-off / pick-up point for passengers on the forecourt itself. Herts County Council will be carrying out a video survey of the site to record and enable them to review how the area is being used. I was very pleased at their willingness to agree it is not working and to put things right.

Tackling litter problems

I am very pleased to report that Network Rail has also agreed to pay Veolia to litter pick and sweep the footpath link at the rear of the Bridal Path. It is their path, and is always a mess! We are looking at putting in a zebra crossing to help pedestrian negotiate the raised crossing from the footpath link across the service road to the station.

Health Campus

Public Consultation launched

I firmly believe Watford Health Campus is a unique opportunity for improving Watford, and it is well on the road to becoming a reality with the new masterplan now out for consultation. As members know the vision has always been to enhance west Watford and provide better facilities and services for the whole community. The scheme will take at least 15 years to be delivered, but once completed it will have successfully regenerated a vast area of derelict industrial land, paving the way for hospital development, while creating some 1600 jobs, more parks and green space for all to enjoy, and some 700 new homes. What's more 35% of the new homes will be classed as 'affordable homes'.

We want the public to better understand this vision, so are running a number of exhibitions this month, as well as putting the plans online and mailing every household in the town, a survey form with freepost return form. Please do encourage your residents to take part and have their say – we want to hear from as many people as possible.

Stakeholder event

Thank you to those of you that attended our stakeholder event. We had a great turnout and it was particularly good to hear the Chief Executive of West Herts Hospitals Trust speak about their support for the scheme and give her public affirmation for it.

Secretary of State grants consent for use of Farm Terrace allotments

It was reassuring to hear the news before Christmas that the Secretary of State has once again granted us permission to include the Farm Terrace allotment land in the development, recognising our very real need for the land in order to secure the best possible Health Campus scheme. We take no joy in removing residents' cherished plots, but are trying very hard to work with allotment holders to relocate them to their next preferred site, and will be creating new allotment space elsewhere in the Borough to ensure our overall provision doesn't diminish.

Parks & Open spaces

New accessible play equipment in Meriden Park

Due to bad weather my official unveiling of new equipment, that will enable children with disabilities to play alongside their friends or siblings, at the Meriden Park Sports Legacy Zone has been postponed. The new equipment, which has been jointly funded by Watford Borough Council and Watford Community Housing Trust, is at the York Way end of Meriden Park, near the two high rise blocks. It includes a fenced off disabled swing; infinity bowl; revolve; mezzo; two play orbs; an exosphere; and two play panels with 'eco-bond' safety surfacing.

Winter walks in Cassiobury Park

Activities set in our award winning Cassiobury Park are always popular with residents, so next month we are hosting a guided winter tree walk for ramblers of all ages. It will be led by Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust Officer, Rob Hopkins, and participants will learn how to identify trees in winter, understand woodland management and nature conservation, plus have the opportunity to hear some tales of woodland folklore.

Cassiobury Park Heritage Lottery Fund project

We will soon be submitting our Round two bid for funding to restore and improve Cassiobury Park. At the latest cabinet meeting we approved the designs for the park and I am really pleased with how the plans look - the officers involved have been working very hard on this.

Gas Holder site

I went along to an event last week which celebrated the first visible signs of demolition of the Gas Holder site down by Bushey Arches. It's going to be a process that happens over several stages – rather than one big collapse, but as it's something I've been pushing for ever since becoming Mayor, given it is such an eyesore – I couldn't be more pleased.

Family friendly town centre

Charter Place redevelopment

Our Charter Place redevelopment has been granted full planning permission, so Intu can move forwards with its exciting plans for the shopping centre. This will be a huge boost to the local jobs market – with the creation of around 1,125 additional new jobs across the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors, and up to 500 temporary construction jobs supported during the construction phase. It will also ensure Watford remains a top regional shopping destination, and provides new family friendly leisure facilities for the town centre, including a cinema with IMAX screen and a new restaurant hub. Construction is expected to start during 2015, and it will be open for business in 2017.

Reduction in crime and disorder

I was a firm advocate for the introduction of new technology, Scan Net ID, a year ago in many of our bars and clubs. It scans every customer's identification and highlights to the door staff if the ID is forged, fake or tampered with. It also allows police and venues to share data about problem individuals and to impose bans across every venue which uses the equipment. Its main value is as a deterrent – people out to cause damage or do no good, go elsewhere.

The police have advised me that as a result, year on year, reports of antisocial behaviour are down 28%, thefts have reduced by 57%, violence has reduced by 14%, and all crime in Watford is down by 16%. Also, approximately 250 people have been banned from our town centre as a result of the technology. This is hugely important as we want Watford to be a safe and enjoyable place to visit.

PCC Visit to Watford

Hertfordshire's Police Crime Commissioner David Lloyd spent the day with us recently to better understand how we manage our town centre, and the steps we have put in place – such as Scan Net - that led to us achieving the Purple Flag accreditation. Many members will have attended his councillor Q&A session and I believe he will now have a very good grasp of Watford's crime and safety agenda and how we operate.

I was also pleased to be recently invited to speak at a national event on the subject of Police Crime Commissioners. I shared our experiences, one year since their inception.

New look Watford Market gets green light

Planning permission was also recently granted for the new look Watford market to move to its new location of the TJ Hughes building car park, giving it a High Street entrance at the heart of the town centre shopping area. I believe Watford should have a market that we can all be proud of. We have gone for the best option possible - a two storey market, with stalls spilling out onto The Parade, and open five days a week. It will be fully covered with a canopy roof to protect shoppers and traders from adverse weather.

Engaging the community

Schools visits

Earlier this month I gave an assembly for pupils at Knutsford School about having pride in our town. Members will all know I am immensely proud of Watford, so I do believe it is important that children recognise that they do live in a great town and want to look after it and get involved in keeping it nice. I'll be running the same assembly at other schools in the coming months.

A fit, active community

Woodside leisure centre refurbishment

Following the successful upgrade of the gym equipment at Central Leisure Centre last Summer, our other centre at Woodside has now undergone a similar refurbishment. £250,000 has been invested into state-of-the-art fitness equipment, including 'touch screen' cardiovascular equipment, online personal workout programmes, and the latest functional fitness equipment including the X-Cube and GRAVITY Training on the Total Gym.

Efficient & effective, well run council

Tackling benefit fraud

We continue to prioritise tackling those individuals or organisations who behave fraudulently, costing the council money or depriving others from valued services. One resident recently convicted of Council Tax Benefit and Employment Support Allowance Fraud has been fined £2,500 and ordered to pay £1,500 in costs. Another benefit cheat has had to pay back over £11,000 to us following a successful prosecution. Our consistent success in prosecuting benefit fraud cases acts as a powerful statement of intent from Watford Borough Council – that we will not tolerate benefit fraud. Members should encourage their residents to report a fraud in confidence using the council's freephone fraud hotline on tel: 0800 459 9200.

Mayor's Christmas Card

For several years now I have contacted local businesses asking them to sponsor my Mayor's Christmas card, in order to raise money for a local charity. This year's card, which featured a drawing by local resident Sylvia Hatch, raised £4,150 for Disability Watford. I really do value the generous support from all the companies that sponsor the card - Warner Bros Studios Leavesden, intu Watford, Watford Football Club, Brasier Freeth, Humphrey's Data Management Ltd, West Herts Golf Club, Imagine, Schuco, Freedom, The Prince of Bengal and Sigma Pharmaceuticals – and know the recipient charities do too.