

Mayor's Report – March 2014

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

Health Campus

Public back the Health Campus

As members are aware, during January and early February we ran an extensive public consultation on the Health Campus to help the public to better understand the vision. We ran exhibitions, mailed every household and put all the details online. Reassuringly 77% of responses were positive. I fully believe residents understand what we are trying to achieve and are supportive – the Health Campus is not an issue that is raised negatively with me when I'm out and about.

BBC Inside Out

The Health Campus featured recently on BBC London's Inside Out programme. I was interviewed for it along with Farm Terrace allotment holders and Samantha Jones Chief Exec of the Health Trust. Despite them telling me it was a reasonably pro-allotment programme, I was pleased they presented it in a balanced way. That the Health Trust cannot yet specify exactly which hospital facilities will go on their land is not my concern, only that we allow them the space they have asked for and that they take whatever time they need to ensure they get it right.

Town Centre updates

Update on Watford Market

Work is progressing on our new market. We have now selected the construction contractor and container unit supplier – both of which are local companies. Preparatory works are also underway – the town twinning signs and the old display cabinets have been removed from the Exchange Road flyover, which has had a deep clean. We have had agreement from Herts County Council to part fund the new footpath link to the market.

As a reminder to members, the idea is to create a modern market that will look and feel different to the current market – which as we know has been losing business and is costing council taxpayers a lot of money. Therefore we do not expect every trader to be successful in their application for a new unit – Town and Country is carrying out a selection process and will choose traders they think will have most success to help ensure the new market thrives.

Launching our events strategy

I introduced our new events strategy to the cultural leaders in our town at an event at the Colosseum last week. One of the key components is the exciting programme of events we have planned for the new events space we're currently creating on the The Parade. I want residents to look forward to the monthly events, and for

families to enjoy themselves together. Working with the Palace Theatre, and local and national partners, we know we'll have top quality events that will deliver the fun factor too.

Awards event for Town Centre venues

I had a wonderful evening presenting awards at The Best Bar None Awards, which celebrate the responsible management of town centre nightspots. The awards build on the Purple Flag Partnership between Watford Borough Council and local businesses in ensuring a safe and positive night-time economy. The awards attracted 150 attendees from seventeen venues. Awards were given to the Best Pub, Best Bar and Best Club, as well as Best Door Team and Staff Member of the Year.

Transport matters

Watford Junction

In my last Mayor's Report I informed members that I had met with senior executives from Network Rail and London Midland to discuss the re-signalling project and issues surrounding the new station forecourt. Following that meeting Network Rail informed me that they have reduced the number of days that the railway will be closed in order to carry out the much-needed work. This means that the continuous 16 day line closure of the West Coast Mainline planned for this August and the 9 day continuous closure planned for February 2015 are cancelled. The work will now be carried out over a series of weekends. This is still a major issue for the town.

A working group, involving representatives from London Midland, Network Rail, Herts County Council and Watford Borough Council, chaired by Herts County Councillor Giles-Medhurst, has been set up to look at how best to resolve the issues surrounding the station forecourt, namely that buses are still parking on Woodford Road and the lack of provisions for drop off / collection at the Junction. In addition, we are working on a pedestrian safety improvement scheme to provide a safer route for pedestrians who cross-over the underground car park access road on to the Bridal Path footpath link. This includes an extension to the taxi bay and the installation of steel bollards to prevent obstructive parking.

Buses shelter improvements

We have been working with the Quality Network Partnership to get Real Time Passenger Information screens installed in a number of our town centre bus stops. In addition, we are in process of putting an up to date time-table in all of our 112 bus shelters across the Borough. We have also installed a new shelter in Haines Way two weeks ago and the new shelter for Vicarage Road, opposite Watford Hospital, is set to be installed the week commencing 17th March.

Croxley Rail Link plans are in

The planning applications have been submitted for the two new stations – Watford Vicarage Road and Cassio Bridge – as well as the viaduct and electricity substation. They will come to Development Control Committee on 4th April. Members can keep

up to date with all the information about the project at www.croxleyraillink.com

New BRE bus link

I was delighted to attend the launch event of a new bus service providing better links between BRE in Garston with Watford, St Albans and Hertfordshire University in Hatfield. This service recognises BRE's commitment to sustainable transport solutions for themselves and the local community. Over the past year they have been working closely with UNO bus service to extend the current 622 service. The service, which will commence on Monday 31st March, will include a stop on Bucknalls Lane and another on site for staff and visitors.

Partnership working

Flood Summit

Over the first two weekends of February, Watford experienced some flooding in the Lower High St area. The borough council's role is primarily the provision of rest care accommodation should it be needed. The main emergency responders are the fire authority, the police, and highways authority - who close roads affected by flooding and redirect traffic, and the Environment Agency which has responsibility for rivers and will instigate any actions such as opening sluice gates, which we had to do on this occasion. I have organised a meeting with the key representatives from these organisations to get a full picture of the impact of the floods, the collective response and what (if any) improvements could be made in the future.

Ambulance visit

I recently spent half a day with the local ambulance service, including having the exciting experience of riding with an ambulance crew as they responded to emergencies, so that I could get a better understanding of what they do and the challenges they face. I absolutely admire the dedication of the people who do this job and the care they give is terrific. I learned a lot, and what surprised me most of all was to discover just how many people call for an ambulance for reasons that are quite clearly not emergencies. The frequency of this has actually led to the service being downgraded by government to being an 'essential' service rather than an 'emergency' service – which is not great for the morale of all those that work there. I was amazed by how good their bedside manner was – even despite some of the reasons people gave for calling them out!

Supporting local organisations

Watford boxing club

I recently visited Watford Boxing Club, who currently operate out of Sun Postal Sports Club. They have been a club for 10 years and are producing high quality training delivered by accredited coaches. I was surprised by the friendly atmosphere and impressed by the concentration and focus of the youngsters there. Unfortunately they are being evicted in August. Their heart warming tales of how boxing has given individuals inner confidence, which has subsequently improved their school work and whole sense of worth was really touching and I'm keen to help

them. If members know of anyone that has a space that could lend its self to such a club do get in touch.

Alzheimer's fundraiser

I recently met with a watford resident who is planning a fundraising afternoon tea event for Alzheimer's research. She's very dedicated to the cause and has my full support. I am looking forward to attending the event of the 20th July and will circulate more information to members nearer the time.

Peace Hospice bag packing

I joined volunteers at Asda earlier this month to do some bag packing to raise money for the Peace Hospice. I admire the relentless fundraising the Peace Hospice carries out and the variety of ways they do it. They are of course such a popular and well-loved organisation in our town, people are always happy to donate something to their cause.

St John's Primary School

I was invited to a public meeting last month to speak about the proposed new St John's Church of England Primary School, which the church wants to establish in central Watford. As members are all too aware, we have a shortage of primary school places in the town – something we are working with the County Council to try to address – so I am fully in favour of this new school.

Economic prosperity and business

Big business connect

When the recession struck, it was more important than ever for me that we as a council engaged more with the business community to build confidence in the town and secure our future economic prosperity. We set up our Big Business Connect group, which is a forum for the top 30 companies in Watford to get together and express their views and lobby us on what we can do to remove barriers to growth. At our most recent session, up at Warner Bros, among other things we agreed to promote the town's strong HQ presence, and improve Watford Junction in its capacity as being the landmark point for those that arrive in our town by train.

Chamber of Commerce

As members will know, we as a council are closely involved with the Chamber and have funded roles within the Chamber, supporting the creation of its successful Business Growth Forum and Sector Networks, leading business support through the recession and creating an inward investment / business retention service. This has ensured we have retained and attracted over 30 companies, representing additional investment in excess of £20m, creating or safeguarding over 500+ jobs. We all said a very fond farewell to the former Chief Executive Roger Gagen last week, but I am confident his replacement will continue the good work.

Town Centre Partnership

Our new Town Centre manager has started. She is a council employee who will support the work of our new Town Centre Partnership, which we initiated now that our plans for making the town centre more family friendly are starting to really take shape. It's formed of town centre businesses who are working together to improve the marketing of Watford to increase footfall and decrease vacancy rates. We wanted it to be business-led to ensure it is most effective and resilient in the long term.

Engaging the community

Schools visits

I have given an assembly most recently for pupils at Bromet School and Cassiobury JMI about having pride in our town. 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 am also talking to pupils at Westfield Academy about local government.

Talking to neighbourhoods

Part of the role of Mayor is about taking difficult decisions when necessary that benefit the majority of the town. To do this I make sure I listen to a real cross-section of people not just those that shout loudest, so I try to talk to local neighbourhoods whenever possible. Most recently I have been at the Kingswood Residents Association and the Central, Nascot and Oxhey Neighbourhood Fora, where I have been updating them on what is going on in our town.

Efficient & effective, well run council

Flying a Flag for The Commonwealth

We joined over 500 councils, charities and community groups to take part in Commonwealth Day celebrations by holding a flag-raising ceremony. It's the largest single raising of the Commonwealth flag in history, at which a newly written Commonwealth Affirmation was read out, together with a message from The Queen. My thanks to Councillor Derbyshire, as Vice Chairman, for raising the flag on behalf of Watford.

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. We have most recently successfully prosecuted a resident for benefit fraud, who must now pay back over £17,000. The lady had been claiming Housing and Council Tax Benefit from both Watford Borough Council and Three Rivers District Council for a property in Newhouse Crescent and a property in Coates Way after supplying both councils with false tenancy agreements.

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.

Successful flytipping prosecution

We also take a tough stance on environmental crime and have recently successfully prosecuted a Watford resident for flytipping, who had left a number of black bags and laundry bags on the Boundary Way estate. The resident was sentenced to a fine of £130 plus £20 victim surcharge. Prosecution costs of £650 were also awarded. Anyone who sees someone in the act of flytipping is encouraged to report it by telephone on tel: 02035 676900 or via the ['Report it'](#) link on the homepage of the council website.