

## **Mayor's Report – November 2014**

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

### **Town Centre**

#### **Big Events: a success story**

Our summer of Big Events was a huge success. It's great to give families a good reason to come into this part of town and hear them talking so positively about their experiences. In December we will have our first ever outdoor winter ice rink. It's something residents have been asking for ever since the rise in popularity of winter skating at the likes of Somerset House, but until The Parade redevelopment we simply didn't have space. It will measure 25 metres by 15 metres and will have a huge Christmas tree next to it. There will be a performance space and lots of seasonal activities are planned, so do bring your families down to enjoy the festivities.

I am confident that the word has now got out among the majority of residents about the events programme. We now need to attract people from outside the town to our events, so they will make a day out of coming to Watford, and further boost trade for the local businesses.

#### **Positive news about empty properties**

The intended knock-on effect for redeveloping The Parade and making the town centre more family friendly was to revitalise the local economy, generating greater footfall and business for those shops and restaurants in the area, and in turn encourage new and different companies to open up and fill the empty shops. So it is very encouraging to hear that most of the empty shops along the High Street are currently under offer. It will take some time before tenants actually move into the vacant lots, but it's reassuring to know the ball is rolling and the capital investment was justified.

#### **New Watford Market**

Our new Watford market is now officially open. Celebrity chef Rosemary Shrager joined us for the launch event, and I had the pleasure of getting involved in her cooking demonstrations, using fresh produce from the market. She was full of praise for Watford - from the coffee she'd had from Barracuda and the excellent guinea fowl she'd got from Gibsons Butchers to the fish she'd got from our popular fish stall and the buzz on the High Street overall.

I did feel some sadness on the last day of the Charter Place market as my nostalgia kicked in, remembering back to how it once was. I am very grateful to all the traders for being so patient while the work has progressed, and to all the input they've had in shaping the new market. The important thing now is that shoppers come to the new market, that they like what's on offer and they keep coming back.

### **Business event: Shaping the future of Watford town centre**

Our Town Centre partnership is holding its first major event for town centre businesses on 18<sup>th</sup> November, to get them involved in shaping our future town centre. All business managers and property owners have been invited to come along and tell us what is important for their business and what they believe will help Watford thrive in the future while retaining and building its reputation as a vibrant town where people want to visit and invest.

### **Jobs & the economy**

#### **Positive jobs news**

The latest employment statistics showed that unemployment in Watford has more than halved since just before the general election in 2010. The number of people claiming job seekers allowance had dropped to 1076, compared with 2106 people in May 2010. The falls mirror what is happening nationally where unemployment is at its lowest level for almost six years.

I was interested to hear that Watford creates around 500 jobs per year, despite the fact we haven't delivered any new office space in almost 15 years, which suggests employers are making their space work more efficiently. In recent months Watford Borough Council, through our work with the Chamber of Commerce, has been directly involved in nine companies moving to the area, totalling in excess of 394 jobs created. Some of these companies have relocated due to expansion and are expected to take on a healthy level of additional staff within the next 12 to 18 months, which is all good news. We also know that many companies are keen to stay, and are currently helping a number who wish to move to larger or better quality spaces, so they can find somewhere still within the town or the border areas.

#### **Visiting new businesses**

With promoting our town's economic prosperity being a key mayoral pledge I make it a priority to meet with existing businesses on a regular basis and visit those that are new to the town. For example, earlier this month I met with the people behind Hot Yoga, a new company that has opened off Imperial Way. The company has been stunningly successful in St Albans and is looking to replicate that success now in Watford. I also went to see Rebble Pebble, a lovely craft shop that has opened on The Parade. It's run by a plucky local artist who after having success at her stall on the Queens Road Summer Market decided to have a more permanent outlet.

#### **Growth index**

I was pleased to see that Watford featured in the top ten list of local authorities for employment growth, in the recent index of 'high growth places' produced by accountancy firm Grant Thornton. With the UK emerging from the worst economic crisis in many generations, local authorities have had to pay far more attention than ever before to delivering and supporting economic growth. Growth – its stimulation, acceleration and maintenance – is at the forefront of our agenda here in Watford

and precisely why I have prioritised our major investment projects such as the Health Campus, Croxley Rail Link, the town centre improvements and the Watford Business Park. These projects are in place to ensure our town will grow and prosper, with jobs for all that want them, now and in the future.

## **Watford Junction**

### **Improving access to and from the station**

Earlier this month I met again with the Managing Director of London Midland to really try to nail a solution for all those residents who night after night were getting stuck waiting anywhere up to 40 minutes to try and exit from Watford Junction station. I found this to be completely unacceptable, and London Midland's MD agreed. As a result of that meeting Watford's first red route has now been created in the tunnel, which means no vehicle is allowed to stop there at all, which in turn should mean traffic can flow more freely. I will be monitoring its effectiveness.

The long term solution is to create another entrance to the station, from St Albans Road or from the rear. This is anything but straight-forward as neither London Midland nor Watford Borough Council owns the land by Penn Road which would be an obvious solution – it is owned by HSBC – and so far they have not been co-operating. We will however all be giving them one further push to attempt to get them on board.

### **Passenger drop-off bay**

I also again raised why it was taking so long for the new passenger drop-off bay to be put in place. This was something that was agreed at an earlier meeting, at which I brought together representatives from Herts County Council, London Midland, TFL and Network Rail, and something we had asked for in the original plans. I am pleased to report that county council officers are looking at the feasibility of a drop-off bay in Station Road, between Bridle Path and St Albans Road, by reducing the large footway width here. It is frustrating how there appears to have been a lack of urgency about something that everyone agrees is important.

### **Buses on Woodford Road**

It's also been very frustrating that we still have buses parked up in Woodford Road rather than in the bus depot. The original aim was to take all the buses off the road but this is still not happening because Transport for London says it's not safe to get all the buses into the bus station without further changes to the layout. Council officers presented some suggested changes at the meeting that should make this feasible, so I am pushing for this to happen as quickly as possible.

## **Culture, parks & green spaces**

### **Public back Cassiobury Park**

Investing in parks and open spaces continues to be a top priority, so it was really pleasing to see that Cassiobury Park has been voted among the top five parks in the country following a nationwide competition run by Keep Britain Tidy. Around 35,000

votes were cast and Cassiobury Park came in fourth with nearly 2,000; London's Victoria Park scooped the top spot. With the major investment planned for Cassiobury Park over the coming months, I'm confident that next year we'll do even better.

### **Watford Museum**

I was very impressed to hear that visitor numbers to Watford Museum soared over summer to 3,286 compared to 2,336 visitors for the same period last year. This is undoubtedly down to the range of successful activities that take place there, such as the Little Gallery Tearooms and the evening music and arts events – especially the WW1 exhibition/events. We have decided that following our successful bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund for £4.5 million to restore Cassiobury Park, we are now putting the expertise and experience we have gained into a new bid to refurbish Watford Museum.

This project would see the current tired displays transformed to better care and provide better access for all, including families and disabled visitors. The plans would also celebrate the iconic building that houses Watford Museum. The project shows our long-term commitment to the heritage of Watford and reflects the high profile of Watford Museum in working in partnership with the Watford community.

### **Cassiobury Park book launch**

I am delighted that two of our officers, Paul Rabbitts and Sarah Priestley, have teamed together to write the book 'Cassiobury: the ancient seat of the Earls of Essex'. This is the first proper book on the history of Cassiobury - a subject of local, national and international interest. It is £20 and can be bought directly from the museum, and Paul and Sarah are donating their author's commission to their favourite charities. Having the experience and knowledge of these officers, as well as their passion about Cassiobury's heritage has been an invaluable asset for our Heritage Lottery Fund bid, and for the work that follows as a result of our success.

### **Pump House Theatre lease renewed**

I am delighted that the Pump House Theatre & Arts Centre group has signed a thirty year lease with us. They are among our best tenants, as the trustees look after this amazing building; providing excellent community facilities and activities - all at no cost to the tax payer.

### **Health Campus**

#### **Farm Terrace – judicial review**

I was very disappointed to hear the outcome of Farm Terrace Association's judicial review into the Secretary of State's decision to allow the appropriation of the Farm Terrace Allotment site for the development of the Watford Health Campus. A lot of work has been put in by all the partners and council officers on this hugely important £300 million regeneration scheme, and to hear that a judge has effectively told us we need to get back to the Secretary of State for approval again over Farm Terrace allotments, on the basis of what he has termed 'quite narrow ground' is immensely

frustrating – especially as he dismissed every other point raised by the Farm Terrace Association and the Secretary of State’s barrister stood up in court to say the point referred to was immaterial to him reaching his decision!

We will have to now go through the time and effort of applying again, specifically addressing the issue the judge referred to. We can’t afford not to. The allotments are key to providing a scheme which will deliver on its promise to regenerate west Watford providing new homes, business and community facilities, and much-needed space for Watford Hospital. We are also confident that the Secretary of State will arrive at the same conclusion in re-taking the decision.

### **Progress and plans**

In the meantime, we continue to work with our partners to progress other elements of the scheme. We will be signing the contractor for the road construction imminently, with work starting on the important new link road in the New Year. The Compulsory Purchase Order is on schedule. All tenants have now vacated Cardiff Road Industrial Estate allowing us to finally close the gates on the site, and clearance works have started at Cardiff Road. We have achieved Resolution to Grant Planning Permission for the Hybrid Masterplan planning application on 18th September subject to the completion of a S106 Legal Agreement, and we are continuing to work closely with the Croxley Rail Link team.

### **Out and about**

#### **Visit to Westfield Academy**

I recently paid a visit to Westfield Academy. They are set to expand by around 25% in 2016 as they move into a brand new building with a new purpose built SEN centre, new classrooms, an improved library, seven new ICT rooms and new sports facilities including a county standard football pitch and five new outdoor tennis courts. This is thanks to government funding of around £20million as part of the Priority Schools building Programme.

#### **Catch up with CI Wheatley**

I have always recognised the importance of having a good relationship with the local police force, and meet regularly with the Chief Inspector. I am full of praise for our current Chief Inspector, Dave Wheatley and how he is dealing with matters. He assured me that although we had some high profile tragedies recently, these were isolated incidents and that overall things are very much under control.

#### **Meeting with the community**

Watford has a wonderfully diverse community and as the town’s Mayor it is important I keep my finger on the pulse on what is going on across the borough. I have regular meetings with our Muslim community – plans are progressing for the Tolpits Lane community centre, and have this month also met with the Amidayya Muslims at the Holywell Lodge, the Sikhs at the Gurdhwara and the Christians at St Matthews’s Church. I am looking forward to Diwali on the Parade and joining the

interfaith pilgrimage on the 16<sup>th</sup>, and attending the Church of the Mountains of Fire conference on the 15<sup>th</sup>.

### **Sports clubs**

Watford benefits from a huge array of sports clubs - I genuinely believe there are very few sports you cannot do in Watford! I recently visited Kodokan, a Kendo Club located on Whippendell Road. They have 20 juniors and 15 adults practising the art of Kendo (Japanese Fencing), many of whom are from Watford. This month they are taking 4 juniors to Japan to take part in special event there, which is such wonderful opportunity for these young people.

As a council we invest significantly in sports equipment. We are currently consulting with residents about what they think of sports facilities in the town to shape our sports facilities strategy which sets our goals over the next ten years.

### **Events**

#### **Fireworks**

We had another successful fireworks evening and I'm proud we draw such huge crowds for what is always a memorable night for local families. We raise thousands of pounds for local charities and enjoyed the entertainment provided by the local bands, organised by Vibe Fm.

#### **Remembrance**

It was an excellent turnout for this year's wreath laying ceremony at the Peace Memorials. Once again it was sun shine and blue skies, and I am proud that we hold such an important remembrance service here at the Town Hall.

#### **Audentior Awards**

We held another very successful Audentior Awards evening, at which we once again honoured the outstanding work carried out by individuals and organisations in the community. My thanks to those members that nominated, attended and helped make this evening a success. We raised over £1500 for the Chairman's charities – Herts Inclusive Theatre and Arthritis Research UK.