
WALTHAM FOREST FEELS GOOD



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WALTHAM FOREST FEEL GOOD CENTRE

OLYMPIC MEDALIST

LUTALO MUHAMMAD

RISING STAR REECE PRESCOD



£26M FEEL GOOD CENTRE AIMS TO APPEAL TO TV ADDICTS, COMPUTER GAMERS AND ASPIRING OLYMPIANS

By Linsey Wynton

When an Olympic medallist describes his local council leisure centre as “incredible”, “state-of-the-art” and “world class”, you might wonder if you’ve misheard.

Not in this case. Lutalo Muhammad, who won a silver medal in Taekwondo in Rio, is talking about Waltham Forest’s new Feel Good Centre. Walthamstow, dubbed Awesome-stow by estate agents, is no longer up-and-coming, it’s up with its gentrified village, its Mini Holland scheme to encourage cycling and its soaring property prices.

The Feel Good Centre is part of this cultural change. Set to open at the start of October close to the town hall, it is a vast sparkling glass and shiny steel fronted example of modern architecture that cost £26m. It would not look out of place in the Olympic park down the A12 in Stratford.

It replaces the borough’s Pool and Track, a yellow emblazoned brick-built sixties relic, which had grotty floors, shabby lockers and faltering showers.

Lutalo’s Olympic ambitions began on this site: “I used to train at the Pool and Track from 8 years old. It was part of my coming of age. It is utterly amazing to see what it has become.”

Stepping inside this flagship facility for a sneak preview, you feel like a child with a golden ticket to Mr Wonka’s Chocolate Factory. The daunting 12m diving pit has disappeared. So have the seemingly endless steps down to the chilly swimming pool.

What lies ahead is a two-storey futuristic labyrinth of immaculate white corridors and wood floors leading to a myriad of the latest top-notch facilities, all fully accessible to disabled visitors.

Most mind-blowing is the eight-lane infinity-style swimming pool. It is tranquillity. Gaze up to the ceiling and you cannot miss

five of the biggest, thickest exposed Scandinavian wooden beams you’re likely to have seen. Each weighing 7 tonnes, the surrounding roads had to be shut for a nocturnal delivery by articulated lorries.

The range of facilities has multiplied exponentially and includes an upmarket spa with mood lighting and glistening tiles. It is straight out of a luxury hotel with its sauna, steam room, hydrotherapy pool and treatment rooms for massages, mud wraps and more.

Close to the three-tiered soft play kingdom for under-sixes is an extreme sports area for older children and teenagers. It boasts London’s first permanent ninja run obstacle course with a battle beam inspired by TV shows Ninja Warrior and Gladiators. There’s also a trampoline park and a climbing area with floor to ceiling climbing walls and super-sized stepping-stones.

And there is the largest gym you can envisage. With 132 cardiovascular and resistance stations and areas for free weights, stretching and spinning, queuing at peak times seems unlikely.

It is a health fanatic’s paradise, but it cannot fail to appeal to the unfit. Lutalo, who is training for the World Taekwondo championships in South Korea next year, enthuses: “This is fantastic for young athletes. But children with chunk around the stomach also have a chance there with extreme sports, climbing and trampolining – these are disguised sports. I love the jungle gym and the monkey bars – seeing that brought the inner child out in me.”

Local authorities are now responsible for public health and Waltham Forest’s intention is to appeal to all ages, classes, cultures and sporting abilities. Head of Parks and Leisure Joyce Guthrie explains: “Our focus is getting people out. We have a holistic approach to health and well-being. Our strategy is about changing behaviour – from the couch to a 5k run.”



“Most mind-blowing is the eight-lane infinity-style swimming pool.”



ATHLETE INSIGHT REECE PRESCOD

And if the Pool and Track inspired an Olympian or two, who knows how many its replacement might unearth. Sprinter Reece Prescod, who is training for the 100m and 200m in the Tokyo Olympics in 2020, spent much of his childhood at the Pool and Track. His first athletics track adjoins the new development and has been resurfaced and now includes a 150-seat grandstand for county championships.

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“Everyone has got a talent – you just have to discover it and there are so many opportunities here. Even if you are not that into sport you can go to the gym – you will feel good afterwards. It will help you deal with stress.”

Indeed, all GPs in the borough have been invited to a Feel Good reception, to encourage them to refer patients with conditions ranging from stress, depression and anxiety to heart disease and high blood pressure. And PE teachers have been asked to bring pupils to sample an array of alternative sports.

Funded through prudential borrowing (money that local authorities loan at a low interest rate) the council has no doubt that Feel Good Centre will pay itself off.

The development comes despite Waltham Forest being badly hit by the Government’s austerity cuts. As an outer London authority with the health needs of an inner London borough, the council received £7.5 million less last year than the Government estimated it needed.

Council leader Chris Robbins says: “We asked ourselves, what can we do in these constrained economic times that is meaningful for people?”

Since becoming an Olympic host borough in 2012, Waltham Forest has spent £1.9m redeveloping most of its parks and playgrounds. Residents under 18 and over 60 are entitled to unlimited free swimming sessions and, in 2014, a free exercise class programme called Our Parks started, which has since gone global.

All four of Waltham Forest’s other leisure centres have undergone refurbishments totalling £4m. “The Pool and Track was in the

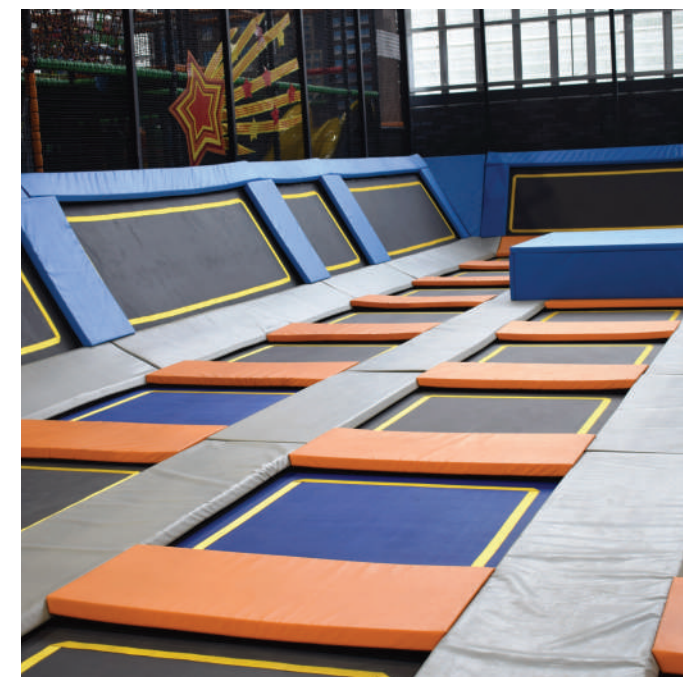
worst state. We took this as our centrepiece,” Councillor Robbins explains. “The Feel Good Centre is part of a six to seven year strategy of creating an active place to live so residents think of their borough as a place where sport and leisure and open spaces are important to them.”

“This is an iconic building and facility not only for Waltham Forest, but for north London and Essex - it is one of the biggest leisure centres in London. The only thing you do not get is a band playing when you go there!”

Figures from Public Health England show Waltham Forest has higher than average rates of overweight and obese children. And statistics from 2011 – 2013 show almost 300 residents died each year from preventable causes (including heart disease and type 2 diabetes).

The Feel Good vending machines are part of the drive to change this: they are full of seed bars, dried fruit and smoothies – there’s not a crisp or chocolate bar or fizzy drink in sight. Likewise the café and wifi work zone will serve ethically sourced produce.

Councillor Ahsan Khan, Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing, says: “Most of the things that create preventable disease are linked to national policies. We cannot lecture people, but we can educate people to have healthier lives and provide facilities for them to use when the penny drops.”



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”



COMMUNITY INSIGHT

The sort of person he hopes will join the Feel Good Centre is 63-year-old Sheila from Chingford. Almost two years ago she was diagnosed with dangerously high cholesterol. She says: “I was not feeling well in myself. I had a lot of aches and pains.

“I did not want to take medicine so I started doing a bit of exercise in the park. I had two walking sticks for support and I thought if I collapsed there would be people around to help me!”

Sheila was spotted by an Our Parks exercise group. They nicknamed her “Aunty” and encouraged her to join them.

After 18 months of weekly box fit, circuits and yoga in Ridgeway Park and a low fat diet, Sheila feels revitalised and her cholesterol is low. She enthuses: “It’s never too late to do exercise. Even if you have not done it all your life – start!”

Similarly, fitness instructor Sasha Taylor, who works at the refurbished Walthamstow Leisure Centre, wants residents to make the most of the borough’s revamped leisure facilities.

She says: “One of my clients is a lady in a wheelchair. When she first came in she could just do one machine. Now she has done them all and I see a huge difference in her confidence.

“People come not just to get fit. Some people might be at home alone all day, so there are social and community benefits.”

Her colleague, fitness instructor Franklin Udenze, ought to be an exercise ambassador for the borough. He asserts: “The thing about exercise is that you can’t fail. It tends to be the solution to most things, whether that is mental or physical illness. It is the feel good remedy.”

The Feel Good Centre has a series of events running from 27 September, including a press night on 29 September and a reception for GPs and PE teachers on 30 September. It will be open to the public on 1 and 2 October for pre-booked taster events before the doors open for business at 6am on 3 October.

Waltham Forest *Feel Good* Centre

THE FEEL GOOD CENTRE'S FACILITIES INCLUDE:

- a 132 station gym with areas for free-weights, spinning and stretching;
 - an indoor four court sports hall for netball and badminton;
 - two dance, yoga and exercise class studios;
 - an outdoor floodlit pitch for five-a-side football and basketball;
 - a teaching pool and an eight-lane 25m swimming pool, with 1m and 3m springboards and a 3m diving platform;
 - a spa with a steam room, sauna, hydrotherapy pool, lounge area, nail bar and wet and dry treatment rooms;
 - a three-tier soft play area for under-6s;
 - a 4-layered adventure zone for older children;
 - a trampoline park;
 - horizontal and vertical climbing walls;
 - a ninja run obstacle course;
 - a refurbished running track with 150 seat grandstand;
 - a café with wifi.
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