

Introduction

Like all local authorities, we know 2024 is going to be challenging as we continue to navigate a political landscape marked by government funding cuts, a cost-of-living crisis, and higher interest rates. Watford Council is in a stronger position than many other councils. The Cabinet and I remain steadfast in our commitment to excellent financial stewardship, protecting services our residents value and remaining an ambitious council that delivers for our town.

We have made sound strategic investments and remain focussed on delivering improvements in our town, with initiatives such as expanding the Beryl bike scheme, plans to introduce an Electric Vehicle Car Club, and launching a new Shopper Bus service. Alongside this, we are enhancing our environment. Efforts include planting 20,000 trees, revitalising the River Colne, and continuing the Cassiobury Wetlands project.

To support the local economy, we have overseen investment into Watford Business Park. Plans to reopen Watford Colosseum and deliver a new Innovation and Incubation Hub are progressing well. Despite financial challenges, we have managed to ensure the quality of local services, from pristine parks to efficient waste and recycling services.

A competent council

Our Corporate Peer Challenge

Whilst we can be extremely proud of our track record and all that we are achieving for Watford, we are not complacent and recognise the importance of external assessment and validation. This is why we were pleased to welcome a team of five peers from a range of local authorities and the LGA who visited Watford to undertake a peer challenge last November.,

During the four day visit, the team gathered information and views from more than 55 meetings, in addition to further research and reading. They spoke to more than 150 people including a range of council staff, councillors and external stakeholders and partners.

We have now received the teams' final report, which highlighted a range of strengths including that:

- we have transformed since our last peer challenge in 2017, driven by strong leadership and a 'can do' attitude
- we are 'delivering hugely ambitious plans for Watford' and have 'an unwavering focus' on outcomes for our residents
- we have very effective partnerships in place involving both our businesses and community and we have 'forged strong external relationships' to support delivery
- we are underpinned by 'a culture of pride, ambition, and empowerment'
- we have a well-developed focus on place shaping with joined up senior leadership ensuring the vision for Watford is promoted nationally, regionally and locally
- we have a good record of financial stewardship and a clear understanding of our financial position

This was a huge vote of confidence in the council and the town and a well-deserved testament to the vision and hard work of our councillors, staff and partners.

Levelling Up Funding

Last November, we also received the news that our transformational plans for the Town Hall area and Watford Colosseum has provisionally been awarded £16m in funding from the government's Levelling Up Fund. The funding will help us forge ahead with delivering our ambitions for this area of the town, unlocking economic growth, and driving further investment in Watford. This will mean new jobs and opportunities for local people as well as an exciting new venue to see some outstanding live performances. Very few areas' bids were successful, so this is a major achievement for Watford and the council and shows we are a town that makes the right decisions for our community and our future.

A caring community

Supporting those most in need

Throughout the year, our focus has centred on alleviating the impact of the cost-of-living crisis. Collaborating with organisations such as Citizens' Advice, implementing council tax reductions for low-income households, and safeguarding essential services underscore our dedication to supporting residents, particularly those who find themselves most in need

I am delighted that we continue to be able to offer real and timely support to organisations and charities that are at the frontline of the cost of living crisis through our grant giving programme. During 2023, I continued to champion the Watford Community Fund, raising funds that can swiftly get to organisations and make a real difference across the town. The Fund has supported a diverse range of need including warm, welcoming spaces, help for food charities and community events that bring local people together at a time when, more than ever we need to unite and build a sense of belonging and understanding. The Mayor's Small Grant Fund has already helped more than 20 different community groups to bring their local initiatives to life. Alongside this, we are now in the process of awarding £300,000 from our neighbourhood grants budget.

The cost of Living Forum I convened in 2022 has been a vital source of information and insight into how people are managing in Watford. Bringing together groups and organisations who can provide their perspective and share their experiences has been extremely powerful and also offered an opportunity for networking, joining up and learning. I am delighted that, together, we have decided to take the forum forward as the 'Watford Community Response Forum' so we maintain what is a very effective and helpful means of supporting each other.

Raising money for good causes

As well as the Watford Community Fund, I am always pleased to do whatever I can to raise money for local causes as is our Chairman and many of our councillors. Last year saw the launch of the Watford Community Lottery, which I am pleased to say has already raised £18,892.20 for local groups and charities. The Mayor's Christmas card raised £8,000 for Playskill and Guideposts, both amazing organisations, through the generous sponsorship of Bugler Foundation, Warner Bros. Studios Leavesden, Murrill, Everyone Active, Morgan Sindall Construction, Wenta, Berkeley Group, Camelot, Sigma Pharmaceutical, West Herts Golf Club and Veolia UK.

I will be taking part in 'The Dreams United: Stadium Sleep Out' on 1 March at Vicarage Road Stadium to raise awareness and funds to help our local homeless charities - One YMCA, Herts Young

Homeless, New Hope and DENS. This is open to all our community, and I would encourage people to consider getting involved.

Watford People's Panel

Hearing from local people is such a critical part of my role as Elected Mayor and I was pleased to launch the Watford People's Panel last autumn. This is a panel of local residents with a real passion for Watford who are keen to understand more about the council and help us by sharing their views and ideas for the future. We have already covered the significant issue of the council's budget but also had the opportunity to hear their thoughts on the new Museum, uncovering some really interesting stories about the town's history and also putting forward a suggestion for a 'Watford Day', when we can celebrate everything we love about the town together.

100 people who made Watford

We launched this wonderful insight into those people who have contributed so much to the town during our centenary year. Thank you to the councillors who came forward with suggestions and I hope you agree that the 100 reflect so much about the diversity, pride and energy that makes Watford so special. The stories of the 100 will be captured in our new museum as a lasting legacy of our 100 years as a borough. It will probably come as no surprise that we are finishing our 100 this month with Sir Elton John's story but I would encourage everyone to take a look at other nominations – they might not be as world famous but their contribution has been no less outstanding.

Shopper Bus

I am pleased to announce the introduction of the Watford Shopper Bus Service, a new initiative aimed at providing a safe and welcoming travel option for residents who may need a bit of extra assistance when visiting local shops. In collaboration with the organization Communities 1st, known for successfully running similar services in other areas, the council is committed to ensuring the service is both reliable and responsive to the unique needs of our residents.

Starting from this month, Watford residents facing mobility challenges, social anxiety, or other vulnerabilities can conveniently book the shopper bus for trips to local supermarkets across the town. This service, offered at a reasonable cost of £6 per person for a return trip, with an accompanying carer paying only £1, reflects our commitment to making sustainable and accessible travel options available to all. The Shopper Bus not only facilitates shopping trips but also serves as a community-engaging and supportive mode of transport, embodying our vision for a greener and more caring Watford.

A thriving local economy

Shop local

For all of us that live in Watford, we know that our local businesses in the High Street and beyond are the backbone of the community and our economy. From popping into a local bakery for a cake, or buying a quirky gift from a local shop, by shopping locally people can help local business owners and local communities overcome the challenges of the last few years. Whether it's your local grocer, florist or fabric shop, I spent the last few months getting out and about to showcase these local success stories and promoting what they do through videos, interviews and social media posts.

We wanted to do this over the winter months as for many businesses, Christmas is a small businesses busiest time of the year. We knew it was really important we help them as much as we can. Shopping locally means money is kept in the local economy supporting jobs and local families. So, this year, when people in Watford were thinking about Christmas presents for friends and family, they had extra reason to explore some of the wonderful businesses in the town and their unique products. These businesses are the heart of our community and we need them to still be there for us in the future.

FSB Pledge and Business Reception

For the same reasons, on Wednesday 13 December 2023, we held a packed event for local businesses, charities, and community leaders. There, I signed the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) Local Leadership Partnership Pledge, cementing Watford Borough Council's continuing support for local small businesses – and the first district in Hertfordshire to do so.

Through this, Watford council was recognised as a Local Leadership Partner by Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) here in Watford. We understand the value of smaller to medium sized businesses and the vitality they bring to our local economy.

We want to include these businesses in Watford's decision-making when it comes to our local economy. The pledge commits Watford Borough Council to work with the FSB to communicate the needs of smaller businesses in Watford. The council pledges to continue promoting a supportive environment in which small businesses and local communities can prosper. With rising costs due to the cost-of-living crisis, it's really paramount that local councils make pledges such as these to reassure our small to medium sized enterprises.

Watford Business Park

The huge investment of £25 million into an eco-conscious redevelopment has recently been completed in our town. The gateway to Watford Business Park has been successfully constructed, transforming 4.3 acres of an old car park and surrounding, out of date buildings into a striking modern hub for many different industries and businesses.

Sustainability has been really important in this build. Every industrial unit has been equipped with solar panels, electric vehicle charging points and ample cycle storage facilities to reduce car reliance and encourage Beryl Bike and electric vehicle use. The buildings are also designed to maximise natural light and ventilation to lower energy use. We think that because of the way it has been constructed, with a view to sustainability, Watford Business Park is likely to achieve a 'Very Good' sustainability rating.

Working in a green and clean environment is important and aligns to the commitments in our Environmental Strategy. A new sustainable urban drainage system, pond, native wildflower beds, and a large number of newly planted trees all bolster the beauty of this new site. Joining together nature within an industrial setting adds to the site's green credentials, while helping support biodiversity and boost well-being for residents and workers.

In recent years, premises and available space for new business and industry in Hertfordshire has been in short supply. To keep our local economy up to pace, reap all the benefits of being outside

London, the vitality of our town, and to provide local employment opportunities for residents, it is essential that we continue to offer high quality premises where our businesses can thrive for years to come.

Not limited to adult career installations, Watford is also investing in a gaming training hub for our youth as part of the innovation hub within the Town Hall complex. We plan to team up with specialised education providers to help kickstart careers in the gaming industry. The council aims to provide physical space and part funding for equipment, and then local businesses will be involved in the structure and set up.

Projects like these would not have been possible without Watford Council's input and direction, highlighting the prowess of services in our town and the great team we have constantly working on innovation and ideas.

Standing up for Watford

Watford General Hospital

I am pleased to announce a significant achievement for our community as the West Hertfordshire Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust has successfully completed the acquisition of the final plot of land necessary for the construction of a much-anticipated transformed hospital in our town. I have championed the Trust's plans for Watford throughout my time as Elected Mayor and so we have made sure that the hospital could purchase the land and get ready for building to commence, once they have had the green light from government.

This achievement represents a crucial step forward in realising the vision for a modern healthcare facility that will not only benefit our dedicated NHS healthcare professionals but also provide the best possible care for Watford residents. It's really important the modern, 21st century facilities patients, staff and visitors deserve, get delivered.

The recently acquired plot of land, located adjacent to Thomas Sawyer Way, will soon undergo preparations for the initial stages of construction. These preparations include clearing the area, levelling the land, constructing retaining walls, and laying foundations.

Housing / housing targets

I would like to address the recent developments regarding the Housing Delivery Test and its impact on Watford. Watford Borough Council, along with 58 other councils, has been highlighted by the government for not meeting the set targets, resulting in the obligation to produce a plan outlining strategies to increase housing construction. This, in turn, will lead to a 'presumption in favour of sustainable development' which may mean sanctions for our council, and many other councils who have been busy building homes.

While acknowledging the housing challenges faced by our town, it is essential to provide a balance. Over the past three years, we have made substantial progress, with 73% of the UK Government's set quota for new homes achieved between 2019 and 2022. The Local Plan, recognised for its excellence, guides our approach to building quality homes with essential services and affordability in mind.

The government has imposed very high targets for our geographically small borough of 8 square miles. Our community has actively participated in the planning process, contributing to our commitment to building homes that align with residents' needs and desires. The challenge is to strike a balance between housing demand and shaping the town for current and future generations.

Our call for change extends to the planning system, where local input should play a more significant role. The current system imposes housing targets, sometimes overlooking local people's views and sentiments. We seek a more flexible approach that enables communities to make decisions that best suit their needs. Recent instances of Planning Inspectors overruling local decisions highlight the urgency for reform.

Despite this, Watford Borough Council remains committed to addressing housing needs while preserving the wishes of the community. Despite the flaws in the national planning system, I remain committed to working closely with residents to find solutions that align with their aspirations for our town.

A greener town

Tree planting

I am delighted to share the positive outcome of the 'Your Tree Our Future' initiative that took place in Watford on 9 December 2023, supported by Watford Borough Council. Thousands of residents participated in collecting the free trees, demonstrating a remarkable commitment to making our town a greener and more sustainable place to live.

The response from our community was outstanding, with 8,980 trees requested for collection at the Woodside Playing Fields. The impact of these trees on our local environment is substantial, with the potential to eliminate an estimated 125,000 tonnes of carbon from the atmosphere throughout their lifespan.

These trees, predominantly destined for private gardens, will contribute to enhancing the greenery of neighbourhoods across Watford. As we work towards our goal of planting 20,000 trees by 2026, this tree giveaway marks a significant step forward to having a greener town.

Before my election, I set a goal to actively contribute to the planting of 20,000 trees by 2026, and this initiative represents a substantial stride toward achieving that objective. Beyond the immediate environmental benefits, the distribution of these trees aligns with the broader aim of our borough to achieve carbon net zero by 2030.

Watford Borough Council has broken last year's record on tree planting. In our commitment to environmental sustainability, we have planted 197 trees across the town this year. The funding, made possible through the generous support of the Forestry Commission's Local Authority Treescapes Fund (LATF) amounting to £73,203 and further topped up by Watford Borough Council, will enable the planting of 115 trees, in addition to the 82 trees funded by the council earlier this month. When combining the two schemes, 168 of the trees will be in public streets, surpassing the previous street tree planting record last year of 122. The remaining 29 trees will be in parks. Additionally, 300 new tree saplings will be planted in Lea Farm Recreation Ground and Woodside Playing Fields.

Parks / open spaces

We ended 2023 with the fantastic news that Cassiobury Park has again been recognised as one of the top ten parks in the country. We will continue to maintain and provide exceptional green spaces.

I am equally delighted to share that the Meriden Park improvement project in Watford is nearing completion. The final phase, marked by a bulb planting event, was a great event attended by councillors and residents to crown a year-long effort to revitalise this cherished green space.

Throughout these park improvements, we focused on biodiversity and accessibility. From new planting schemes to wildlife-friendly landscaping and improved footpaths, these changes not only promote environmental sustainability but also create a more inviting space for our local community right across Watford.

Projects and awards like these reflect our ambition to a greener and more accessible Watford.

River Colne

We have been focusing a tremendous amount of energy upon green initiatives since I last reported back, not least on our River Colne. To detail improvements and draw attention to the importance of our river, I have been working in partnership with West Herts College on a series of podcasts. This will form part of Tales of the River programme, which comprises events and activities for the whole community. All these are free to the public and, as we improve and enhance the River Colne physically, you will be able to enjoy the walks, media and eco activities for people of all ages.

Volunteers and staff will have spades in the ground throughout 2024. This will be to physically improve the banks and woodlands by the River Colne in a bid to tackle diseased trees, improve our tree canopy and also tidy the riverbanks.

Beryl Bikes

Over the past three years, the introduction of the Beryl Bike scheme in Watford has proven to be a resounding success. I am pleased that Beryl bike usage remained high throughout 2023. This has contributed not only to the individual health benefits of riders but also to the overall environmental improvement in our town. It's been good to see people of all ages and abilities using these bikes about our town. The continuation and success of Beryl Bikes bring into line with our commitment to making Watford a greener place, reducing pollution, and alleviating congestion in our town centre.

The recently released fourth annual Rider Report by Beryl, sheds light on the positive impact of the bike scheme. The report, based on a survey of over 3,000 riders in September 2023, highlights the increasing impact of ease and speed as factors influencing sign-ups. Notably, 62% of riders in Watford are now cycling more frequently since joining Beryl, and a significant percentage has reduced their reliance on cars and taxis. These findings reinforce our dedication to providing accessible and sustainable travel options for Watford. Beryl Bikes are here to stay.

We are now working with Three Rivers and Hertsmere councils to expand the scheme. In the coming weeks we will be installing bays in Bushey and Croxley so that the scheme covers a larger area and there will be more electric bikes added to the fleet.

Car Club

I am pleased to announce a significant step forward in our commitment to reducing carbon emissions in Watford. The Council has chosen Enterprise Car Club as a strategic partner to introduce

an eco-friendly car club for our community. This initiative supports our idea for a greener and more sustainable town, complementing the existing BerylBike rent-a-bike scheme.

Car clubs, offering hourly or daily car hire, provide a convenient and cost-effective alternative to ownership, catering to individuals and organisations alike. This initiative is designed to address the needs of those who prefer flexible travel options without the burden of car ownership. We are excited about the partnership with Enterprise Car Club, as it brings a new and eco-friendly dimension to Watford's evolving transportation landscape.

By offering zero-emission vehicles for hourly rentals across the town, we aim to reduce private car ownership and enhance air quality. Car club is a fine demonstration to our dedication in providing accessible and sustainable travel options for the residents of Watford.

A safer town

CCTV

New safety measures are being installed at two of Watford's parks to make sure that they are safe, welcoming, and enjoyable for everyone. We are proudly investing in new security measures in Cassiobury Park and Watford Fields.

In Cassiobury Park, we are improving the lighting between the car park and the Visitors' Hub and café and in Watford Fields we are installing new security cameras along the path from the High Street station to Ladies Close. With both being popular routes for people walking and cycling, we wanted to make sure that everyone feels safe when they're using the routes.

We are also funding a camera in Victoria passage over the next year in response to local concerns

These cameras will be staffed 24 hours a day, 365 days a year and operators will be on the lookout for illegal and antisocial behaviour in our communities via the town's network of 53 cameras.

Working with the police

Monday 4 December 2023 marked a significant moment in Watford's local history as the town's new police station at 3 George Street opened. The old station and adjacent courthouse in Shady Lane opened in 1940, replacing the older Victorian police station which was on King Street. Working closely with me, our police force and town is changing to service the needs of 21st century Watford's growing population. I made sure that as soon as it was open, I went down to visit the Hertfordshire Police officers based out of the new site. The facilities are really modern and more than capable enough to suit the officers based out of the new station.

Public Spaces Protection Orders (PSPOs) renewed

Following a public consultation in October, [Safer Watford](#), Watford's Community Safety Partnership, which includes the council and the police, two important PSPOs have been renewed in the town. One stops non-commercial vehicles from entering Albert Road South between specific times, and the other is an extension, which allows Police Officers to remove alcohol from people drinking in the town centre and also into Watford Fields, if necessary. PSPOs are designed to address specific issues that may negatively impact people's quality of life and are vital to maintaining the safety and family-friendly atmosphere of the town.

Disabled Parking Bays

We can't forget the challenges faced by disabled residents and visitors in finding suitable parking in our town to access Watford's bustling high street.

We are constantly taking measures to address this issue. There are now five new on-street disabled parking bays along Church Street and an additional three bays on George Street. These on-street disabled parking bays will make our town centre even more accessible.

The newly installed parking bays feature accessibility enhancements, including wider spaces to accommodate wheelchair users and those with mobility aids, ensuring greater ease of access.

Improving Watford

Town Hall Quarter programme & Watford Museum

We have made great steps forward in the ongoing refurbishment of the iconic Watford Colosseum, paving the way for the venue's anticipated reopening in autumn 2024. Pending approval, key alterations include the addition of an external ventilation duct, a roof plant, and a front canopy, all contributing to the enhancement of this beloved cultural landmark at the centre of our town.

Since 2022, we have been committed to preserving the rich heritage and past of Watford Colosseum while elevating it to new heights as a cultural and sustainable hub for our community. This extensive reimagining not only breathes fresh life into the historic venue but also makes it more accessible and appealing to local performers, creative individuals, and arts groups.

With AEG Presents managing the venue, we look forward to welcoming leading entertainers to Watford, stimulating our local economy, creating jobs, and offering increased volunteer opportunities for those of us that have a bit more free time to give back to the community. This is a pivotal part of our broader plan to revitalise the town centre, creating a vibrant community hub that highlights the great culture and history of Watford.

The refurbishment of the Colosseum and moving the Museum includes the revitalisation of the Town Hall. The site will include a new, modern Watford Museum, spaces for the community, entertainment, learning, and innovation to the area. I'm really proud of all the officers and elected members who have been working on this project. In Watford, we are clearly very good at showcasing our plans for the future and securing the bids to facilitate those plans.

News and Events

Remembrance Day

On Sunday 12 November, I commemorated the service and sacrifice of the town's armed forces in the two world wars and up to the present day by laying wreaths at Watford's Peace Memorial outside the town hall. A two minute silence was also observed led by myself and the Chairman of the Council.

This year's tribute included a parade, led by the Lord Lieutenant of Hertfordshire from St Mary's Church. This parade also included flag-bearers from the Royal British Legion and local scout groups. I am grateful to the Lord Lieutenant and all of those who attended the event. It is important that we never forget the sacrifice that so many have made to protect our freedoms and defend democracy.

This year in particular, as the war in Ukraine continues and conflicts rage across the globe, we are reminded of the cost of maintaining the rights we hold so dear.

White Ribbon Accreditation

On Wednesday 6 December, we commemorated White Ribbon Day to mark the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women alongside the Chairman and Deputy Mayor. We were joined by a number of local organisations, including Veolia, Waford Football Club and SLM, as well as survivors of domestic abuse in a walk to remember the 186 women and girls who were victims of violence in our town in the previous year.

I am very proud to be a White Ribbon Ambassador and to see the number of men and women who walked with us to show that our town is a place where women and girls must feel safe and supported and that we will not except, excuse or enable male violence against women and girls.