

Introduction

In my last report, I said that 2024 would see challenges due to government funding cuts, the cost-of-living crisis and increased demand on our services. Reports by the Local Government Association and others show that councils across the country are facing significant financial difficulties.

As a result of these financial pressures, many councils are cutting important public services. In Watford we have taken sensible financial decisions for many years but, like all councils, we are having to work harder than ever to balance the books.

As we mark the second anniversary of the full-scale war in Ukraine, and witness the horrific events in Gaza, I am aware of the direct impact these conflicts are having on loved ones of residents living in our town. I am continuing to work closely with the Watford Interfaith Association and others to ensure that Watford remains a united town in the face of these terrible global situations.

There are many exciting and important updates in this report. It is important to remember that we are only able to progress these because of the dedication and ability of members and officers in the council.

As testament to the hard work in our Town Hall, I am pleased to report that Watford has recently been listed as the top place to live and work in the UK in the Vitality Index. The Vitality Index is an annual assessment of the UK's largest towns and cities outside London, undertaken by property consultancy Lambert Smith Hampton. They revealed Watford as the UK's best place to live and work based on a number of metrics that contribute to overall growth prospects.

A Competent Council

Parks and Open Spaces Designs by West Herts College Students

I recently visited West Herts College to see the showcased talent of students there. These students designed innovative concepts for Watford's parks and open spaces. Focused on blending art with practicality, these designs demonstrated the students' creativity and community centred approach. These projects are a really valuable way of fostering skills and empowering students to contribute meaningfully to urban environments. The collaborative effort between students and Watford Borough Council will go a long way to create vibrant and sustainable public spaces.

It's very evident from my visit to West Herts College that the design students will be a great addition to the next generation of British landscape designers and architects.

Focused Efforts Against Fly Tipping

Councillor Kennedy Rodrigues, Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhood Services, and I, led a site visit to address fly tipping hotspots around St Albans Road. The initiative is part of ongoing efforts to combat illegal waste disposal and raise awareness about responsible waste practices.

We are utilising the S.C.R.A.P code, verifying waste carriers and obtaining proper documentation for waste removal. We will be reinforcing the narrative that fly tipping is not a victimless crime and that these fly tipping hot spots are in fact environmental crime scenes. We remain committed to tackling fly-tipping through investigations, fines, and promoting responsible waste disposal practices.

A Caring Community

Impact of Watford Community Lottery

The Watford Community Lottery has achieved a remarkable milestone, raising £20,000 for local charities and projects since its establishment in 2023. I promised to introduce a lottery when standing in the 2022 mayoral election and am pleased to see this delivering funding for community groups, including sports clubs, disability charities, projects to combat homelessness, and many more.

Mayor's Small Grants Fund for Community Initiatives

We recently reopened the Mayor's Small Grants Fund, offering voluntary and community organisations the opportunity to apply for grants of up to £3,000. The fund supports various initiatives aligned with the Council Plan themes, focusing on creating a greener, brighter future; an inspiring, thriving, and creative town; and a diverse, happy, and healthy town.

Past beneficiaries include multicultural community carnivals, sustainability projects, support for elderly care, and community allotment initiatives. We are encouraging local groups to apply, so we can support the impactful work of voluntary and community groups in Watford. Drop-in sessions will be held to guide interested organisations through the application process.

A thriving local economy

Watford Tops UK Vitality Index

As mentioned previously, Watford has been rightfully recognised as the UK's top place to live and work in the 2024 UK Vitality Index, surpassing last year's top location, Bath.

This annual health assessment by Lambert Smith Hampton identifies the best places for living, doing business, and potential future opportunities among the UK's largest urban areas. Watford's top-ranking position is attributed to its outstanding performance in the Economy and Business pillar, reflecting the town's steady climb in the overall standings. Watford placed 3rd last year.

Watford is committed to strategic investments, environmental initiatives, and improvements in various sectors, making it a vibrant and thriving community.

Wellbeing event for our business community

Watford Borough Council, in collaboration with key partners such as Watford & Three Rivers Trust, Hertfordshire Mind, and Watford's Chamber of Commerce, is taking proactive steps to promote employee wellbeing in local businesses.

The event, 'Looking after your organisation's wellbeing' in February took place in Watford Town Hall and invited businesses to learn and connect with local wellbeing services. This initiative aims to provide practical strategies for effective wellbeing plans, creating healthier workplaces, and boosting overall productivity. It's important to build a thriving and supportive business community, with mental wellbeing supporting staff performance and job satisfaction.

A greener town

Beryl's Expansion in Hertfordshire

I am pleased that we are expanding the highly successful Beryl Bike scheme so that the scheme will now be operating across three neighbouring Hertfordshire councils. This expansion stems from the success of our partnership in promoting active travel within the county. Watford's decision to extend the contract until 2026, coupled with Three Rivers District Council and Hertsmere Borough Council introducing Beryl Bikes' services into Croxley and Bushey, respectively, has created a seamless network across Hertfordshire.

With upcoming plans, including new docking stations and e-bikes, we aim to enhance the cycling experience for residents in Bushey, Croxley and Watford. Beryl's impact has been transformative, promoting sustainable transportation and reducing carbon emissions across the region.

The expansion into new areas, benefits a wider section of our Hertfordshire community and contributes to a healthier and cleaner environment, and carbon neutrality by 2030.

Tales of the River Heritage Exploration

Watford's River Colne has been spotlighted with new 'Tales of the River' activities. Made possible by The National Lottery Heritage Fund, this program invites schools and community organisations for captivating river tours, an upcoming podcast series unveiling hidden secrets, scenic River Ambles, and eco-friendly Wild Play activities for families. In 2022, Watford Borough Council were awarded over £246,000, and this three-year project aims to strengthen community ties and explore the river's impact on Watford's history.

Restoring the River Colne Milestone

Watford Borough Council, in collaboration with Groundwork East, celebrates a significant milestone in the 10-year 'Rediscovering the River Colne' project. Volunteers and staff were engaged in physical activities to improve the river's landscape for both wildlife and visitors. The project involves creating low banks and flow deflectors to replicate natural bends, slowing the water flow and enhancing biodiversity. The council expresses gratitude to partners Grundon Waste Management, the Environment Agency, and Affinity Water for funding this initiative.

20,000 Trees Planted

Last time I reported back, I was happy to say that Watford Borough Council had broken last year's record on tree planting. In our commitment to environmental sustainability, we planted 197 trees across the town last year.

Now, we can announce the successful achievement of the ambitious target to plant 20,000 trees in the town by 2026. The manifesto commitment, launched in 2022, has seen remarkable progress, with thousands of trees enhancing the urban landscape, supporting biodiversity, and improving air quality. Through tree giveaways and highway plantings, we have surpassed the goal two years ahead of schedule.

Watford is trailblazing in local government on creating a greener and healthier environment. The newly planted trees are expected to absorb approximately 60,000 pounds of carbon dioxide annually, contributing significantly to the town's transition to a net-zero carbon status by 2030.

New Electric Vehicles for Parks Maintenance

In a commitment to reduce emissions and lead the way towards carbon neutrality, we have worked in collaboration with Veolia, has secured three new electric vehicles for the town's parks maintenance. The electric cage tipper vehicles bring several environmental advantages. Notably, improved air quality, diminished noise pollution, and reduced carbon dioxide emissions. These additions align with the council's pledge to achieve net-zero carbon emissions in the town by 2030, representing a crucial step in making Watford a greener and more environmentally friendly community.

A safer town

Public Consultation on Licensing Policy

We have been engaging the public in a consultation on our licensing policy, asking local residents, licence holders, schools, and other stakeholders to share their insights on the borough's licensing policy. Governed by the Licensing Act 2003, this policy addresses alcohol, entertainment, and late-night refreshment licensing, aligning with the four key objectives of preventing crime and disorder, ensuring public safety, preventing public nuisance, and protecting children from harm.

Particularly, we sought views on the Cumulative Impact Policy, aimed at promoting a diverse mix of businesses in the town centre. This policy safeguards residents while supporting licensed businesses. It articulates our expectations for the town centre, aligning with our vision for the area.

New Police station opened

In December of the previous year, officers and staff bid farewell to the long-standing police station on Shady Lane, their operational base since 1940, as they transitioned to their new home on George Street. I attended a ceremony hosted by Chief Constable Charlie Hall and Police and Crime Commissioner David Lloyd which marked this pivotal moment in Watford's policing history.

The Lord-Lieutenant of Hertfordshire, Robert Voss CBE, honoured the occasion by unveiling a commemorative plaque.

The strategic move to George Street, facilitated by Hertfordshire Police and aided by Watford Council, positioned the new facility closer to the town centre than its previous site on Shady Lane.

Watford Council played a pivotal role in ensuring seamless access to the new building, collaborating closely with the police to execute a successful and efficient relocation. Council officers from the parking team changed restrictions on lines outside the building so that vehicles could get better access to the new station. I also intervened to ensure that Hertfordshire police had less problems parking nearby, notably at St. Mary's church. The transition to the new building became necessary as the Shady Lane site had reached the end of its economic life and demanded increasingly costly maintenance.

Improving Watford

Watford's Commitment to Development Quality Charter

Watford Borough Council proudly endorses the Hertfordshire Development Quality Charter, for high-quality, sustainable development. The Charter sets a benchmark for excellence in urban planning, architecture, and environmental sustainability. The council aims to meet the charter's design and

sustainability pledges, aligning with the principles outlined in the RTPi East of England award-winning Local Plan.

Watford Shopper Bus

The newly launched Watford Shopper Bus, a collaborative effort led by Communities 1st and supported by Watford Borough Council, has become an integral part of transport in Watford.

The bus, serving various wards in Watford, provides a vital link to essential services, particularly grocery shopping. I joined residents on the bus, and I could really see the positive impact it has on residents' lives. The Shopper Bus, operating on Mondays and Tuesdays, offers a reliable and affordable travel option for Watford residents that find it difficult to get about.

Through the Shopper Bus we offer reliable transportation allowing people to maintain their independence.

News and Events

Holocaust Memorial Day

Watford joined communities worldwide in commemorating Holocaust Memorial Day, laying a wreath at Anne Frank's tree outside Watford Central Library. Chairman Cllr Simon Feldman and I were joined by representatives from Watford and District Synagogue and Watford Police, recognising the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau. This day pays tribute to victims of the Holocaust and subsequent genocides, highlighting Watford's historical connection, especially through the Kindertransport mission and Mrs. Kathleen Freeman OBE's compassionate efforts. We must stand up against discrimination, racism, and hatred in all its guises, to preserve freedom for future generations.

Watford Museum on Tour: 'From Watford, With Love'

Watford Museum on Tour, supported by The National Lottery Heritage Fund, presented the event 'From Watford, With Love.' This free drop-in event at the Creator Space, Watford Central Library, on 22 and 23 February, explored Watford's rich history. Attendees engaged in entertaining craft activities for children, learned about historical communication methods, and interacted with the museum's handling collection.

Observing the Second Anniversary of the Conflict in Ukraine

Ukrainian families, alongside their hosts in Watford, commemorated the second anniversary of the conflict in Ukraine. The events on February 23rd and 24th, included a flag-raising ceremony, candlelight vigil, and a service at St Mary's Church.

Successful Abbey Line Trail Walk Raises £1,000 for Watford Women's Centre

I am pleased to report the success of the Abbey Line Trail Walk, where the community of Watford came together to raise £1,000 in donations for the Watford Women's Centre. Led by Deputy Mayor Cllr Aga Dychton, this 10-mile walk reinforced the success of the white ribbon day campaign at the council.

Participants of all ages, families, and groups actively engaged in the event, contributing not only to the funds raised but also to a meaningful dialogue about the important work undertaken by the Watford Women's Centre.

This walk, starting from Watford Junction station and concluded at St Albans Abbey station. We wanted to highlight the importance of challenging attitudes and behaviours that perpetuate violence against women and girls. I extend my heartfelt gratitude to everyone who joined the walk, reinforcing our community's dedication to supporting vital services in Watford.

Dreams United: Stadium Sleepout

On Friday, March 1st, the Watford FC Community Sports and Education Trust, in collaboration with New Hope, One YMCA, DENS, and Herts Young Homeless, organised a Sleepout event at Vicarage Road Stadium.

I took part in the sleepout, held in the Rookery Stand. A unique overnight experience, participants trading their beds for sleeping bags overlooking the empty pitch in the freezing cold.

Special guests and ambassadors from the charities raised awareness of homelessness, and engaging activities were featured during the evening. People taking part raised hundreds of pounds for local charities fighting homelessness and offering support services.