

# Rediscovering the River Colne: changing narratives through tales of the river

**Watford Borough Council**

Friday 21 March 2025

## Summary

Tales of the River is focused on community engagement, by reigniting an appreciation of a forgotten river for Watford's long-standing community, along with how we spark that passion in our newer and more disengaged communities. The project aims to create a legacy of river community champions and stewards, to sustain river restoration long into the future.

"Tales of the River is entering its final year, delivering our remaining activities and summer 2025 festival, while securing a lasting legacy. At its heart, this community-driven environmental project places the Colne front and centre, empowering residents to foster biodiversity, sustainability, and wellbeing through shared knowledge and action. Inspired by David Attenborough's call to care through experience, our devoted volunteer base will continue to monitor and protect this vital natural resource long after the project closes in October 2025." – Councillor Ian Stotesbury, Watford Borough Council Portfolio Holder for Transport and Sustainability

## The problem

Watford is a young and diverse borough, located in the southwest of Hertfordshire and home to 102,000 residents. It currently tops Lambert Smith Hampton's Vitality Index, which assesses the 100 largest towns and cities outside London as the best places to live and do business.

In 2019, WBC instructed the Colne Catchment Action Network (Colne CAN), to complete a feasibility study which confirmed that the River Colne through Watford is polluted, leading to perceptions among residents that the river is dirty, inaccessible, and of limited wildlife value. Engagement with the river and its surrounding area was shown to be low and the health of the river itself was rated as poor. Surveys completed during this feasibility study assessed barriers to accessing the river, and concluded that there was a sense that the town had turned its back on the river and that residents were unaware of this precious resource on their doorstep.

With Watford Borough Council's Environmental Strategy including a commitment to achieving net zero emissions by 2030, the aims of the broader Rediscovering the River Colne programme – addressing pollution, improving river health, and enhancing wildlife in the River Colne – were timely priorities. In 2023/24, Watford's annual

emissions totalled 2091.7 CO<sub>2</sub>e, with parks and green spaces accounting for 156 CO<sub>2</sub>e (7.48%). To meet our net-zero goals, improving the management of the River Colne was essential to reducing these figures.

Watford recognised that the success of a programme of this scope and ambition hinged on community support. Additional funding was therefore sought through the Heritage Fund to tell the next chapter in the story of the River Colne through a 'Tales of the River Colne' community engagement project, designed to complement the wider aims of Rediscovering the River Colne.

## The solution

Tales of the River is an extensive programme to rebuild the borough's relationship with the river. Over three years, a programme of free events and activities has been designed with the community to reach those furthest away from engaging in nature and heritage through active inclusion, supported by partners to achieve WBC's ambitions.

WBC sought to identify and better communicate the river's heritage by delivering:

- 'Travelling Tales' exhibition – to bring the heritage and ecological importance of the river to life through sight, sound, smell and touch. This portable exhibition, visiting schools, care homes, civic and retail spaces, focused on specific aspects of the river's history and explored links with the town such as swimming in the lido, water mills, river wildlife as well as water quality and flooding events.
- Tales of the River Colne podcast and video series – featuring local river users and experts sharing memories of and hopes for the river past, present and future, building a valuable oral history of the river. The podcasts were produced in partnership with West Herts College, thereby engaging young people in the project too.
- Guided River Ambles – facilitated by a wide range of project partners including Groundwork East, Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust along with local artists and have featured interactive story walks including topics such as a bat walk, foraging, in river restoration works, health and wellbeing and Wind in the Willows.
- Riverside WildPlay – facilitated sessions run by project staff to teach families the heritage of the river through outdoor play, empowering parents with the confidence and ability to engage in further outdoor play with their families. These sessions sought to foster strong early bonds with the river.
- 'Ask Me Anything' events (quiz a River whiz) – will be delivered in 2025. Led by the Environment Agency, topics will include the 'Basics of river geomorphology and chalk streams, access to nature, and the interconnection between biodiversity and geomorphology and catchment-based river management.
- Self-guided walking heritage trail – to link the town and river through built and natural landmarks (including mills, breweries, veteran trees, and old river trajectories) encouraging the local community to explore the Colne as a legacy of the project.

- New artistic pieces – including poetry produced by local children focused on the river. New art pieces, inspired by the stories and poems, were also created to encourage visitors to the river, and to spark interest in the stories of its past, present, and future.

The project is also enabling residents and existing Watford Borough Council officers alike to learn new skills:

- WBC has created 2 paid internships offering new routes into green jobs for residents. Interns have worked on various aspects of the project and are fully inducted and trained to lead all events.
- WBC has recently completed a Green Skills conservation volunteering programme – focused on new skills development and employability for local people. Over 12 sessions, meeting twice a week, between 10 – 15 volunteers worked with our partner Groundwork East to create a new destination area alongside training local participants with the knowledge to complete the [CITB Health, Safety and Environment test](#). Physical work has focused on dead hedge and hazel hedge building/planting, creating a meadow area and building a seating area.
- Officers have gained new experience with the launch of Watford's first podcasts and have completed formal Oral History training.

The project will culminate in a River Colne Festival to celebrate the project with the town's residents, including all those who have participated in the project across its three years of delivery, and project partners.

## Stakeholders

At the heart of Tales of the River is strong partnerships, with a large number of organisations playing a wide array of roles in project delivery.

As a local authority, Watford firmly believes that driving forward the places that we serve relies on the success of complex, multi-stakeholder relationships. Put simply, it can't be done alone. Convening the right partners at the right time has allowed WBC to influence and shape the future of the area, fulfilling a commitment to serve the communities in the fullest sense of the word.

Partnership was a significant part of the National Lottery bid, demonstrating that through close working with multiple organisations and shared goals, WBC can achieve remarkable things. This was evidenced in the bid through letters of support received from numerous partners and colleagues including local community groups, Hertfordshire and Middlesex Wildlife Trust, local public bodies including further education colleges, and Watford's Mayor.

To deliver this project, Watford Borough Council is partnering with Groundwork East, along with numerous others including:

- National Lottery Heritage Fund

- ColneCAN
- Hertsmere Borough Council
- Environmental Agency
- Affinity Water
- Thames Water
- Colne Valley Fisheries Consultative
- Community Connections Project
- Hertfordshire and Middlesex Wildlife Trust
- Veolia UK
- West Herts College
- Watford Green Gym

Partners deliver a number of roles including promotion of the programme, technical expertise, funding, facilitation of volunteering opportunities and completion of physical improvements such as key maintenance work along the river. The ColneCAN catchment facilitates the sharing of efforts with other authorities along the Colne, and to communicate about cross-council efforts to improve the health of the river.

## Impact

Throughout the project, proactive measures have been taken to be inclusive, remove barriers to access, and reach new and diverse audiences through the delivery of this project.

Every event and activity type was and is measured against agreed outcomes and tailored methodology which are reviewed at monthly project meetings.

In addition, we hold one annual focus group, with the project team and volunteers, with the aim to gain deeper understanding of barriers to participation, preferred methods of participation and feelings towards the river. A pop-up survey is also issued, hosted on [rivercolnewatford.co.uk](http://rivercolnewatford.co.uk), at three time points throughout the project. The questionnaire asks the same questions at each time point focused on:

- (1) awareness of the river and its environmental importance
- (2) use of the river
- (3) feelings about the river.

As of mid-January 2025, 2,375 people have been involved in an event or activity. Including

- 29 Travelling Tales sessions have been held, engaging 626 visitors, with 84% stating their appreciation of the river has increased from attending the event. These sessions have focused on delivery to our senior community based at care homes, including dementia groups along with primary schools and SENS groups.
- 44 Wild Play sessions have been delivered, engaging 598 participants, including 37% from underrepresented groups. Surveys completed before and after the event consistently show participants have an improved sense of Wellbeing following the event.
- 3 Podcasts have been released with over 350 downloads
- 11 River Ambles with a total of 99 participants have taken place. 79% of participants have stated improved mental health and wellbeing post course, 88% have stated their knowledge of local heritage had increased.

- 9 external events to raise awareness of the project to a wider local audience have been held. These events have included various Watford festival events, teacher meetings and attendance at community groups.
- 73,993 social media impressions – and growing!

## Lessons Learned

During the planning phase of the project, whilst documenting the Equality Impact Assessment (EIA), it was highlighted that it would be a challenge to ensure that the project reached all underrepresented groups with the existing project translation budget for Tales of the River. The EIA has confirmed through census data that 23% of households in Watford do not speak English as a first language and in addition, there are broader accessibility issues such as sight and hearing to consider. A solution was to purchase 'Recite Me,' an online tool for the duration of the project, which offers a range of on-demand accessibility solutions that support in conforming to WCAG (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines) standards and can ensure that the WBC website is user-friendly for individuals with disabilities, situational challenges, and language support, through customisable options.

12 Tales of the River Colne Podcasts were initially planned for delivery in partnership with West Herts College students. This was a new medium for the council, and the editing requirements could not be completed by the team, so these had to be outsourced at extra time and cost. With the additional challenge of finding enough guest speakers, it was agreed to deliver the remaining recordings through video. This has allowed the council to move production support in-house, reducing budget pressures, whilst providing key opportunities to up-skill and develop staff,. It also unlocks access to more audiences across a range of platforms and provides a visual record of the project and its achievements for posterity.

The project operates within a strong governance framework, including 6 weekly meetings at which the above challenges were addressed and resolved. In addition, the project team hold annual internal evaluation sessions to share learning from the previous year. This allows for dedicated time to reflect, and celebrate success, whilst also providing an opportunity to adapt our approach moving forward and keeps the team focused on delivery.

## Finances

In 2021, WBC committed £750,000 in capital to enable the first three years of the broader programme to be initiated.

The project partner, Groundwork, is responsible for identifying and assessing additional funding opportunities as part of the wider programme.

The National Lottery Heritage Fund was identified as a good match for our engagement ambition, and after a successful application, awarded a grant of £246,731.00 alongside a commitment to contribute £35,230 in non-cash contributions (1,810 hours of volunteer time). The project is on track to be delivered within budget.

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As WBC enters the final year of the project, the remainder of the planned activities are still to be delivered, leading to the summer festival, whilst also focusing on securing the legacy of the project.

At its heart, this is an environmental improvement project designed to foster collective action to protect a precious local resource. Through Tales of the River, WBC is addressing key priorities and ambitions across councils including, raising awareness of biodiversity, the sustainability agenda, wellbeing and community.

WBC is changing the narrative, and this project places the river front and centre of the story, highlighting its relevance to residents' lives in the past, present and future. Empowering communities by providing opportunity to build environmental skills and knowledge and create new places for people to connect with the natural world.

WBC will continue to build a volunteer base as part of the broader programme: to date, this is currently made up of 26 people with continued promotion planned to achieve a target of 40 volunteers by the end of the programme.

By increasing awareness of how the river has shaped the town, 'Tales of the River' will inspire residents to adopt new positive environmental behaviours built on a foundation of strengthening the links between a population and its river – taking inspiration from David Attenborough's infamous adage: 'no one will protect what they don't care about; and no one will care about what they have never experienced'.

## **Links, contacts, and credits**

- Header image credit: watford Borough Council