

Building a brighter future: Our progress in 2024

Homes for all

A home is more than a building. It's a feeling of belonging, safety and opportunity. In Waterloo Region, we are tackling the affordable housing crisis to help more people and families find a home where they can build a brighter future.

Too many people in our community struggle to own or rent a home. In the Region of Waterloo, more than 45,000 residents — about 8 per cent of us — live below the poverty line. Chronic homelessness has grown an average of 28 per cent each year since 2020. But with wise investment and hard work, we can build the affordable housing our community needs.

We can end chronic homelessness. We can use land innovatively. The Region of Waterloo is building safe communities with affordable housing and good jobs for the future... homes where everyone can thrive and contribute together.

How we've built a brighter future in 2024:

Addressing Chronic Homelessness

Regional Council endorsed the Plan to End Chronic Homelessness in April 2024. It's an ambitious roadmap of strategies and actions, created by 57 community partners working together. With the Plan to guide us, the Region is boldly taking action.

- More than doubled shelter bed capacity since 2018, so we now have 548 spots in emergency shelters, motels and transitional housing
- Purchased 84 Frederick Street, in June 2024 to become a permanent emergency shelter in downtown Kitchener
- Supporting YWCA Cambridge to open a new shelter for women and gender diverse people
- Committed to providing emergency shelter and services at the Erb's Road Hybrid Shelter until 2030

Advancing Affordable Housing

This year, we continued to address the urgent need for affordable housing. In November, we accomplished our Building Better Futures goal to add 2,500 new affordable homes – and we did it a year ahead of schedule! We’re at 2,700 plus homes built or in development, and we’re not stopping there. The Region of Waterloo also hosted a Homes for All Summit in June for local housing champions to connect and find innovative solutions to get shovels in the ground on important housing projects.

- 2,707 new affordable homes completed or in development over the last four years
- 675 affordable homes added per year since we started Building Better Futures
- 1 year ahead of schedule on our Building Better Futures goal
- 30% is the maximum amount of income spent on housing to be considered “affordable”

In October, 30 affordable housing units opened in Cambridge for First Nations, Inuit and Métis people. This new building offers unique cultural supports for the people living there and includes indoor and outdoor space that can host cultural events and traditional ceremonies. It was built by Kitchener-Waterloo Urban Native Wigwam Project, and supported with funding from the Region of Waterloo.

Offering employment supports

To watch a video about the Community Benefits Program, please [click here](#).

This year, we’ve invested in new upstream solutions that provide employment opportunities and foster economic growth in the region.

Community Benefits Program: we partnered with companies building the Region’s affordable housing projects to ensure people from equity-deserving groups are hired and gain valuable construction experience working on these projects.

Pathways to Employment: We’ve also partnered with the Grand Valley Construction Association on a new program to match job seekers with training and work placements. The program opens up opportunities for people from underrepresented groups, including youth, newcomers, people with disabilities and other equity deserving groups.

- In 2024, 66 participants completed the 5-week training
- Out of the first 19 participants, 16 secured full-time employment following the program

Supporting economic growth

YKF is not just an airport. The Region of Waterloo International Airport is a gateway for people to travel across the world and welcome guests to our community. It's also a hub of economic activity and home to many businesses in the aerospace industry. In June, the Waterloo Wellington Flight Centre opened a new state-of-the-art flight training facility, developed in partnership with the Waterloo Institute for Sustainable Aeronautics that houses three new flight simulators. This hub will help establish Waterloo Region as a leader in training and advanced research on sustainable aeronautics.

YKF continues to evolve as it supports jobs and economic growth in Waterloo Region.

- \$220+ million in direct annual economic output
- 44 businesses at the airport
- 660 people employed by those YKF businesses

Providing community and supportive housing

The Region of Waterloo made real progress in 2024 to add more community and supportive housing, where there are social services for people most at risk of homelessness. For example, residents at the new St. Mark's Place benefit from cooking lessons, job search assistance and on-site health care.

In collaboration with community partners, the Region now provides:

- 2,816 community housing units
- 760 supportive housing units
- 100+ transitional housing units

We are also redeveloping Region owned land to add services and provide more of the homes people need- including adding childcare, community spaces, and more accessible units to these housing developments.

- 60 new accessible units under construction and 88 more in the design phase for Waterloo Region Housing
- 1,686 new affordable homes built and occupied since starting Building Better Futures Plan
- 1,021 more in development
- This is a total of 2,707 homes, 884 of which were added in 2024 alone!

Equitable services and opportunities

This community is growing in new, exciting ways. As we become more diverse, Waterloo Region can become stronger than ever by working alongside one another and ensuring we're a place where everyone can thrive.

More than ever, people are coming here to enjoy what we offer and contribute to our thriving community. In 2023, the Region of Waterloo grew by 4.4 per cent — that's like adding a city the size of Stratford. Our community is richer when we add newcomers and their unique cultures and knowledge. As our population becomes more diverse every year, we must continue to evolve how we serve people, listen to each other, and work together. By keeping people at the heart of what we do, everyone can feel safe, heard and welcomed when they call Waterloo Region home.

How we've built a brighter future in 2024:

Growing childcare equitably

Affordable, plentiful child care is critical for Waterloo Region families. We've continued rolling out funding from the Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care agreement in 2024, lowering fees across the community. We're also working on using Region-owned land for child care, and partnering with community organizations to deliver culturally-responsive child care options.

- 20,000+ child care spaces receiving funding to bring costs down to \$10 cost per day
- 2,000 new child care spaces created in the last two years
- 1,725 more spaces to be created by end of 2026

Providing connection

We're continuing to support active, fulfilling lives for people who are living with dementia. For example, the Young Onset Dementia Association at Sunnyside home is for people younger than 65, in the early stages of memory loss. They gather to connect and share experiences. It provides a routine and a chance to feel like themselves.

In 2024:

- 20 people participated in the Sunnyside YODA

- 280 people participated in our Community Alzheimer Day Programs across the region
- 263 older adults live in community at the Sunnyside Home Long-Term Care

“There’s a routine there, like when I was working. It reminds me that I have some strengths to offer, qualities I can share, experiences that others find interesting. It reminds me that I am still me. It’s a welcomed break from my struggles with my brain.” - YODA member

Sharing Resources

We have 11 library branches offering services, programs and events in the Townships of North Dumfries, Wellesley, Wilmot and Woolwich. These Region of Waterloo Libraries serve as safe, welcoming spaces for community members. In September 2024, The Township of Woolwich and the Region of Waterloo celebrated the grand opening of the Breslau Branch in the Breslau Community Centre. Breslau is the first new library branch to open in the Region in over 40 years.

- 102,589 people visited Library branches
- 8,965 requests for in-person assistance
- 359,333 items were borrowed free of charge
- \$5,769,256 worth of items enjoyed by library users
- When asked what the Region of Waterloo Libraries are doing well, residents shared their appreciation for access to (borrowing) materials, library staff and library programming.

Ensuring learning and growth for all

Region of Waterloo Libraries is working to give everyone — regardless of income or background — an opportunity to learn, grow, and succeed. Programs include literacy, job training, arts workshops, and financial seminars. Library catalogues provide access to accessible technology, recreational sites, wellness supplies, and hobby kits. Our impact in 2024:

- Personal growth or health-based kits were borrowed 1,151 times
- Programs for enjoyment and growth were attended 17,300 times
- Hotspots, providing access to the internet, were borrowed 349 times
- C-Pen ReaderPens, for accessibility, were checked out 16 times
- EnvoyConnect, an accessibility tool, and Decodable Books, which help people with dyslexia, were added to the catalogue

Supporting healthy communities

To watch a video about our new public health clinic in Kitchener, please [click here](#).

Public Health is adapting to meet residents where they are, supporting people in spaces where they can more easily and comfortably access health services. We opened a new Public Health clinic in 2024. We met with residents in more community spaces and supported people who may have previously experienced barriers to health. Better access to health services means better overall wellbeing for the people of Waterloo Region.

- 4,853 health service appointments at 62 community outreach locations
- 3,283 of Ontario Senior Dental Care Program appointments
- 33,595 students caught up on mandatory school vaccines
- 15 peer health worker programs, serving unique communities

Advancing community safety and wellbeing

We support community-led projects that help make Waterloo Region a place where everyone feels safe, welcome and valued. This summer, we announced another \$2.89 million for projects through our Upstream and Community Capacity Building Funds. These projects focus on prevention and supporting grassroots change-makers.

Guided by the Community, Safety, and Wellbeing Plan (CSWP), we're also bringing together "community action tables". Here, Regional staff and community partners work to address CSWP priorities to combat hate, address intimate partner violence, gender based violence, and missing and murdered Indigenous women, support community mental health and addiction needs together, and create safe and inclusive spaces in the community.

Upstream impacts since 2021:

- \$12 million in Regional funding
- 116 community-led projects supported

Investing in food security

One way to create more food security in our community is through farm and garden projects. In 2024, we partnered with Wisahkotewinowak, a local urban Indigenous garden collective, to build a new community garden across from Schneider Haus National Historic

Site. The new garden has space for Crow Shield Lodge, an Indigenous land-based education and healing organization, and for Muslim Social Services of Kitchener-Waterloo.

This exciting collaboration includes education for the gardeners on sustainable gardening, seed saving, soil management and planting diversity. By investing in community-led gardens and education, we are working alongside different racialized communities so people can access sustainable food sources, gain skills and connect socially.

- 60 families received garden crops through White Owl Native Ancestry food share program – just some of the many people receiving produce from this garden.

Climate aligned growth

In Waterloo Region, invention and ambition are in our DNA and we're putting our innovative spirit to work in the areas our community needs it most — including climate change and environmental stewardship.

The natural world is under pressure and Waterloo Region is no exception. Our community is facing unprecedented challenges due to global warming — hotter temperatures, heavier rains, severe storms and increasing pollution.

We can work together and do our part to ensure Waterloo Region has a healthy environment for everyone, with clean air, water, land and biodiversity. A community where people have climate-friendly ways to get around. We've already reduced our region's greenhouse gas emissions below 2010 levels, but much more work is needed to reach our 80 per cent reduction target by 2050.

How we've built a brighter future in 2024:

Expanding public transportation

We continued to improve service in 2024 to meet the needs of our rapidly-growing community and make it easier for people to get around Waterloo Region. We increased service to the Cambridge Business Park and surrounding area, boosted connections to the Region of Waterloo International Airport, and added late-night service between Waterloo and Kitchener. And we make progress on our important climate change goals every time someone chooses public transportation. As our ridership grows and changes, GRT is also evolving to meet the demand.

- 3 new bus routes added
- 9,500 tonnes of CO2 emissions saved by riders using GRT

Growing Accessible Transit

We want public transportation to be an easy option for as many people as possible. Everyone deserves good transportation! We're proud that ridership continues to grow on MobilityPLUS, GRT's specialized transit service for people who are unable to use conventional transit due to a disability.

We made significant progress in 2024 to decrease the number of undelivered trips and improve our system's efficiency through software updates and other operational adjustments.

- 173,000+ MobilityPLUS trips scheduled in 2024
- 25% ridership increase over 2023

Linking community with trails

Community members are embracing the Region of Waterloo's active transportation links, so they can walk, bike or roll where they need to go.

The Region's Market Trail, connecting Northfield Station in Waterloo to St. Jacobs Farmers' Market saw record use in 2024:

- 61% increase in trail usage
- 72,000+ users recorded on the trail
- nearly 15,000 users in July 2024 alone

We also built a new pedestrian and cyclist crossing over Highway 7/8. It took just 20 hours to lift this bridge into place! This was a big step in improving transportation by giving people different ways to get where they need to go.

Supporting Active Transportation

The Region's shared e-bike and e-scooter program marked another year of growth.

- The network increased to more than 60 square km of service area and 380 stations, connecting Cambridge, Kitchener and Waterloo
- Over 280,000 km travelled by nearly 30,000 people

- Up to 9,850 kilograms of carbon emissions diverted by those trips

Using energy sustainably

At the Region of Waterloo, we are choosing smart investments that use energy efficiently and result in long-term savings. In 2024, we made progress on our long-term goal to reduce carbon emissions and protect our environment.

- GRT launched its electric bus pilot.
- Since 2019, the Region has secured over \$8 million in incentives and grants to implement 237 energy conservation projects, 27 of which were completed in 2024. This includes the development of three new, net zero carbon apartment buildings for Waterloo Region Housing. These efforts have surpassed our sustainability targets and resulted in:
 - \$11.4M in utility costs saved
 - 15,400 MWh of electricity saved (equivalent to 1,700 homes)
 - 1,950,000 m³ of natural gas reduced (equivalent to 800 homes for a year)
 - 5,200 tonnes of GHG emissions prevented (equivalent to 950 vehicles for a year)

Creating greener energy

Not only is the Region working to save energy, we're also working to create energy in sustainable ways, for a greener future. We're doing our part to adopt more sustainable energy sources and generate our own power.

- GRT installed solar panels on the Northfield Drive Maintenance Facility.
- These panels generate around 1,000 MWh of electricity every year, offsetting 27 tonnes of emissions.
- This is the equivalent of not using 12,000 litres of gasoline.
- In 2024, we generated 2,299 MWh of energy from all solar panels across Region of Waterloo buildings.
- That's the equivalent of powering 255 homes for a year.
- We also captured 51,572 tonnes of methane gas emitted from the Waterloo Landfill. Methane impacts global warming 28 times more than CO₂
- With this methane, we generated 24,055 MWh of electricity.

Protecting our natural environment

We've worked alongside community partners and area municipalities to enhance and protect our natural environment in new and creative ways. Significant impacts in 2024 include:

- Through a joint effort with Waterloo Region Nature, the Region worked alongside 25 volunteers to plant over 1,500 to 2,000 native perennials along our roadsides, supporting pollinators and improving air quality.
- Through Trees for Woolwich, the Region supported another group of volunteers, including youth from Sunnydale gaining work experience, to plant over 22,000 native trees along roadsides in Woolwich. These trees help cool the climate and clean the air.

Collaborating on heritage conservation

In 2024, the Region's work on Fischer-Hallman Road in 2020-2023 was recognized with awards from the Ontario Public Works Association and the Municipal Engineers Association. The Region collaborated with several Indigenous communities and worked with archaeologists, consultants, and contractors to preserve local artifacts discovered on the site. What they didn't expect was the extent of the findings. These findings helped reconstruct life in a Late Woodland village 600 years ago.

- 128,600+ hand-excavated artifacts uncovered including arrowheads, blades and scrapers, jewelry, and ceramics.
- 69 features including a longhouse, sweat lodge, and hearths

Collaboration on this project was key — highlighting how development can be balanced with heritage conservation. The collaborative archaeological assessment model used by the Region and its Indigenous partners is now being adopted by other municipalities in Ontario.

Resilient and future ready organization

An organization needs to be future ready in order to thrive in a rapidly changing world. As Waterloo Region's population grows, we face new pressures. We must evolve our services,

infrastructure, and ways of making decisions so we can meet whatever challenges lie ahead.

We need to innovate, be efficient, and build resilience to ensure we are prepared for growth. To do that, our employees need to feel valued and know that they belong. They need to be supported to serve residents with compassion and care, to build trust and confidence in what we do, and to drive this organization forward. They need a safe space for bold ideas and innovation, based on data and other ways of knowing.

How we've built a brighter future in 2024:

Supporting employee wellbeing

When you call 911, you rely on emergency crews to respond with compassion and care. But in order for our paramedics to provide the best care for you, they have to be cared for too. Paramedics often experience high stress and trauma, and this can impact their mental health.

To watch a video about the paramedic peer support program, please [click here](#).

The Region's peer support program helps to build resilience and maintain service levels by having staff take good care of each other.

Through the program, paramedics provide emotional and psychological support to their colleagues. Team members share similar lived experiences with each other and receive guidance from trained peers.

Embedding Indigenous ways of knowing

Indigenous Ways of Knowing are vital to Reconciliation, and they help communities grow in healthy ways. They invite us to learn from all creation, think holistically, and plan for future generations.

This year, the Reconciliation Action Partnership (RAP) drew from Indigenous traditions including the Haudenosaunee White Pine Tree of Peace and the medicine wheel to develop a plan that will guide their work. Medicine wheels allowed the group to plan and balance their actions across all stages and seasons.

In November, RAP's new Pathway Forward was shared at a Community Feast and will guide the Region and municipalities as they work alongside the Indigenous community. RAP is a group of municipalities working together to embed Reconciliation into our community and government.

To watch a video of the Reconciliation Action Partnership's Pathway Forward, please [click here](#).

Creating safe spaces

Sweetgrass is one of many plants that, when lit, can have a positive effect on you and the space you're working in. Smudging is a deeply rooted cultural practice for many Indigenous peoples. It is a way to connect with tradition, ancestors, and the natural world, and to foster a sense of spirituality, healing, and reflection.

This year the Region adopted a new smudging policy that respects and encourages this practice, ensuring that everyone who visits or works in a Regional facility can bring their whole selves into the space.

It is an important step toward creating a more inclusive environment as we commit to integrating Indigenous knowledge, traditions, and values into our programs, policies, and spaces, aligning with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action.

Celebrating Indigenous voices

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's calls to action include preserving Aboriginal languages as a fundamental and valued element of Canadian culture and society.

A new installation at our headquarters that greets you with 14 Indigenous languages in the Region is one of the ways we are advancing Truth and Reconciliation at the Region.

This greeting recognizes the diversity of Indigenous voices and carries a message of change: away from a history where not all were welcomed in formal government spaces or where Indigenous languages were frowned upon, and towards a new era where doors are open with an explicit welcome to First Nations, Indigenous, and Métis peoples.

Protecting your essential services

While a growing online presence creates new opportunities to serve you better, it also brings new risks. The amount of money businesses spent recovering from cyber security attacks has doubled in the past two years, which shows the importance of being prepared.

While the Region has security technologies and emergency plans in place, practicing these plans in a mock situation strengthens our response and builds resilience.

In 2024, the Region ran a simulated cyber incident exercise to ensure we minimize the risks and maintain essential services in the event of an actual incident. We also continue to educate and train staff on how to help protect services and the organization from a cyber incident.

- 2,500+ hours of cyber security training completed by staff
- 10,000+ phishing simulations completed

New way of working to meet community needs better

For many families, it can be hard to find an affordable home with child care nearby. The Region works in many ways to address these challenges, and in 2024 we added a new way — leveraging the land we own for mixed-use development. We provide the land to the developer, and the developer makes a percentage of homes affordable while designating space in the development for child care.

This creates more sustainable, walkable, and vibrant communities. We began planning two new developments this past year, one at 1388 Highland Road West in Kitchener and another on 30 Lauris Avenue in Cambridge. About thirty percent of the units in each community will be affordable and licensed child care will be on site.

Making services more accessible

As the region's population grows, so too does the need for accessible services. This goes beyond meeting provincial requirements, to ensuring we are doing everything we can to create the best service experience for all.

Our accessibility plan for the next few years describes what the Region will do to reduce barriers to our services and public spaces for people with disabilities. In 2024, the Region consulted with the Grand River Accessibility Advisory Committee and the community on more than 10 projects, including planned improvements to transit, washrooms, housing, and the budget. We also provided staff training and made improvements to communications media, and public spaces.

- GRAAC consulted on 10+ projects for the Region in 2024.

- We improved bus stops so that people with disabilities can more easily board and exit the bus.
- We committed to adding more accessible units to Region-owned housing, so that just over 20% are accessible.
- A new incentive program helped increase the number of accessible taxis available.
- The Region's airport made plans to add tactile and braille signage, accessible kiosks for self-check-in and designated seating over the next few years.