

# Public Document Pack

## NOTICE OF

### WITNEY ANNUAL TOWN MEETING

WEDNESDAY, 15TH MARCH, 2023

MAIN HALL, THE CORN EXCHANGE, WITNEY

7.30 PM

[Refreshments available from 6.45pm]

### AGENDA

1. **Introductions and Welcome from the Mayor of Witney, Cllr Liz Duncan**
2. **Official Noting of the Town Councillor apologies for Absence**
3. **To receive and approve the minutes of the Annual Town Meeting of 25 April 2022**
4. **Thames Valley Police**  
A Local Police Officer will attend the meeting to give a brief report and answer questions on any relevant matters raised at the meeting.
5. **To receive Reports from each of the Town Council's Standing Committees**
6. **Open Forum to discuss matters raised by the general public at the Meeting**  
To receive questions relating to the Town of Witney which may be asked by any Witney resident. Notice of such matters would be appreciated and should be sent to the Town Clerk.
7. **Town Mayor's closing remarks and thanks**



COUNCILLOR LIZ DUNCAN  
Town Mayor, Witney Town Council

**This is an annual statutory public meeting of the Local Government electors of Witney who are invited to attend and take part in discussions.** It is not a Town Council meeting although the Town Council does take the opportunity for its Committee Chairs to make a report to the meeting on the work being undertaken by its committees. **It should be noted, this is not a political meeting.**

**After the formal business of the meeting, you are invited to meet local Councillors and discuss the work of the Town Council and other town issues.**

# Agenda Item 3

## WITNEY ANNUAL TOWN MEETING

Held on Monday, 25 April 2022

At 7.30 pm in the Main Hall, The Corn Exchange, Witney

### Present:

Councillor J Aitman (Chair)

Councillors:	T Ashby	D Enright
	D Butterfield	V Gwatkin
	O Collins	A Prosser
	L Duncan	R Smith
	H Eaglestone	D Temple
Officers:	Sharon Groth	Town Clerk
	Adam Clapton	Deputy Town Clerk
	Angus Whitburn	Maintenance & Environmental Services Officer
	Polly Inness	Communications & Community Engagement Officer
Others:	16 members of the public.	

### 1 INTRODUCTIONS AND WELCOME FROM THE MAYOR OF WITNEY, CLLR JOY AITMAN

The Town Mayor, Cllr Joy Aitman, welcomed the public to the meeting and introduced herself and the Deputy Mayor, Liz Duncan, officers of the Town Council and representatives of Thames Valley Police.

### 2 OFFICIAL NOTING OF THE TOWN COUNCILLOR APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Witney Town Councillors L Ashbourne, R Bolger, D Harvey, M Jones, and A McMahan.

### 3 TO RECEIVE AND APPROVE THE MINUTES OF THE ANNUAL TOWN MEETING OF 11 MARCH 2020

The minutes of the Annual Town Meeting meeting held on 11 March 2020, copies of which were available at the meeting, were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

### 4 THAMES VALLEY POLICE

The Mayor welcomed Inspector Chris Ball to the meeting who introduced himself and his colleague PC Chris Cochrane who was part of the Witney policing team.

Attendees were advised there had been a number of successes in recent months on crime and the police were actively working with young people to build a respectful and educated community.

There had however been 23 burglaries, 2 robberies, and 41 bicycle thefts. The figures were low compared to those nationally, but they were still too high. In response to a question from the floor, Officers confirmed they did have tactics in place to tackle the high rate of bicycle thefts, and there were hot spots, mainly in secluded areas which included the Leisure Centre. The most beneficial advice to the public was to not be so trusting and to make it less attractive to potential thieves.

Cllr Jane Doughty, West Oxfordshire District Council, raised concerns about antisocial behaviour at Tungsten Park in West Witney. Residents were frustrated the police appeared to be doing little about car meet ups late at night which were disturbing families in this part of the town. It was advised that Officers were speaking with those involved and trying to make it less attractive to the drivers. Police resources were stretched and being put towards targeted events when they were known about with a tactic of disperse and displace. They stressed the more the police were told about these kinds of events, the more they could do.

A final question concerned the illegal use of e-scooters and the lack of a police presence on the streets. It was confirmed the police were recruiting more staff, but the number was below where it needed to be and PCSO's were being drawn into police work. With regard to e-scooters, warning letters were issued and, if after that they were still being used by individuals they were confiscated. Bike thefts were currently the top priority.

5 **TO RECEIVE REPORTS FROM EACH OF THE TOWN COUNCIL'S STANDING COMMITTEE**

The Mayor gave an update on her two years as Mayor and invited the Town Council's Committee Chairs to give brief updates on their Committees' responsibilities and an overview of what they had been working on throughout the Covid-19 pandemic.

As the Leader and Chair of Policy, Governance and Finance Committee was unable to attend, Cllr O Collins gave an overview of the work of that the Committee had been doing on her behalf.

Following this, Cllrs Smith, Gwatkin, and Collins introduced themselves as Chairs of the Climate, Biodiversity & Planning Committee, Parks & Recreation Committee, and Stronger Communities Committee respectively. Cllr Aitman provided an update on the work of the Halls, Cemeteries & Allotments Committee in that Chair's absence.

6 **OPEN FORUM TO DISCUSS MATTERS RAISED BY THE GENERAL PUBLIC AT THE MEETING**

Further to the updates from Committee Chairs, the Mayor opened the floor to questions from the public.

**Q1. Is anything being done to address the problems around the new cycle lanes in Corn Street? They are not currently safe, and buses cannot pass each other safely.**

The Mayor thanked the member of public for the question and referred to fellow councillors R Smith and D Enright.

It was confirmed that feedback and questions had been passed on by the Town Council at the consultation stage for this project, which was part of an active travel package delivered by the County Council. There had regrettably, been a short time frame on consultation due to time constraints in spending the funds and the result was narrower, and not necessarily safer lanes.

There was agreement this was a work in progress, and unfortunately not everything is right first time. The County Council was currently creating a Local Cycling & Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP) which would attempt to produce a plan. There would also be further consultation when additional funding became available.

**Q2. 20mph Speed Limits. People do not know Corn Street has a 20mph limit – what can be done? Drivers might take more notice if signs are on the road**

The Mayor advised this information would be fed back to Oxfordshire County Council who were responsible for implementing the scheme. As a wider issue, it was advised that lots of footpaths and cycle paths were overgrown so there was work needed on the ground to clear these. Police representatives suggested the Police Community Payback Scheme may be able to assist with this.

**Q3. What is the Town Council role in assisting vulnerable people and riparian ownership of land in conjunction with flooding?**

The Mayor advised the Town Council's Planning Committee, members recognised and commented on new developments, large and small where ground is tarmacked over. Thankfully, these comments were being listened to increasingly at District Council. Everyone was beginning to recognise the sewerage problem which tied into this issue.

Cllr Andrew Coles, West Oxfordshire District Council commented that there were a number of reasons why flooding happens. Government thinking was that not enough properties flood and therefore no funding is provided to invest in defences and mitigations. What was being done was a sticking plaster approach. The floods two years ago highlighted many failures, it was the worst time for affected residents and community agencies were not ready. Therefore, much more needed to be done.

**Q4. What is happening to our 500-year-old Market town? Is it becoming a suburb of Oxford?**

There was agreement that shopping habits had changes as a result of the Covid-19 Pandemic and further investment was needed in the town centre. Members advised there would be an opportunity to come together and talk about the future of the High Street during the coming months.

**Q5. Are you disappointed with the turnout for this evening's meeting?**

The Mayor advised it was disappointing only a small number of the public had attended but the meeting had been advertised in all the usual ways, Witney Gazette, website, poster, and social media. In response to an attended, the Mayor said the Town Council could look into the communications in the future.

**7 TOWN MAYOR'S CLOSING REMARKS AND THANKS**

The Mayor thanked the public for attending the meeting and invited them to stay on now that the formal business was concluded to speak to the Councillors informally.

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The meeting closed at: 8.45 pm

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Chair

## **WITNEY ANNUAL TOWN MEETING 2023**

### **REPORT TO THE ANNUAL TOWN MEETING FROM THE MAYOR**

#### **CLLR LIZ DUNCAN**

It has been a great privilege to spend the last year as Mayor of Witney, a time when the life of the town has become so much busier as we have been able to return to some level of normality moving out of the effects of the pandemic. I have met so many people and can say that Covid and its effects are still with us in so many ways, particularly for people's health, for key workers and for local businesses.

My mayoral year has been framed by events for our Royal Family, starting with the celebrations for the Queen's Platinum Jubilee. It was wonderful to support the family events, the coffee morning for seniors, the beacon lighting, the wonderful Jubilee concert and the Big Lunch on the Leys.

And then, we had the sad death of the Queen and the formal duties of the historic proclamation from here in Market Square supported by the wonderful Witney Town Band, and the very moving Civic Service held at St Mary's Church. Thanks are due to The Rector and Mayor's Chaplain, Toby Wright for his support throughout the year. At the very end of my year, in May, we are looking forward to celebrations for the Coronation of our new King.

As Mayor, I was keen to make contact with residents who had been particularly affected by Covid and have contacted and visited some of our care homes in Witney. We have included the care homes in our art competitions for the Jubilee and Christmas card competitions and it has been lovely to visit and present prizes as well as participating in coffee mornings and Christmas Fairs.

My visits to schools have also been very rewarding, presenting prizes for the Witney in Bloom and Jubilee competitions, attending Christmas celebrations, reading stories and answering all those wonderful questions. Thanks also to the many organisations for young people who have invited me to visit, such as the Churchill Beavers group and both the army and air cadets.

This year we also had the welcome return of so many well-loved events. It was a great honour to be asked to open the Witney Music Festival, Witney Pride Day, Witney in Pink, and to present the prizes at the Witney Carnival. The Christmas lights switch-on event was again a joyful event at the darkest time of the year. After the disruption of the pandemic it was wonderful for the town to see these events return. Thanks are due to the many organisations in the town who organise these events so perfectly, including Witney Rotary, Round Table, Witney Lions, Witney Pride and many others.

I was also very pleased to be invited to support the many volunteer organisations in the town at their events and AGMs. My two chosen charities are Volunteer Link Up and the Windrush Bike project, both of whom work hard to make a real difference to the lives of people in Witney. I also connected with many other organisations, such as Witney Day Centre, Witney Shed, West Oxfordshire Community Transport, Witney and West Oxfordshire Foodbank, Chatterbox, Got2B and many others. I enjoyed my day at the Witney Museum, helping at the

Heritage 'Have a go' day, and the Mayor's Christmas Carol service returned with some wonderful music and raised funds for the Mayor's charities.

I enjoyed my day at Witney Fire Station, presenting firefighters with their Platinum Jubilee medals on behalf of the Queen, and experiencing an exciting trip on the hydraulic platform – a very different view of Witney!

I have also represented Witney around the County, attending services in Oxford to commemorate the platinum jubilee and to celebrate Christmas at Christchurch Cathedral at the invitation of Thames Valley Police. I travelled to Reading to collect awards in the Witney in Bloom competition and attended the Civic Service and military parade in Bicester. The remembrance service and parade in Witney was incredibly moving and it was an honour to lay a wreath on behalf of our town. Deputy Mayor, Cllr Owen Collins, travelled to our twin town of Unterhaching in Germany and presented a wreath on behalf of the people of Witney at their remembrance ceremony on the same day.

There are so many people to thank who have supported the role of Mayor during the year. Our previous Mayor, Joy Aitman, did a wonderful job for two years during the challenging years of Covid and made a huge difference to many during that time. Her advice has been invaluable. Thanks also to the Deputy Mayor, Owen Collins, for his support throughout the year, and to all the staff and councillors at Witney Town Council who work tirelessly behind the scenes.

My main thanks go to the people of Witney who have done me the honour of including me in their celebrations, events and activities. We are so lucky to have such wonderful volunteers and organisations in the town who work so hard on our behalf to improve the life of everyone in Witney.

**Cllr Liz Duncan, Mayor of Witney**

# **WITNEY ANNUAL TOWN MEETING 2023**

## **REPORT TO THE ANNUAL TOWN MEETING FROM CHAIR OF THE TOWN COUNCIL'S CLIMATE, BIODIVERSITY AND PLANNING COMMITTEE CLLR RUTH SMITH**

The climate emergency, declared by the Town Council in 2019, is the key theme which underpins all planning applications and biodiversity matters considered by this Committee. The Council has a target of being Carbon neutral across its operations by 2028. The intention is to do our bit to improve Witney's emissions and to lead and inspire residents and businesses to do the same.

### **Planning**

Witney Town Council is a statutory consultee on all planning applications inside Witney's boundaries, and is consulted on some neighbouring applications, too. The Committee meets every three weeks to deal with the volume of applications.

As a Committee, we regularly tailor our planning responds to represent Witney's best interests on themes of flooding prevention (including adequate drainage and acknowledgement that the EA's flooding maps are openly agreed to be in need of updating); sewerage (given the fact that Witney's sewage treatment plant cannot cope with current capacity never mind hundreds of new bathrooms); green energy and energy efficiency to address the climate crisis; and infrastructure for pedestrians, cyclists and public transport so that children, older people and people trying to be healthy and green can traverse our town safely, with clean air.

Between 1 April 2022 and 31 January 2023, the Town Council was consulted on:

- 149 planning applications
- 5 planning appeals
- 6 licensing applications (pavement licences & premises licences)
- 1 Experimental Traffic Regulation Order (ETRO) consultation
- 2 road closure consultations

Approximately 70% of the Town Council responses are endorsed by the District Council at the planning decision stage.

Planning Officers at the District Council benefit from the advice of technical consultees. Sometimes technical consultees are able to identify reasons for refusal that might be outside of the expertise of our Town Councillors. This can lead to applications being refused by the Local Planning Authority when Witney Town Council have not raised objection comments, and vice versa. The difference in opinion or additional expertise might include the following matters of interest: protection in Conservation Areas, protection of Heritage assets, drainage issues, highway safety, threat to biodiversity, poor design, non-compliance with planning policy or NPPF, and many other constraints that are identified by District Planning Officers.

### **Climate**

New energy performance audits are underway and partly completed at Langdale Hall, Burwell Hall, Town Hall, Reception Office and the Corn Exchange in Market Square.



Work on making these buildings more energy efficient has begun which includes, repairing windows at the Town Hall and heating system changes at Burwell Hall. The Council estate is also provided by a 100% green energy supplier.

The Council's Grounds Maintenance service will benefit from the introduction of electric vehicles into its fleet over the next five years and all new tools are procured as electric ones where possible.

The Council purchased a Thermal Imaging Camera which is managed by a local community group, for use by residents on request, to check their home insulation.

### **Biodiversity**

The Committee receives regular updates from the Park Ranger, who was appointed during this year to help spearhead the Council's biodiversity aspirations. Some of the biodiversity work carried out by the Council over the last year are listed below:

- Remedial work has been undertaken on a number of trees arounds the Country Park that were damaged in the winter storms.
- 12 trees have been planted across Witney, 5 of which are replacement trees. There are a further 2 trees to plant. Of the 16 trees planted in 2021, all have survived very well. 14 trees planted between 3-5 years ago are now established and have had stakes and watering bags removed.
- The wildflower beds at Oxlease and Burwell are showing good results but the beds at Eton Close have been resown.
- Autumn & winter bedding has been planted.
- Slow worm habitat works are taking place at the old Allotment site Park Road.
- Lake & Country Park - Work has continued on the bank stabilization.

The Committee wrote to WODC to advocate for swift bricks, along the lines of the Petition to Government to "Make swift bricks compulsory in new housing to help red-listed birds", after being addressed by a local activist.

### **Agenda Items in the Year April 2022-2023**

The committee responded to the following large Infrastructure and policy consultations:

- A40 access to Witney Shores Green - Planning Reference R3.0039/22.
- Consultation on Proposed Main Modifications to the Salt Cross Garden Village Area Action Plan.
- Developer contributions (Supplementary Planning Document) Consultation, West Oxfordshire District Council.
- Botley West Solar Farm - Public Consultation.

### **Witney-Specific Projects**

- The 20mph Working Party worked with Oxfordshire County Council to design Witney's speed limit changes.
- The Committee had input into Witney's Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP).
- The Committee responded to the consultation on Traffic Calming at The Leys.
- Several Street naming requests were considered.
- Notice of a Definitive Map Notice of landowner deposit was received in relation to land at Langel Common, and the footpath across it.

**Cllr Ruth Smith, Chair of Climate, Biodiversity & Planning Committee**

## **WITNEY ANNUAL TOWN MEETING 2023**

### **REPORT TO THE ANNUAL TOWN MEETING FROM CHAIR OF THE TOWN COUNCIL'S POLICY, GOVERNANCE & FINANCE COMMITTEE**

#### **CLLR JOY AITMAN**

Witney Town Council is a public-facing and publicly funded organisation designed to deliver grassroots services to our community in a meaningful and accountable way. Our Town Council is responsible for a large population that continues to grow annually. We take pride that we as a professional body, with aspirations, we have delivered workable projects within the constraints of our capacity, culture, and budget.

The Town Council has gone from strength to strength this year after implementing the organizational restructure that was begun in 2020. This has allowed us to work more efficiently and flexibly. Bringing the Grounds Maintenance contract in-house is a perfect example of this. We are lucky to work with amazing staff who have the same vision as the councillors and have patiently worked with us to deliver our goals. We are confident that this organizational structure will future proof the Town Council for many years to come, ensuring that residents have the council they deserve, and that the staff have the capacity and support they need.

#### **Policy**

The Committee oversees all policy decisions and recommends their approval to the Council.

The implementation of our Open Spaces Strategy is moving ahead with great enthusiasm. Our recently appointed Park Ranger has brought forward new projects particularly around our lake. The area has been developed to enhance its biodiversity and make it more accessible for all.

Our open spaces and parks are important places to be protected, cherished, and enhanced. They take great effort - and money - to maintain, but they give back so much to our community. Witney is lucky to have some wonderful open spaces.

Our cemeteries are being made more accessible and plans are well underway to provide areas for reflection.

Our well-used sports grounds are being enhanced and, working with West Oxfordshire District Council, we are increasing capacity and facilities. However, we realise that to encourage both physical and mental health, particularly in our young people, we need to keep up with our ever-increasing population.

Allotments are even more in demand, and we continue to provide them on our new housing estates.

The Leys, which has been at the heart of the town for generations, will be developed with stakeholders to provide more activities and enhanced spaces.

## **Governance & Finance**

The Policy, Governance and Finance Committee approves the Council's spending and ensures financial procedures are being followed. It regularly carries out the following:

- Approval of accounting and finance documents at each meeting.
- Overview of internal audit documents and reports which culminate in the signing and competing of Annual Governance & Accountability Return.
- Overseeing the spending of all the Council committees.
- Oversees budget setting and recommendation of Council tax precept setting annually.
- Awarding of the Council's annual, discretionary and youth services grants.

Grants this year have been awarded to organisations such as Rotary Club of Witney, Witney Town Band, Witney & District Twinning, Witney Museum & Historical Society, West Oxfordshire Citizen's Advice and Volunteer Link-Up.

The Council was also delighted to be able to increase our Youth Grants scheme to £40k of funding to provide greatly needed services for our young people. This was awarded to Got2B CIC, Home-Start, APCAM and Oxfordshire Music & Arts Trust.

Supporting the community, financial support has also been provided to West Oxfordshire Community Transport towards the running of the invaluable community bus and to events at that draw people together at the Leys. These include this summer's Witney Carnival, Witney Pride and Witney Music Festival. With the latter, the Council has entered into an agreement with to help ensure its continuation to help showcase youth talent and bring vitality and vibrancy to Witney.

The Committee also and has agreed spending on the repair & re-decoration of the Town Hall and Corn Exchange exteriors, the development of The Corn Exchange to provide a café/bar and professional theatre with retractable seating, professional lighting and sound, and cinema equipment. We were also able to provide a week of activities for The Queen's Platinum Jubilee, a very popular Advent Fair for children, and a subsidised theatre performance on The Leys in the summer.

We continue to recognise the strengths and weaknesses of our offer and will look at further opportunities for the future and how we can recognise the changing needs of the people of Witney and our neighbours.

We are also mindful of the financial challenges that delivering our aspirations and meeting the needs of the community brings and this gives us a direction of travel for future investment decisions. Crucial to our long-term efforts is the involvement of the local community and its various interest groups. Whilst there is already a good degree of public engagement in our services, there is always so much more that could be achieved with more interaction, and by building close working relationships between the Council and those that it represents. Working together, we can accomplish so much more.

**CLlr Joy Aitman, Chair of Policy, Governance & Finance Committee**

# **WITNEY ANNUAL TOWN MEETING 2023**

## **REPORT TO THE ANNUAL TOWN MEETING FROM CHAIR OF TOWN COUNCIL'S PARKS & RECREATION COMMITTEE**

### **CLLR VICKY GWATKIN**

This Committee has responsibility for all recreation grounds, parks, public open spaces and sports activities upon any ground under the control of the Town Council.

The Committee is overseeing a number of projects in Witney.

#### **Open Spaces Strategy (OSS)**

The OSS provides a framework for developing a number of projects and longer-term ambitions for a wide range of open spaces in the town. The committee remains committed to this strategy, as a means of transparently setting and prioritising objectives and allowing us to move forward with a clear sense of direction and purpose.

#### **Play Areas**

Work is continuing to improve existing play areas.

We have now put in place the formal rolling programme for the replacement and upgrade of existing play areas, to ensure a planned, budgeted, and consistent strategy going forward. This includes the addition of an inclusive piece of play equipment in each park.

Splash Pad repairs were carried out last year with further repairs due in Spring 2023. As part of ongoing management, repairs to existing equipment and bark replenishment have taken place through the year.

The Committee supported the Smoke Free Parks initiative to try and discourage park users from smoking in these valuable and well used community areas, signs will be installed in the coming months.

#### **Playing Pitches**

We have continued our focus on bringing unused pitches on-line as soon as possible to support our local sports teams. Over the last few months, we have gained some traction, working alongside West Oxfordshire District Council to discuss improvements to existing sites, and the development of new sites, including locating the new Astro-turf pitch.

Since the Town Council's grounds maintenance contract has been brought in house, we have been able to improve the maintenance regime and invest in new equipment.

Extensive annual maintenance has taken place - pitches have been linearly aerated and seeded and pitch goal mouths have been heavily sanded to help with surface drainage and impact damage.

A defibrillator is due to be installed at King George V playing field in the coming weeks. This will mean all playing pitches will have access to this life-saving piece of equipment, maintained by the town council.

Three swamp-variety trees have been planted at West Witney to establish if this could be a partial solution to the excess water around one of the pitches.

### **Sports Facilities**

Sports facilities, including playing pitches, remain heavily subsidised by Witney Town Council.

We have continued to work with consultants and local stakeholders to try and bring about much needed improvements to existing facilities, including large scale projects at West Witney and the Leys and informing plans for new facilities at Windrush Place. A pre planning application has been submitted for the skatepark to help inform this project.

At West Witney the tennis courts have been recoated and negotiations have commenced with the tennis club regarding a new lease which will provide them with increased control and enable them to better access funding.

The hugely successful Witney Parkrun has been granted a 4-year licence extension to run until March 2027.

We have undertaken bowls green renovation work at West Witney and the Leys, installed new ditch liners and new boarding.

At Burwell we are currently looking at improvements to existing changing facilities. The toilets are being refurbished and a new, energy efficient heating system will be installed.

### **The Lake & Country Park**

In addition to the work undertaken under the remit of the Climate, Biodiversity & Planning Committee to improve the site, the pathway around the lake is being widened and stabilised to assist users with limited mobility.

Overall signage is also being improved, new no-swimming signs have been installed and fencing is being upgraded along the Windrush River to aid the safety of users.

### **General Maintenance & Improvements**

The Hedge line dividing the fields at Burwell Recreation ground has had all dead wood removed. In spring they will be planted with whips and fenced to help it re-establish.

Five new trees have been planted at Quarry Road and a large diseased tree has been removed from Pensclose. Remedial work has also been undertaken on a tree damaged by storms on Woodgreen.

A memorial picnic bench has been installed at Oxlease.

### **Cllr Vicky Gwatkin, Chair of Parks & Recreation Committee**

# **WITNEY ANNUAL TOWN MEETING 2023**

## **REPORT TO THE ANNUAL TOWN MEETING FROM CHAIR OF THE TOWN COUNCIL'S HALLS, CEMETERIES AND ALLOTMENTS COMMITTEE CLLR MEL JONES**

This Committee has responsibility for all aspects relating to the public halls, cemeteries, and allotments under the control of the Town Council.

### **Public Halls**

#### **Corn Exchange**

The focus in the last year has been on delivering the Council's vision for the Corn Exchange, 'to create a modern, accessible, and affordable arts venue for Witney and its community, capable of facilitating both local and professional arts and performances.'

Through the efforts of the Corn Exchange Working Party, audio and lighting enhancements were introduced during the summer and retractable seating was installed in December. The works were funded by Witney Town Council, Section 106 Developer funding and a grant from West Oxfordshire District Council. In addition, several areas have been re-carpeted and projection equipment for film viewing has been installed. An Open Day was held at the end of February which showcased the refurbishment and the Gallery Room set as a wedding venue.

A programme of events is now being finalised with many bookings and enquiries already coming in. Aladdin by Buttercross Theatre Productions was a great success, as were the new Open Mic Nights and other music performances. We hope it will become a very well used and loved part of the community where it has been for 160 years this year. We look forward to welcoming local performing groups and artistes to the Hall in particular.

#### **Burwell Hall**

The Hall has not been forgotten and plans and budgets are in place which will see the introduction of an energy efficient heating system and upgrades to the toilets and sports team changing rooms in the next year.

#### **The Town Hall**

The sash windows have been repaired and are due to be painted later this year. Plans for the fascia and window vinyls at the accessible Town Hall reception on Market Square are underway. This window provides the opportunity to advise on Council services, Corn Exchange events and offers charities and local groups an area to advertise what they do.

The area around the Buttercross has been tidied and the natural Flag stones underneath the Town Hall have been repaired.

### **Cemeteries & Closed Churchyards**

The upkeep and enhancement of Tower Hill and Windrush Cemeteries continues to remain a key focus of this Committee's work.

- Re levelling work at Tower Hill cemetery has taken place to ensure the lawn areas look as good as possible.
- The trees have been assessed to ensure their future viability and safety.
- Memorial Stability testing has taken place at St Mary's & Holy Trinity Churchyards.
- A wisteria has been planted at the Windrush cemetery.
- A wildflower area has been created in conjunction with the rotary club of Witney at Tower Hill Cemetery.
- A review of cemetery regulations has been carried out to ensure the cemeteries are managed to best practice and are able to provide grave spaces for as long as possible.
- A wildflower area at St Mary's churchyard has been established which the Council cuts and collects throughout the year.

### **Allotments**

The Town Council owns the allotment sites at Lakeside, Hailey Road, Newland and at Windrush Place which are administered by the Witney Allotment Association.

Improvements have taken place in the last year to make sure the allotments are well maintained and run; these include the following:

- Hedging has been maintained around Lakeside allotments.
- A shed has been provided for equipment at Windrush Place.
- New vehicle and pedestrian gates at all allotments sites to improve security are imminent.

Accessible allotment plots/planting beds at Windrush Place allotments have been taken up by the Windrush Church of England Primary School and the ICE Centre.

### **Cllr Mel Jones, Chair of Halls, Cemeteries & Allotments Committee**

# **WITNEY ANNUAL TOWN MEETING 2023**

## **REPORT TO THE ANNUAL TOWN MEETING FROM CHAIR OF THE TOWN COUNCIL'S STRONGER COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE**

### **CLLR OWEN COLLINS**

This Committee has responsibility for improving the community environment in terms of street infrastructure, trees, floral displays, Christmas lights, working with voluntary groups, and arranging or facilitating events on Town Council premises.

The Committee has implemented and supported many projects in the last year. Rebranding of the town council has taken place to present a more modern and friendly organisation, community groups and organisations are also able to promote their causes in the town hall reception window on Market Square.

#### **Communications**

The Council has recently issued its annual newsletter which is being delivered to every household at the beginning of March. It explains how the Town Council part of council tax is spent and budgeted for in the new financial year. Three other newsletters are issued throughout the year electronically and a mailing list for these and other news is being re-configured.

The annual resident's satisfaction survey is included in the above publication and is also available electronically until the end of April. This is to help understand residents' thoughts on Town Council services and where they can be improved.

Both the Corn Exchange and Town Hall Reception have joined the Safer Places initiative administered by WODC. This supports vulnerable individuals in the community if they need to seek shelter or support when in the centre of Witney.

#### **Community & Civic Events**

The Town Council continues to support community events and welcomed back Witney Music Festival, Witney Carnival and Witney Pride to the Leys in the last year. There was also a theatre tent provided by Oxford Playhouse and the usual annual events such as Hatwell's Funfair and Witney Feast. Our annual events will be back once again this year, supported by the Council.

A Civic Reception will be held in March and Citizens of the Year will be awarded for their work 'above and beyond' in Witney during 2022.

Competitions were once again held to create the Council's civic Christmas card (now virtual), Mayor's Carol Service cover and a Christmas light, this year a reindeer, which was installed on the Town Hall as part of the Christmas Lights display.

The Council contributed towards a commemorative blue plaque for Alice Batt (Batt House, High Street) which was unveiled in October 2022. Alice was an important figure, celebrating the heritage of our town.

The free Children's Advent Fayre held in Corn Exchange at the end of November was very successful, with approximately 300 children in attendance.



The Council also hosted two 'Jo Cox Winter Get Together' events, in January and February. Free hot drinks, soup and rolls were provided along with several activities and a warm space to gather and chat with others.

### **Youth Services Grant Funding**

The Council set aside a budget for enhancing youth service provision in Witney. In 2022 increased funds totalling £40,000 were shared between Got2B CIC, who deliver youth outreach sessions in Witney, Home-Start who provide services for very young children and their parents, Oxfordshire Music & Arts Trust who hold music sessions and APCAM who provide mental health services for young people and their families who are in mental health crisis.

### **Britain In Bloom with the RHS**

This year the Town Council entered the Tiny Forest area and Tower Hill Cemetery in the Royal Horticultural Society and Thames & Chilterns In Bloom competition. The Tiny Forest returned a Silver Award and Tower Hill was awarded Silver-Gilt (missing gold by just 3 points). Tower Hill showed the added benefit of community engagement by showcasing a bed planted in conjunction with the Our Lady of Lourdes School and wooden nature habitats provided by The Witney Shed organisation.

In addition to the annual community gardening across the town, the Schools In Bloom competition also proved popular, themed for the Platinum Jubilee last summer. Partaking schools were provided with a wheelbarrow, compost and vouchers and created an array of red, white and blue barrows (there was even a corgi) for judging. Three prizes were awarded including the People's Choice award with the votes being cast on Witney Carnival day. Also, a guest barrow was created by adult support charity Guideposts.

### **Queen's Platinum Jubilee & King Charles III Coronation**

A programme of events took place across Witney for Her Late Majesty's Platinum Jubilee. A beacon was lit at the Leys and various free displays and performances for all ages took place across the bank holiday weekend. As part of this, a competition across Witney's schools to design a congratulations card to Queen Elizabeth took place, the card being signed by the Mayor on behalf of the town and sent to Buckingham Palace. Witney care homes were invited to create a design which was printed to canvas as a legacy project.

The Coronation of King Charles III will take place at the beginning of May and plans for further free events are well underway in line with the requests from His Majesty.

### **Street Furniture & Infrastructure**

A Community Infrastructure Review has taken place in the last year to help prioritise and manage future repairs, replacements and cleaning of street furniture the Council is responsible for. A 'Happy to Chat' Bench has been designated on the corner of Welch Way and the High Street to help combat loneliness and a Covid-19 Memorial area at the Leys is due to be completed shortly to remember those who lost their lives to Covid and to thank local heroes who went above and beyond in our community during the pandemic.

### **Cllr Owen Collins, Chair of Stronger Communities Committee**