

WITNEY ANNUAL TOWN MEETING

Held on Wednesday, 20 March 2024

At 7.31 pm in the Main Hall, The Corn Exchange, Witney

Present:

Councillor O Collins (Chair)

Councillors:	T Ashby D Enright R Smith A Bailey R Crouch G Doughty	J Doughty D Edwards-Hughes J Robertshaw S Simpson G Meadows
Officers:	Derek Mackenzie Adam Clapton Mark Lewis Nigel Warner Sharon Groth Polly Inness	Senior Administrative Officer & Committee Clerk Deputy Town Clerk Head of Estates & Operations Responsible Financial Officer Town Clerk Communications & Community Engagement Officer
Others:	74 members of the public. Councillor Michael Brooker, West Oxfordshire District Council Councillor Andrew Coles, Oxfordshire County Council Councillor Andrew Lyon, West Oxfordshire District Council Inspector Chris Ball, Thames Valley Police	

1 INTRODUCTIONS AND WELCOME FROM THE MAYOR OF WITNEY, CLLR OWEN COLLINS

The Town Mayor, Cllr Owen Collins welcomed the public to the meeting which was the best attended that he was aware of. He introduced himself, Councillors and officers of the Town Council, along with the representative from Thames Valley Police.

2 OFFICIAL NOTING OF THE TOWN COUNCILLOR APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Witney Town Councillors J Treloar, J Aitman, D Newcombe and L Cherry.

3 TO RECEIVE AND APPROVE THE MINUTES OF THE ANNUAL TOWN MEETING OF 15 MARCH 2023

The minutes of the Annual Town Meeting held on 15 March 2023, copies of which were available at the meeting, were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

4 **THAMES VALLEY POLICE**

The meeting received a verbal update from Inspector Chris Ball of Thames Valley Police with a general update on policing.

Over the previous six months he reported there had been 91 incidents of Criminal damage, 150 assault reports along with a similar level of shoplifting incidents. However, he was concerned that crimes were not being reported and explained how the lack of reporting leads to the resources allocated to his team being reduced.

He continued by reporting that his team had recently disbanded a county lines organisation which resulted in two individuals being sent to prison with a further two on bail.

Incidents of Anti-Social Behaviour remained low in his opinion at 106 incidents, again due potentially to non-reporting by residents and retail outlets. Hot spots had been identified on newer housing estates and TVP were working with developers and schools to combat this.

TVP would also be working with detached youth workers and would run sessions at the All-Terrain Pitch on Gordons Way over the summer period to engage with young people.

He was thankful to the support provided by the Town Council towards the new “Through their eyes” initiative that was due to be launched in the Corn Exchange on 26 March 2024. Hopefully, if successful this would be rolled out across the country.

Inspector Ball opened the floor to questions.

A resident asked for further clarification on the assaults figure provided; the Inspector confirmed this included all domestic assaults and that the majority of the figure was made up from incidents involving Licenced Premises. As a result of these assaults a force review was taking place with the potential for a 50% increase of officers on Friday & Saturday nights.

It was raised that there was a difficulty in reporting incidents to TVP due to the lack of a walk-in facility at Witney police station. Inspector Ball acknowledged this and understood the issue however, advised the yellow phone situated at the police station was able to be used to get hold of the Witney Team as well as Inspector Ball himself. Options for reporting online were also being explored.

Councillor J Doughty raised an issue with ASB on Downs Road due to speeding of motor vehicles, Inspector Ball advised that speeding was an issue however, it was data led and one of the ways individuals could assist was to participate in the Speedwatch scheme as the results of these checks were followed up by TVP where necessary.

Cllr Andrew Coles of Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) who was the Chair of the Witney Traffic Advisory Committee explained that Witney did have a Speedwatch scheme in place and that anyone interested in joining could contact the Town Council for further details.

Cllr Coles (OCC) asked for details of when the crackdown of electric scooters would start. Inspector Ball advised that this was already happening and that sixteen Section 59 seizure notices had been issued by the Witney Team.

Questions were raised about cycling in and around the areas at the back of Henry Box School, St Marys Church, and Corn Street. Residents were concerned about the use of cycles on pavements

and through the churchyard. Inspector Ball advised that TVP did work with schools and PCSO's attended assemblies to educate students. In respect St Marys this was down to a lack of compliance from cyclists however, clearer signage would be one option to explore. A resident advised of a problem with resident parking in Corn Street and that the white cycle lines were not being used or adhered to.

Inspector Ball responded to a question regarding police being on the front line of a mental health crisis and agreed resourcing for such issues was an issue nationally.

Lastly a resident asked about the use of Witney police station since it closed; the Inspector advised of the various different teams of officers that used the station as a base and assured everyone present that it was not under occupied.

5 **TO RECEIVE REPORTS FROM EACH OF THE TOWN COUNCIL'S STANDING COMMITTEES AND THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL**

The Chair summarised his past year as Mayor which had led to him attend a huge number of events; though he had lived in witney all of his life, he was always impressed with the amount that goes on in the community and the efforts of those who contributed to it.

The Chairs of the town council's committees were then invited to give brief updates on their Committees' responsibilities and an overview of what they had been working on during the past twelve months.

Cllr Crouch began as Deputy Chair of the Policy, Governance & Finance Committee, followed by, Cllrs Bailey, Smith, Crouch and Meadows who introduced the reports of the Climate, Biodiversity & Planning Committee, Parks & Recreation Committee, and Halls, Cemeteries & Allotments Committee and Stronger Communities Committee respectively.

Next, a report from the Leader of the Council, Cllr R Smith was received. She also thanked officers and staff of the Council for their efforts over the past year.

Finally, the Mayor thanked all the Members of the Committees for their support over the past year.

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. All were asked to provide their name and home road name before asking their questions.

Q1. In respect of the recently submitted North Witney Development planning application how do Witney Town Council deal with the lengthy technical documentation that is submitted as part of the application, such as the flooding analysis reports?

Cllr A Bailey, as Chair of the Council's Climate, Biodiversity & Planning Committee, advised that along with Cllr R Smith they represented the Town Council along with representatives from other neighbouring parishes, on the Witney Infrastructure Neighbourhood Group (WING) who were working collaboratively to seek the best outcome for residents on the North Witney Development in respect of the impact not only on flood risk, but on all aspects of the development that may affect current and future residents.

He encouraged residents to submit their comments to the planning authority (West Oxfordshire District Council - WODC).

The Mayor then read three questions out which had been submitted by residents ahead of the meeting.

Q2. Regarding the proposed housing development between Woodstock Road and Hailey Road. Witney is already struggling from a lack of full and proper provision of services and facilities. Now I read that the developer consortium of this proposed estate will not be required to build the West End Relief Road as previously agreed. Considering this development is forecasting 1250 new homes, this would strike most logical people as being a very poor deal for the existing residents of Witney. I request that a full public consultation be conducted in relation to the West End Link Road being a non-negotiable requirement of this development if planning permission is granted.

Cllr R Smith responded and explained that she was aware of the Witney Gazette article that had recently been published in which it was reported the developers had removed details of the link road from their proposal. Witney Town Council would meet to discuss the application soon however, it was important to note that the development fell in the parish of Hailey and that the parish councils were only a consultee in the planning process, the overall decision would be made by WODC.

In respect of flooding risk, she explained that the engineers engaged by the developers had said they would deal with the flooding risks, and though she was sceptical of their comments to date, it would be something the Town Council would represent the views of residents on as well as reviewing the opinion of the other technical consultees.

Cllr Smith also clarified that Oxfordshire County Council had not yet made a final decision on the link road and they may well demand the building of it. She also expected that there would be further public consultation as the planning proposal progressed.

A resident asked if consideration had been given to building the link road to the top of Deer Park Road rather than the proposed Woodford Way. Cllr D Enright responded in his capacity as a County Councillor and explained that many options for the link road had been considered and presented however, the link to Woodford Way was favoured as it provided the most direct route.

Cllr Enright finished by encouraging, as Cllrs Smith & Bailey had, for all present to submit their comments to WODC as the planning authority and that they should contact Town, District & Country councillors if they had any further questions as the plans advanced. This was also something which was reiterated later in the meeting by Cllr M Brooker (WODC) as chair of the Lowlands Planning Committee, he emphasised the importance of residents submitting their views as these were all read by the planning officers when considering the application.

Q3. Why are many thousands of pounds spent on plant bunkers, flower beds, white imitation gates on the roads into the town and other numerous unnecessary projects?

The Mayor responded to explain that the Town Council carried out the work of planting across the town as an act of Civic Pride, in his opinion the town looked better for a “splash of colour” and believed that the council team did an excellent job with the land they manage this included the areas of wildflower planting such as the roundabout at Welch Way as these provide pollinating and bee friendly areas.

Q4. In Corn Street between the traffic calming humps by Sue Ryder shop and Marlborough Lane in the day, but especially at night vehicles parked cause problems for traffic. Buses are affected worse than small cars. There should be double yellow lines on both sides of the road and if there are already lines they need repainting.

Inspector Ball from Thames Valley Police responded to say that yellow lines were in place however parking enforcement was managed by OCC; He would raise the issues in Corn Street when he next met with them.

Q5. Are shops allowed to ban school children from entering their premises whilst in school uniform or resist them to only entering in individually or maximum of two at a time? With the lack of facilities after school this does not seem fair.

Inspector Ball confirmed that shop owners were allowed to restrict access in order to protect their livelihoods, they were not breaking any law by doing so. He sympathised as the majority of children in groups were simply gathering to have a chat and were not always responsible for causing issues; it was the incorrect perception of others that lead to this feeling.

The Mayor explained the action taken by the Town Council to support youth services in the town such as the new detached youth programme it has financed, and the refurbished wheeled sports park which would be opening at the end of that week. He finished by thanking the resident for their question and challenging those present not to stigmatise or judge “young people for being young people” and to make them feel welcome as part of the community.

Q6. If No Mow May regime is due to be followed again this year is there the possibility of improvements as last year Welch Way for left for some time, could more be done to present these areas better, perhaps with more wildflower planting?

Cllr D Enright, responded by saying that as a Member of the Town, District and County Councils he accepted that getting all three and private owners of grassed areas to work together was a struggle however, he believed this was closer than ever before. The Town Council did a great job of the areas it was responsible for however, if it were to take on more areas under its remit this would require it being financed from the other stakeholders.

He reported that OCC had agreed to cut the verges twice this year and would ask that all Councils focus on ensuring that long grass at junctions and footpaths were well maintained.

Lastly, he praised the residents that had taken action to improve the area around their own properties whether that was by litter picking, gutter clearance or maintenance of small areas, though he acknowledged this should not be expected of them as it remains the responsibility of the various Councils.

A resident asked later in the meeting that thought be given to reduce the heaps of grass that were left following the cutting of areas that had been left to grow longer, perhaps using machinery that can mulch the grass as it cuts. The Mayor advised these points would be passed on.

Q7. What does the Town Council do with the flowers that it removes from the planted beds around the Town?

The Mayor advised that these were offered to individuals and groups for them to replant, usually by notice on social media if in an acceptable condition. Should any residents wish to receive any they were welcome.

Q8. Following the theme of the umbrella at Marriotts Walk last year what is planned for this year?

Cllr Enright advised umbrellas would be the theme again this year, however they would be in a different pattern and would be treated to ensure they did not fade over the summer months.

Q9. When will the work at West Witney Sports & Social Club commence? What is the cost of the works?

Cllr Smith advised that, at the request of the Club, work would commence in the Autumn of 2024, subject to financing being agreed. The expected cost was £600- 800k which would be financed by either a community ownership grant, the same as received for the redevelopment of The Leys, or by the Council taking on a public works loan, or a mixture of both. The Council had budgeted for the loan so this option would not delay the project.

She also confirmed that the expediated work at The Leys had resulted in the relocation of the Works Depot to the West Witney area and officers would continue to search for a permanent location. This had however resulted in additional unforeseen costs to these two large scale projects.

Q10. Witney is proud to be a Fairtrade town and an event is planned to mark the 30-year anniversary in September. Would the Town Council be happy to provide support?

The Mayor agreed the Council would be delighted to provide support to the organisers and welcomed them to get in contact with Officers to discussed what the council could do. It was also noted that Witney was registered as the 1,000th Fairtrade town.

Q11. Please can you update on the Shores Green development?

Cllr Enright was able to update that the delay had been due to an enquiry held by the Planning Inspectorate following objections being registered by the owners of the land that the new road junction would be built on. The landowners did not attend the enquiry and therefore a decision was swiftly made to proceed with the project. He hoped that work would commence in 2024 with completion in 2025.

Q12. Many of the paths are overgrown and make cycling difficult, what can be done?

The Mayor asked that these be reported to the Council so action could be taken; this was not limited to paths, but any areas that would benefit from tiding up, new grit bins etc. The responsible council could then be chased up to action if it is an area that the Town Council did not control.

In response Cllr Andrew Coles (OCC) thanked the Town Council for carrying out works that it did not have to do, such as the support provided to Riverside Gardens who appreciated the help with flood prevention by way of filling and arranging sandbags to protect their properties.

Q13. What is the Town Council doing to use its powers to find additional allotment sites to meet the demand, as the current waiting list sits at around 200? And what is done to encourage social use of the allotments by the community collectively and by those with additional needs?

Cllr Smith explained that new allotment sites were a result of new developments however, accepted that both the Town and District Councils could look at exploring the options outside of these developments.

Cllr R Crouch advised the most recent addition to the Council's allotments portfolio at the Windrush Estate has raised beds for use by those with reduced mobility, as well as having an area that was utilised by the school and acknowledged the importance to support their use.

7 TOWN MAYOR'S CLOSING REMARKS AND THANKS

The Mayor thanked the public for attending the meeting and reminded them they are welcome to approach Councillors at any time including at the Councillors in the café events which were held each month in the Corn Exchange.

He finished by inviting attendees to stay should they wish for the opportunity to speak to Councillors informally and thanking everyone for continuing to do what they could to make Witney a welcoming and dynamic place to live and visit.

The meeting closed at: 9.06 pm

Chair