

Public Document Pack
NOTICE OF

WITNEY ANNUAL TOWN MEETING

Wednesday, 20th March, 2024

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 Owen Collins**
2. **Official Noting of the Town Councillor apologies for Absence**
3. **To receive and approve the minutes of the Annual Town Meeting of 15 March 2023**
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 and Leader of the Council**
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 Owen Collins
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.

Public Document Pack Agenda Item 3

WITNEY ANNUAL TOWN MEETING

Held on Wednesday, 15 March 2023

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

Present:

L Duncan (Chair)

Councillors:	J Aitman	A D Harvey
	T Ashby	A Prosser
	O Collins	R Smith
	D Enright	P Hiles
	V Gwatkin	D Thomas
Officers:	Adam Clapton	Deputy Town Clerk
	Sharon Groth	Town Clerk
	Polly Inness	Communications & Community Engagement Officer
	Derek Mackenzie	Senior Administrative Officer & Committee Clerk
	Tomas Smith	Venue & Events Officer
	Nigel Warner	Responsible Financial Officer
	Angus Whitburn	Operations Manager
	Carl Whitehead	Park Ranger
Others:	41 members of the public.	

1 **INTRODUCTIONS AND WELCOME FROM THE MAYOR OF WITNEY, CLLR LIZ DUNCAN**

The Town Mayor, Cllr Liz Duncan welcomed the public to the meeting and introduced herself and officers of the Town Council. She advised that a representative of Thames Valley Police was expected to attend.

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

Apologies for absence were received from Witney Town Councillors L Ashbourne, M Jones, and H Eaglestone.

3 **TO RECEIVE AND APPROVE THE MINUTES OF THE ANNUAL TOWN MEETING OF 25 APRIL 2022**

The minutes of the Annual Town Meeting held on 25 April 2022, copies of which were available at the meeting, were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

4 **THAMES VALLEY POLICE**

A representative from Thames Valley Police was invited to attend the meeting, however no representation was made. The Mayor asked residents that if they had any questions the Town Council would pass them on to the police for an answer.

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

The Mayor gave an update on her year as Mayor which included attending over 100 events representing the town council on behalf of residents. She had thoroughly enjoyed meeting so many residents of the town and she thanked all those in attendance.

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 Aitman began as Deputy Leader of the Council and Chair of the Policy, Governance & Finance Committee, followed by, Cllrs Smith, Gwatkin, and Collins who introduced themselves as Chairs of the Climate, Biodiversity & Planning Committee, Parks & Recreation Committee, and Stronger Communities Committee respectively.

Deputy Mayor Cllr Collins thanked officers and staff of the Council for their efforts over the past year. He also thanked all the individuals who provide support services to the town and its residents for making Witney such a supportive community to live in.

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, beginning with the first four which had been submitted to the Town Clerk ahead of the meeting.

Q1. Urban Meadow and Verge Guidelines. Will the Town Council be following these guidelines within Witney Town? Will the mower operators be given appropriate instructions and monitored?

Cllr R Smith responded and explained that not all areas in Witney were owned by WTC. All Councils had plans to increase biodiversity, however some of these schemes had not been successful and the town council was no exception; it had tried multiple ground maintenance methods with varied success.

The Town Council does however maintain a wildflower meadow in Windrush cemetery and will add wildflower seed to Tower Hill & Curbridge Road roundabouts this year. If any of these swards successfully flower the cuttings can be collected and distributed over areas to promote species diversity using our "Grillo" grass cutting machine. Some schemes, such as the reduction of cutting in Quarry Road have not been welcomed by residents.

In October 2022 the town council's grounds maintenance was brought in house so it now had qualified operators who were able to act more quicker and carry out action where required.

Q2. Does Witney Town Council monitor the potholes in the town? Who informs Oxfordshire County Council about the potholes that need repair? And How is it that a hole, like one outside the Windrush Pub, can have a white mark around it and be filled, while holes immediately before and after it are ignored?

Cllr D Enright (OCC) advised the County Council highways crew actioned repairs on receiving a report and were tasked to inspect the area for other potholes, however they were unable to relay whole section of road. He explained March was the worst time of year for potholes following the cold, wetter, winter months and repairs could not take place during that time. Money had been borrowed and more had been fixed this year than ever before; a trial of pothole 'Superusers' was ongoing to expediate reports.

He encouraged residents to report potholes via the Fix My Street online service. It was a nationwide scheme for reporting all manner of problems that residents encounter and reports in Oxfordshire would be sent to the relevant authority to deal with.

Q3. Do Witney Town Council and the residents of Witney have a say in the speed restrictions, the implementation and review of them?

I ask this because of what I see as inconsistencies in how they have been imposed across parts of Oxfordshire I have visited. I compare Woodstock Road in a busy built-up part of Oxford, where the speed limit is 30 compared with 20 on the Burford Road which could easily be 30 and then 40. I look at the speed limits in Charlbury and compare them to Witney.

Cllr D Enright (OCC) again replied confirming that most councils were moving to 20mph which would become the norm. In response to inconsistency, he added that some of the bus routes into Oxford were still 30mph at the request of Bus Providers in order that they could still provide the required service. There were a number of things to be considered in changes which included; wideness of the roads, proximity to schools and pet mortality. Regarding the 20mph in Puck Lane raised by a resident, Cllr Enright advised that this was the lowest legal limit that could be applied.

It was advised that the town council were contacted by the County Council to become a 20mph trial area which allowed councillors to highlight the roads to be included in the scheme and the town council supported the reduction. It also hosted the Witney Traffic Advisory Group where all subjects that involve travel and transport were discussed.

Cllr Enright continued by advising that road safety appeared to be improving, and the town council had received positive feedback, including correspondence from the Headmaster of Wood Green School supporting its introduction and stating that children felt more safe travelling to School.

Cllr R Smith advised that it was Thames Valley Police who were responsible for the speed cameras and enforcement of the 20mph limit, however it also relied on everyone being socially responsible for their speed.

There were representations on the scheme for and against and non-adherence, particularly in Corn Street

Q4. I cross the Windrush on my way to work and have noticed that since the national outcry over the polluted state of many of the nation's rivers, including the Windrush, it has lost its opaque grey appearance. I can only assume that that is because the sewage company upstream is no longer releasing effluent into it. As the Windrush river passes through the council's boundaries I assume that you have an active interest in the river's condition. I would like to know what you are doing to ensure that the water companies that have been causing the pollution are kept to account?

This question was raised ahead of the meeting and the resident was not in attendance. The Mayor advised that everyone was rightly concerned about this issue and the Council did keep abreast of situations as much as it could. The town was fortunate to have the group Windrush Against Sewage Pollution (WASP) who kept everyone informed.

Q5. What are the changes to on street parking enforcement?

Cllr D Enright (OCC) responded and advised the County Council would take over the on-street parking enforcement from 1 April 2023; the District Council would retain the enforcement in its car parks. As the authority responsible for all the highways in the county, information was collected on traffic flows so if the flow was restricted in an area due to parking issues, they would be better places to focus enforcement on that area.

Q6. Where are residents of Corn Street to park? Will there be resident parking permits and charges?

Cllr D Enright (OCC) agreed to look into this and report back to the resident. He was not aware of any charges and the only area with permits was West End as part of a historical arrangement.

Cllr D Harvey added that he hoped that the transfer of enforcement changes and change of staffing would not mean a loss of the community aspect the District Council community wardens brought to their role.

Q7. Who is responsible for the lifts at Marriotts Shopping Centre?

Cllr D Enright (WODC) advised that following the ownership changes at the shopping Centre he would investigate the continual breakdown of lifts with the necessary officers at the District Council.

Q8. Does the council have a digital strategy to engage with young people in order to engage with them?

Cllr Joy Aitman (WODC) responded to inform the District Council had recently completed a survey of schools to gather information on forming a strategy to reach younger people, as a former teacher, she was aware of the issues faced.

It was advised that the Witney Town youth council was wound down over the Covid period. Cllr Aitman explained she was also aware of the relationship between youngsters' mental health and sport and was working along with her fellow councillors across authorities to improve and inform the sports strategy.

Q9. Could we have an update on the Flood Warden initiative?

Cllr L Duncan advised the details of the County Council pilot scheme had been advertised and asked that any interested parties contact the town council so their details could be forwarded.

Q10. Are there any plans for the West Witney Sports Ground, such as a commercial aspect to generate income for the council?

Cllr V Gwatkin advised there were plans for the facility, but it was a difficult site with many stakeholders and varying restrictions. The town council supported Witney Parkrun, tennis and football teams, and West Witney Sports & Social Club. It was working with these clubs to grant leases so that they can access grant funding and the Council's aims could be found in the adopted Open Spaces strategy on the Council's Website.

Cllr J Aitman (WODC) advised there was a playing pitch strategy which covered west Oxfordshire. There was a huge shortage in pitches, and this was trying to re-address the balance.

Q11. What does it take to get the Witney Gazette to attend?

Cllr O Collins understood the frustration of residents about the Witney Gazette not covering Witney news and confirmed the town council did send press releases to them. There was little else the Council could do to encourage attendance.

Q12. In response to the above question, an attendee referred to problems in advertising amateur dramatics events, which were exacerbated by the difficulty in advertising on the town hall noticeboard?

Cllr O Collins apologised but assured the town council supported all events across the town and would investigate the problems with advertising third party events.

Q13. What plans do the council have for the Coronation of King Charles III?

Cllr O Collins responded the town council did indeed have plans, party in the park, volunteer day, children's activities and a community bunting-making challenge. Further details would be advertised in the coming weeks.

Q14. What are the Plans for opening the High Street?

Cllr D Enright (OCC) advised that nearly £2m had been allocated to improve the access for all, and the County Council had engaged with the Witney Chamber of Commerce and Traffic Advisory Group. After May there would be an in-person event/exhibition and associated stakeholder meetings to assist in the planning of a brand-new scheme.

It was advised the District Council were hoping to hold an event on the High Street in the Autumn for food and drink event.

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.

She also requested that any residents with questions for Thames Valley Police should leave these along with contact details and they would be passed on.

The meeting closed at: 9.03 pm

Chair

WITNEY ANNUAL TOWN MEETING 2024

REPORT TO THE ANNUAL TOWN MEETING FROM THE MAYOR

Cllr Owen Collins

I have been privileged to serve as Mayor of my hometown for the 2023-24 Council year, and even though I have grown up, and lived the majority of my life, in Witney, one of the most exciting aspects of the past year has been the opportunity to meet people and organisations, and see great swathes of brilliant work, that I would otherwise never have crossed paths with.

This includes some of our fantastic local businesses, such as Moshon Data, a provider of Automated Driver Assistance Systems, which celebrated its 10th anniversary in 2023 and which has been genuinely leading the world in their market, all from a warehouse on Station Lane; Cloudkubed, experts in the digital transformation industry, who will officially open its brand new premises later this month; or The Crafty Pint, the latest terrific addition to Witney's magnificent pantheon of pubs.

When taking up the chain, I said that I wanted to represent Witney in its entirety, regardless of age, faith, ethnicity, ability, gender identity, or political persuasion. I hope that this commitment has been felt across the town, and looking back over the year it certainly feels like I have been lucky enough to meet members of our community from across every spectrum.

I was delighted to pay several visits to various facilities that support the more senior people of our town, from Millers Grange care home to Witney Community Support Service, which also does such wonderful work supporting those with dementia, and disabilities both learning and physical. Through these visits I have also got to know not just the staff and service users, but also many members of Witney's excellent Rotary Club, who have supported this, and many other great causes, across our town. A superb example of a service which supports our community, and receives support *from* the community in return.

At the other end of the age range, I've greatly enjoyed meeting children from many of our local primary schools, fielding some of the trickiest questions any councillor will ever face ("what happens if people don't like you – can they get rid of you?" being a particularly memorable one) and talking to the sixth form students at Henry Box on the vital importance of engaging in voting from the earliest opportunity, especially in this election year. At Christmas, I was also thrilled to attend the Wood Green School Christmas concert, and get a window into the jaw-dropping talent that the young people of Witney hold.

Suitably, for a town of blanket making heritage, Witney in 2024 is a beautifully woven mix of many different creeds and cultures. In July, I attended a joyful celebration of Eid organised by local resident Abdul Mubin on Springfield Oval, and was deeply moved to see the whole

neighbourhood come together to mark this holy day together – many, I am sure, for the first time. I was privileged to join members of Witney Congregational Church for the induction of their new minister, Reverend Brian Doyle, and of course I have greatly enjoyed working closely with Reverend Toby Wright, on such truly special events as the celebration of the 75th anniversary of the NHS in July, the Civic and Golden Gallopers services in September, the town's Remembrance Sunday commemorations in November, and the annual Mayor's carol service at Christmas. These events are made even more precious to me in hindsight, with the knowledge they were Toby's last as Rector of Witney. I'm sure I speak for all of us when I wish Toby, Sally and their family the very best of luck on their move to the beautiful city of Wells – Witney will miss them terribly.

Returning to the theme of annual events, I've had a ball sharing in so many of the wonderful events that make our town unique, such as helping to open Witney Pride, alongside the Deputy Mayor Cllr Georgia Meadows, and the Chair of WODC Cllr Andrew Coles; cutting the ribbon to officially open Witney in Pink, the now-legendary day of colour and fundraising organised by Jeanne Chattoe, and shaking buckets all day with our inimitable town crier Jean; and dancing through the sun and the rain throughout the glorious spectacle of Witney Music Festival, a jewel in Witney's crown that I am so proud that we partner, as the Town Council. To see the streets of Witney full and buzzing over that June weekend was an absolute joy, and to see people of all ages, from across our town and beyond, coming together in a celebration of music and culture.

That distinct cultural combination has continued indoors throughout the year, and I've greatly enjoyed exhibitions from Buttercross Quilters and Witney Photo Group, as well as plays and pantomimes from Witney Dramatic Society and Buttercross Theatre Productions, including catching the eye of the voluptuous Dame Edna Bucket...!

As Mayor, one (eventually) becomes used to being the focal point that comes with being First Citizen, but the obvious reality is that none of the above would've been possible without so many hundreds of people, from those true community champions that have organised so many exceptional events throughout the year, to the indefatigable team of officers at the Town Hall and Corn Exchange that have spent another year working tirelessly for the people of Witney. I would also like to thank my predecessor, Liz Duncan, for always being on hand with advice and wisdom, my Deputy, Georgia, for filling in for me at the drop of a hat on many an occasion, and my fellow Councillors, for their support throughout the year. Most of all, I would like to finish by thanking the people of Witney for their kindness, welcome and support throughout the year, for never failing to make me smile, inspire me, or take me by surprise, in the town I am prouder to call home than ever before.

WITNEY ANNUAL TOWN MEETING 2024

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

Cllr Joy Aitman

Committee Overview

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

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 continues to grow from strength to strength since implementing the organizational restructure that was begun in 2020. In the last year it has employed wonderful new staff, to expand on the work already undertaken, who have brought new skill sets to the team and enabled it to be even more ambitious.

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 our 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 implementation of our Open Spaces Strategy continues to move ahead with great enthusiasm. The Council's Biodiversity & Green Spaces Officer has brought forward new projects particularly around the 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. The Council's cemeteries are being made more accessible and plans are well underway to provide areas for reflection.

The Council's 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, is being developed with stakeholders to provide more activities and enhanced spaces.

Governance & Finance

Grants this year have been awarded to organisations such as Witney Town Band, Buttercross Scouts, Witney Day Centre, Broadhill Playgroup, Oxfordshire Mind and Oxfordshire Play Association.

The Council was also delighted to be able to fund a youth scheme, launching soon, to provide greatly needed services for our young people (covered in the Stronger Communities report). 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.

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 venue for weddings, professional theatre, music and comedy events, with retractable seating, professional lighting and sound. The cinema has proved extremely popular during school holidays.

We were also able to provide activities for The King's Coronation, a very popular Advent Fayre 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, such as the major projects already mentioned, not just by prudent fiscal planning but by applying for grants and using developer funding where available.

The Council is 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 2024

REPORT TO THE ANNUAL TOWN MEETING FROM THE CHAIR OF THE TOWN COUNCIL'S CLIMATE, BIODIVERSITY & PLANNING COMMITTEE

Cllr Andy Bailey

Committee overview

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

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.

Planning

The Council's planning responses are made to represent Witney's best interests. There is a major focus on flood prevention, sewerage, and ensuring that air quality and pollution levels in Witney are properly managed. When considering development applications, the Committee seeks to secure improvement that benefits the whole of Witney. These have included construction of sport facilities, new parks and playing fields, improvements to roads to help with congestion, new shops, and community centres.

In the last year (1 April 2023 to 31 January 2024) the committee reviewed:

- 151 planning applications
- 11 licensing applications
- 4 planning appeals
- 1 Parking Regulation Order
- 2 Street Naming Consultations
- 1 Street Trading Consent

West Oxfordshire District Council is the Planning Authority which makes the final decisions on applications and approximately 91% of the Town Council responses are endorsed by the District Council at the decision stage. This is an increase of 30% from last year. This is due to the excellent help of town council officers supporting the team, the Deputy Chair, Cllr Meadows and the rest of the Councillors who form the Committee.

In the last year, the Council has been consulted on the future of the West Oxfordshire Local Plan up to 2041 and provided comments on draft local objectives and potential sites which should be included. It encouraged a holistic approach to the plan, which would provide greater connectivity and stronger policies developers should adhere to in relation to delivering infrastructure.

Climate and Biodiversity

This is a particular passion of the Chair, and the topic has seen increased engagement from members of the public. The regular dumping of sewage in the river Windrush by Thames Water, and the amount of congestion, which is causing poor air quality, affects everyone in Witney. Although, not directly responsible for solving these issues, Members and officers continue to meet with counterparts in other Authorities to help bring about positive change.

Flooding is also a major issue, and the Committee is proud that flood mitigation efforts on council land have been carried out to meet its riparian ownership obligations and additional improvements to watercourses to help lessen the impact of flooding events are underway. In response to all planning applications, the Committee also evaluates the flood risk due to the loss of permeable drainage.

There is still much more work to be done in these areas and the town council continues to lobby other stakeholders, most recently the Environment Agency and Government Ministers, on committing to a long-term plan to flood mitigation works.

Due to the Climate Emergency the proposed Botley West Solar Farm has been a priority for this committee and a key issue for many in Witney. If Botley West is approved by the Secretary of State following the phase two consultation, Members have sought to get the best outcome for Witney. This includes a permanent reduction on energy bills for people affected by the development, improvement to roads, and increases in biodiversity.

Over the last year the committee has worked to improve the green spaces in Witney – particularly in Witney Lake and Country Park where a dedicated Management Plan has been created and adopted. The committee has also approved measures to improve the biodiversity and access to nature while officers continue to work towards nature recovery.

The Committee receives regular updates from its experienced Biodiversity & Green Spaces Officer who was appointed two years ago. His expertise has helped strengthen the team and provide expert knowledge for members of the committee.

Over the last year some of the projects the committee and officers have worked on are:

- Improvements to Witney Lake & Country Park. This has included:
 - improving disabled access,
 - increasing safety measures,
 - the creation of a new footpaths around the lake,
 - the improvement of fishing at Witney Lake,
 - Renewed support for Forest School Training
 - Supported the establishment of Nature First, a project enabling children to experience nature, and provided funding to allow places for those struggling with the cost-of-living crisis.
 - Enacted a Water Vole Recovery Plan which will increase biodiversity and have larger positive impacts on the whole of the Windrush.

- Reviewed the impact of new weed control measures which use environmentally friendly pesticides.
- Witney Traffic Advisory decisions, including a Community Speed watch scheme.
- A consultation on the Witney Air Quality Action Plan.
- Improvements to the A40 to allow better access and decrease congestion across Witney.
- Installation of new benches, picnic tables, trees, and bird boxes across Witney.

A number of internal energy efficiency measures have been implemented across the Council's estate to further reduce the Council's Carbon footprint before 2028, more are planned for later this year.

Special thanks must go to the Biodiversity & Green Spaces Officer and the Council's works team. The work they carry out, often unseen, makes Witney a greener and cleaner place, and allows everyone in Witney to enjoy the outdoors spaces we have.

WITNEY ANNUAL TOWN MEETING 2024

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

ClIr Denis Newcombe

Committee Overview

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 currently overseeing a number of projects in Witney.

Parks

Open Spaces Strategy (OSS)

The Council's 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 it to move forward with a clear sense of direction and purpose.

Play Areas Work is continuing to improve existing play areas. The Council has 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. The Splash Pad will be undergoing a major refresh to make it more reliable and economical to run. 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, designed by local schoolchildren, have been installed.

Playing Pitches

The Council has continued its focus on bringing unused pitches on-line as soon as possible to support local sports teams. Over the last few months, the Council has continued 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. It also continues negotiations to get the much-delayed Windrush pitch and pavilion completed and is in discussion with cricket clubs about their pitch requirements in the coming years.

Since the Town Council's grounds maintenance contract has been brought in house, it has 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. In a report by the STRI (Former Sports Turf Research Institute) the executive summary stated, '*general conditions of the natural turf sports facilities have improved considerably across all inspected sites*' under its direct stewardship.

A defibrillator is imminently due to be installed at King George V playing field. This will mean all playing pitches will have access to life-saving pieces 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

Facilities, including playing pitches, remain heavily subsidised by Witney Town Council. It has 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. Work is underway on the skatepark and there is much excitement for completion later this month.

Work is also underway on our Leys project in partnership with Courtside Hubs CIC. This will improve the facilities for the whole community. There is a lot of interest in the Paddl ball courts, and we are delighted to bring a new sport to the town.

At West Witney, the Council is working with the Sports and Social Club committee to upgrade the facilities and make it a more fitting home for their teams. The plans are looking great, and we look forward to the work starting later this year. The hugely successful Witney Parkrun has been granted a 4-year licence extension to run until March 2027 and we have been able to provide an area for storage of their equipment. We have undertaken bowls green renovation work at West Witney and the Leys, installed new ditch liners and new boarding.

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 has been improved, new no-swimming signs have been installed and fencing is being upgraded along the Windrush River to aid the safety of users. There has been work done to stabilise the banks of the lake and a survey to establish the depth of the lake. We have been delighted to see an influx of flora and fauna which have attracted more visitors and increase the biodiversity of the area.

General Maintenance & Improvements

There is continuing maintenance and improvements to the Burwell Recreation ground. In spring there will be new planting. Remedial work has also been undertaken on any tree damage in our recent storms. A memorial and bench have been installed on The Leys as a Covid Memorial and in bringing grounds maintenance in-house, the Council has been able to manage the emptying of litter, waste and recycling bins on its land.

Cllr Denis Newcombe, Chair of Parks & Recreation Committee

WITNEY ANNUAL TOWN MEETING 2024

REPORT TO THE ANNUAL TOWN MEETING FROM THE CHAIR OF THE TOWN COUNCIL'S HALLS, CEMETERIES & ALLOTMENTS COMMITTEE

Cllr Rachel Crouch

Committee Overview

This Committee has responsibility for all aspects relating to the Public Halls, Cemeteries, Closed Churchyards and Allotments under the control of the Town Council.

Halls

Corn Exchange

The continued focus in the last year has been on building upon the Council's vision for the Corn Exchange, 'to maintain a modern, accessible, and affordable venue for Witney and its community, capable of facilitating both local and professional arts and performances.' A Business Plan has been produced in the current year which contains the costed aspirations to run and expand the business of the hall for years to come.

The Gallery room, Café 1863 and the main corridors have recently been decorated with the works being funded by Witney Town Council. They have been re-painted in heritage colours to be in keeping with the history of the building and complimentary carpeting has been upgraded in the Gallery Room, on the landing and staircase. The Gallery room is now used for many more meetings, parties, functions and indeed, this includes wedding bookings. The Council has also restored the blue plaque on the exterior of the building.

Through the efforts of staff, there has been a real surge in event bookings including children's film afternoons, a Classic film club, Jazz evenings, the showing of sports events including the Women's World Cup, the regular Tribute bands and the yearly panto!

The 1863 Café continues to flourish as a warm/cool and safe space for so many people. A monthly 'Councillors at the Café' event has been introduced which has become popular, enabling families to talk to Councillors about their concerns and suggestions to continue to make Witney an even better place. This Café is a great hub for meetings and a friendly place to meet up, offering immeasurable social value to the community at the heart of the town.

Burwell Hall

The Hall continues to be a well-used asset of the Council for regular bookings and for one-off family events and parties.

The Council has invested in a new energy efficient heating system which has been installed this year, along with upgrades to the sanitaryware in toilets and general redecoration throughout.

New blinds have been installed into the Hall and they have certainly shown an improvement to the setting.

The Hall was used for the first Christmas Lunch event which took place in December for over sixty residents. This was a great success and should now become a yearly event. The residents of Burwell and the Witney Day Centre team indeed ran this.

The Town Hall

The area around the Buttercross has been tidied and the natural Flag stones underneath the Town Hall have been repaired as have the old Town Hall door and the sash windows, helping to maintain this piece of town heritage.

Redecoration has taken place and signage has been added to promote the accessible Town Council reception and administration office adjacent to the Bus stops on Market Square.

The Town Council also continues to work with its tenants at Langdale Hall and Madley Park Hall to maintain these buildings for residents.

Cemeteries & Closed Churchyards

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

- The Commonwealth War Grave Commission have agreed to install signs at Tower Hill Cemetery.
- The Windrush cemetery was entered into a Cemetery of the Year Award. The feedback will help improve the service offered.
- Cream 'post boxes to heaven' have been placed in both Cemeteries. This is for families to write letters to their loved ones.
- The Friends of the Cemeteries group continues to meet to support the Town Council's work moving forward.
- Grave mapping is underway at Windrush Cemetery to plan the future availability of grave plots in Witney.
- New signs are being erected in both cemeteries to remind visitors to always keep their dogs on leads.
- A Children's Memorial Garden is being constructed at Windrush Cemetery to allow grieving parents a quiet reflective setting.

The Council also has responsibility to maintain the 'closed churchyards' at St Mary's and Holy Trinity churches. Cycle racks have been installed at St Mary's Church and works on repairing the historic boundary wall are underway. A Commonwealth War Graves sign is also to be installed at Holy Trinity Church to signpost the War Graves there and the Council will be conducting repairs to the pillars and arch.

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.

In June 2023, the Chair of this Committee attended the first WAA committee meeting after election and offered to gather feedback from the WAA committee and tenants and be a direct link between the WAA and WTC. She then visited Lakeside to familiarise herself with the site and assess the issues with gates, boundaries, and access to the site.

The Chair also visited Newland and took photos of the gate that needed replacing and the boundary that needed higher fencing to prevent intruders to the site. The Council has:

- Supported the removal of debris and an old gate from Newland.
- Provided an Asgard shed and Lawnmower for Lakeside, to store site equipment.
- Delivered two benches from The Leys to Lakeside.
- Erected fencing on the lane at Lakeside bridging the gap that had been created in the hedge, meaning the lane is now only good for access to the allotments.
- Fitted a new gate to Newland and removed rubbish.
- Delivered fallen leaves to allotment sites to be used as leaf mould in Autumn 2023.

Accessible allotment plots/planting beds at Windrush Place allotments continue to be used by the Windrush Church of England Primary School and the ICE Centre.

The Council is aware of the size of the Waiting List for an allotment and the need for further allotment sites. The Chair continues to visit the Windrush Allotment and meet with the Chair and secretary of WAA to liaise on the future of what is needed.

WITNEY ANNUAL TOWN MEETING 2024

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

Cllr Georgia Meadows

Committee Overview

The Stronger Communities Committee is responsible for improving the community environment including, trees, floral displays, Christmas lights, working with voluntary groups, and arranging or facilitating events on Town Council premises.

Community & Civic Events

In the last year, the Town Council held a series of free events to mark the King's coronation and continued to support other community events run throughout the year. We have been happy to welcome back the usual annual events such as Witney Music Festival, Witney Pride, Witney Carnival, and Witney Feast back onto The Leys.

We also held the annual remembrance service at the war memorial, Citizen of The Year Awards earlier this month, in which we awarded members of our community who have truly gone above and beyond in supporting and contributing to it. In the summer we welcomed a contingent from the Council's twinned German town of Unterhaching to Witney.

The Council supported the Rotary Club of Witney in their running of the Christmas light switch-on and has held its annual competitions for local schools in which students submitted designs for the Council's Christmas card and designs for the Christmas light that hangs on the Town Hall along with a Creepy crawly safari hunt competition.

The free children's Advent Fayre was also hugely successful again this year, with 242 attendees over the day, engaging in activities such as creating Christmas tree decorations and making reindeer food. The Council also hosted a Car Free Day in September. There will be further events in the forthcoming year to mark 50 years of Witney Town Council and the 80th anniversary of D-Day.

Communications

This year, the Council resolved that a digital poster be placed in the window of the town council administration offices adjacent to the Market Square bus stops; this came after concern from some residents who were unable to access the information provided on the Council's social media channels as an alternative for them to find important information regarding what events are going on around the town.

Also at the Town Hall reception office, the Community window, in which local charities and organisations are able to promote their services has gone from strength to strength.

The Town Council sent out its annual newsletter in early March with a satisfaction survey that the Chair would actively encourage residents to complete, as it helps the Council understand what areas it can improve in as a Council and what issues matter to our residents.

The Council also started a TikTok account to reach younger members of our community. Youth representation is as important as ever, and encouraging young people to get involved with our community is one of this Council's foremost ambitions.

Young people

Along with broadening our reach on social media, the Council have been looking at other ways of engaging with, supporting, and increasing the representation of young people.

In February, 'The Station' initiative launched, run by Bright Futures Oxfordshire and funded by the town council; the service will see detached youth workers being deployed across Witney to aid our young people, especially after the devastating closure of Got2B. This initiative was spawned after the Council resolved that it should provide funding for detached youth work following a meeting it spearheaded with local stakeholders during the summer. The Council also created a list of all activities open to young people during the summer and employed the services of APCAM to offer health and wellbeing sessions to young people and their families during the crucial holiday period. Further funding was provided to Home-Start Oxford to help provide the best start in life for young people.

The Council has also put together a Task & Finish group to restart the Witney Youth Council, which will give young people the opportunity to start projects with a small amount of funding from the Council, and support from the Council to apply for further grant funding if required. The Youth Council will be an incredibly unique way for young people to represent themselves and will provide a unique way to apply themselves in our community.

Community Infrastructure

The Council agreed to take ownership of four new bus shelters for the Windrush Estate, along with providing four replacement shelters on Thorney Leys, in the High Street, and by Staple Hall; this being a jointly funded project with Oxfordshire County Council to provide better access to these stops.

The Council also agreed to fund two new grit bins for the newly built Kingfisher Meadows, but the developer unfortunately refused to site them. The Council also had the privilege of installing the "Together but Apart" covid memorial on The Leys, along with a bench providing a beautiful view of St Mary's Church behind the stones. It is a wonderful reminder of the beauty we see in collaboration and togetherness whenever an event like the covid pandemic seeks to tear us apart. A further group was set up to explore opportunities for a new Christmas Lights Contract which will come on line for this Christmas.

The last year also saw the town council achieve silver for Witney Lake & Country Park in the Thames & Chiltern In Bloom competition and the town's primary schools create wheelbarrows for Schools In Bloom which were judged at Witney Carnival.

Cllr Georgia Meadows, Vice-Chair, Stronger Communities Committee

WITNEY ANNUAL TOWN MEETING 2024

REPORT TO THE ANNUAL TOWN MEETING FROM THE LEADER

Cllr Ruth Smith

2024 marks the 50th anniversary of Witney Town Council as a local authority. As a town council with one of the largest populations among UK town and parish councils, the staff team is never short of work to do to keep the town and its facilities in good shape and to co-ordinate events for residents.

When we drafted the Strategic Plan last spring, it was clear that 2023-24 would be about the delivery of major projects. The committee chairs' reports communicate these brilliantly. However, that is not all we have been focusing on.

My mind thinks back to the glorious wildflower roundabout between Corn Street and Tower Hill which was the product of several years trialling wildflower techniques at sites around the town, and another successful, fun, and informative Car Free Day last September. I am also proud of the small gestures the Council thought of, such as marking the 75th anniversary of the arrival of our river's namesake, the Windrush citizens, with a selection of books and posters in the 1863 café.

The Council is always conscious of its ambitious target of becoming carbon neutral by 2028, set in 2019 when it declared a Climate Emergency. Decarbonisation of the halls and fleet vehicles is underway, but it does need to accelerate.

Britain's first Tiny Forest continues to get national attention, with Earth Watch studying it and introducing newer forest keepers from other areas to it.

Sometimes the Town Council steps in to do things no other authority is doing. The Council recently committed to desilting the riverbed by Bridge Street, subject to permission from the Environment Agency. This adds to the flood prevention support we continue to provide for the residents of Riverside Gardens and is proving a useful model for other councils. The Council has also funded a new detached youth work initiative that you will be hearing more about this spring.

Witney Town Council has worked closely with the team responsible for redesigning the High Street and look forward to hearing soon from Oxfordshire County Council on the next step of the consultation process as we share the frustration that it has taken so long, however councillors insisted that Witney residents fed into the process, rather than having a design imposed.

A separate committee administered by the Town Council is the Witney Traffic Advisory Committee, which allows councillors, local transport representatives, County Highways professionals and residents to have a round table discussion. One of the results of this is a new Community Speedwatch initiative which has been launched, with the hope that

data from around the town will give police and residents a better picture of problem areas. More volunteers are welcome; information about how to can be found on the Council's website or by contacting the Town Hall.

The Town Clerk and I have represented Witney at forums such as the Oxfordshire Councils' Charter and the newly formed Town Centre Partnership, as well as in meetings with the District Council about sports pitches and play parks. Councillors also represent WTC on numerous local organisation committees including the recently formed North Witney Collaboration Group, a group seeking the best infrastructure in that area of the town as well as any proposed development at the Witney-Hailey boundary.

You will have seen the changes underway at The Leys, which has been a public park for 104 years, as the new Wheeled Sports Park nears completion the Courtside expansion gets underway. The Coffee Shed and the free and community interest company facilities around it have become a vibrant meeting place for families and sport and recreation users, and the new improvements will enable residents to enjoy it all the more.

In 2023, planning permission was granted for the significant regeneration of West Witney Sports and Social Club, work which is expected to start at the end of 2024. This comes after years of exploration as to the best solution for this well-loved and well-used site and comes through good relationships between the Council and the sports clubs.

Behind the scenes, the Council's maintenance team has had to relocate from the depot on the Leys in order to give space for the new facilities. This team successfully completed its first year of in-house grounds maintenance work, saving the council money and enabling flexible responses to the needs of the town's green spaces. A move, on top of this, shows their resilience, commitment and versatility. Added to this the council received an excellent independent report on the upkeep and quality of its football and cricket turfs, maintained by the team despite the challenging weather and the welcome but unforgiving increase in hours of use.

This year, Town Council staff have completed training in Mental Health First Aid and the organisation has become a Disability Confident employer.

The Corn Exchange continues to establish itself as a much-needed community space and performance venue, with a café-bar that has received an overwhelmingly warm welcome from residents. Regulars notice bar staff going the extra mile regarding their welfare or dietary needs. The footfall at the café has put councillors more in touch with residents, with the Councillors at the Café gazebo surgeries on the first Saturday each month drawing in residents to keep Councillors busy for the session.

The reports are bursting with all the things the Council has been doing this year. And there is more to come!

Thank you for your interest as a resident in the Annual Town Meeting. It's your meeting and your town, and all feedback and questions will help to shape Witney for the better.

Ruth Smith, Leader, Witney Town Council, 2023-24