

# **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**