

# **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**