

STRONGER COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE

Date: Monday, 20 March 2023

Title: In Bloom Update

Contact Officer: Communications & Community Engagement Officer - Polly Inness

Background

As the gardening season approaches it is time to consider the Council's entries to the In Bloom competition and how it can support community and school gardeners this year.

Current Situation

In Bloom – Community Gardeners

There is a meeting of the In Bloom group on Tuesday 21 March at 3pm in the Main Hall of the Corn Exchange. It's an opportunity to inform the groups of the Council's plans for planting and entries to the Thames and Chilterns competition this year.

Leftover bulbs and compost from the pot planting activity at the Winter Warmer sessions has been passed on to two of the gardening groups who said they could make use of them.

The Edible Gardens group have taken the advice of the Council's In Bloom judges and entered the 'It's Your Neighbourhood competition' so they will be judged in their own right and get valuable feedback as a group. They have requested permission to add small compost bins to one of their beds, "It would be another aspect of our educating people about GYO and being as 'green' as possible." They have not stated whether they would be paying for these themselves or would request a further voucher towards the cost, as the Council has previously done to assist with the purchase of water butts for our gardeners.

The Community Engagement Officer is exploring ways to increase the amount of community activity with gardeners and other In Bloom partners in terms of year-round activities and events, to improve the score it gets for the 'Community' Thames & Chiltern's criteria.

Schools In Bloom

The Operations Manager has reported that some of the wheelbarrows previously used for the competition are showing signs of wear and may need replacing next year. The Communications and Community Engagement Officer has suggested a rolling cycle of replacement beginning with the worst ones first, replacing up to four at a time.

No theme has yet been announced by the RHS for In Bloom. The wheelbarrows do not have to be themed, but the Council normally offer some guidelines.

The BBC Gardening programme runs an annual wheelbarrow competition. Their theme for this year is “a meal in a barrow” and last year was a “travel barrow”. Possible themes could be flag colours or a desert garden. Following on from the Platinum Jubilee with the Coronation, another red, white and blue theme is not particularly desirable. If members have any ideas they would like to put forward, they would be welcome.

Some changes to the judging process to fit in with those requested by the Rotary Club who generously supply a £100 prize, will be instigated this year. Members should also consider where the finished barrows will be displayed. Last year the position outside the depot on the Leys meant that they could easily be watered by the works team and there was no vandalism of them.

Grants

In 2021 both schools and community gardening groups received £30 each as their grant. In 2022 the grant to groups increased to a one-off £100 and schools received £40 each to enable them to add extra wow for the Jubilee.

While £30 is an adequate sum for the barrows where they have received free compost it is a low sum for the community gardeners, who are maintaining much larger areas. The Council no longer have compost being supplied by our contractors so will either have to provide that ourselves or increase the grant sum to cover it. Further money is spent on prizes, refreshments and entry fees, but there is enough to cover some reasonable increases.

Councillors may like to consider an increase for the community gardeners to £50 to cover rising costs of their resources.

Witney Town Council's In Bloom Entry

The Council needs to decide which sites it would like to enter this year. Possibilities are:

- **The Lake and Country Park**
- The Leys
- Tower Hill Cemetery
- **Windrush Cemetery**
- Eton Close and the Tiny Forest
- Any other

Of these, only the ones in bold type have not been entered previously and Tower Hill, Eton Close were entered in 2022. Members may decide that continuity would be a good way to gain some consistent insight into progress or may decide that it is a good opportunity to ‘benchmark’ a new site. We usually enter two sites, but The Lake and Country Park would take

up the entire judging time we have allocated, so if that is chosen, it will need to be just that site.

When considering sites, it is useful to note that the Thames & Chiltern judging criteria which is attached to this report. Some may simply may never be able to attain the gold status, but other such as the Lake & Country Park demonstrate many already.

Impact Project – Welcome to Witney Planters

Unspent budget from last year was made available for an impact project. Councillors have opted for planters on the entrances to town, The Operations Manager and Communications and Community Engagement Officer have explored some options. Most planters are very expensive so, again this may be something that is implemented over a couple of years.

Option 1 Cotswold Stone Planters

These would have to be positioned in front of the Welcome to Witney signs as there isn't room directly beneath them. We do not currently have a price for these but Woodstock Town Council have them and we may be able to get a rough idea of price from them. They would require a large amount of compost but would hold a lot of plants and retain water relatively well if lined. There would be some longevity with this type of planter and maintenance around them should be fairly easy.

A photo is included in Appendix 1.

Option 2 Tree slices

These would be a sustainable and cheaper solution. It is unlikely they would hold as many plants as a conventional planter. The Council could ask its tree surgeons if they are able to supply some of these. They would need to be planted on a sloping pile of earth in order to have maximum visibility. They would eventually rot down and provide insect habitats and compost. They would be easily replaceable. Because of the lack of height and definition maintenance of the area around them might not be as easy as around the stone ones.

A photo is included in Appendix 1.

Environmental impact

Having declared a Climate Change Emergency at its Council meeting on 26 June 2019 – with this in mind Councillors should have due regard to the environmental impact of any decisions they make with regard to its facilities and services it operates.

Additional or enhanced planting for In Bloom projects would help create more biodiverse green and flowering areas.

Risk

In decision making Councillors should give consideration to any risks to the Council and any action it can take to limit or negate its liability.

Financial implications

Described here or as stated in the report above.

- The existing In Bloom budget is adequate to cover entry fees for up to two sites (£100) into the competition, any increase to grants decided prizes, plus other occasional expenditure on items such as water butts and compost bins.
- An increase in community and school gardening projects can be met from the current In Bloom budget.
- The In Bloom underspend is likely to be able to cover either Option 1 or 2 to improve entrance to Witney signs.

Recommendations

Members are invited to note the report and consider the following:

1. Which site/s to enter for the Thames & Chiltern In Bloom Competitions and,
2. A theme for the Schools In Bloom Wheelbarrows and,
3. Agreement on whether they should be displayed as previously at the Leys and,
4. Whether an increase to the community gardening grants to cover rising costs is appropriate and,
5. Which type of Welcome to Witney planters the Council should investigate installing within the agreed budget.