

STRONGER COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE

Date: Monday, 29 January 2024

Title: In Bloom

Contact Officer: Communications & Community Engagement Officer

Background

This report is intended to inform Members of any community initiatives which the Council may wish to support.

Current Situation

Thames & Chiltern In Bloom Competition

The Council's In Bloom entry should once again be the Lake and Country Park so it can see how the improvements carried out since it was last judged impact on the score. The Council will be going for gold in this, its 50th year. Mile markers are being placed around the perimeter of the lake to mark ¼ mile points for runners and walkers. Rubbing posts and information boards have been added from money in the In Bloom budget set aside for impact community projects.

2023-24 Budget set aside for Impact project

In previous years, money from the In Bloom budget that had not been spent on the Community Gardens and Schools in Bloom projects had been spent on additional seasonal, annual flowers or hanging baskets. These were not sustainable and added nothing of significance to the town's display. The unspent money came about where In Bloom projects had changed, community groups had dropped out of tending beds, the Schools in Bloom awards event was no longer held, and Witney no longer entered the Large Towns category, as there was a lack of support for that from other agencies that should have been involved. In 2021 the lead officer for In Bloom proposed that money not spent on other aspects of In Bloom could be used to carry out larger projects of significance and benefit to the community in general. Extract from the report.

"Councillors may like to consider spending the In Bloom budget in a more focused and impactful way, while continuing to support Community and School gardeners, who do bring additional colour and alternative planting schemes to areas in the town, and who benefit from the experience as groups.

Policy EE7 of the OSS refers,

'Ensure that Community Engagement is enshrined into all work and projects undertaken by WTC'

One option would be split the budget, retaining a larger sum to make a high impact difference to a 'left behind area'. This could be a piece of infrastructure, accessibility improvements or a regeneration or biodiversity project. This reflects the vision of the Town Council's Open Spaces strategy,

9.3 to, 'deliver high quality public open spaces that meet local needs and aspirations'

and four of the five key themes in 9.5,

9.5.1. Modernising and upgrading our parks and open spaces.

9.5.3. Improving and investing in our leisure provision.

9.5.4. Improving and investing in our infra-structure.

9.5.5. Working in the most effective and efficient manner.

This would still qualify for entry to In Bloom if Councillors wished to enter the competition as the judges look for year on year improvements to areas, which bring enrichment and benefit to residents and visitors. Therefore, it is an appropriate use of the budget. Using the budget in this impactful way rather than a scattergun approach, also addresses the delivery of the strategy's vision,

10.1.4.2. We will seek to provide a range of infra-structure aimed at all age groups and as many differing types of facility as is feasible."

This was agreed in minute SC577.

This approach allows for In Bloom competitions to be undertaken and money spent as necessary before any remaining is proposed for larger projects which complement the Council's biodiverse areas.

In 2022 an underspend of approximately £4,000, was allocated to funding Welcome to Witney Planters. This was progressed as far as planning for The Witney Shed to produce bespoke wooden planters. However, this is now on hold as the Town Clerk is pursuing outstanding S106 money promised to the Town Council for the purchase of more durable stone planters.

A further underspend in 2023 was proposed and agreed for improvements to the Lake and Country Park ahead of entering again this year. This has provided a number of nature rubbing posts and information boards (ready for installation and PR to follow).

In addition to this, officers recognise the need to complete the Children's Memorial Garden at Windrush Cemetery as referred to in the Project Officer's report to the Halls, Cemeteries & Allotments Committee on 22 January 2024. Additional funds would go towards a sign and planting in this area. Alternatively, if S106 is recovered and able to be used for the planters, the 2022 sum could be used to help add finishing touches to the Children's Memorial Garden instead.

The Town Council may expect to spend more of the 2024 budget on In Bloom as it is the 60th anniversary of the RHS In Bloom initiative and it might be desirable to treat our community gardeners to a small celebration to thank them for their dedication. This could be something as simple as a small bring and share picnic at the Lake and a tour round the Lake and Meadows with the Biodiversity and Open Spaces Officer. This could be timed to fit in with Judging Day.

In Bloom 60 Years

As mentioned above, In Bloom has its 60th anniversary this year and the town council is celebrating 50. They have shared a calendar with gardening tips for each month which officers are including on each issue of the Council's digital signage and will be sending through seeds to grow cut flowers for bouquets which it will gift on to its community gardeners.

Schools in Bloom

It may be necessary to purchase a new wheelbarrow or two to replace a few of the older rusting and rickety ones currently in use. This year sees the introduction of the new Schools In Bloom initiative where a love of growing and gardening can be shared across generations. Schools will plant the barrows which will, once judging has taken place, be passed on to Care Homes and other organisations, whose residents will continue to tend and care for them over the summer.

For this reason, the mixed planting seen in recent years that includes both flowers and veg that are also pollinators, might be ideal. Councillors might like to suggest a theme that would encourage this and be suitable for launching this new nurturing friendship aspect to In Bloom.

Best Kept Allotment

Previously Witney Town Council Managed all the allotment sites and the award for Best Kept allotment was one of the Citizen of the Year awards. This finished when management was passed to the Allotment Association.

Members are asked to consider if the Town Council should reinstate this competition as part of the In Bloom initiative and to be awarded as a Citizen award at the Civic Reception from 2025 onwards. If this is agreed, Councillors should consider when the judging for this should take place and whether this is something delegated to the Allotment Association to choose a winner from each site or an overall winner.

Environmental impact

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

As explained in the items above.

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.

Social Value

Social value is the positive change the Council creates in the local community within which it operates.

Benefits provided by the above items are:

- Extension of community connections between schools and other organisations through the barrow scheme
- Recognising and Rewarding our community gardeners in our 50th and In Blooms 60th year
- Using unspent budget to improve and enhance our open spaces for the benefit of the wider community.

Financial implication

- A budget for these items is already in place for In Bloom, there are no financial implications that would fall outside this other than the funds for the Children's Memorial Garden.

Recommendations

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

1. The entry to Thams & Chiltern In Bloom for 2024.
2. Recommending that between £1,000-£1,500 be provided from the In Bloom budget towards the Children's Memorial Project.
3. A theme for the 2024 Schools In Bloom competitions.
4. That the Town Council rewards the loyalty of long-established community gardeners with a small 60th In Bloom celebration
5. That Best Kept Allotment is considered as a Citizen Award for 2025