

# 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.