

WITNEY ANNUAL TOWN MEETING 2024

REPORT TO THE ANNUAL TOWN MEETING FROM THE LEADER

Cllr Ruth Smith

2024 marks the 50th anniversary of Witney Town Council as a local authority. As a town council with one of the largest populations among UK town and parish councils, the staff team is never short of work to do to keep the town and its facilities in good shape and to co-ordinate events for residents.

When we drafted the Strategic Plan last spring, it was clear that 2023-24 would be about the delivery of major projects. The committee chairs' reports communicate these brilliantly. However, that is not all we have been focusing on.

My mind thinks back to the glorious wildflower roundabout between Corn Street and Tower Hill which was the product of several years trialling wildflower techniques at sites around the town, and another successful, fun, and informative Car Free Day last September. I am also proud of the small gestures the Council thought of, such as marking the 75th anniversary of the arrival of our river's namesake, the Windrush citizens, with a selection of books and posters in the 1863 café.

The Council is always conscious of its ambitious target of becoming carbon neutral by 2028, set in 2019 when it declared a Climate Emergency. Decarbonisation of the halls and fleet vehicles is underway, but it does need to accelerate.

Britain's first Tiny Forest continues to get national attention, with Earth Watch studying it and introducing newer forest keepers from other areas to it.

Sometimes the Town Council steps in to do things no other authority is doing. The Council recently committed to desilting the riverbed by Bridge Street, subject to permission from the Environment Agency. This adds to the flood prevention support we continue to provide for the residents of Riverside Gardens and is proving a useful model for other councils. The Council has also funded a new detached youth work initiative that you will be hearing more about this spring.

Witney Town Council has worked closely with the team responsible for redesigning the High Street and look forward to hearing soon from Oxfordshire County Council on the next step of the consultation process as we share the frustration that it has taken so long, however councillors insisted that Witney residents fed into the process, rather than having a design imposed.

A separate committee administered by the Town Council is the Witney Traffic Advisory Committee, which allows councillors, local transport representatives, County Highways professionals and residents to have a round table discussion. One of the results of this is a new Community Speedwatch initiative which has been launched, with the hope that

data from around the town will give police and residents a better picture of problem areas. More volunteers are welcome; information about how to can be found on the Council's website or by contacting the Town Hall.

The Town Clerk and I have represented Witney at forums such as the Oxfordshire Councils' Charter and the newly formed Town Centre Partnership, as well as in meetings with the District Council about sports pitches and play parks. Councillors also represent WTC on numerous local organisation committees including the recently formed North Witney Collaboration Group, a group seeking the best infrastructure in that area of the town as well as any proposed development at the Witney-Hailey boundary.

You will have seen the changes underway at The Leys, which has been a public park for 104 years, as the new Wheeled Sports Park nears completion the Courtside expansion gets underway. The Coffee Shed and the free and community interest company facilities around it have become a vibrant meeting place for families and sport and recreation users, and the new improvements will enable residents to enjoy it all the more.

In 2023, planning permission was granted for the significant regeneration of West Witney Sports and Social Club, work which is expected to start at the end of 2024. This comes after years of exploration as to the best solution for this well-loved and well-used site and comes through good relationships between the Council and the sports clubs.

Behind the scenes, the Council's maintenance team has had to relocate from the depot on the Leys in order to give space for the new facilities. This team successfully completed its first year of in-house grounds maintenance work, saving the council money and enabling flexible responses to the needs of the town's green spaces. A move, on top of this, shows their resilience, commitment and versatility. Added to this the council received an excellent independent report on the upkeep and quality of its football and cricket turfs, maintained by the team despite the challenging weather and the welcome but unforgiving increase in hours of use.

This year, Town Council staff have completed training in Mental Health First Aid and the organisation has become a Disability Confident employer.

The Corn Exchange continues to establish itself as a much-needed community space and performance venue, with a café-bar that has received an overwhelmingly warm welcome from residents. Regulars notice bar staff going the extra mile regarding their welfare or dietary needs. The footfall at the café has put councillors more in touch with residents, with the Councillors at the Café gazebo surgeries on the first Saturday each month drawing in residents to keep Councillors busy for the session.

The reports are bursting with all the things the Council has been doing this year. And there is more to come!

Thank you for your interest as a resident in the Annual Town Meeting. It's your meeting and your town, and all feedback and questions will help to shape Witney for the better.

Ruth Smith, Leader, Witney Town Council, 2023-24