

# WITNEY ANNUAL TOWN MEETING 2024

## REPORT TO THE ANNUAL TOWN MEETING FROM THE CHAIR OF THE TOWN COUNCIL'S POLICY, GOVERNANCE & FINANCE COMMITTEE

**Cllr Joy Aitman**

### **Committee Overview**

The Committee oversees all policy decisions and recommends their approval to the Council. It also approves the Council's spending and ensures financial procedures are being followed. It regularly carries out the following:

- Approval of accounting and finance documents at each meeting.
- Overview of internal audit documents and reports which culminate in the signing and competing of Annual Governance & Accountability Return.
- Overseeing the spending of all the Council committees.
- Oversees budget setting and recommendation of Council tax precept setting annually.
- Awarding of the Council's annual, discretionary and youth services grants.

Witney Town Council is a public-facing and publicly funded organisation designed to deliver grassroots services to our community in a meaningful and accountable way. Our Town Council is responsible for a large population that continues to grow annually. We take pride that we as a professional body, with aspirations, we have delivered workable projects within the constraints of our capacity, culture, and budget.

The Town Council continues to grow from strength to strength since implementing the organizational restructure that was begun in 2020. In the last year it has employed wonderful new staff, to expand on the work already undertaken, who have brought new skill sets to the team and enabled it to be even more ambitious.

Bringing the Grounds Maintenance contract in-house is a perfect example of this. We are lucky to work with amazing staff who have the same vision as the councillors and have patiently worked with us to deliver our goals. We are confident that our organizational structure will future proof the Town Council for many years to come, ensuring that residents have the council they deserve, and that the staff have the capacity and support they need.

### **Policy**

The implementation of our Open Spaces Strategy continues to move ahead with great enthusiasm. The Council's Biodiversity & Green Spaces Officer has brought forward new projects particularly around the lake. The area has been developed to enhance its biodiversity and make it more accessible for all.

Our open spaces and parks are important places to be protected, cherished, and enhanced. They take great effort - and money - to maintain, but they give back so much to our community. Witney is lucky to have some wonderful open spaces. The Council's cemeteries are being made more accessible and plans are well underway to provide areas for reflection.

The Council's well-used sports grounds are being enhanced and, working with West Oxfordshire District Council, we are increasing capacity and facilities. However, we realise that to encourage both physical and mental health, particularly in our young people, we need to keep up with our ever-increasing population. Allotments are even more in demand, and we continue to provide them on our new housing estates. The Leys, which has been at the heart of the town for generations, is being developed with stakeholders to provide more activities and enhanced spaces.

### **Governance & Finance**

Grants this year have been awarded to organisations such as Witney Town Band, Buttercross Scouts, Witney Day Centre, Broadhill Playgroup, Oxfordshire Mind and Oxfordshire Play Association.

The Council was also delighted to be able to fund a youth scheme, launching soon, to provide greatly needed services for our young people (covered in the Stronger Communities report). Financial support has also been provided to West Oxfordshire Community Transport towards the running of the invaluable community bus and to events at that draw people together at the Leys. These include this summer's Witney Carnival, Witney Pride and Witney Music Festival.

The Committee also and has agreed spending on the repair & re-decoration of the Town Hall and Corn Exchange exteriors, the development of The Corn Exchange to provide a venue for weddings, professional theatre, music and comedy events, with retractable seating, professional lighting and sound. The cinema has proved extremely popular during school holidays.

We were also able to provide activities for The King's Coronation, a very popular Advent Fayre for children, and a subsidised theatre performance on The Leys in the summer. We continue to recognise the strengths and weaknesses of our offer and will look at further opportunities for the future and how we can recognise the changing needs of the people of Witney and our neighbours, such as the major projects already mentioned, not just by prudent fiscal planning but by applying for grants and using developer funding where available.

The Council is also mindful of the financial challenges that delivering our aspirations and meeting the needs of the community brings and this gives us a direction of travel for future investment decisions. Crucial to our long-term efforts is the involvement of the local community and its various interest groups. Whilst there is already a good degree of public engagement in our services, there is always so much more that could be achieved with more interaction, and by building close working relationships between the Council and those that it represents. Working together, we can accomplish so much more.

Cllr Joy Aitman, Chair of Policy, Governance & Finance Committee