
Agenda Item:	Annual Town Meeting
Meeting Date:	Monday, 3 February 2025
Contact Officer:	Senior Administrative Officer & Committee Clerk

Background

The Annual Town Meeting, the holding of which is a statutory requirement, is scheduled to be held on Wednesday 19 March 2025. This is not a Town Council meeting but is administered by it as the parish council.

The format of this meeting usually remains the same, since it is principally a meeting for local electors to meet any Councillors who may be present to discuss parish/town affairs.

With the OCC elections this year (and potential devolution changes from 2027), it is anticipated a greater number of residents may attend the meeting. **It should however be noted, this is not a political meeting nor an opportunity for debate or canvassing by electoral candidates or political party members;** only electors of the parish are permitted to speak/ask questions during the meeting.

Current Situation

Officers ask that the Council consider two options regarding the seating layout:

1. To have the seating out as an auditorium event with Councillors and participants on the stage (Approx capacity 135)
2. To have the seating retracted, apart from the bottom two rows, with large round tables in front running towards the back of the Hall (Capacity 80-90)

The second option is what was utilised in 2023 and 2024; it was broadly thought to offer a more inclusive feel for the electorate and gives the opportunity to be more informal, particularly during the Questions and Answer sessions with Members at the end of the meeting.

The details of the meeting are as follows:

- It is a statutory requirement to advertise the meeting in a local newspaper. The advert invites questions to be submitted to the Town Clerk/C.E.O ahead of the meeting. This would appear once in the 5th March edition.

- The meeting is Chaired by The Mayor, who has the Leader sat near to them providing a welcome and assisting in highlighting points from the Committee reports. They will also welcome questions on all matters from the public.
- In a change to previous years an Annual Report (as discussed at the Stronger Communities Committee meeting) will be produced by Officers and published ahead of the meeting for residents to review, this will contain reports on each Committee along with other relevant material. The production of an Annual Report is a requirement of the NALC Local Council Silver Award that the Town Council is working toward. This would negate the need for all Chairs to present their reports, with the Leader providing an overview after the Mayor's introduction.
- Officers will prepare the Committee updates for the report which will be signed off by each Chair.
- Officers propose to show images from the Annual Report on the large screen during the meeting.
- There will be an official agenda, copies are prepared for the public and will be put on a table at the front of the hall along with copies of the Annual Report.
- Witney Ward members from WODC/OCC are invited but do not take part in the formal part of the meeting.
- Thames Valley Police are invited to attend and usually present a verbal report and answer questions.
- Round Tables are designated as 'Committee tables' which Chairs sit at and meet residents after the main part of the meeting so they may discuss items relating to that committee.
- There will be the need for several members of staff to be present on the evening some of whom will need to walk around with a microphone so the public can hear the questions raised. The Senior Officers of the Council will be on hand to help direct Chairs with any answers to questions.
- It has been customary to provide non-alcoholic refreshments which could be provided by the opening of Café 1863.
- Officers will also encourage audience participation by use of the Slido app which residents can access via their mobile phones, to provide their views and questions. A interactive table based activity is also being considered.

Other suggestions:

Publicity

In addition to the advertisement in the Witney Gazette, Officers will advertise in the annual newsletter which will be delivered to all Witney properties in the week commencing 3 March. Officers will also place posters across the town and in Town Council locations, on the Website, screen in the Admin Office and publish on its social media platforms.

Youth Engagement

A suggestion at the 2024 meeting was to encourage the inclusion of under 18's who would not be registered on the Electoral Roll and therefore excluded from participating actively in the meeting. The Council may wish to consider participation which would also further support the re-establishment of the Youth Council.

Community Engagement

Officers suggest that groups who have received grant funding from the Town Council during the past year are invited to participate in the creation of a short video of how the funding has been used and enhanced their services.

Security

Officers are aware of the negative treatment received by Councillors and Council staff on this and other Oxfordshire Councils. Officers will cover security in the event's risk assessment.

Impact Assessments

The Town Council has a duty to consider the effects of its decisions, functions and activities on equality, biodiversity, and crime & disorder. Consideration should also be given to effects on the environment, given the Council's Climate Emergency declaration in 2019.

- a) Equality – The advertisement of the meeting in the Witney Gazette and in poster format ensures that those who do not have social media access are reached.
- b) Biodiversity - None
- c) Crime & Disorder – A invitation of a representative from Thames Valley Police allows residents to raise issues directly with them.
- d) Environment & Climate Emergency - None

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.

- Effective communication and engagement with residents foster trust.
- The inclusion of under 18's would further indicate the Town Councils approach to awareness of issues of young people.

Financial implications

- The printing of the Annual Report and video production would be in house and therefore not attract any costs.

- There is a £122.70 charge for advertising the Annual Town Meeting in the local newspaper and there is an allocated budget of £250 for this (budget line 4031/701).
- There is no further budget for this meeting.

Recommendations

Members are invited to note the report and

1. Agree the layout and format so necessary arrangements can be made and,
2. Consider if Café 1863 should be opened and,
3. Consider if under 18's should be permitted to participate and,
4. Consider if short community group video reports should be shown.