

STRONGER COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE



Agenda Item: Committee Objectives & Work Programme for the Municipal Year

Meeting Date: Monday, 2nd June 2025

Contact Officer: Town Clerk/CEO

The purpose of this report is to set out this Committee's objectives and priorities for the 2025/26 municipal year. This will enable the Town Clerk and her Officers to draw up a manageable programme of works, ensuring necessary resources are available and can be deployed appropriately, particularly bearing in mind the workload of other Committees.

Background

This Committee's priorities differ from others in that several budget lines are allocated to provide grants to local organisations, enabling them to deliver key services in the town such as detached youth work and community transport. The Committee also oversees ongoing infrastructure projects, community engagement initiatives, and civic events that strengthen community cohesion.

The current terms of reference encompass supporting voluntary groups, maintaining town infrastructure and public realm, organising civic events and commemorations such as VE Day 80th Anniversary, overseeing communications, and managing community competitions. The proposed expanded terms of reference would enhance the Committee's role in community engagement, inclusivity, youth services, and environmental considerations, reflecting the Council's evolving priorities and statutory duties.

Over recent years, funding has been accumulated within the Council's Earmarked Reserve - Infrastructure (a/c 369) - primarily for street furniture and the ongoing rolling programme of replacements. The Committee continues to build upon the success of previous initiatives while identifying new opportunities to strengthen community provision in line with its broadened remit.

Current Situation

The Committee has successfully delivered numerous projects during 2024/25, demonstrating strong community impact and value for money. Key achievements include the continuation of vital youth services, enhancement of infrastructure particularly the successful Christmas Lights display, and support for community events that bring residents together.

As part of the current meeting cycle, the Committee is reviewing its terms of reference to ensure they remain fit for purpose and reflect the Council's current priorities. The proposed enhanced terms of reference would strengthen the Committee's focus on inclusivity, community engagement, youth services, and environmental considerations, while

maintaining its core functions around infrastructure, civic events, and voluntary sector support.

Several projects remain in progress and will continue into the new municipal year, including ongoing infrastructure improvements and community partnerships. The Committee must now consider its priorities for 2025/26, balancing ambitious new initiatives with the completion of existing commitments, and ensuring alignment with any revised terms of reference.

Budget allocations from previous years remain available through Earmarked Reserves for specific infrastructure projects, providing flexibility in programme delivery while ensuring financial sustainability. Note that responsibility for trees, floral displays and hanging baskets, will transfer to the new Climate & Biodiversity Committee, subject to full Council approval on 23rd June 2025

Proposed Priorities for 2025/26

Core Service Provision

- Continue core grant funding for community transport (£23,500) and youth services (£40,000) as essential community services, in addition to funding The Station – detached youth work
- Develop enhanced youth engagement initiatives including potential expansion of Witney Youth Council activities

Infrastructure and Public Realm Enhancement

- Prioritise the infrastructure replacement programme using available Earmarked Reserves, focusing on safety-critical items and those with greatest community benefit
- Monitor and support the High Street upgrades project, continuing to work closely with Oxfordshire County Council to ensure that new public space enhancements align with the Council's standards for infrastructure and planting schemes
- Consider allocating resources to upgrade key elements such as the town centre bus shelters outside Barclays Bank and the Town Hall, which are essential for creating a more visually attractive and welcoming town centre environment
- Address bin provision and placement issues in the town centre, working with West Oxfordshire District Council to resolve concerns about removed bins near Mountain Warehouse and Part'n'Parcel that have negatively impacted the town's appearance

Wayfinding and Visitor Experience

- Oversee the West Oxfordshire District Council's wayfinding signage project, recognising that the Council will likely assume responsibility for maintaining this infrastructure once installed

- Possible partnership working with the Chamber of Commerce to support initiatives to:
 - improve the Welcome to Witney web pages and information resources to better guide visitors
 - Explore opportunities to enhance data collection on visitor insights to understand what draws people to Witney and inform future strategy development
 - Consider coach parking and drop-off solutions as part of broader visitor accessibility improvements

Community Engagement and Communications

- Establish enhanced community engagement frameworks to ensure resident input into project selection and delivery, potentially including annual satisfaction surveys
- Explore opportunities for collaborative projects with local businesses and the Chamber of Commerce to strengthen the town's economic vitality
- Continue to utilise the Town Council's communication channels, including newsletters, to gather community feedback through initiatives such as QR code surveys

Strategic Planning and Partnership Working

- Begin strategic planning for the implications of local government reorganisation, particularly assessing what additional assets the Town Council may need to take on for future maintenance and management
- Strengthen partnership working between different tiers of local government to maximise the benefits of funding opportunities such as Section 106 contributions
- Support local businesses by advocating for continued cash payment acceptance where appropriate

Inclusivity and Environmental Sustainability

- Embed inclusivity and environmental sustainability as key criteria for all project approvals, supporting the Council's equality duties and Climate Emergency commitments
- Ensure all infrastructure improvements incorporate environmental considerations and support biodiversity where possible

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 Committee's work programme promotes inclusive community access through infrastructure improvements, youth services, and events that serve all demographics. If the proposed enhanced terms of reference are adopted, the Committee would have an explicit mandate to ensure inclusivity and advocate for underrepresented groups, strengthening its equality impact. Defibrillator installations and bus shelter improvements particularly benefit elderly and vulnerable residents.

b) **Biodiversity** - Infrastructure projects incorporate environmental considerations where possible, including sedum roofs on bus shelters and consideration of wildlife-friendly materials. The In Bloom programme supports local biodiversity, though this may transfer to the Climate & Biodiversity Committee. The proposed enhanced terms would embed environmental protection as a decision-making criterion.

c) **Crime & Disorder** - Youth services funding and community engagement activities contribute to crime prevention. The proposed enhanced terms of reference specifically recognise the role of youth engagement and the Witney Youth Council in preventing antisocial behaviour. Well-maintained infrastructure and lighting improvements enhance community safety and reduce anti-social behaviour opportunities.

d) **Environment & Climate Emergency** - All projects are assessed for environmental impact. The proposed enhanced terms would explicitly require environmental and biodiversity considerations in all decision-making, strengthening the Committee's contribution to the Council's 2019 Climate Emergency declaration. The Committee prioritises sustainable materials, energy-efficient solutions, and projects that reduce carbon footprint where feasible.

Risk

When considering priorities, the Committee should be mindful of all resources - financial and human - and competing demands from other Committees. Key risks include:

- Over-commitment leading to undeliverable projects and reputational damage
- Insufficient resource allocation resulting in incomplete initiatives
- External partner dependencies affecting project delivery timelines
- Inflation impacts on previously budgeted infrastructure costs
- Community expectations exceeding available resources
- Partnership risks from ineffective coordination between local government tiers
- Reputational risks if public realm and wayfinding projects fail to meet community expectations

Mitigation strategies include realistic project phasing, regular budget monitoring, strong partner agreements, clear communication with residents about project timelines and constraints, and maintaining regular dialogue with partner organisations and businesses.

Social Value

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

The Committee's work programme delivers significant social value through:

- Youth services supporting personal development and community cohesion, with potential expansion through enhanced Youth Council oversight
- Infrastructure improvements enhancing accessibility and community pride
- Event programming fostering local identity and social connections
- Grant funding enabling third-sector organisations to expand their community impact
- Skills development and employment opportunities through local procurement
- Enhanced community engagement initiatives, including potential annual resident satisfaction surveys if the revised terms of reference are adopted
- Explicit advocacy for inclusivity and equality, fostering stronger community belonging

Financial implications

- Infrastructure Earmarked Reserve (a/c 369) contains accumulated funding for ongoing replacement programmes
- Annual grant commitments of approximately £74,500 for community transport and youth services
- Capital expenditure requirements for infrastructure improvements to be phased across multiple years

Recommendations

Members are invited to note the report and consider the Committee's objectives and priorities for the 2025/26 municipal year.