



Witney Town Council

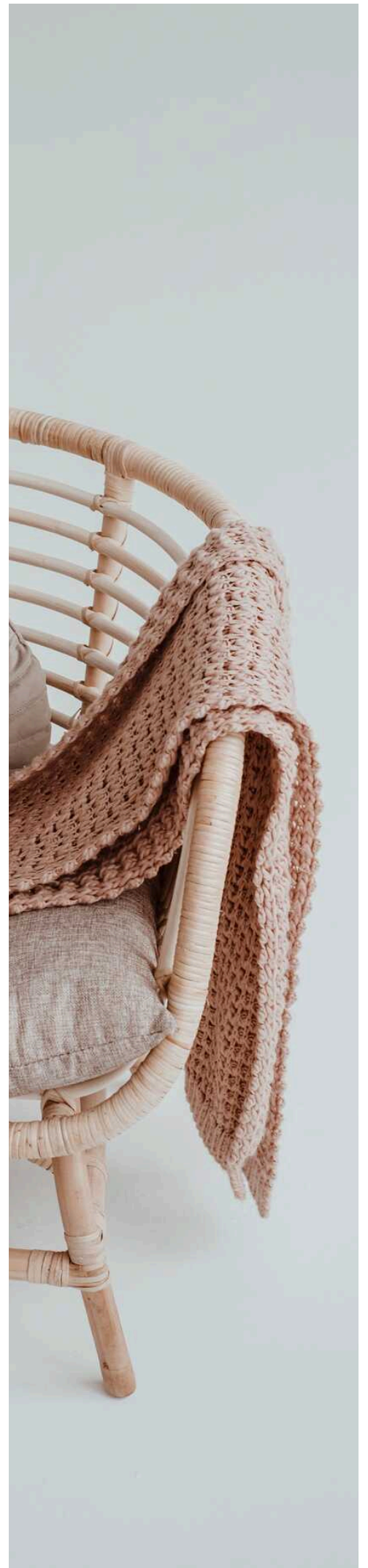


WITNEY
TOWN COUNCIL

**Community
Engagement Strategy
2024**

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Introduction

The purpose of Witney Town Council's Community Engagement Strategy is to assess and enhance the quality and effectiveness of our interactions with the local community. By seeking feedback and encouraging open dialogue, participation and inclusion we will build stronger trust-based relationships with our community, leading to an improved reputation and better understanding of what Witney Town Council does.

Actively engaging with and listening to the views and aspirations of our community members, ensures that the council's actions align with the genuine needs and concerns of those within our town. This approach enables the provision of appropriate activities, facilities, and services that effectively promote the overall well-being and priorities of all our residents.

We are starting from a strong position. As a council, we create lots of opportunities for community engagement, but we need to ensure that as a body and as individuals we are making the most of all of them. While we are looking at innovation and finding new ways to reach people, Witney was identified as an ageing town ([Oxfordshire Data Hub](#)) and this needs to be taken in to account to ensure that no one is 'left behind'.

What is Community Engagement?

Quite simply, Community Engagement is about getting to know the people in a community and building meaningful relationships and connections. It involves, sharing information in a two-way exchange and working together in different ways to bring about change. Good Community Engagement is an ongoing thing and needs to be flexible and agile to adapt in response to new initiatives and opportunities. It is the process by which we get people to have an active involvement in council business and encourage them to influence decision making and services.

There are five levels at which engagement occurs, from minimal involvement to substantial participation. These levels include: Informing, Consulting, Involving, Collaborating and Empowering.





Aims

This Community Engagement Strategy aims to equip Witney Town Council to better cater to the needs of local residents, the following objectives are essential:

- **Understand and respond** effectively to the needs of the community.
- **Increase accountability** to local residents.
- **Plan and deliver** improved services.
- **Use public resources** more efficiently.
- **Make transparent decisions** grounded in strong evidence.
- **Build strong, positive relationships** within and across local communities.
- **Test ideas** and explore emerging issues.

The strategy will also aim to measure the Council's performance in service delivery.

The local community will benefit by:

- Having a **greater say** and more choices in designing and delivering services.
- Developing **new skills and expertise**.
- Becoming **better informed** about the Council's initiatives.
- Engaging in **accessible conversations** about important issues.
- Building **trust and confidence** with the Council.
- Understanding how their **participation** has influenced decision-making processes.

Objectives

The following objectives set out how we are going to make certain that our engagement activity is flexible, focused, and appropriate for the diverse needs of the community.

Together the council will:

1. **Plan and co-ordinate activities**, collaborate in partnerships whenever possible and make the most effective use of our resources.
2. **Encourage active participation involvement from all communities**, especially those from traditionally under-represented groups or areas.
3. **Be open and creative** in defining the most appropriate relevant, engaging and successful approaches to consultations.
4. **Promote transparency and build trust** by communicating results and ensuring they are used to inform the Council's policies, services and decision-making processes.
5. **Build relationships** with communities to establish and maintain sustained engagement.



Who Do We Want to Engage With?

Alongside maintaining the many successful channels of Community Engagement that we already have we also need to seek to hear from those in the community not already engaged and expand our reach still further.

Everything we do must be accessible and inclusive as far as possible. We must make particular efforts to engage those who may not usually get involved in dialogues with their local council.

To that end, we are fortunate to have counsellors that are working in the community with refugees and asylum seekers.

Councillors should be at the forefront of our community engagement. They have a unique perspective and understanding of what it's like to live in their ward and this equips them with specialist knowledge and equips them to represent and amplify the voices of their community.

Our ambition is to engage successfully with all of the following:

- young people
- older people
- service users
- all residents including minority groups
- people of differing abilities
- schools and colleges
- tourists and visitors
- people of different or no religion
- LGBT groups
- itinerant visitors
- local businesses
- community groups and organisations
- tenants and residents' associations and groups
- volunteers and voluntary groups
- neighbourhoods and wards
- public and private sector including other local councils

If we look at the source of most of the data we gather in our Annual Resident's Satisfaction Survey, the average age of those attending the Annual Town Meeting, the clientele at 1863 café, and many of the people that attend our events there is a heavy bias on older people. It would seem we are doing well at reaching them, but actually they are also the people who claim that they don't know what we do or what is going on unless it is in the Witney Gazette or they get a letter about it.



Below are some extracts from a recent report by **Centre For Towns**, an independent non-partisan organisation dedicated to providing research and analysis of our towns highlights that many young people are moving in to cities and larger towns leaving smaller towns and villages as 'ageing towns'. This should be taken into account when considering what we do and how we want to improve.

- **The Office for National Statistics currently projects that by 2046 there will be seven million more people aged 65 and over in the United Kingdom.**
- **Around three-quarters of the increase in 45 to 64-year olds and over 65s between 1981 and 2011 took place in villages, communities, small and medium sized towns.**



Barriers and Challenges

We must consider the collection of data gathered and ensure that any stored information complies with the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR).

Often engagement opportunities are lost because of the difficulties of bringing people to our events. This could be due to the availability of people during the event times, such as working people (including volunteers) lack of transport to events or winter weather or shorter days affecting the willingness of some to travel or be out in poor weather or low light. This might also affect and those under or over a certain age.

Inaccessibility of buildings and some venues may highlight problems for those with physical or mental disabilities or mobility issues.

There may be technical barriers such as a lack of equipment or inability to purchase tickets using an online system. Affordability and financial constraints can be a problem, though most of our community and civic events are free. Apathy or lack of awareness about the events themselves may reduce the numbers attending.

There may be preconceived ideas about what a 'council' led event might be like.

Social barriers may exist for those that might experience a sense of 'not belonging' perhaps being new to the town, itinerant visitors, cultural differences, language barriers or those that are otherwise socially isolated.

Community Engagement may be stifled if we only engage with the same 'easy' demographic and don't make the effort to find new ways to reach out to groups who are experiencing barriers and provide information that they can and want to connect with.

Our Strategy - Ideas and Approaches

If people are not coming to events and meetings, we should explore ways to take more information out to them. We have previously considered roadshows and making information more mobile. We have held meet and greets with the Biodiversity and Green Spaces Officer at the Lake and Country Park and there may be ways we can expand on this.

- Taking information about our events services and activities into council wards might reach additional people. Staff and relevant ward councillors could set up a small event in a local community centre or school. It would be along the lines of Councillors in the Café but with more leaflets, newsletters and general information that we want to share.
- Councillors in the Café, could also become more mobile with Councillors taking a ride on the local WOCT bus services. 'Councillors on the Bus' provides a perfect opportunity to chat about things that matter to small groups of bus users at a time. This might also serve as an opportunity to let them know that the service is something that the Town Council has been instrumental in funding. Since most (though not all) of the bus users are older people, this will go some way to addressing the report that identifies Witney as an ageing town.





- A member of the Customer services team has expressed a wish to learn sign language when communicating with hearing impaired customers. This would be a good opportunity for staff to learn and could form part of a training plan for those that would like to undertake it. These are small things for marginal groups, but vital to some.
- Suggestion Boxes are still a useful way to gather instant feedback at our various sites – Tell Us About Your Visit Today. It is worth considering extending this to strategic locations such as libraries, surgeries or community centres, allowing residents who may prefer not to engage digitally or in person, to submit comments or suggestions anonymously.
- Explore offering an interactive activity at the Annual Town Meeting, such as a budget setting exercise to make the meeting more engaging. The activity needs to be quick and simple but at the same time thought provoking and a conversation starter. We are also looking to increase our engagement with under 18-year-olds at the Annual Town Meeting. Voting apps are likely to be something they are familiar with and comfortable using. These and similar apps could encourage other less confident residents to ask questions and participate in polls.
- **Webinars and Workshops. Use our new conferencing system to host live interaction webinars that focus on topics of interest or concern. Discussions could include councillors, officers and visiting experts.**



WITNEY
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WELCOME TO



Witney



ST. MARY THE VIRGIN,
CHURCH GREEN, WITNEY

- The travelling community seldom responds to written information but do come in to see officers when they have particular concerns or issues. They also encounter works team staff in the cemeteries. This may be the best opportunity to make contact or discuss with them any major or extended work taking place in the cemetery such as memorial testing, creation of new areas or other matters that will be of interest to them. The chapel would be an ideal place to have staff in place for a few hours on days when the work is taking place. We could offer refreshments and ensure that office staff that are particularly informed regarding cemeteries and burials are available there.
- Talking news could record our spring newsletter to ensure that visually impaired people have access to an audio copy. We do give them a grant and many residents are used to getting news from the Witney Gazette in this way.
- The convenience of our Admin Office in the town centre means that we pick up a lot of calls and visits that should be fielded by other councils or organisations.
- **Although we are a small team, we aspire to be the benchmark for helpful and caring customer services. Officers have produced a flyer with useful contacts and other regularly asked for information, for customers. We have a reputation for being polite and helpful and that is something we should acknowledge and take pride in.**

- The Town Council previously sent out meeting agendas to the local press – this might be worth doing again, though they are available on social media and that is where the Gazette gleans much of its information. It would increase the amount of messaging they receive from us and hopefully strengthen their awareness of us as reporters come and go.
- Extend the mailing list for our press releases and pass relevant news on to schools, community groups, youth organisations and housing associations to share via their own newsletters. It would be worthwhile ensuring that a handful of printed issues of all our quarterly letters are delivered to care homes as these may not be included as residential addresses for the issue that is usually mailed out.
- Invest in additional noticeboards. We no longer have a noticeboard at the Leys while the Courtside Construction is taking place so officers will request a budget for three new noticeboards at the Leys to capture the different demographics at the splash/skatepark, the new Coffee shed and along the path that connects Station Lane businesses with Church Green
- Live stream the Mayor's Carols for all that cannot attend.
- Councillors have expressed a wish to include greater focus on young people and work on consulting with care homes to ensure they are communicated with. Continue to survey ask our Youth Councillors to find out how they discover what is going on in and around Town, what their sources of news and events are, and how best to engage with other young people.



What We Already Do



- Police attend our meetings for an exchange of information
- The communication of the importance of consideration of Social Value and Biodiversity in our decision making (as in committee reports)
- Development of a Welcome to Witney Page with local information for newcomers to the town
- Digital signage
- Clear sign posting about TC services and responsibilities (Who Does What?)
- Clear and accessible website with reliable and up to date information
- Printed information in the form of newsletters, posters and other publications available to all. Last year we made the newsletter available on tables in 1863 in A5 format. The newsletter this year will be 8 pages A5 format and will be placed on tables again.
- Maps and leaflets of lake trails and emergency equipment such as defibrillators and life preservers.
- The admin office has leaflets containing useful information and contact numbers that they have compiled to hand out to customers.
- Annual Town Meeting
- Transparency- freely available minutes, agendas, policies and financial documents
- Broad range of Communications
 - o Press releases
 - o Newsletters
 - o Surveys
 - o Social media
 - o Posters
 - o In person events
- Staff and cross team meetings – to keep everyone informed and up to date so that they can confidently field enquiries and publicise reliable information
- Corporate branding and a recognisable logo. Building trust by highlighting that information is coming from a trustworthy and reliable source
- Employment of a Town Crier
- Custodianship of some historic civic artefacts and documents - .e.g older copies of local newspaper On the back of a Heritage Open Day event that showcased these, a member of the public who set up the Witney Memories Facebook page has asked if he can digitally scan all our old copies of gazettes to share on the page and in return he will provide us with digital copies too.

- Councillors in the café
- Attending third party events such as the carnival and using this as an opportunity to consult
- As a council take part in other consultations on matters that affect the town
- The Town Council is a consultee on Town planning applications
- Annual Residents' satisfaction survey has FREEPOST return to make sure anyone can reply for free.
- Survey responses are anonymous, because of the need for the protection of a large amount of personal data, but we can acknowledge and reply by creating You Said, We Did reports and posts
- Youth Council
- Consultations at all levels including simple consultations where appropriate- easy to take part - project specific consultations using stickers so children can select options for play equipment etc
- The Voice of Witney - opt-in feedback database
- Feedback cards and web surveys for Lake and Country Park and 1863 Café
- Parents of Young People feedback forms and Young People feedback forms



To Involve

- Witney flood prevention group have fed back how valued they felt. With the investment in desilting and sandbags and support of personal contact from officers, councillors and the works team. Again, this is resource intensive for a relatively small group, but of exceptional value to them. This is the case with some of our community engagement that perhaps does not reach a large number of people but the quality of that reach is hugely important to that target group.

An extract from their letter with some of the comments they made to us about their experience.

- o I wanted to thank you so much for your support in helping to improve our lives here and for making us feel more valued as a community.
- o I have spoken at a full Town Council meeting and at two committee meetings and was always met with respect and friendliness. When you're out of your comfort zone and a little nervous, that means a lot!
- o The residents were thrilled.
- o Thank you for taking the time to do that as it makes residents feel seen and cared about. You're always welcome to visit us.
- o The Town Operations team has helped to build sandbag walls in times of flooding and removed them when necessary, making residents feel less anxious.
- o We're very fortunate!

- Friends of the cemeteries
- Promoting community groups -Community Window
- Inclusivity and diversity group
- Mayor representing at events, openings and civic events





- Town Councillors represent the Council on outside bodies
- Attend Stakeholder and partner meetings – e.g. museum
- Officers attend area community, business and health forums
- We have working parties, task and finish groups and forum groups which can include members of the public.
- Encourage members of the public to attend and take part in meetings
- Apprentice scheme
- Work experience
- Our Admin Office is also registered as a WODC Safe Space (one of only 29 in Witney) which means that it offers a Safe Place for vulnerable people (such as those with dementia, learning disabilities or mental health needs) when they feel lost, worried or threatened while they're out and about in the town. The safe space is used by a very small minority but is absolutely crucial to those that do use it. It isn't just the elderly that use it. There have been interactions with other age groups that have needed to make use of it.
- Volunteers -Offer volunteer opportunities for community members to engage actively in council-led projects or events, fostering a sense of ownership and involvement
- Fairtrade Town
- Citizen of the Year Awards, acknowledging all the hard work that others do that benefit the town.
- Seasonal competitions –Christmas, Wild Witney etc.
- Cross generational events such as the Switch on event in the gallery room and Schools In Bloom wheelbarrows.
- The potential for resource sharing- such as our thermal camera
- Twinning Association support and promotion
- Collaboration and partnership working – a list of our partners is available on the website. Partnership working also includes initiatives such as Witney in Bloom, Schools in Bloom and the Tiny Forest.
- Although we have no direct business development remit, we do maintain a healthy relationship with local businesses and benefit from sponsorship by local businesses e.g. Christmas Trees and Lights. We have been invited to attend Town Centre forums which we previously facilitated and have recently been invited to the Chamber of Commerce meeting to explore the different services offered by Town and District Councils.
- Our events
- Civic events
- Community events
- 50th Anniversary events



- Promote democratic elections- ensure equal opportunities for people wanting to stand as councillors
- Encourage participation in elections, and in particular, voting in local elections
- Have a web page about what councillors do and how to become one. Promote recruitment of councillors and provide information for candidates
- Support new councillors with training and information that enables them to confidently represent and serve their communities as their elected
- Supporting local groups and events by providing grants and subsidised lettings such as the Music Festival. There has been some interest from the Music Festival and Youth Council in working together to support a 'Day of Culture'. This is a nice example of Community Engagement paying it forward.
- Subsidised Youth Services such as APCAM and The Station - Youth Outreach work to engage with young people we seldom hear from.
- The Mayor's Charities



Objectives	Actions
1. Plan and co-ordinate activities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify engagement opportunities across the council's activities and committees through internal comms meetings. • Collaborate in partnerships whenever possible and make the most effective use of our resources • Consider any possible collaboration/partnership and make the most effective use of our resources
2. Encourage active participation involvement from all communities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure accessibility and inclusion are considered for all events • Advertise events and other engagement in the areas where the target audience go • Hold appropriate events to encourage attendance from traditionally under-represented groups or areas
3. Be open and creative when consulting.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tailor methods of consulting to meet the specific needs of communities – young people , seniors etc • Define the most appropriate relevant, engaging and successful approaches to consultations. • Go to where the target audience are and adopt their preferred platforms and formats.
4. Promote transparency and build trust.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicate results from surveys and consultations and ensure they are used to inform the Council's policies, services and decision-making processes. • Find ways to demonstrate and communicate the impact of responses on the decision-making process and actions taken – such as You Said – We Did • Ensure our communications are truthful and the information we share is reliable
5. Build relationships.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to partner and support our community organisations • Demonstrate support for local community and business where possible by using local suppliers and engaging in relevant forums. • Continue to organise and attend our own and other community events and be visible and approachable at both

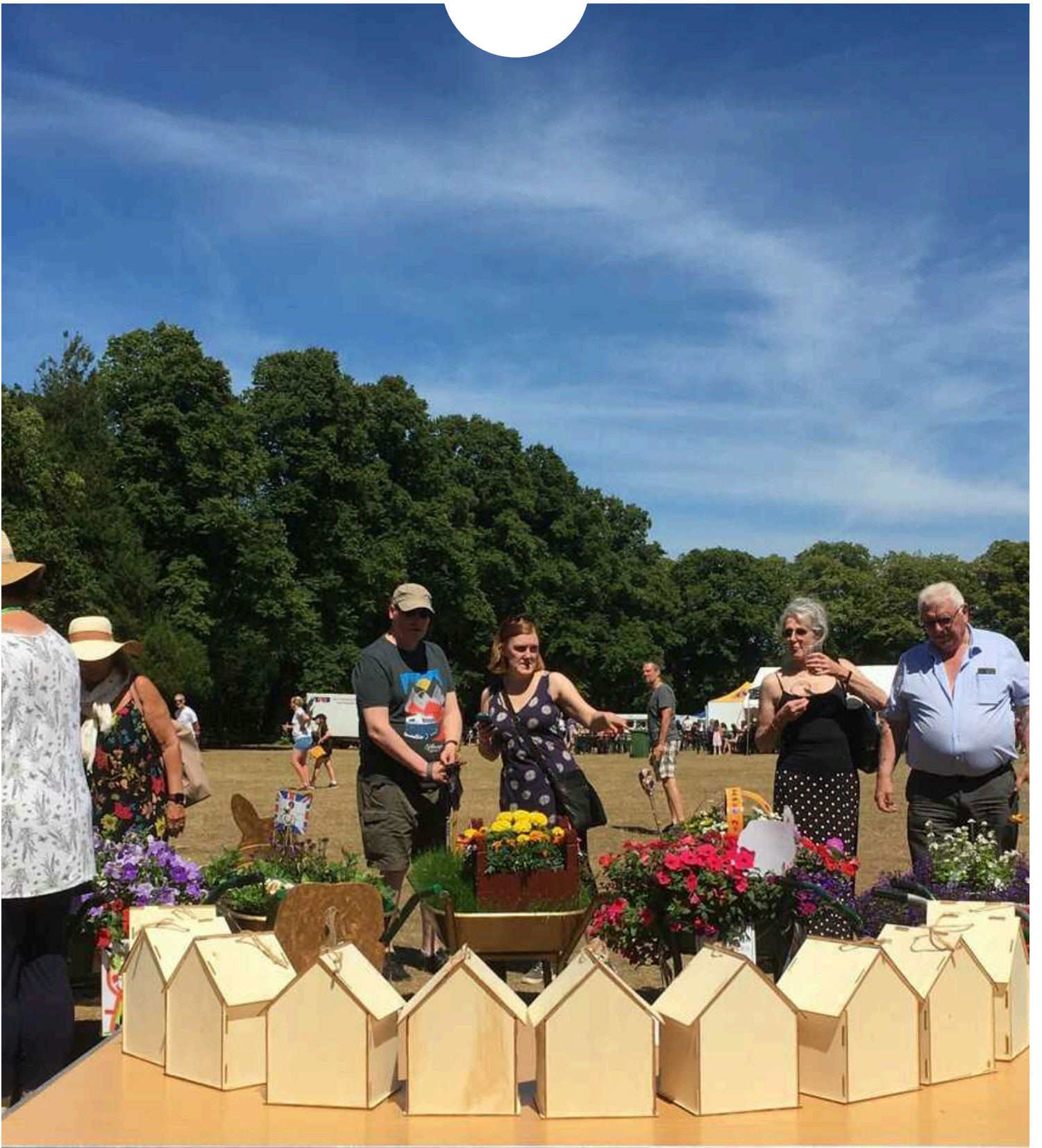
Evaluating and Measuring Success

We need to continuously review our Community Engagement activities and be prepared to be flexible and find new solutions and methods to improve Witney Town Council's relationships with residents.

It can be difficult to evaluate what works well and what approaches are less effective, but we can measure some success through tracking

- Attendance at meetings of the Council and the Annual Town Meeting.
- Number of responses received to surveys, the quality of those responses and diversity of the respondents – age, ethnicity etc.
- Metrics from the website and interactions on social media platforms
- Attendance at Witney Town Council events





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**Witney Town Council
Community Engagement Strategy 2024**