

**POLICY, GOVERNANCE & FINANCE COMMITTEE MEETING OF THE
WITNEY TOWN COUNCIL**

Held on Monday, 22 September 2025

At 6.02 pm in the Gallery Room, The Corn Exchange, Witney

Present:

Councillor R Smith (Chair)

Councillors:	R Crouch	G Doughty
	A Bailey	S Simpson
	J Doughty	G Meadows (In place of J Aitman)
	T Ashby	
Officers:	Sharon Groth	Town Clerk
	Adam Clapton	Deputy Town Clerk
	Derek Mackenzie	Senior Administrative Officer &
		Committee Clerk
Others:	None	

F540 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

An apology for absence was received from Cllr J Aitman with Cllr G Meadows attending as a substitute.

F541 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Cllr J & Cllr G Doughty declared personal, non-pecuniary interests in agenda item 22 as a resident at a property referred to in the report was known to them.

Later in the meeting, Cllr R Crouch declared a non-pecuniary interest in agenda item 22, noting that she was a member of the tennis club mentioned in the report.

F542 MINUTES

The minutes of the Policy, Governance & Finance Committee meeting held on 21 July 2025 were received.

There were no matters arising from the minutes.

Resolved:

That, the minutes of the Policy, Governance & Finance Committee meeting held on 21 July 2025 be approved as correct records of the meetings and be signed by the Chair.

F543 **PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

There was no public participation.

F544 **SUBSIDISED LETTING POLICY REVIEW**

The Committee received and considered a draft policy for the allocation of subsidised letting grants by the Council.

Members welcomed the policy, which had been requested at the previous meeting in response to the oversubscription of this year's budget. The policy would help prioritise funding requests and provide the Committee with greater flexibility to allocate funds based on community benefit. It was agreed that a point should be added to ensure funding approvals took place at the bi-annual meetings with a percentage of budget limits, helping to preserve funds for the latter part of the year.

It was also noted that hall hire costs had risen in line with inflation in recent years, while the budget allocated for this financial support had remained unchanged.

Resolved:

That, the Subsidised Letting Policy, subject to the above amendment with wording delegated to the Deputy Town Clerk, be approved and reviewed after one year.

F545 **LOST PROPERTY POLICY**

The Committee received and considered a draft policy for the management of lost property by the Council.

Members welcomed the comprehensive policy which clearly outlined expectations to anyone who lost property on Council premises.

Resolved:

That, the Lost Property Policy, as presented, be approved by Witney Town Council and reviewed after one year.

F546 **OPEN WATER POLICY**

The Committee received and considered a draft Open Water Policy for the Council.

Members welcomed the introduction of this policy, recognising its importance given the Council's responsibilities regarding open water facilities. The policy clearly outlined permitted activities, associated risks, and the mitigation measures in place within the Council's parks.

Resolved:

That, the Open Water Policy, as presented, be approved by Witney Town Council and reviewed every two years or sooner if legislation or operational needs changed.

F547 COMMUNITY WINDOW POLICY

The Committee received and considered a policy for the community window of the Council's reception/administration office.

The policy had been recommended for approval by the Stronger Communities Committee at its meeting on 15 September, the annual review incorporating health and safety measures.

Resolved:

That, the Community Window Policy, as presented, be approved for Witney Town Council.

F548 MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING POLICY

The Committee received and considered a Mental Health and Wellbeing policy for employees.

The policy had been recommended for approval by the Personnel Sub-Committee at its meeting on 10 September.

Resolved:

That, the Mental Health & Wellbeing Policy, as presented, be approved and reviewed every two years, or sooner if required by legislation or operational change.

F549 CORPORATE VOLUNTEERING POLICY

The Committee received and considered a Corporate Volunteering policy for employees.

The policy had been recommended for approval by the Personnel Sub-Committee at its meeting on 10 September.

Members welcomed the policy but agreed that the title could be revised to either "Charitable Volunteering" or "Employee Volunteering" to provide greater clarity. Questions were also raised regarding time off for other types of service, whilst the Town Clerk agreed to investigate the examples further she did advise that she was sure these would be set out in the 'Green Book' the National Joint Council (NJC) for local government services.

Resolved:

1. That, the Corporate Volunteering Policy, subject to the name change noted above, be approved for Witney Town Council and,
2. That, the Town Clerk/C.E.O refers back to the Personnel Sub Committee on points raised regarding other periods of time off.

F550 LONG SERVICE AWARD POLICY

The Committee received and considered a policy for the recognition of long service of employees.

The policy had been recommended for approval by the Personnel Sub-Committee at its meeting on 10 September to ensure fair and consistent recognition to staff members.

Members welcomed the policy and agreed that, under point 5, long service awards should be presented at the most appropriate and timely Council meeting. However, it was also agreed that all recognitions within the year should be celebrated at the Council's annual Civic Reception.

Resolved:

That, the Long Service Awards Policy, subject to the above amendment, be approved and reviewed every three years, or sooner if legislative or operational needs required it.

F551 PAYMENT OF ACCOUNTS

The Committee received the report of the Responsible Financial Officer (RFO) with the accompanying payment schedules, bank statements and reconciliations.

Officers noted the continued and growing use of electronic payments for June and July 2025.

Resolved:

That, the report, bank statements and reconciliations be noted, and the following schedule of payments be approved:

Payment reference	In the sum of:	Account
DDs, ELPs 97-123 (electronic payments) and Standing Orders June 2025	£185,901.47	General CB 1
Cheques 100060 and 35180-35181; DDs, BACs and Standing Orders June 2025	£9,650.85	Imprest CB 2
DDs, ELPs 124-140 and Standing Orders July 2025	£188,256.59	General CB 1
Cheque 35182, DDs and Standing Orders July 2025	£8,975.65	Imprest CB 2

F552 INTERNAL AUDIT REPORT 2025

The Committee received a verbal update on the Internal Audit report which had been agreed and submitted by the Council as part of its Annual Governance and Accountability Return.

Members noted a non-material error in the report which had the date of the first internal audit visit as 16 October 2025, when in fact it had been 2024. The error had been reported to the external auditor.

Officers advised the conclusion of the external audit had been received and a report would be prepared by the RFO for the Full Council meeting on 6 October 2025.

Resolved:

That, the non-material error in the Internal Audit report 2025 be noted.

F553 ANNUAL GOVERNANCE STATEMENT 2026 - ASSERTION 10

The Committee received the report of the Deputy Town Clerk which highlighted changes to the Annual Governance Statement for 2026.

Members were informed that updates to the Practitioners Guide, issued by the Smaller Authorities Proper Practices Panel, had introduced a new assertion 10 in the annual statements, requiring the Council to determine whether it met the relevant digital compliance standards.

Although this assertion applied to the 2026 statement, the requirements took effect immediately. It was noted that the Council was already compliant in the necessary areas.

Resolved:

That, the report be noted.

F554 APPROVAL OF LOAN

The Committee received notice of borrowing approval from the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government.

The RFO advised that this was a formal document enabling the Council to apply for a loan to support the West Witney project. Following its approval, tender documents had been published, with contracts expected to be awarded in November. This was likely to necessitate an Extraordinary Council meeting.

Members welcomed the information and were pleased the project had progressed to this stage. The final loan amount would be known on receipt of the tenders.

Resolved:

That, the approval of borrowing (for a loan) from the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government be noted.

During the following Agenda Item Cllr A Bailey left the meeting at 6:50pm rejoining at 6:55pm

F555 FINANCE REPORT

The Committee received and considered the report of the RFO detailing income and expenditure for budgets which were the responsibility of the committee and investments of the Council.

There were several questions from Members, including local government accounting practices, reinvestment of investment growth, the Councils overall financial holdings and the practice of the retention of existing budget lines into the following years budget.

The Committee was also invited to note information about a subscription to Breakthrough Communications, providing additional support with data governance and communications.

Members agreed that the service offered good value for money and would strengthen the Council's governance.

Finally, the Committee was informed that officers would be reviewing the budgets for the 2026-27 financial year and were asked to submit any capital or special revenue projects not previously raised at this time.

Resolved:

1. That, the report be noted and,
2. That, the management accounts of the Committee for the period 1 April to 30 June 2025 be approved and,
3. That, a subscription to Breakthrough Communications Council Hive service for the sum of £1,200 in the new financial year be approved and funded from existing budgets and,
4. That, the investment statement for July 2025 be noted and,
5. That, the subsidised lettings budget for 2026-27 be increased from £1,800 to £2,000 to help meet higher hall hire increases from previous years.

F556 BUDGET PARAMETERS 2026-27

The Committee received and considered the report of the RFO in relation to budget-setting for the 2026-27 fiscal year.

Members were advised it was good practice for the Council to formally agree the parameters within which the budget for 2026/27 would be prepared. The RFO had outlined the current position with suggested prudent estimated increases for inflation, staffing costs, utilities, insurance, and other expenditure lines, and sought the Committees endorsement, to enable him to work to these parameters when producing the draft budgets.

The RFO also provided information on consulting residents about the 2026-27 budget and how this could be accomplished within the limited timeframe for finalising the budget calculations. Members agreed that while a consultation would demonstrate transparency, it would only be valuable if the feedback could impact the final decision.

It was concluded that the consultation should consist of a small number of straightforward questions focused on prioritising key services, and that consideration be given to collecting postcode and age data to enhance the results analysis.

Resolved:

1. That, the report be noted and,
2. That, the budget parameters contained in the report be approved and,
3. That, consultation on the budget takes place, based on the prioritisation of services, with these delegated to officers to finalise.

F557 FINANCIAL MATTERS REFERRED FROM SPENDING COMMITTEES

The Committee received and considered the report of the Deputy Town Clerk concerning financial expenditure from spending committees.

By way of an update, officers advised that the potential cost of a newly made Witney town flag was likely to be between £200-400 based on initial quotes.

The Chair explained that, as a matter of historic practice, only approved expenditure was typically reported under this item, not requests that had been declined. However, given the community need reflected in the West Oxfordshire Community Transport (WOCT) new year grant application, the Chair of the Stronger Communities Committee was asked whether there had been any indication that Oxfordshire County Council might support the additional £2,500 required for the services. He responded that he would follow this up with the County Council. The Chair added that the item should be revisited to ensure the funding gap is addressed in some way.

Resolved:

1. That, the report be noted and,
2. That, the recommendations of the spending Committees as detailed be approved and,
3. That, the potential cost of a new town flag be noted and,
4. That, the decision not to provide further annual funding to WOCT remain under review.

F558 GRANTS & SUBSIDISED LETTINGS

The Committee received the joint report of the RFO and Deputy Town Clerk concerning grant activity to local organisations.

Members were informed that there had been two grant applications and one late subsidised letting request. They agreed to refuse the latter, as the budget for the year had already been fully allocated.

The Committee acknowledged the benefits of a grant for an e-bike to support community policing, especially given the incidents of antisocial behaviour over the summer but noted vehicles should form part of general policing operations. Approving the grant would assist in fulfilling the Council's obligations to prevent crime and disorder; however, it would also reduce funds available for other purposes. Therefore, it was agreed to approve a reduced amount of £1,000.

Regarding the contribution for the Christmas Lights switch-on event, Members noted that the requested amount exceeded previous years and was above the approved budget. Due to the difficulty of justifying and allocating additional funds mid-financial year, a reduced amount of £2,500 was approved.

Resolved:

1. That, the report be noted and,
2. That, Thames Valley Police Witney neighbourhood policing team be awarded a grant of £1,000 towards an e-bike for Witney and,
3. That, the Rotary Club of Witney be awarded a grant of £2,500 towards the 2025 Christmas Lights switch-on event and,
4. That, the Deputy Town Clerk write to the Rotary Club explaining the situation, asking for estimated costs for 2026-27 and,
5. That, these grants be awarded under the General Power of Competence and awardees be asked to acknowledge the Town Council in any promotional material and,
6. That, a late request for one day's subsidised letting by Circus Ginnett be declined and,
7. That, the updates regarding the Youth Services Grant be noted and,
8. That, the correspondence from Be Free Young Carers and Ducklington Sports Club be welcomed and noted.

A Member of the public joined the meeting at 7:58pm

F559 **SUSPENSION OF STANDING ORDER 5(W)**

Resolved:

That, Standing Order 5(w) be suspended in order to allow the meeting to continue as it had now lasted for two hours.

F560 **BROADCASTING OF COUNCIL MEETINGS**

The Committee received and considered the report of the Committee Clerk concerning the future live broadcasting of meetings.

This report had been referred from the previous meeting and confirmed the Council's technological capability for this purpose and proposed a start date as 13 January 2026.

Members confirmed their desire for residents to be able to observe the democratic process in January. They agreed that no additional procedures were necessary, as Councillors were already bound by the adopted Code of Conduct and meetings were expected to be managed appropriately by their Chairs.

Resolved:

1. That, the report be noted and,
2. That, the live broadcasting of Council meetings begins on 13 January 2026 and be reviewed after six months.

F561 **EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC**

Resolved:

That in accordance with section (1(2) of the Public Bodies (admission to Meetings) Act 1960, and as extended by Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972, the public, including the press, be excluded from the meeting because of the confidential nature of the following business to be transacted.

The Member of the public left the meeting at 8:10pm

F562 **STRATEGIC PROPERTY, LEGAL & INSURANCE MATTERS**

The Committee received and considered the confidential report of the Town Clerk/C.E.O.

Members were provided with updates on a range of property and lease matters, including the Leys Hub Development, West Witney Tennis Courts, and the Clubhouse.

In relation to the Leys, members noted the Heads of Terms prepared by Officers in consultation with the Council's professional property advisors, which had been circulated prior to the meeting. Discussion took place on the proposed level of rent, and the Town Clerk was instructed to negotiate this further with the tenants. An update was also given on the infrastructure supporting the tennis courts at West Witney Sports Ground, and it was agreed that the tenants should submit an invoice for the costs incurred in carrying out repairs.

Prior to Officers drafting Heads of Terms for the eventual lease of the clubhouse at West Witney Sports Ground, the Committee were being asked to consider the responsibility and future management of the sports changing rooms, given that these facilities were to have separate access from the social club. Members emphasised that all sports ground users must be able to access them in the future regardless of membership to the sports and social club, and that this requirement should be clearly reflected in any lease.

Estate matters were also discussed, with members agreeing that an external review of the Council's grounds maintenance should be undertaken as good practice, following three years of in-house operation. In addition, a decision was taken regarding how the Council should proceed with an issue concerning amenity land at Thorney Leys.

Resolved:

1. That the confidential report be noted;
2. That the Council's legal position on the Leys Hub Development be noted, and that Bidwells be instructed to progress the terms of the lease and rent level as set out in the Heads of Terms and as discussed;
3. That Witney Lawn Tennis Club submit an invoice for the fencing repairs; and
4. That use of the changing room and toilet facilities at West Witney be protected for the benefit of all sports users.
5. That, the Council commissions an external, independent audit of its in-house grounds maintenance service and,
6. That, the issue surrounding amenity land at Thorney Leys be referred to West Oxfordshire District Council.

F563 HR & HEALTH & SAFETY SUPPORT

The Committee received and considered the confidential report of the Town Clerk/C.E.O regarding human resources and health & safety advice for the Council.

Members welcomed the report and agreed a contract should be taken out with the company outlined in the report for human resources and health & safety add-ons as it was hoped it would reduce the Council's overall costs.

Resolved:

1. That, the confidential report be noted and,
2. That, the Council commits to a contract with CIPD HR-Inform Pro as outlined in the report.

F564 MINUTES - PERSONNEL SUB COMMITTEE 10 SEPTEMBER 2025

The Committee received the minutes of the Personnel Sub Committee meeting held on 10 September 2025.

Resolved:

That, the confidential minutes of the Personnel Sub-Committee meeting held on 10 September 2025, and the recommendations contained therein be approved.

The meeting closed at: 9.08 pm

Chair