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<b>Agenda Item:</b>	Community Engagement Report
<b>Meeting Date:</b>	Monday, 26 January 2026
<b>Contact Officer:</b>	Communications & Community Engagement Officer

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The purpose of this report is to inform Councillors about proposed projects, events and activities that will provide opportunities for engaging with the community.

### **Current Situation**

#### **Witney: Past Present and Future Working Party**

Arrangements to commemorate St George's day are taking shape. The idea is to produce a small scale, family friendly formulaic plan that can be reused as needed. This year the day falls on Thursday which is market day. As a result, the flag raising and town cry will take place on Thursday 23<sup>rd</sup> April and the main bulk of the other events will take place on Sunday 26<sup>th</sup>.

Minutes of the Working Party meeting are viewable as a sub section to this report.

Those organisations and groups that have responded to invitations to participate have, for the most part, agreed to take part. Overall engagement has been positive, indicating a willingness across the community to support the initiative.

However, some reservations have been expressed. One adult group has agreed to participate while describing the subject as a potential "hot potato." In addition, the leader of a youth organisation has provided a tentative response, explaining that while the initiative is seen as a positive expression of national pride, there is some nervousness among the young people due to the area's multicultural and diverse nature. Their concern is that participation could be misinterpreted as endorsing extremist views in the current political climate. The leader has indicated that they will seek to reassure the group and provide a further response in due course.

#### **Advent Fayre Feedback**

During this year's Advent Fayre the Council received requests from several families as to the possibility of reserving a couple of hours as SEND sessions.

This is easy to put into place and would probably work best at either end of the day, providing that sufficient materials were in reserve for the later session. It would also be possible to have some activities that are suitable for all but of a particularly sensory nature or appealing to those with neurodiversity.

### **Gallery Room Christmas Engagement 2025**

This year, the Gallery Room was made available for Witney's Young Carers to watch the switch-on, enjoy refreshments, and take part in crafting activities, which was very well received. The Ice Centre has expressed an interest for 2026.

### **Witney Carnival 2026**

Carnival stalls are now available. Traditionally, Witney Town Council has hosted a stall where members of the public judge the school's planted wheelbarrows as part of the In Bloom competition. The wheelbarrows are delivered by the Works Team, along with a gazebo, tables, and chairs, ready for set-up.

However, the wheelbarrows are very heavy, and there are practical issues with continuing this as part of the WTC stand. While the stall is well-staffed during the day, take-down has often fallen to staff and volunteers, who have limited assistance in returning the wheelbarrows to the old depot. Additionally, if Courtside is operational by July, there may be no suitable storage for the wheelbarrows over the remainder of the weekend ahead of them being distributed to Care Homes for the summer.

The Council will therefore need to consider additional staff resources to assist with wheelbarrow handling at the start and end of Carnival Day, or whether the wheelbarrows should no longer be featured as part of the Council's stall.

### **Heritage Open Day (HOD) 2026 -11- 20 September**

The Council had not planned to hold an event for HOD this year and therefore there is no budget for one, but the theme this year is very appropriate to Witney and makes for a great partnership with the Museum and Blanket Hall. The theme is based around the everyday histories of working lives:

The butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker - what did your ancestors do? From factory floors to kitchen counters, school desks to sailors' docks, serving halls to vegetable gardens. Exploring the daily routines of different jobs, the skills required, the people that did them and the places that housed them all.

It is proposed the Council does a day and a half over Friday afternoon 3pm to 8pm and Saturday morning 9am to 1pm to give fair access to schools and people who work. Officers suggest an exhibition in the Gallery Room with Lift the Flap quiz reveals and 'feely bags' to give clues to occupations. Perhaps some oral histories from the Museum of Blanket Hall. Example of a Lift the flap. Outside illustration of sacks and scales, text says:

"I light the fire before most of the town is awake. By breakfast time, my hands are white with dust.

I earn around 18 shillings a week"

Beneath the flap is a baker with loaves of bread.

## Request to Fly Europe Flag

A request has been received to fly the European Flag from the Town Hall on 5<sup>th</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> May annually. The details are included as **Appendix A**. The relevant criteria for flag flying from the Council's policy is included below.

### *6. Requests to Fly Other Flags*

*Witney Town Council welcomes engagement from the community and will consider requests to fly or display other flags in line with the following:*

- 1. Requests must be submitted in writing to the Council and approved by the relevant Committee and/or Full Council through a formal resolution. Please note, many flags require planning consent from the local Planning Authority to fly.*
- 2. The Council reserves the right to refuse any request associated with political parties, groups, or organisations, or any request that may bring the Council into disrepute. The Council must remain politically neutral, and its decision is final.*
- 3. The Council will not purchase flags on behalf of third parties. Successful applicants may provide their own flag to the specified size, and donations will be acknowledged in Council minutes.*
- 4. The Council will store donated flags safely but cannot accept responsibility for wear, damage, or replacement.*
- 5. Flags will normally be displayed for a single day corresponding with the relevant campaign or commemoration, subject to staffing availability.*

## 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 –

All proposed projects and events aim to be inclusive and accessible to all residents, supporting equal participation across the community.

### b) Biodiversity –

No direct impact on biodiversity is anticipated from these activities. Outdoor events will continue to use existing green spaces responsibly.

### c) Crime & Disorder –

Community events and engagement activities promote civic pride and positive social interaction, contributing to a reduction in anti-social behaviour.

### d) Environment & Climate Emergency –

Events and communications will consider environmental impact, minimising waste and promoting sustainable practices in line with the Council's Climate Emergency declaration.

## **Risk**

Councillors should note potential risks relating to event management, staffing capacity, and weather conditions for outdoor activities. Appropriate risk assessments will be undertaken for each project to minimise liability.

- Risks are considered low and manageable through established procedures and officer oversight.
- There is a risk that the Council agrees to fly the Europe flag it may be perceived as contrary to the aims of celebrating local and national pride recently debated by this Committee.

## **Social Value**

Council-led events and partnerships create opportunities for community connection, volunteering, and cultural enrichment. Initiatives such as Heritage Open Day Events and the Carnival involvement strengthen community identity and wellbeing.

These projects deliver strong social value by supporting local groups, encouraging participation, and enhancing civic engagement.

## **Financial**

All activities will be delivered within existing budgets apart from Heritage Open Day. Event costs and officer time will be managed to ensure best value for the community.

## **Recommendations**

Members are invited to note the report and:

1. a) Consider endorsing the proposed small-scale, family-friendly, and reusable format for St George's Day events, with activities split across Market Day (Thursday 23 April) and Sunday 26 April.
- b) To note the concerns raised by some participating groups regarding perceptions of the St George's Day event and support officers in continuing to position the event as inclusive, civic, and community-focused, rather than political or ideological.
2. Consider approving the introduction of dedicated SEND friendly sessions at future Advent Fayres, to be scheduled at the start and/or end of the day.
3. To note the success of the Gallery Room provision for Witney Young Carers during the Christmas switch-on and consider use by the Ice Centre for 2026, subject to capacity and safeguarding considerations.
4. Consider and determine one of the following options for Witney Carnival 2026:

Consider whether additional staff resources provide assistance with the delivery, set-up, and removal of the planted wheelbarrows on Carnival Day, subject to staffing availability and health and safety considerations; or

That the planted wheelbarrows no longer form part of the Town Council's Carnival stall, in recognition of manual handling risks, storage constraints (particularly if Courtside is operational), and staff welfare considerations.

**5.** Support officers in developing a low-cost partnership event for Heritage Open Day 2026, working with Witney Museum and the Blanket Hall, despite no budget being pre-allocated.

**6.** Consider the request to fly the Europe Flag from the Town Hall.