

**CLIMATE & BIODIVERSITY COMMITTEE MEETING OF THE
WITNEY TOWN COUNCIL**

Held on Tuesday, 19 May 2026

At 6.00 pm in the Gallery Room, The Corn Exchange, Witney

Present:

Councillor S Simpson (Chair)

Councillors:	J Robertshaw	R Smith
	J Aitman	J Doughty
	G Meadows	
Officers:	Derek Mackenzie	Senior Administrative Officer & Committee Clerk
	Janine Sparrowhawk	Compliance & Environment Officer
	Carl Whitehead	Biodiversity & Green Spaces Officer
Others:	One member of the public.	

CB243 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

An apology for absence was received from Councillor D Newcombe.

It was also noted that Cllr R Smith was running late however would be joining the meeting.

CB244 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest from Members or Officers.

CB245 ELECTION OF VICE-CHAIR

The Chair called for nominations for the position of Vice-Chair of the Committee.

It was proposed and seconded that Councillor G Meadows be elected. There being no other nominations, it was:

Resolved:

That, Councillor Georgia Meadows be elected Vice-Chair of the Committee for the 2026/27 municipal year.

CB246 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

The Committee adjourned for this item.

The committee received representations from a resident concerning Agenda Item 9 who shared his thoughts on the proposals for the introduction of PV Solar panels as well as wider climate action activity.

The Committee reconvened.

CB247 MINUTES

The minutes of the Climate & Biodiversity Committee meeting held on 13 January 2026 were received.

CB28 – An update was provided on the progress of the Nature Verges projected being spearheaded by a resident. Members heard that engagement was ongoing between the Council, Oxfordshire County Council and the neighbouring parish councils of Minster Lovell, Hailey and Curbridge. The Biodiversity & Green Spaces Officer was also due to meet with the group for an onsite visit in June.

Resolved:

That, the minutes of the Climate & Biodiversity Committee meeting held on 13 January 2026 be approved as a correct record of the meetings and be signed by the Chair.

CB248 FINANCE REPORT

The Committee received and considered the report of the Responsible Financial Officer (RFO) detailing income and expenditure for budgets which were the responsibility of the committee.

A question arose from a Member regarding income from fishing rights, it was confirmed that it was not expected that the Newland Angling Club, who historically had utilised fishing rights on the river section within the Country Park, would be replaced by any other entity.

Resolved:

1. That, the report be noted and,
2. That, the management accounts of the Climate & Biodiversity Committee for the period to 31 March 2026 be approved.

CB249 COMMITTEE TERMS OF REFERENCE

The Committee considered whether any changes were needed to the current Terms of Reference.

It was unanimously agreed that the following additional term be added to reflect the oversight of the Climate & Biodiversity Working Party.

(k) To oversee the work of the Council's Climate Action Working Party.

Recommended:

That, the Terms of Reference including the above suggested change be recommended for approval by the Full Council at the meeting of 13 July 2026.

CB250 ANNUAL RESIDENTS SURVEY RESULTS

The Committee received and considered the report of the Deputy Town Clerk concerning the results of the residents' annual satisfaction survey, which was conducted at the beginning of the year.

Members were advised that the report represented the survey results for services within the remit of this Committee, presenting combined 'satisfactory', 'good' and 'excellent' responses alongside negative feedback. Comparative data from previous years was included to assist with benchmarking performance trends. The report also contained all unedited comments received in relation to the services.

Members welcomed the overall increase in satisfaction ratings and noted the positive comments received, particularly in relation to the Country Park, where accessibility improvements were recognised as having made a significant impact. Clarification was provided regarding comments about the use of material to fill holes on the lake pathway. It was confirmed that the material used is binding ballast, which is appropriate for this type of surface; when damp, it forms a firm, durable compound, although it may initially appear dusty in dry conditions.

The Committee noted that the cycle stand had been temporarily removed to facilitate the installation of new noticeboards, with works nearing completion, and requested that the cycle stand be reinstated as soon as possible.

Concern was expressed regarding the reduction in responses from residents under the age of 18. Members agreed that further work should be undertaken to raise awareness of the Country Park and lake, recognising it as a valuable community asset. It was suggested that this could include increased promotion through social media and other channels, as well as exploring opportunities to involve the Youth Council in supporting engagement and awareness-raising initiatives.

Members placed on record their appreciation for the continued hard work and commitment of the Operations Team, Ranger, and Biodiversity and Green Spaces Officer in delivering and maintaining high-quality services.

Resolved:

1. That the report be noted;
2. That officers explore opportunities to increase awareness and usage of the Country Park and lake, particularly among younger residents, including through social media and engagement with the Youth Council; and
3. That the cycle stand be reinstated at the earliest opportunity following completion of the noticeboard works.

CB251 CLIMATE ACTION PLAN REPORT

The Committee received and considered the report of the Compliance and Environment Officer (C&EO) providing an update on the Council's Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan.

The C&EO presented the report, advising that it was a detailed and comprehensive document covering a wide range of climate-related priorities. Members were informed that, following a period of competing operational demands, the C&EO was in a position to progress the proposals within the Action Plan. It was also noted that, as previously requested by Members, colour

coding had been incorporated into the Action Plan to clearly identify priority actions requiring more immediate attention.

Members noted the findings of the energy assessments commissioned through Energy Solutions Oxfordshire for the Council's buildings. It was reported that a recent assessment of the Windrush Cemetery Depot (undertaken in December 2025) identified a range of potential energy efficiency measures, many of which could be progressed through existing maintenance budgets, alongside further opportunities such as solar photovoltaic panels and alternative heating systems. The building was fully electric, with relatively modest annual energy costs, and therefore presents opportunities for targeted improvements to further reduce emissions.

Members further noted the assessment of the Corn Exchange, completed in April 2026, which highlighted the building as the Council's largest energy consumer in terms of electricity, gas and water usage. The report identified a number of potential improvements; however, it also noted that further investigation would be required where limited data was available, particularly in relation to insulation and building fabric. Members acknowledged that, due to the building's scale and usage, it offered significant potential for carbon reduction, particularly through measures such as solar panel installation and improved energy efficiency controls.

In relation to Burwell Hall, Members heard that the assessment was undertaken in 2022 and that improvements had already been made since that time, including the upgrade of the gas boiler system. The report identified additional opportunities for further savings through fabric improvements, enhanced controls, and renewable energy installations. In response to a question, it was confirmed that an updated assessment could be commissioned; however, this would incur an additional cost. Members agreed that the existing report continued to provide a sufficient evidence base for the time being and that a further assessment was not currently required.

The Committee welcomed the benchmarking information included within the report and expressed particular interest in the significant emissions reductions achieved by Corsham Town Council. Members recommended that the C&EO engage with those councils, especially Corsham, to better understand the measures implemented and associated costs, with a view to applying relevant learning to Witney's own approach.

Members also considered the Council's first Eco Fair held in October 2025 and agreed that a further event should be planned for autumn 2026. Discussion took place regarding the merits of holding the event on a weekday or at the weekend. It was noted that while weekday events may support attendance from partner organisations and council stakeholders, a weekend event could enable greater participation from residents, volunteers, and smaller community groups. Members agreed that further exploration of format and promotion would be beneficial to maximise engagement. In addition, it was suggested that climate- and energy-focused organisations could be invited to attend existing "Councillors at the Café" sessions to further raise awareness of the Council's climate objectives.

In relation to funding, Members considered how the allocated £50,000 capital budget for carbon reduction projects could best be utilised, and how this may be enhanced by matched funding available through Energy Solutions Oxfordshire's Green Fund. It was suggested that priority projects could include energy improvement works at Windrush Cemetery Depot (estimated at approximately £14,000) and the installation of solar panels at the Corn Exchange (estimated at approximately £34,000).

Members agreed that further detailed consideration of these options was required and therefore agreed that a Climate Action Working Party meeting be convened on 11 June 2026 to review the proposals in more detail. It was proposed by Cllr R Smith, seconded by Cllr J Doughty, and unanimously agreed that officers should scope the proposals further and present options to that meeting to inform recommendations on the allocation of the budget.

Recommended:

1. That the report be noted;
2. That authority be delegated to officers to scope options for the allocation of the £50,000 carbon reduction budget and report back to the Climate Action Working Party meeting scheduled for 11 June 2026;
3. That officers engage with other councils, including Corsham Town Council, to gather information on effective carbon reduction measures and the associated costs they incurred; and
4. That a further Eco Fair be considered for autumn 2026, with the Climate Action Working Party to further explore the format, including the potential for a weekend event, and improved promotion and engagement opportunities.

CB252 SEASONAL PLANTING SCHEMES

The Committee received and considered the report of the Head of Operations and Estates (H&O), as presented by the Biodiversity & Green Spaces Officer (B&GSO).

The B&GSO advised Members that the report outlined proposals for the future delivery of the Council's seasonal planting scheme. It was highlighted that there would be a short-term increase in costs associated with the purchase and planting of perennials; however, this approach would deliver environmental and financial benefits over the longer term. Members were informed that, with the establishment of the new depot facility, there was now capacity to lift and store certain bulbs over the winter period, enabling reuse and reducing future purchase costs. It was noted that, when considered over a number of years, the overall financial outlay should remain broadly comparable.

The Committee considered the proposal to move towards a mixed planting approach, incorporating both perennials and seasonal planting, and expressed support for this direction.

Members highlighted the current planting at Church Green as a positive example of the visual and environmental benefits of the towns approach, with one Member noting that similar attractive planting schemes appeared to have been adopted by Henry Box School within its grounds.

A Member raised the proposed wildflower planting at Deer Park Roundabout, Officers reported that operational challenges had arisen, with the initial maintenance and practical considerations being highlighted. It was therefore agreed that a further report be presented to the next meeting of the Climate Action Working Party scheduled for 11 June 2026, to enable a more detailed consideration and to inform a decision on how the Council should proceed with this location.

Members were unanimous in their support for the recommendations set out within the report.

Resolved:

1. That the proposed transition to a mixed planting scheme incorporating perennials and seasonal planting be approved; and
2. That a further report on the Deer Park Roundabout wildflower planting be presented to the Climate Action Working Party meeting on 11 June 2026 for consideration.

CB253 BIODIVERSITY UPDATE

The Committee received the report along with a verbal update from the Biodiversity & Green Spaces Officer (B&GSO).

Members were advised that a name had been proposed for the new community orchard at the Country Park, with "Railway Orchard" put forward for consideration. The Committee agreed to adopt this name and requested that its existence be promoted more widely within the community to encourage awareness and use.

The B&GSO also provided an update on the Council's Green Flag Award application, which was nearing submission. It was noted that the application had been strengthened in response to feedback received previously, with a more detailed and comprehensive submission being prepared. Members were informed that a fee of £500 would be required for the resubmission.

Members discussed the importance of recognising the Council's achievements in biodiversity and environmental management. It was suggested that any awards received by the Town Council in respect of its biodiversity objectives should be shared with the Planning & Development Committee, to support and strengthen the Council's responses to larger-scale applications within the parish.

Recommended:

1. That the report be noted;
2. That the name "Railway Orchard" be approved for the new community orchard at the Country Park;
3. That the orchard be actively promoted to the local community;
4. That the update regarding the Green Flag Award application, including the associated resubmission fee, be noted; and
5. That any biodiversity-related awards received by the Council be shared with the Planning & Development Committee.

CB254 LAKE & COUNTRY PARK REPORT

The Committee received and considered the report of the Biodiversity & Green Spaces Officer (B&GSO), together with a verbal update.

Members were advised that external grant funding of £4,500 had been secured and was being utilised to support activities within the Lake and Country Park area. This included the provision of a lectern board and noticeboard at Mill Meadow and the Avenue Two entrance as well as additional seating, aimed at improving visitor information, engagement, and interpretation of the site.

The B&GSO reported that water quality testing at the lake was ongoing and had now reached a stage where sufficient data had been collected. Members were informed that a detailed report

on the findings would be presented to the Committee at its meeting scheduled for 8 September 2026.

Members also heard that discussions were ongoing with Synolos, who had expressed an interest in supporting the Country Park through the provision of volunteer assistance. This was welcomed as a positive opportunity to enhance maintenance and biodiversity work within the park as well as volunteer enrichment.

The Committee was informed of proposals to create a small, informal natural area within the park designed specifically for young children visiting the site. This space would enable children to sit, explore, and engage with the natural environment. Members were supportive of this initiative, recognising its value in promoting early understanding of environmental and biodiversity principles.

It was further noted that work was continuing to improve and establish pathways around the lake. Members welcomed that this work was being supported in part through external grant funding, thereby reducing the financial impact on the Council.

Resolved:

1. That the report be noted;
2. That a further report on lake water quality testing be presented to the Committee on 8 September 2026.
3. That the proposed use of a designated natural area for young children to support early learning and engagement with the environment be approved;

CB255 NATIONAL EMERGENCY BRIEFING

The Committee received and considered the report of the Committee Clerk regarding the National Emergency Briefing film.

Members agreed that hosting a screening would be beneficial and supported the proposal to hold an afternoon showing on 27 July 2026, with a particular focus on encouraging attendance from younger people. It was noted that though the film carries a 12A rating, there was additional guidance that those under the age of 16 should be accompanied by an adult.

Members discussed opportunities to enhance the event and recommended that The Station be approached to explore their involvement, including supporting promotion of the showing, potential use of their hot chocolate van and potentially participating in, or chairing, a discussion following the screening.

It was agreed that Members seek to attend one of the other local screenings taking place in advance of the proposed event, to assess the suitability of the film for a younger audience. Members also suggested that local schools could be engaged to help promote the event ahead of the summer holidays, noting that the proposed date would fall within the holiday period and therefore maximise accessibility for young people.

In addition, Members supported the invitation of the local Member of Parliament to attend the event, recognising that the film's objective was to raise awareness of climate change issues at a national level.

Resolved:

1. That the report be noted;
2. That an afternoon screening of the National Emergency Briefing film be shown on 27 July 2026, with a focus on engaging younger audiences;
3. That Members attend alternative local screenings in advance to assess the suitability of the film for younger viewers;
4. That The Station be approached to explore opportunities to support and participate in the event;
5. That local schools be engaged to help promote the screening; and
6. That the local Member of Parliament be invited to attend the event.

CB256 DEFRA BIODIVERSITY CONSULTATION

The Committee received and considered the correspondence regarding the DEFRA consultation on Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG), which proposed an exemption for residential development on brownfield land.

Members discussed the implications of the proposed changes and expressed concern regarding the potential impact on biodiversity within Witney. It was noted that all development sites within the parish were brownfield, and as such, any exemption applied to this category could have a significant cumulative effect locally.

Members highlighted that, while brownfield land was often perceived as having limited ecological value, it could in practice support important habitats and form part of wider ecological networks. Concern was expressed that relaxing BNG requirements could result in a loss of biodiversity and undermine the progress made both nationally and locally.

The Committee emphasised the importance of ensuring that development continues to deliver environmental improvements and supported the principle that new developments should be at least as biodiverse as existing sites and ideally deliver measurable enhancements.

Members further noted the significant work undertaken by the Town Council to improve biodiversity across its estate, including initiatives supporting insects, small mammals, reptiles, wildflower planting, and the creation of nature corridors. It was agreed that these efforts should not be put at risk by any weakening of current requirements.

The Committee agreed that a clear and robust response should be submitted to DEFRA, reflecting these concerns and reinforcing the importance of maintaining strong biodiversity protections within the planning system.

Recommended:

1. That the report be noted; and
2. That officers draft a response to the DEFRA consultation for circulation to Members, prior to submission.

CB257 ANNUAL COMMUNITY PAYMENTS FROM RENEWABLE ENERGY

The Committee received and considered correspondence from Oxfordshire County Council's relating to the consultation on annual community payments from renewable energy.

Members discussed the content and noted the length and complexity of the survey questions. It was therefore agreed that a coordinated response on behalf of the Town Council would be prepared, ensuring alignment with the Council's climate objectives and its commitment to supporting renewable energy initiatives.

In doing so, attention was drawn to one of the Committee's Terms of Reference which was to *"explore and promote the expansion of community energy to keep the benefits of our local energy generation in our local economy"*. It was agreed that this principle should be reflected within the Council's response.

The Committee agreed that the submission would be made jointly by the Leader of the Council, the Chair of the Committee, and the Deputy Leader. Members also noted that individual councillors were able to submit their own responses should they wish to do so.

The delegation to the three Members was supported in order to ensure that a clear, consistent, and considered response could be prepared in an efficient manner, reflecting the Council's strategic priorities and commitment to community energy.

Recommended:

1. That the correspondence be noted; and
2. That it be delegated to the Leader of the Council, the Chair of the Committee, and the Deputy Leader to prepare a response on behalf of the Town Council.

The meeting closed at: 7.40 pm

Chair