
Agenda Item:	Communications Report
Meeting Date:	Monday, 21 st September 2026
Contact Officer:	Communications and Community Engagement Officer

The purpose of this report is to update councillors on various communication matters.

Current Situation

Podcasting

Officers have been asked to consider the potential for the Town Council to produce a podcast as an additional way of communicating with residents and promoting local organisations, businesses, events, and community activity. Podcasting could provide a more informal and accessible means of communication, helping to put a human face to the Council and reach residents who may not engage with traditional Council communications.

Officers have reviewed podcasts produced by other town councils. The majority were established during the Covid-19 pandemic, and available listening and viewing figures are generally very low, with most attracting single-figure audiences. This is also broadly consistent with the Council's experience of live streaming its meetings, which currently receive very few views.

There would be financial and staff resource implications, as the Council does not currently have the necessary equipment and would either need to purchase this or outsource production. Podcasting is also labour intensive, requiring time to develop content, arrange guests, record, edit, publish and promote episodes. The resource and cost would therefore need to be considered against the likely audience and the reach that can be achieved through existing communication channels.

If pursued, the content would need to be creative and focused on subjects residents would genuinely find interesting, rather than simply recording Council meetings or routine Council business. A small pilot could therefore be considered, with audience figures, resident feedback and actual production costs reviewed to establish whether the benefits provide sufficient value for money to justify continuing the service.

Budget Survey 2027-28

Last year's budget survey was developed at short notice, with limited time available before the budget meeting. The Communication and Community Engagement Officer felt that the survey was too long and onerous and could discourage residents from completing it.

However, there was insufficient time to make significant changes before it was issued. The survey received 45 responses.

This year, the survey is being launched earlier in the budget-setting process, with a closing date one month earlier than last year. This provides additional time to review the approach and make improvements where appropriate.

The previous survey included a substantial amount of explanatory information and asked residents to rank each service within each committee area. Asking respondents to rank 8–11 individual services requires them to make relatively fine distinctions between priorities. This can make the survey more demanding to complete and is particularly cumbersome when completed on a mobile device.

To make the survey more concise and accessible, residents could instead be asked to identify their top three priorities overall. This provides a clearer indication of what matters most to residents, while significantly reducing the time and effort required to complete the survey.

Copies of the original survey and the revised, more concise version are attached as **Appendices A and B** respectively.

Witney Town Guide (minute no SC304(4) refers)

A follow-up meeting was held with the Town Guide team and Councillor Thomas Ashby (Chair of the Stronger Communities Committee, to explore whether the Town Guide could provide a supplementary channel for Council communications, perhaps serving as part of The Welcome to Witney project. There are four printed copies available at this meeting for members to explore.

A number of questions were raised in response to costs, commerciality, and business models – responses are provided in confidential **Appendix C**.

Website –Translate page, Accessibility Compliance contract proposal

The Council was approached to consider an Accessibility Monitoring Programme and reporting system (**Confidential Appendices D and E**). The programme would provide quarterly independent reviews of a selection of randomly chosen pages, highlighting accessibility issues, suggesting remedial action, and providing guidance as an evidence trail. The cost would be £2,400 + VAT per annum for three years. Councillors may wish to consider whether this additional independent assurance would be beneficial.

In the meantime, the Council's Communications team continues to make regular progress on website accessibility, addressing new requirements as they arise while also working through legacy issues. Officers use the free WAVE accessibility checker alongside manual reviews to identify and address issues. An internal spreadsheet (**Appendix F**) is maintained as an audit trail, recording pages reviewed or amended, issues identified and the fixes made. This provides a clear record of the Council's ongoing accessibility work and progress should the

website be subject to an accessibility review or audit. *It is included for internal information only for Members.*

Work includes removing outdated content and images, improving screen-reader compatibility, adding alt text where required, ensuring appropriate use of headings and paragraphs, and improving navigation. The website has also recently been enhanced to allow users to translate content into multiple languages, where possible. Accessibility work is undertaken alongside other priorities, with resources focused on this area as operational demands allow.

The Monitoring programme would provide an additional level of independent monitoring, but the Council's existing combination of free checking tools, manual reviews and its ongoing audit trail provides a structured approach to identifying and addressing accessibility issues. The Council will continue to review its approach as accessibility requirements develop.

Spring Newsletter

Councillors are asked to consider and make a decision on how the Spring Newsletter should be distributed, with the associated cost to be considered as part of the budget-setting process.

Both Royal Mail and hand-delivery systems have experienced distribution issues in previous years, while a hybrid approach has also resulted in some areas being missed. The hand-delivery company used last year was particularly open to providing evidence in the form of delivery maps, which gave the Council greater visibility of the areas covered. Encouragingly, two or three survey respondents specifically commented that this was the first time they had received a Council newsletter, though some councillors had not received a copy.

No distribution method has proved to be completely infallible. As Witney continues to grow, finding a system that can provide comprehensive coverage at a reasonable cost, while also being able to cope with the increasing scale of the town, is becoming more challenging.

Targeted Survey Boards

Investing in printed boards displaying the annual Residents' Satisfaction Survey has proved an effective way of reaching age groups from whom the Council traditionally receives fewer responses, particularly residents aged 18–30 and those in their 40s.

The boards were taken to community events, including the Carnival and Burwell Play Day, where there was a strong presence of young families and parents.

This helped to increase engagement and provided additional survey responses and valuable data from groups that can otherwise be harder to reach through more traditional consultation methods.

Professional Signage Boards for Play Areas

Following a number of changes this year to signage at the Council's splash park and skate park areas, including temporary closures, seasonal information and opening times, the Communications and Community Engagement Officer recommends that Councillors consider investing in lockable noticeboards for each of these.

Currently, temporary notices are often displayed using laminated paper, plastic wallets, and cable ties. These can look untidy and can become damaged, weathered, removed, or blow away, resulting in important information not being displayed reliably. Purpose-built, lockable noticeboards would provide a consistent and professional way of displaying temporary and seasonal information, while also reducing the need for single-use plastic and printed materials.

A range of suitable noticeboards is available, including child-friendly designs that complement play areas as well as more generic options. Examples and indicative prices are provided (**Appendix G**) for Councillors' consideration for budget setting should they agree to the purchase of these.

Corporate Strategy

The Council's Strategic Plan 2025–29 sets out the Council's long-term priorities and direction, supporting its mission to 'make Witney a great place to live, work and visit.' This report contributes to the delivery of the following strategic pillar of the plan:

2. An Engaged & Supported Community

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 report supports more inclusive communication and engagement by providing residents with a range of ways to access information and participate in consultations. The shorter budget survey and targeted survey boards are intended to improve engagement with groups from whom the Council traditionally receives fewer responses. Website accessibility improvements, including screen-reader compatibility and translation functionality, further support access to Council information.
- b) Biodiversity – No significant direct biodiversity impact is identified. The proposed play area noticeboards would reduce reliance on laminated paper, plastic wallets, and other temporary materials.
- c) Crime & Disorder – No significant impact identified.
- d) Environment & Climate Emergency – The Council's ongoing website accessibility work reduces the need for printed information where digital communication is appropriate. The proposed lockable noticeboards would provide a more durable means of displaying information and reduce the use of temporary plastic-based signage.

Risk

In decision making Councillors should give consideration to any risks to the Council and any action it can take to limit or negate its liability.

The principal risks relate to the effectiveness and value for money of communication methods. Podcasting would require staff time and potentially additional expenditure despite evidence of relatively low audiences for similar Council podcasts. The Town Guide is dependent on sufficient advertising revenue and is only published biannually, so would not replace regular Council communications. Newsletter distribution also remains subject to the risk of missed areas regardless of the delivery method selected. The Council will need to consider these risks alongside cost, reach and available staff resources when making decisions.

Social Value

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

The proposals support the Council's objective of maintaining an engaged and supported community by improving access to information and increasing opportunities for residents to participate. The targeted survey boards have demonstrated particular value in reaching younger residents and young families.

The Town Guide could provide an additional route for promoting local organisations, businesses, and community activity, while improved website accessibility helps ensure that Council information is available to a wider range of residents.

Financial implications

- The report contains a number of potential financial implications for budget consideration.
- The accessibility monitoring programme would cost £2,400 + VAT per annum for a three-year term; although this would simplify and speed things up a little it does not make the fixes itself, and officers are managing with existing free tools. Internal monitoring provides a good level of assurance.
- The Town Guide would be provided at no cost to the Council, subject to the publication securing sufficient advertising revenue.
- Councillors are asked to consider the cost of Spring Newsletter distribution as part of the budget.
- Indicative costs for professional play area noticeboards are provided at **Appendix G** for consideration as part of budget setting.
- Any podcasting provision would also have equipment, production, and staff resource implications. Approximately £100-150 for equipment, not including hosting fee and office resource.

Recommendations

Members are invited to note the report and consider;

1. The revised 2027/28 Budget Survey.
2. Whether the Town Guide should be pursued as an additional communication channel.
3. Whether a podcast pilot should be explored, taking into account the likely audience, staff resource, and cost.
4. The preferred method and associated budget for distribution of the Spring Newsletter.
5. The indicative costs for professional lockable noticeboards at the Council's play areas and whether provision should be included in the 2027-28 budget.
6. To note the continued progress being made on website accessibility and consider whether members would like to purchase the monitoring programme at this time.