
Agenda Item:	In Bloom 2027
Meeting Date:	Monday, 21 st September 2026
Contact Officer:	Communications and Community Engagement Officer

The purpose of this report is to update councillors on In Bloom initiatives for 2027.

Current Situation

Schools In Bloom Challenge

2027 will mark the tenth anniversary of the Wheelbarrows Schools Challenge competition. Members are encouraged to consider a suitable theme to mark this milestone year. The £40 vouchers, together with compost, have produced good results and officers therefore do not consider an increase in the voucher amount necessary at this time. It is recommended that the £40 voucher, together with compost, continues for the forthcoming year.

As part of the tenth anniversary, officers would like to offer a special prize to the three award winners, including the Mayor's Choice and People's Choice. The Biodiversity and Green Spaces Officer has agreed to provide a session for the winning schools at the Lake and Country Park, using the child-safe area.

This would provide a special tenth anniversary prize while also supporting the promotion of the children's area at the Lake and Country Park, as requested as a Committee action.

All entries would receive a bag of wildflower seed to help promote green initiatives within the schools themselves; this will encourage re-wilding as part of the Council's Climate & Environment initiatives.

Community Gardening

The Council's community gardeners have had a mixed year, with difficult weather conditions affecting progress. The Horticultural Society has been unable to undertake much work on its bed following the discovery of what appears to be a cable close to the surface. The Council's Works Team have not been able to investigate while the bed has been in full flower, but this will be addressed over the winter months. The group has been issued with a £40 voucher to allow them to lift and preserve as many plants as possible before the bed is refreshed next year.

There was also some confusion regarding the requirement to retain receipts for purchases. One group made purchases before this had been fully understood and was subsequently reimbursed through a voucher.

Officers recommend that the community gardening groups return to meeting in person once or twice a year with officers. This would provide an opportunity to ensure everyone is clear about the arrangements, discuss plans and address any issues collectively.

One group has not yet received a voucher or made any purchases, as work is currently focused on removing the oak trees before they can progress their garden further.

Queen Emma's Garden was provided with a voucher, and a water butt this year.

Given the increase in the cost of plants and gardening equipment, officers suggest that the community gardening groups are offered £75 vouchers for the forthcoming year to help them maintain and develop their beds.

Voucher amounts for 2027-28

- Schools In Bloom £40 each
- Community Gardeners £75 each
- In Bloom wheelbarrows £40 each plus compost

Thames and Chiltern In Bloom Awards

Officers do not consider that any of the Council's sites are ready for entry in 2027. The Lake and Country Park previously achieved Gold status, while the other sites are not currently considered to be at a sufficiently high standard for entry. In addition, current Works Team staffing levels would limit the capacity to undertake the additional work required to prepare another site.

Officers and the Works Team will continue to focus on improvements to Unterhaching Park, with the aim of bringing the site to an appropriate standard for entry in 2028. A reasonable amount of dedicated budget to support these improvements would be useful in helping to progress the site towards the required standard.

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

The Schools In Bloom Challenge and community gardening programme provide opportunities for residents, community groups and schools to participate in local environmental and horticultural activities, helping to build community involvement and pride in Witney's public spaces.

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 Schools In Bloom Challenge and community gardening programme provide opportunities for schools, community groups and residents to participate in activities that improve and enhance local spaces. The initiatives are open to participating schools and community groups and encourage involvement from different age groups and sections of the community.

b) Biodiversity – The initiatives have a positive potential impact on biodiversity through planting, wildflower areas and the creation and maintenance of green spaces. The provision of wildflower seed to participating schools supports opportunities to introduce additional planting and biodiversity within school grounds. Improvements to Unterhaching Park may also provide opportunities to enhance planting and biodiversity as the site is developed towards a potential 2028 In Bloom entry.

c) Crime & Disorder – There is no significant direct impact on crime and disorder arising from this report. The maintenance and improvement of public and community spaces can support positive use of these areas and contribute to community pride.

d) Environment & Climate Emergency – The activities support the Council's environmental objectives through community gardening, planting and improvements to green spaces. The Schools In Bloom Challenge also encourages schools to engage with green initiatives, while community gardening provides opportunities to promote sustainable gardening and local environmental awareness.

Risk

The principal risks relate to staffing capacity, weather conditions and the practical condition of individual gardening sites. Current Works Team staffing levels limit the capacity to undertake additional work required to prepare sites for In Bloom entry. Officers will continue to progress improvements to Unterhaching Park at a manageable pace, with a view to potential entry in 2028.

Community gardening activity may also be affected by weather, site conditions or unforeseen issues such as the cable identified at the Horticultural Society's bed. Officers will continue to work with the groups to address issues as they arise and improve communication through periodic in-person meetings.

Social Value

The Schools In Bloom Challenge and community gardening programme provide opportunities for schools, community groups and residents to take an active role in improving their local environment. These activities can encourage volunteering, community participation, pride in local spaces and opportunities for people to develop horticultural knowledge and skills.

The tenth anniversary Schools In Bloom prize would also provide an opportunity for participating schools to engage directly with the Council's Biodiversity and Green Spaces Officer and learn more about the natural environment at the Lake and Country Park.

Financial implications

- The proposed voucher amounts for 2027–28 are £75 per community gardening group and £40 per school participating in the In Bloom Wheelbarrows Challenge, with compost continuing to be provided for the latter.

The proposed increase in community gardening vouchers reflects the increased cost of plants and gardening equipment. Officers do not consider an increase to the £40 Schools In Bloom voucher necessary at this time, as the existing voucher, together with compost, has produced good results.

- A dedicated budget allocation to support improvements at Unterhaching Park would assist with progressing the site towards the standard required for a potential 2028 In Bloom entry. The level of any such budget would need to be considered as part of the budget-setting process.

Recommendations

Members are invited to note the report and:

1. Consider and agree the proposed voucher amounts for 2027–28 of £75 per community gardening group and £40 per Schools In Bloom Wheelbarrow, together with compost.
2. Suggest a suitable theme for the tenth anniversary of the Schools In Bloom Wheelbarrows Challenge.
3. Consider the proposed special tenth anniversary prize for the three Schools In Bloom award winners comprising a session with the Biodiversity and Green Spaces Officer at the Lake and Country Park.
4. Note the current position regarding Thames and Chiltern In Bloom entries and the intention to continue improvements at Unterhaching Park towards a potential 2028 entry.
5. Consider whether a dedicated budget allocation should be made to support improvements at Unterhaching Park.