# HALLS, CEMETERIES AND ALLOTMENTS COMMITTEE

**Agenda Item:** Closed Churchyards Update

**Meeting Date:** Monday, 9th November 2026

**Contact Officer:** Head of Estates and Operations

The purpose of this report is to provide Members with an update on the management, maintenance and future works associated with the closed churchyards at St Mary's and Holy Trinity Churches following the Annual Planning Meeting held on 7th October 2026.

## Background

On 7th October 2026, representatives of Witney Town Council and St Mary's and Holy Trinity Churches met to review the condition of both closed churchyards, discuss ongoing maintenance responsibilities, identify future works programmes and consider upcoming projects requiring support from both organisations.

The meeting was attended by Mark Lewis, Nick Brown and Cllr Rachel Crouch on behalf of Witney Town Council, and Ruth Smith and Charlotte Tremain representing the churches.

## Current Situation

### St Mary's Churchyard

Routine maintenance of the churchyard continues to be delivered by the Town Council.

Key updates:

- The churchyard footpath has been resurfaced and grass footpaths will continue to be maintained throughout the year.
- Memorial safety inspections are currently underway. Unsafe memorials are being identified, fenced and recorded. Upon completion, a detailed report will be provided to the church to determine appropriate remedial actions.
- The Eco Churchyard project has now been implemented with three designated biodiversity areas prepared and seeded by the Council's grounds maintenance team. Future management arrangements have been agreed.
- Lighting within the churchyard is operational with the timer being adjusted to suit the seasons. The archway light requires contractor attention.
- Planned wall repairs remain a priority, particularly along the western boundary where tree growth is impacting the structure.
- Several drainage covers have been identified and brought to the attention of the church as requiring repair or replacement.

- The church continues to progress proposals to improve accessibility through replacement entrance doors, subject to planning and faculty approvals.
- The church is developing proposals to achieve net zero carbon emissions, including consideration of solar photovoltaic panels and air source heat pumps.
- Work is progressing on the installation of an additional bell whilst preserving the existing carillon and clock mechanism.
- The church clock is currently undergoing servicing. The south-facing clock remains inoperable and will require scaffold access and associated maintenance works following completion of the bell project.

**Holy Trinity Churchyard**

The condition of Holy Trinity Churchyard remains good, with a number of maintenance matters identified for further review.

Key updates include:

- Tree maintenance works within the churchyard have been completed by the Town Council. Further discussions are ongoing regarding additional works to a mature yew tree on the north side of the church.
- Churchyard lighting is operational.
- The biodiversity and rewilding approach continues to be successful, although the outcomes achieved during the current year were affected by extreme weather conditions.
- The perimeter walls remain in good condition, with only minor vegetation clearance required.
- Officers will review the condition of approximately 250 metres of railings to determine future maintenance requirements and cyclical replacement needs. There is currently no earmarked reserve for these works.
- The grass cutting regime has been reviewed, with discussions held around mowing frequencies in different areas of the churchyard.
- Several landscape management actions have been identified, including the removal of grass arisings, inspection of an overgrown shrub, reduction of a mature laurel and inclusion of vegetation management around memorials within future maintenance schedules.
- A broken memorial lying flat within the churchyard is being investigated to determine its condition and any associated liability.
- One drainage cover requires replacement and further ground reinstatement works are required in an area affected by a Thames Water leak.

**Community and Civic Events**

The churches continue to play an important role in supporting civic events throughout the year.
Current arrangements include:

- Planning for Remembrance Sunday is underway, with the Town Council Events Officer and church representatives coordinating service arrangements.
- Discussions took place regarding church involvement in Witney Feast activities.

- Arrangements for the Mayor's Carol Service will be supported by early sharing of invitation lists to assist with operational planning and event set-up.

**Faculties and Church Building Projects**

The churches continue to utilise the Church of England's new faculty management portal to progress heritage and maintenance related applications.

A forthcoming faculty application is expected for the next phase of wall repairs at St Mary's.

**Funding and Grants**

St Mary's Church has received outline agreement from the Diocesan Advisory Committee to progress works to replace the front and rear doors to improve accessibility.

Additional fundraising will be required before the project can proceed.

## Corporate Strategy

The Council's Strategic Plan 2025-2029 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 towards:

A Respectful Community through maintaining safe, accessible and well-presented churchyards that provide opportunities for remembrance, biodiversity enhancement, heritage conservation and community engagement.

## Impact Assessments

a) Equality - The proposed accessibility improvements at St Mary's Church will improve access for people with disabilities and reduced mobility.
b) Biodiversity - The establishment of dedicated wildflower and ecological management areas at St Mary's Churchyard, together with the continued rewilding programme at Holy Trinity Churchyard, positively contributes to local biodiversity objectives.
c) Crime & Disorder - There are no direct Crime and Disorder implications arising from this report. Continued maintenance of churchyards assists in ensuring that the sites remain safe and welcoming public spaces.
d) Environment & Climate Emergency - The Eco Churchyard initiatives support biodiversity and climate resilience. In addition, St Mary's Church is actively exploring renewable energy technologies and carbon reduction measures as part of its net zero ambitions.

## Risk

The principal risks relate to:

- Unsafe memorials identified through the inspection programme.
- Deterioration of perimeter walls, railings and drainage infrastructure if maintenance works are not undertaken in a timely manner.
- Potential increases in future maintenance costs arising from ageing infrastructure and heritage assets.

These risks are being managed through regular inspections, planned maintenance programmes and ongoing liaison with church representatives**.**

## Social Value

The closed churchyards provide important heritage, environmental and community assets for residents and visitors. Their continued maintenance supports opportunities for reflection, volunteering, biodiversity enhancement, civic ceremonies and community engagement.

## Financial Implications

Existing maintenance activities are being met from approved operational budgets.

Future financial pressures may arise from:

- Perimeter wall repairs at St Mary's.
- Railing maintenance and replacement at Holy Trinity.
- Memorial safety works resulting from the ongoing inspection programme.

Any significant additional expenditure requirements will be the subject of future reports to Members where necessary.

## Recommendations

Members are invited to note the contents of this report.