STRONGER COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE

Agenda Item: Communications Report

Meeting Date: Monday, 16 November 2026

Contact Officer: Communications and Community Engagement Officer

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

Background

This report brings together news on progress of agreed projects and some suggestions to make the Council more accessible and inclusive.

Current Situation

2027 Spring Newsletter and Survey

While the newsletter will be ready to go in February, it will be reliant on budgetary information as this is one of the major content pieces, along with the residents' survey.

It may then be too late to include any information for recruiting councillors or advertising the Annual Town Meeting so members are asked to consider what other information they might like to include on the front and back pages, between a third and a half page on each.

Community Voices/Voice of Witney engagement

Background and proposed approach

The Council's Community Voice Panel is an existing project which, despite previous attempts to establish it, has never fully gained traction. Councillors have expressed an interest in relaunching the initiative, and with an interested party now coming forward, this presents a timely opportunity to review the original concept and consider how it could be developed into a more effective and accessible way of engaging with residents.

Previous approaches may have created too many perceived barriers to participation, and any relaunch should focus on removing as many of these as possible. Rather than relying on residents to proactively sign up, a more targeted approach could be adopted, actively seeking to engage with groups and communities whose views are not routinely heard through existing consultation methods.

Some initial steps have already been taken in this direction. The Talking News organisation has been approached and has agreed to meet to discuss potential partnership opportunities and how they might become more involved in helping the Council reach and engage with a wider range of residents, especially those with visual impairment, in a more accessible way.

Consideration should also be given to making participation as anonymous and informal as possible, reducing any concerns about sharing views directly with the Council. For example, participants could receive a dedicated email, similar to the Council's weekly roundup, containing a single question or short discussion topic rather than lengthy or multiple surveys. A 'Question of the Month' approach could provide a simple, regular opportunity for residents to contribute and this should be a reciprocal arrangement and enable them to ask questions of their own.

Engagement methods should also reflect the needs of different groups. Online meetings, for example, may offer a more accessible way for some residents to participate, particularly those with caring responsibilities or limited availability to attend in person. Targeted engagement could include parents and carers, younger residents, LGBTQ+ communities, people with disabilities, and other groups whose experiences and perspectives may be less well represented in the Council's usual feedback mechanisms.

The overall aim should be to create a flexible, low-pressure and inclusive way of hearing from a wider cross-section of Witney's population, rather than simply establishing a panel of residents who are already confident and motivated to engage with the Council.

Town Guide (Biannual)

Officers are making arrangements to meet with the editors to discuss and progress the next edition.

This would also be a good opportunity for Councillors to consider what information they would like included and whether there is scope to make better use of the publication as a Welcome to Witney guide. By including more useful information about the town, its services, facilities and community organisations, we could help make it a publication that is of value not only to existing residents but also to people who are new to Witney.

Witney Wayfinding Interactive Map

West Oxfordshire District Council has awarded the contract for the development of the interactive town map and established a working group comprising District and Town Council officers, together with representatives from the Chamber of Commerce. An initial scoping meeting has taken place, and the appointed supplier will now work with the group over the coming weeks to develop the map and agree the information that will be included.

From the Town Council's perspective, the project represents a positive example of collaborative partnership working. Once completed, the map will provide an accessible way for residents and visitors to discover local attractions, heritage assets, points of interest, community facilities, and upcoming events, helping to promote the town and support local engagement and tourism which will be embedded on the town council and Chambers' websites.

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 Council's communications activity seeks to minimise equality risks by using a mix of digital and non-digital channels to reach residents of different ages, abilities, and circumstances. The availability of the Communications Preference Survey in both paper and online formats helps to reduce digital exclusion, particularly for older residents and those without regular internet access. Efforts are also being made to reach the less-heard 18–30 age group by targeting engagement at the Carnival and identifying other suitable opportunities to involve younger residents. The proposed Community Voices initiative will further support this by seeking to engage groups whose views may not routinely be heard through the Council's existing consultation methods.

b) Biodiversity – No direct impact on biodiversity is anticipated from the communications work or production of printed materials.

c) Crime & Disorder – Improved communication and community engagement may contribute to greater awareness of community activities, local services, and opportunities to get involved. This can help support community cohesion and a stronger sense of belonging, although no direct impact on crime and disorder is anticipated.

d) Environment & Climate Emergency – While print production has some environmental impact, efforts will be made to minimise waste, use sustainable materials where possible and promote digital communication channels in line with the Council's Climate Emergency declaration. A balance will be maintained to ensure that residents who cannot or prefer not to access information digitally are not excluded.

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.

There are no significant risks arising directly from the communication activities outlined in this report. However, there is a risk that relying too heavily on digital communication or traditional consultation methods may mean some sections of the community are not reached or represented. This will be mitigated by continuing to use a range of communication channels and exploring more targeted and accessible approaches to engagement.

Social Value

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

The communications activities outlined in this report aim to create social value by improving access to information, encouraging participation, and giving residents more opportunities to have their say.

Particular emphasis is being placed on reaching groups who may not traditionally engage with the Council, helping to ensure that a wider range of views and experiences can inform its work.

Better communication also supports community involvement, local identity and a stronger connection between residents and the Council.

Financial implications

There are no significant financial implications arising directly from this report. Any costs associated with the proposed initiatives, including the production of printed materials, a town guide or additional engagement activities, will be considered as the projects develop and reported through the appropriate budgetary processes.

Recommendations

Member are invited to note the report and;

1. Consider what additional content they would like included in the 2027 Spring Newsletter, particularly if there is insufficient time to include information about Councillor recruitment and the Annual Town Meeting.
2. Support the proposed approach to developing the Community Voices initiative, with a focus on making engagement more accessible, informal, and representative of a wider cross-section of Witney's residents.
3. Consider what information they would like to see included in the first edition of the Town Guide.
4. Note the update concerning the Witney Wayfinding Interactive Map.