

STRONGER COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE

Date: Monday, 15 November 2021

Title: In-Bloom Competitions

Contact Officer: Communications & Community Engagement Officer - Polly Inness

Purpose of the Report

To consider future entry into the Britain In Bloom competition for the parks or wider town.

The Council's Open Spaces Strategy was formally adopted on 28th June 2021 and reference PO5 of the associated Action Plan (Modernising and Upgrading Our Parks & Open Spaces Service) is to '*undertake a review of participating in the annual In Bloom competition.*'

Background

Witney falls within the Thames & Chilterns sub region of the Britain In Bloom campaign run in conjunction with the Royal Horticultural Society. Entries are invited from communities of all sizes, parks and neighbourhoods from across the region who wish to enhance their local environment and work together to improve the quality of life locally. The Thames & Chiltern In Bloom Award Criteria are included as Appendix 1 to this report along with the results across the region in 2019 indicating the level of involvement amongst other towns and parishes.

Witney Town Council has been entering the Thames & Chiltern In Bloom competition with the support of community gardening groups for several years with varying degrees of success. Up to 2016, entry was for the whole town but from 2018 (following a two-year hiatus), on the advice of Grounds Contractors as individual entries in the Parks and Open Spaces Category, namely the Leys Park and Tower Hill Cemetery. The latter have gained better results, because there is not reliance on other levels of local council engagement, as the Town Council is custodians of these spaces, please see the In Bloom Working Party minute extract included as Appendix 2 to the report which refers.

In addition, the Town Council runs a 'Schools In Bloom' competition during the summer, open to all primary schools across the town which is always well received. Previously, schools were awarded a budget of £350 to spend on a planting scheme within their own school grounds and had to provide a portfolio of the project but since 2018 wheelbarrows have been provided to the schools to plant with a smaller voucher of £50 to plant up, the barrows then being displayed at The Leys and a winner being picked by residents at Witney Carnival in July. The Rotary Club of Witney sponsors one of the prizes and has been integral to the judging.

Current Situation

In 2021 the town was awarded a Gold Award for The Leys Park, which retained its Gold status for a second year, notwithstanding a break due to the pandemic in between, and a Silver Gilt for Tower Hill Cemetery, on its first entry in the competition. The flower beds in these areas are planted and maintained by the Council's Works Team, its Ground Contracts team and community gardening groups.

The certificates and judges' comments from this year, listing areas of achievement and development were circulated to councillors in September and are included as Appendix 3 for information.

The Town Council publicises these achievements to help create a sense of community pride, but members must consider whether this outweighs the wider resource implications in entering the competition. Flower beds in the parks and in other areas of the town would continue to be maintained whether the town is entered for the national competition or not.

Community Gardening has always gone hand in hand with the competitions and engagement, which was once strong has waned to a small number of groups more recently. Indication is that dedicated groups such as the Witney Horticultural Society, the Edible Gardens, Fairtrade Witney and Burwell Community Garden group would be happy to continue gardening at Burwell and The Leys, respectively. The Committee should consider whether this important aspect of community engagement could still be achieved should the decision be made not to enter the national competition.

Councillors may like to consider spending the In Bloom budget in a more focused and impactful way, while continuing to support Community and School gardeners, who do bring additional colour and alternative planting schemes to areas in the town, and who benefit from the experience as groups. Policy EE7 of the OSS refers,

'Ensure that Community Engagement is enshrined into all work and projects undertaken by WTC'

One option would be split the budget, retaining a larger sum to make a high impact difference to a 'left behind area'. This could be a piece of infrastructure, accessibility improvements or a regeneration or biodiversity project (an example project is included as Appendix 4). This reflects the vision of the Town Council's Open Spaces strategy,

9.3 to, 'deliver high quality public open spaces that meet local needs and aspirations' and four of the five key themes in 9.5,

9.5.1. Modernising and upgrading our parks and open spaces.

9.5.3. Improving and investing in our leisure provision.

9.5.4. Improving and investing in our infra-structure.

9.5.5. Working in the most effective and efficient manner.

This would still qualify for entry to In Bloom if Councillors wished to enter the competition as the judges look for year on year improvements to areas, which bring enrichment and benefit

to residents and visitors. Therefore, it is an appropriate use of the budget. Using the budget in this impactful way rather than a scattergun approach, also addresses the delivery of the strategy's vision,

10.1.4.2. We will seek to provide a range of infra-structure aimed at all age groups and as many differing types of facility as is feasible.

If councillors choose not to enter In Bloom, they might wish to consider a Community Engagement exercise instead, by creating a diverse focus group or panel of residents, rather than the appointed In Bloom judges to gather feedback on improvement works that the In Bloom budget has been used for each year. This could also be used to seek suggestions for future projects.

Environmental impact

There are opportunities to enhance the biodiversity across various areas of the town with bigger spend projects which could be designed to be more sustainable than a succession of annual flower planting schemes.

Risk

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

Financial implications

The cost to the Council for providing summer planting schemes is included within the Grounds Maintenance Contract.

Additional sums were added in recent years for the community and schools gardening challenges, to purchase equipment/infrastructure, to enter In Bloom and augment town-wide planting throughout the season, with additional hanging baskets, planters and emergency replanting when plants have failed. The annual budget now stands at £6,000.

Other resources included Officer time spent co-ordinating the Town's entry, producing a portfolio for the judges to support the entry, as well as managing volunteers throughout the year – and the administration when there was a In Bloom Working Party in place.

With the budget for In Bloom already in place, there is no expectation of needing additional funds as suitably sized and costed projects would need to be chosen to come within that budget. That is not to say that funds taken from future years budgets could not be used to build on a project and improve upon it or make changes and adaptations to it going forward.

Current costs

- The Thames & Chiltern In Bloom entry fees were £25 for a green space under 1ha and £50 for greenspaces over 1ha.

- Expenditure for the Schools In Bloom Competition and Community Gardening in the current year was £644.59

Costs if changing In Bloom format to Big Impact project.

The budget could be split to cover Community and Schools In Bloom gardening, which could include prizes for Witney Town Council led competitions and initiatives including wildlife and nature gardening and entry into the National In Bloom competition for individual parks etc.

The remaining budget could be used to make an In Bloom based, big impact improvement (this could still be a community led project or include community gardeners and volunteers to drive the project).

Recommendations

Members are invited to note the report and consider the following:

1. That a decision is taken on the merits of future entry in the Britain In Bloom competition, either as a town or for individual areas; and,
2. That a task and finish group is established to consider the future of any such entry or future projects involving community gardening groups and schools, such as the suggested sustainable project.