

WITNEY ANNUAL TOWN MEETING 2022

REPORT TO THE ANNUAL TOWN MEETING FROM THE LEADER OF WITNEY TOWN COUNCIL & CHAIR OF THE POLICY, GOVERNANCE & FINANCE COMMITTEE **CLLR LUCI AHBOURNE**

Councils are public-facing and publicly funded organisations designed to deliver grassroots services to the community in a meaningful and accountable way. However, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that a Town Council as large as Witney's is a professional body, and any Council aspirations have to be workable in both in terms of capacity and culture.

Town Council Organisational Review

After the change in leadership roles in 2020, one of the first strategic tasks that we undertook was employing an external consultant to conduct an organizational review of Witney Town Council.

The resulting recommendations were that we needed to increase our staffing capacity by 50% to be able to meet the growing needs of Witney. I am pleased to say that after many months of planning and hard work, Council adopted the recommendations from the organizational review in full, allowing us to begin the task of recruitment. It has been wonderful to work with so many brilliant new members of staff, and I speak for everyone when I say that we are so grateful to the existing employees who have offered patience, flexibility throughout the process, and guidance and support to our new recruits.

Our new organizational structure will future-proof the Town Council for many years to come, ensuring that residents have the council they deserve, and that the staff have the capacity and support they need. I am grateful to the Councillors who placed their trust and belief in this vision and offered support and input on every level.

Open Spaces Strategy

Alongside this, we developed our recently published Open Spaces Strategy. Our open spaces and parks are important places to be protected, cherished, and enhanced. They take great effort - and money - to maintain, but they give back so much to our community. Witney is lucky to have some wonderful open spaces - from the beauty of the Lake and Country Park to the tranquillity of its cemeteries, and from our well-used sports grounds and allotments to the vibrancy of The Leys, which has been at the heart of the town for generations.

This strategic document, developed alongside stakeholders and the wider community, sets out the Council's ambitions to manage our open spaces, working closely with the people of Witney. It highlighted the strengths and weaknesses of our offer and looked at opportunities for the future - particularly to encourage better health, ensure greater accessibility, and increase Witney's biodiversity and carbon reduction. The plan is also mindful of the financial

challenges we will face in delivering our aspirations and meeting the needs of the community and gives us a direction of travel for future investment decisions. Crucial to our long-term efforts is the involvement of the local community and its various interest groups. Whilst there is already a good degree of public engagement in our services, there is still so much more that could be achieved with more interaction, and by building close working relationships between the Council and those that it represents.

Working together, we can accomplish so much more, and I'm excited to begin this journey to creating better open spaces, that the whole of Witney can enjoy and be proud of.

Covid-19 Pandemic

Much of the past two years have been dominated by the Covid-19 pandemic, which has been challenging for us all on so many levels. As a town we proudly rallied round, supporting one another in unprecedented ways, with organisations and individuals stepping up to do all they could to ensure that everyone had help where they needed it.

As a Town Council we were proud to open the doors of both Burwell Hall and the Corn Exchange to provide a space for the Witney Land Army and the Witney Community Fridge volunteers to prepare food and other supplies to be delivered. It was a remarkable effort and working with those volunteers inspired us to launch our Covid Heroes awards scheme, that our Stronger Communities Committee Chair will report on later.

Grant Funding & Further Spending Commitments

In addition to annual financial assistance provided to the Community Bus Service, the Policy, Governance and Finance Committee has approved discretionary grants to many local organisations such as the Witney Shed, Witney Mills Cricket Club, Rotary Club of Witney, and Witney Air Cadets and has increased the grant budget in light of the growing need, largely due to the impact of the pandemic on our community.

The Committee also ensures that proper financial practices are followed in terms of auditing and has agreed spending on the repair & re-decoration of the Town Hall and Corn Exchange exteriors, the futureproofing of democratic meetings, and the further development of Windrush Cemetery.

We have also introduced lights into our beautiful Corn Exchange, which enable us to illuminate the building in different colours, to show solidarity and raise awareness for causes and events– such as the Black Lives Matters demonstration, our precious NHS's birthday, Infant and Baby Loss Week, the people of Ukraine, and many more. The Council now have a policy for lighting up public buildings and flag flying, which means that we can proudly display our support and thoughts on behalf of Witney in more way than one.

Cllr Luci Ashbourne, Leader of Witney Town Council