

WITNEY ANNUAL TOWN MEETING 2022

REPORT TO THE ANNUAL TOWN MEETING FROM CHAIR OF THE TOWN COUNCIL'S CLIMATE, BIODIVERSITY AND PLANNING COMMITTEE CLLR RUTH SMITH

Since the last Town Meeting, in 2020, the Planning and Development Committee was re-formed to the Climate, Biodiversity and Planning Committee, acknowledging the Climate Emergency and the council's target to meet net zero by 2028 and making the work of the Wildlife and Nature Working Party more ongoing.

Planning & Licencing

The committee still meets every three weeks with the main business being responding as consultees to planning and licensing applications that fall within Witney town, and near its borders in neighbouring parishes such as Hailey and Ducklington. The committee can object, enter no objection, ask for infrastructure funds from the development (Section 106 funds), or make comments and suggestions based on local knowledge which are welcomed by the planning authority. Planning permission decisions are then made by officers at the District Council and, where objections are concerned, a committee of councillors, at West Oxfordshire District Council.

During the last two years April 2020 – March 2022, the Town Council has been consulted on 386 planning applications within the Witney parish. The majority of the Town Council responses, which are based on Local Plan policies, have been endorsed by the District Council.

The first meeting of each council cycle also includes Climate and Biodiversity matters. These meetings have seen healthy public participation on matters ranging from tree-planting to re-wilding.

Active Travel and LCWIP

Since 2020, the committee has made robust representations to the County Council to provide evidence for active travel infrastructure needs across the town. The Town Council's Active Travel Infrastructure Development Plan is a working document that details improvements the Town Council considers the town requires.

The council now has representatives on the steering group guiding the development of the Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan for Witney. This document, based on research that is happening now, will detail ways to connect Witney residents on foot and by pedal power.

20 mph Speed Limit Scheme

Witney Town Council is working with OCC to set up a large 20 mph scheme, as the first Oxfordshire market town to do so. The proposal is that all residential areas and areas with shops, schools and similar amenities in Witney will be 20 mph, to keep the rules simple and

to keep signage costs down. Some of Witney's faster roads will also see a commensurate reduction in speed limit, to promote safety, air quality, running and active travel for residents above the pollution and injury that traffic can bring.

Lake and Country Park

The council has written mini management plans for each aspect of the Lake and Country Park. A Park Ranger will be recruited in 2022, to maintain the site and to work with community partners. We have agreed to a re-wilding project with Wild Witney, which will focus on an area of the dry meadow. We have met with local nature groups to get expert advice on how to run this recreational space for optimal biodiversity and public enjoyment.

Climate Change

The council's commitment to reducing its carbon footprint cuts across all the committees. It is worth reporting here, though, that since 2020, the council has switched to renewable electricity provider and certified 'green' gas. The council has plans and a budget to move its facilities away from fossil fuel heating.

On a smaller scale, the committee oversaw the purchase of an infra-red camera with the intention that it can be used to help residents check energy losses from their homes. We hope to partner with a community group for this.

Last Christmas, with a new lighting contract, the Christmas lights had timers for the first time, and were off in the daytime, cutting carbon dioxide emissions and costs.

Sewerage & Flooding

The committee is acutely aware of the risk of fluvial and pluvial flooding in areas across Witney and takes this into account while considering householder, as well as large development planning applications. Where the plans result in a loss of permeable ground area, which acts as a soakaway, the committee returns comments requesting that mitigating actions are taken against the loss.

The committee has noted slightly more assertive replies from Thames Water to planning applications, saying when capacity cannot be met but stopping short of saying they will increase capacity.

The committee joins the rest of the town in voicing serious concerns that even the planned upgrade of the Sewage Treatment Works will not keep up with the needs of our expanding population.

Cllr Ruth Smith – Chair of Climate, Biodiversity and Planning Committee