

ANNUAL TOWN MEETING

WEDNESDAY 15 March 2017

Policy and Resources Committee

The Town Council is responsible for the following facilities:

4 Recreation Grounds – The Leys including the Splash park, Queen Elizabeth 2nd (formerly Burwell), King George 5th, West Witney Sports Grounds and within the recreation grounds there are play areas, skate park, football and cricket pitches, bowls and a shooting range, tennis and crazy golf.

The Lake and Country Park

14 Play areas

2 Cemeteries (Tower Hill and Windrush) and 2 closed churchyards

4 Allotment sites – Lakeside, Newland, Hailey Road and Park Road

4 Public Halls – The Corn Exchange, Langdale Hall (currently closed) Burwell Hall and Madley Park Hall (managed by the Madley Park Trust)

Street Furniture – such as some bus shelters, benches and dog/waste bins

Memorials – Church Green, Newland and The Leys

Open spaces and Floral Displays – grass verges, trees, landscaping and maintenance, Witney and Schools in Bloom

Events – Remembrance, Christmas Lights, Twinning, Citizen of The Year and working with the community on other events and activities

Planning & Development – consultee on behalf of the town.

The above is not an exhaustive list but does give a good overview on how the Town Council strives to use its budget effectively to maintain its facilities to ensure Witney as a town remains a healthy, vibrant and attractive place to live, work and visit.

The Town Council constantly seeks to improve its services, while giving value for money for the small proportion (around 4.7%) of the Council Tax it receives from the Town's Tax payers, collected on our behalf by West Oxfordshire District Council.

Town and Parish Councils do not receive any direct funding from the Central Government or from the business rates, but can generate income from the services and facilities that they provide e.g. rent from leased properties, charges for the use of halls, sports facilities, cemeteries etc. The Town Council regularly reviews its fees and charges for these services. It also actively seeks partnerships /grant funding for specific activities or projects.

The main source of its income is raised by the levy of a Precept on residents aged over 18 who live in the electoral area of the Town Council. It receives this income in two tranches, April and October of each year.

In determining the Precept the Town Council considers:

- The estimated expenditure it will incur in the year fulfilling its current functions
- The expenditure required for any new projects – not just capital costs but recurring running costs
- Any approved contributions to replacement Earmarked Reserve Funds, such as the renewal of plant and equipment or for future capital projects
- The expected income to be generated and any grants expected to be received during the year
- The level of financial reserves

In 2013, whilst setting the 2014/15 budget, the Finance Working Party established a Medium Term Financial Strategy, whereby it pledged to save £100,000, over a three year period. I am pleased to report that we have achieved our target of £100k savings a year early and this allowed us to build a budget for 2016/17 allowing for the reduction and proposed loss of the Council Tax Support Grant in 2018.

At the Town Council meeting on 14 December 2016 the Precept of £1,340,063 was agreed which equates to a Council Tax bill for a band D equivalent property of £134.91 for 2017/18. This is an annual rise of £4.39 per annum or a weekly increase of just over 8 pence. We do believe this represents good value for money when you look at all the services which your Town Council provides as you have read much about from other Committee Chairman reports.

The Town Council, as other local government organisations, continues to feel the brunt of the changes in legislation, such as the Welfare Reform Act 2012, which brought about the localisation of Council Tax benefit. The amount of grant the Town Council will receive from the District Council to meet some of the shortfall will be £39,726 from £59,580 in the current year, being a further 33.32% reduction. Overall since the CTS grant was introduced in 2013/14 at a value of £83,787 it has gone down by 52.58% and is expected to go completely in 2018. The Town Council has no control or influence over this.

The Town Council's internal and external Auditors recommend that the General Reserve should be a minimum of 3 months net expenditure. This year's budget has enabled this benchmark to be maintained however, the Town Council is very mindful of future financial challenges such as the removal of the Council Tax Support Grant and the possibility of Town Councils effectively being capped.

This year the Town Council has enabled the town centre bus service to continue and has committed financial support for this until 2019 when it will be reviewed. In 2016 the Council undertook a 'Satisfaction Survey' and in response to the results of the survey communications have been improved by the development of the Witney Town Council 'app' and the Christmas Lights display for 2016 received additional funding. The Town Council continues to plan for the much needed improvements to the sporting and recreational facilities we provide, and striving to ensure that future infrastructure meets with the needs of an expanding town. Over the years specific reserves have been set aside for such projects, but the magnitude of problems means that proper financial consideration must be planned carefully in order to undertake such expenditure which may put a strain on reserves.

Members of the Town Council take the responsibility for greater transparency of its actions and finances seriously and residents should be reassured that the Town Council's finances come under stringent scrutiny and external examination throughout the year. A copy of the Internal Auditors reports, Financial Statements and Annual Return are available for inspection, on request, at the Town Hall or on the website under Strategic Documents.

Cllr Toby Morris, Leader of Witney Town Council and Chairman of the Policy & Resources Committee