

# ABINGDON-on-THAMES TOWN COUNCIL

Report to	Community Committee
Meeting date	18 February 2026
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Agenda item	11

## Heritage and Cultural

### 1. Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 To inform the committee of the UK Town of Culture 2028 awards and agree to completing the expression of interest with the support of Orchard Fundraising.
- 1.2 To request the formation of a working party who can market the heritage quadrant and support with the Town of Culture application.
- 1.3 To agree Heritage and Culture becomes part of the Town Centre Forum branding 'Discover Abingdon'.

### 2. Summary

- 2.1 The government has taken its latest step in renewing the country by launching the first ever UK Town of Culture competition.

The competition is open to small, medium and large towns, with the winner delivering a vibrant cultural programme. Showcasing towns' local visions and voices - through new arts venues, performances, workshops and more - this competition brings local investment, creates a lasting sense of pride in towns, and opens doors to the arts for everyone.

Towns can submit their Expressions of Interest now. Sir Phil Redmond will lead an expert panel in judging towns on the way they'll tell their unique story, how they'll bring everyone in a community together, and how towns will deliver on their vision. The strongest bids will progress to a shortlist, with each shortlisted town receiving £60,000 to help deliver their full bids for the competition.

Three finalists - one small, one medium, one large town - will be chosen. The winner will be crowned UK Town of Culture 2028 and receive a £3 million prize. The two runners-up will each receive £250,000 to deliver elements of their bid, from refreshed community infrastructure to electric music festivals.

The deadline for Expressions of Interest for UK Town of Culture 2028 is 31 March 2026, with the shortlist of towns expected to be announced this Spring.

The Project Manager for Business and Community engagement would require

support from Orchard Fundraising and a heritage working group to ensure a successful application.

- 2.2 The Project Manager for Business and Community Engagement has been developing a business directory of Town Centre businesses who wish to engage with the Town Centre Forum branded as 'Discover Abingdon'. Including Heritage as part of this brand would strengthen the marketing of Abingdon to visitors and locals.

3. **Action required**

- 3.1 To agree to the Project Manager for Business and Community engagement to pursue the expression of interest form and other officers as required.
- 3.2 To agree Orchard Fundraising support with the application.
- 3.3 To agree a working party is set up to facilitate the application and the marketing and branding of the heritage in Abingdon.
- 3.4 To agree Culture and Heritage be included in the branding for 'Discover Abingdon'

4. **Link to strategic plan and objectives**

- 4.1 KO2 - To develop a resilient, sustainable town which will provide a home for residents now and in the future

KO3 - To manage the Council's assets efficiently and effectively to meet for the needs of the community now and in the future.

KO4 - To work with community partners to support those who are vulnerable and in need and to create opportunities to increase social inclusivity.

5. **Key information**

- 5.1 Abingdon-on-Thames presents a strong and distinctive case for a bid to become the UK Town of Culture 2028, rooted in its rich history, vibrant community traditions, and existing cultural assets. The UK Town of Culture programme, launched by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, invites towns across the United Kingdom to submit Expressions of Interest that showcase their unique cultural identity, community engagement, and capacity to deliver an ambitious cultural programme in 2028. Towns will be assessed on their ability to tell a compelling local story, design inclusive cultural activities, and demonstrate credible delivery plans; shortlisted towns receive development funding of £60,000 to support the creation of full bids, with an overall winner receiving £3 million and two finalists each receiving £250,000.

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Abingdon's cultural landscape reflects both deep historical roots and active contemporary cultural life. The town is renowned for its heritage assets. The annual Heritage Open Days and the Abingdon Heritage Weekend celebrate local history and volunteer engagement, offering free access to historic sites and enriching public appreciation of the town's past.

The historic Abbey Buildings, with venues such as the Unicorn Theatre, are central to community gatherings and theatre productions, and serve as a key hub for arts and cultural activity. In addition, Abingdon's living traditions—such as the historic bun-throwing ceremonies, Morris dancing and the annual Fun and Music in the Park—embody a distinct local identity and community spirit that connects past and present.

Abingdon's cultural offer is complemented by its scenic location on the Thames. Abingdon is a town with both a compelling cultural story and the potential to deliver an engaging programme.

Aligning with the UK Town of Culture competition's goals of celebrating local culture, building community pride, and creating lasting legacies of cultural engagement, an Abingdon bid could leverage existing strengths while articulating ambitious plans for inclusive growth through partnership, innovation, and stewardship of place.

The work may also be used to facilitate the initiation of a plan for the creation of a Culture and Heritage Quadrant in the town.

A copy of the draft EOI is available upon request for members of this committee. More information and guidance can be found here [UK Town of Culture 2028 Expression of Interest: Guidance for bidders - GOV.UK](#)

- 5.2 A working party will help support the application along with facilitating a forum for the heritage and cultural organisations to agree marketing strategies to promote themselves.
- 5.3 Discover Abingdon, is a concept that has proved extremely successful in Thame, Henley-on-Thames, Wantage and Wallingford. All cultural, heritage and town centre organisations, businesses and events are promoted through one collaborative channel and branding. This will act as an aid to unlocking future fundraising.

7. **Climate change/green implications**

- 7.1 None to comment.

8. **Financial/budget implications**

- 8.1 None.

9. **HR implications**

9.1 Project Manager to oversee application and project with the support of local stakeholders.

10. **Supporting papers and appendices**

10.1 Appendix 1 – Proposed logo for ‘Discover Abingdon’