

Speech by the Leader of the Council, Cllr Samantha Bowring, introducing the proposed 2020/21 Budget to the Town Council

Mr Mayor and colleagues

I am pleased to present the budget to the Council for approval.

The current administration was elected in May 2019 and has worked hard since then.

Before going into the specifics of next year's budget I would like to make some general points.

We are keen that we operate all our services in the most effective and efficient manner and since May we have been working closely with staff in this regard. As with many organizations much of our expenditure relates to staffing costs. For this council they amount to 44% of costs, perhaps somewhat lower than you might expect. We pay all our employees more than the living wage and the gender pay gap is not significant. As the Council's needs change, we work with the staff to implement the best outcome. A recent example is at the Museum, when a member of staff left we talked with staff on then thought how best to adapt with them, so adopted a new structure which represents an improvement for the service, and the staff, and also saves money.

We know that in any organization there are efficiencies which can be made and recognise that we must look at ourselves regarding this, and we have undertaken work on procurement and made significant savings since May in procuring IT software directly with suppliers. The Council is working on a procurement policy which will help guide us in the future. We have also consulted with staff regarding their suggestions to make savings and many of these ideas are now being taken up.

We also realise that it is not just about saving money today. Sometimes you need to spend in order to save down the line— this is a major part of our budget for continued Guildhall property improvements.

We have also looked at the way in which some of our costs are represented within the budget in order to drill down more accurately to service costs. This has means that it looks like some costs have risen higher than what might be expected when in fact it is because we have worked hard in how those costs have been apportioned. We are looking to build on this work by allocating office staff costs, which had been discontinued by a previous administration in 2012. By doing this we will more accurately know the cost of our services.

The Council works through a delegated committee system, with service areas divided between committees, which have the power and responsibility then to manage the services. During these last few months members of the various Committees have considered their requirements for next year and the input of all councillors has been welcome. This work has resulted in the recommendation before the Council this evening proposes a net budget for 2020/21 of £1,678,456.

Next year's budget will support a wide range of existing services. We have significant property responsibilities for a town council and this includes the Guildhall, the Museum, the outside areas – open spaces, parks, floral displays and woodlands- and the cemetery. The budget makes provision for the good stewardship of these assets. We also provide the Information Office, events, markets and fairs, Christmas lights, the town centre residents parking scheme and many other services. Our budget provides for the continued operation of these services.

However we are making some significant changes. In November 2019 the Council adopted its vision and its key strategic objectives which will guide our priorities and spending over the coming years. The vision and objectives are detailed on page 2 of the agenda. Each of our committees has been addressing how these priorities should

be reflected in service and budget provision. Our budget is an ambitious one and grasps our progressive agenda in a number of ways.

We will respond effectively and speedily to the climate emergency. Our major property asset, the Guildhall, requires major improvements in order to become greener and to manage the asset efficiently. Whilst some work was done by the previous administration we inherited much more to do and we have provided within the budget an additional £100,000 for property improvements in the revenue budget which will over the next five years include replacing the Abbey Hall roof, which at present has next to no insulation as part of this work possibly introducing solar panels; improving lighting with better and more efficient LEDs throughout the building; double glazing; and replacing the entire heating system. This work is vital if we are to be able to continue to provide the Guildhall and the cinema. With 70% of our energy costs relating to the Guildhall, addressing the problems of this building is our most urgent action in addressing the climate emergency.

Other budget priorities for a greener Abingdon include an additional £15,000 for green transport initiatives and a net budget for next year of £28,000 towards the production of a Neighbourhood Plan. The Liberal Democrat group first proposed a Neighbourhood Plan way back in 2012. We have fallen behind as a town without one, being unable to have our say as effectively as we should have done on the new developments in the north of the town. That is what we missed but there will be others. We now need to work with the community to create a neighbourhood plan in order to meet our objective to develop a resilient, sustainable town which will provide a home for residents now and in the future.

Linked to this, in meeting the needs of the community we realise that we need to improve our communication. We have now adopted a strategy and have re-introduced the popular town crier magazine and our budget allows for the magazine to be delivered to every household in the town four times a year. We are making better use of social media and the budget allows for a revamp of our website, its last major update being almost 7 years ago.

Last, and by no means least, our budget will allow us to work with community partners to support those who are vulnerable and in need and to create opportunities to increase social inclusivity. Early in the administration we led on the Abingdon Pride event. This is an example of how we would like to work with the community as the event is now being taken forward by an independent community group. We know that austerity has had a negative impact on our communities and so our budget provides support for organisations who are there to support the community's needs and fill the gaps created by the cuts. There are grants for Abingdon Carousel (£30,000), Abingdon Bridge (£5,300) and the Citizens Advice Bureau. You will have heard earlier regarding the good work undertaken by the CAB and following a request from them, our budget allows for an increase in their grant to £18,100. We will continue to provide a Community Fund, which has allowed us to recommend later in the meeting grant aid the "Be Free Young Carers" with £7,000 this year, and we have increased our small grants allocation from £18,000 to £20,000.

The budget has been gone through carefully and in detail. Having established our spending requirements we now need to agree on how to fund the budget. We have revised the fees and charges which meet a relatively small part of our spending requirements. However the bulk of the budget must be financed from the Council Tax, and a contribution from reserves. We are aware that times are difficult and although our share of the council tax is the lowest – about 6% of the bill – we are keen not to

unduly add to the financial pressures on residents. The Council has significant reserves. We have considered reserve levels carefully. We consider that there is some leeway for a contribution from reserves to the 2020/21 budget but that we need to limit the contribution from reserves if we are to be prudent and give ourselves the flexibility to roll out further initiatives in future years.

I therefore move the budget recommendations with the following amendments to budget recommendations (vi) and (vii):

- (vi) The total net spending provided in the estimates for 2020/21 amounting to £1,678,456 be funded by way of release of reserves of £45,296 and precept of £1,633,160.
- (vii) The Council request the District Council to levy a precept, for Town Council purposes, amounting to £1,633,160 for the financial year 2020/21, resulting in a Band D Council Tax for parish purposes of £132.65 (based on the draft Council Tax base).

I am pleased to move this budget which continues to deliver the town's services and make substantial improvements in provision of the annual sum of £132.65 for a Band D property, about 36 pence a day.