

Annual Parish Meeting, 14th March 2018 – Finance & General Purposes Committee, Report

I am Councillor Mike Badcock and I am Chairman of the Finance & General Purposes Committee and Leader of the Town Council.

The Finance & General Purposes Committee is one of the six Standing Committees of the Town Council and during the current Council year it has met on four occasions to date, plus a short meeting at the Annual Council Meeting in May 2018. The Committee consists of the Chairman of all the other Standing Committees plus five other councillors and the Mayor who is ex-officio voting member. Under the Council's Standing Orders, a councillor can only be Chairman of one Standing Committee at any one time. All of our meetings are open to the public and agendas, reports and minutes are published online. Residents have the opportunity to make statements and ask questions of the Chairman of the Finance & General Purposes Committee at each meeting, subject to giving notice.

The Committee has a number of responsibilities and these include:

- Considering any recommendations from the other Standing Committees which have policy implications or financial implications beyond the budget already delegated to those committees.
- Recommending budget estimates to the Town Council, and budget monitoring during the course of the year.
- The staffing and administration of the Council.
- Civic and Mayoral matters.
- Making recommendations in relation to the democratic structures and management of the Council.
- Administration of the Council's Community Fund and its base budget grants.
- Management of Council properties, including the Abbey Hall.
- Consideration of items which are not specifically under responsibility of any other Committee.

This has been a busy year for the Council and the Finance & General Purposes Committee and so I would like to highlight five matters for this meeting.

Budget

As I have already mentioned, the Committee is responsible for considering the Council's budget estimates each year and making a recommendation to the full Town Council so that a budget can be set by the end of January. Work on setting the estimates commences early in the autumn although in reality, with budget reports coming to each meeting of the Committee which cover both the services which are the direct responsibility of the Finance & General Purposes Committee and also the budgets of all the other Committees, the work is ongoing and continuous throughout the year.

Following consideration of the budget by the Finance & General Purposes Committee, at its January meeting, the Council agreed a budget and a precept of £1,549,607 for the financial year 2019/20. The precept is the amount of money which the Town Council requests the District Council to collect on its behalf from Abingdon Council Tax payers in order to fund the services provided by the Town Council.

The budget itself is calculated by taking a look at the expenditure of each of the Council's individual services, expenditure line by line, which is then met by income, which may include fees and charges for services, for instance cemeteries and markets, and other sources of income such as grants and interest on balances. The Council may also utilise or make contributions to its reserves. The difference between expenditure and all these sources of income is then met by the precept.

For 2019/2020 the Council Tax which is paid for a Band D property by residents of Abingdon will amount to £126.29, the same as last year and the smallest part of the overall bill, the overall bill including district and county council and police expenditure. Although the percentage of the Council Tax attributed to the Town Council services amounts to 6.53% the Town Council is very aware of the pressures which are being placed on household budgets and the need to try to keep any increases reasonable. We therefore scrutinise our budgets very carefully and we are fortunate to have a very prudent Responsible Financial Officer in Susan Whipp, ably assisted by her assistant Andrea Bessenyei.

There remain considerable financial pressures on the Town Council having over recent years lost substantial grant funding. During the last few years the localisation of Council Tax support reduced the Council's income by approximately £120,000 a year and the grant to the Museum has reduced from £27,000 to zero.

At the same time as the squeeze has been placed on other local and public authorities the Town Council has had to use its discretionary powers to effectively subsidise services which were provided by other authorities. I have mentioned the Museum which received substantial funding from the County Council until the mid-1990s but over recent years the Town Council has taken on responsibility or had to make financial provision for, amongst others, the Guildhall, Children's Centres and bus services.

The major improvements at the Guildhall have been referred to in Cllr Garrett's report. The Guildhall improvements and the re-opening of the Abbey Hall have been a major project for this council, perhaps the largest we have ever undertaken. It has involved much hard work by councillors and staff and has in many respects dominated the agenda for the year. Following the building work, the Abbey Cinema has been operating from the Abbey Hall since December 2018 and the Guildhall is now available for hire. The Guildhall is managed and operated by the Abbey Cinema on behalf of the Town Council.

There is much more that I could say but later in the meeting the Council's partners, Sue and Ian Wiper of the Abbey Cinema, will make a presentation regarding the

facilities available to residents and will then be available to discuss matters with the meeting and answer any questions.

This moves me onto the second area I would like to briefly discuss, the Council's contribution to many community and voluntary groups through its community fund and its base budgets. Cllr Vicky Jenkins has already talked about the Council's Community Grants Scheme. The Council also has larger grants and during the current financial year these have included:

- The Citizen's Advice Bureau, £15,100
- The Abingdon Bridge supporting young people aged 13-25, £5,300

I am pleased to announce that all of these grants have also been approved at these levels for 2018/19.

Some years ago the Town Council took advantage of a Home Office scheme which enabled us to contribute towards the costs of a town centre PCSO and the Town Council has continued with this support, the cost during this current year being £18,000. The Town Council receives invaluable support from the local Neighbourhood Policing Team and this partnership grant is valuable in sustaining that work.

The Council has supported the re-opening of the Children's Centre in South Abingdon, run by the Abingdon Carousel. The grant awarded is £30,000 a year and I am pleased that this funding has again been included in next year's budget.

The third area I would like to briefly mention is bus services. I proposed that a sum of £30,000 also be included in the current year's budget to re-establish a route based on the route 41 service which had previously been discontinued when the County subsidies were removed. I was pleased that we were able to work quickly with the County and Thames Travel to restart the service in October 2018; I know this is very much appreciated by people.

Staffing

I commenced my review of Council activity by mentioning the financial resources of the Council. I would like to conclude by saying something what is the key resource of the Council being its staffing and membership. The Council consists of 19 councillors who are all democratically elected representatives of the Community and we are here to set the Council's policy and direction, agree on its actions and scrutinise and monitor what is being done. All Councillors are volunteers and receive a modest allowance.

The work of operating the Council services and implementing its decisions falls to the Council's employed staff. The Council's staff team is headed by the Town Clerk and he is assisted by two senior managers, the Assistant Town Clerk / Head of Services and the Treasurer / Responsible Financial Officer. There is sometimes a perception

in the public that the Council employs swathes of staff who can be called upon at a moment's notice. In fact, whilst as a Town Council we are one of the larger parishes, our staffing complement is modest. As at today, the Town Council employs 11 full time staff and 14 part time staff. In terms of full time equivalent staff the Council employs the full-time equivalent of 17.4 staff who are employed in the following sections:

- The office at Roysse Court – 6 staff
- The Works Team – 5 staff
- Museum staff – 4.1 staff
- Information Centre – 0.9
- Resident Parking Scheme – 1
- Guildhall – 0.4

In addition, the Council is fortunate to have the services of its Honorary Archivist, an Honorary Mace Bearer and a number of volunteers at the Abingdon County Hall Museum. Over recent years each of our sections has been required to take a reduction in staffing at the same time that we, being the residents of Abingdon corporately, are expecting more and we have undertaken major projects. This needs to be borne in mind when we are looking at what we are expecting to provide in the future.

So I would like to conclude by thanking all the councillors, staff and volunteers for their dedicated hard work in the service of this town during the past year and, as we are nearing the end of this Council's term, during the last four years. This has been a busy year for the Council and I am aware that the coming year will prove, for the incoming council, to be just as challenging.