

Abingdon-on-Thames Town Council
Draft minutes of the Finance & General Purposes Committee
on Tuesday 19th December 2017 at 7.00pm
in the Roysse Room, Guildhall, Abingdon-on-Thames.

Cllr Mike Badcock	Chairman
Cllr Alice Badcock	Chairman of Amenities & Recreation Committee
Cllr Samantha Bowring	
Cllr Margaret Crick	Chairman of Planning, Highways & Consultations
Cllr Vicky Jenkins	Chairman of Community Services Committee
Cllr Sandy Lovatt	
Cllr Andrew Todd	

In Attendance

Mr Steve Rich	Head of Services/Assistant Town Clerk
Mr Nigel Warner	Town Clerk
Mrs Susan Whipp	Treasurer/Responsible Financial Officer (Clerk to the meeting)

13 Members of the public

SECTION I (Open to the Public Including the Press)

F35 **Apologies**

Apologies were received from Cllr Dennis Garrett, Cllr Helen Pighills and Cllr Monica Lovatt.

F36 **Declarations of interest**

None.

F37 **Minutes and matters arising**

The Committee received and considered the minutes of the meeting of the Finance and General Purposes Committee held on 3rd October 2017.

Cllr Sandy Lovatt asked for an update on minute reference F27 (iii) "*that the first instalment of the grant [to Abingdon Carousel, Children's Centre], amounting to £15,000, be made when a letter of intent has been received from Oxfordshire County Council that they will enter into a lease agreement with Abingdon Carousel in relation to the premises at Caldecott School, authority to approve the payment when such a letter has been received being delegated to the Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Finance and General Purposes Committee.*"

Cllr Mike Badcock replied and explained that the requested paperwork has not yet been received and so no cheque has been issued yet.

Cllr Alice Badcock requested that the spelling of Caldecott School be corrected in minute F27.

(Cllr Samantha Bowring entered the meeting, the time being 7:07pm).

Resolved: that the minutes of the meeting of the Finance and General Purposes Committee held on 3rd October 2017 be agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

F38 **Statements and Questions from the Public**

Questions were received from the following members of the public as follows. The responses provided by the Chairman, Cllr Mike Badcock are stated in bold italics after each question.

Bridge Ock Valley Walk

(i) Mr Alastair Fear:

When are repairs planned to the bridge at the town end of the Ock Valley Walk, and when will it reopen?

We hope to undertake the works as soon as possible. We are consulting with the Environment Agency as to any changes to the size and /or design of the bridge which may be required as a result of their works to alleviate flood risk, and in particular the Oxford Flood Alleviation Scheme.

Abingdon Business Improvement District (AB)

Cllr Mike Badcock explained that he would answer the questions received as best he could but that on most of them the matter would need to be considered by the Council as he had no authority to answer without matters having been discussed by Members.

(i) Mr Sean Antony, Sean Antony Hairdressing:

Since Abingdon BID came into being, footfall has decreased and empty units have increased, does ATC as a levy payer feel that they are getting value for Money and that AB (Abingdon BID) are doing a justified and successful job, if so please explain why.

I am unable to offer the opinion of the Council. I will take this to Council to consider.

- (ii) Mr Simon Escreet, Simon's News

AB have spent around £100,000 of levy payers' money, does ATC feel that is correct for AB to continuously refuse requests to present full accounts to its levy payers?

Have ATC received as required full copy of the accounts from AB?

We have received the Annual Report for 2016/17, which includes a two-page financial report. However, we have not received any more detailed sets of accounts.

- (iii) Mr Pete Langston, Clockwork Dragon

Does ATC feel that it is correct that AB are refusing to hold an AGM (for fear of being shouted at, their words), despite agreeing to hold an AGM at the meet the board meeting on 6/6/17.

We will write to the BID and ask them if they will hold an EGM.

- (iv) Mr Steve Bennett, The Lounge Café

A brief copy of a profit and loss account has been provided to a levy payer, which shows a previously unmentioned payment of a £10,000 management fee. Does ATC know what this payment is for and to whom it is being paid.

No, we do not know what this payment is for and to whom it is being paid.

Does ATC think it is correct that AB refuse to divulge the details of this management fee, following levy payers' request.

I will write an ask that this information be given.

- (v) Mr John North, Masons

According to how to calculate your levy charge, on AB website, Waitrose Abingdon should be paying an annual levy of £16,100, yet this has been capped to £5000pa. Does ATC think that this capping is fair and justified. and is ATC levy capped.

I can confirm that the Council is not levy capped.

- (vi) Mr Frank Watters, Rosie's Tea Room

Uppermost on the majority of Levy payers' minds is the lack of transparency of the present AB managing agent (Visit Abingdon) and total ambiguity where accounts, costing and expenses are concerned.

Despite repeatedly being asked to do so the directors of Visit Abingdon have so far failed to produce anything like a comprehensive and detailed set of accounts and it is this obvious "Fogging" by Visit Abingdon that has created a mood. Does ATC agree that the Levy payers (including councils) are entitled to see where and how their funding is being spent and demand that the Visit Abingdon board submit to the levy payers a comprehensive and truthful response to a fair and perfectly entitled to ask list of specific questions relating to finances and accounting within 28 days of that list being submitted to them?

It is reasonable to have answers in relation to questions which you have. If you can forward the questions to me we will send these on your behalf.

Does ATC think its correct that the directors of the AB took it upon themselves to outsource the running off and responsibilities, (including that of finances) without first seeking the approval of the Levy payers?

I am unable to offer the opinion of the Council. I will take this to Council to consider.

We, the Levy payers present here today propose a vote of no confidence in both the Visit Abingdon and Abingdon BID organisations and we respectfully request the assistance of the ATC in bringing about a resolution to the unacceptable scenario ALL levy payers find themselves in.

I am unable to offer the opinion of the Council. I will take this to Council to consider.

Thank you for your questions. I am concerned that you feel that you have to approach the Council and ask these questions. Part of the original concept of the Business Improvement District was that it was to be managed by the business, for business.

We will assist in any way the Council can to resolve the situation.

The Guildhall and the Abbey Hall

- (i) Dr Jim Halliday

Will the Chairman confirm that the report into the future use of the Abbey Hall, which was requested at the October committee meeting, will be made available to the public before the next meeting of the Finance and General Purposes Committee to be held on 9th January?

In October 2017 the Council resolved to investigate the feasibility of bringing the Abbey Hall back in to use at an early date and for a report to come back to this Committee in this cycle of meetings.

This is what we are doing.

As agreed a report is being considered during this cycle of meetings. It is part of the confidential property report being presented to this evening's meeting (19th December 2017). This is confidential because it relates to potential contractual arrangements. There may well be an update presented to the meeting due to be held on 9th January 2018.

However, the work is ongoing. The work requires consideration of many matters but in particular the capital costs of bringing the Abbey Hall up to an acceptable modern standard for it to be used (remember the toilet facilities!) and in particular that it complies with all relevant regulations and guidance.

Although not specified in the Council resolution I have assumed that the feasibility referred to is the feasibility of making the Abbey Hall available for hire to customers during the period when the Council continues to work with its partners in taking forward the extent resolution of January 2017. This resolution, Council policy, is to explore the potential for alternative community uses on the land occupied by the modern part of the Guildhall (the Abbey Hall). If this is the case then the Council will need to undertake a cost-benefit analysis i.e. to consider the revenue costs as well as the capital costs and weigh these against the benefits of making the Abbey Hall available for hire whilst the longer-term future of the Hall is being explored.

- (ii) Following the welcome news that it is proposed to re-open the Guildhall complex in July 2018, please could the Chairman indicate the estimated cost of
- a) improving the sound insulation, lighting, acoustics, and decoration of the Abbey Hall so that it could be used once again as a venue for public functions such as dinners, lectures, dances, concerts?
 - b) the cost of rectifying any dilapidations that may have occurred during the period of closure?
 - c) the extra running costs that would be incurred in running the Abbey Hall as a public function facility (over and above those that are already being incurred running the Visitor and Community Information Office, and those which will be incurred after 1 July 2018 operating the historic Guildhall rooms) in the following categories - 1) staffing, 2) business

rates, 3) utilities (gas, electricity, water, telephone, internet), 4) regular repairs and maintenance and 5) other stated costs?

All of the above costs are likely to be part of the report coming forward on the feasibility of bringing the Abbey Hall back in to use at an early date.

Specifically, in relation to part (b) of the question, dilapidations, the Council has been careful to keep the whole building in a good state of repair during the period that the rooms have not been available for hire. The building has been well maintained albeit we have not undertaken improvement or enhancement works to the building, works which we know would be necessary in order to re-open the Abbey Hall. Any costs of bringing the Abbey Hall back in to use at an early date will be due to factors such as the age of the building and its design and not due to neglect.

F38 **Matters referred (financial) and Financial Report Year to Date and Estimates 2018/19**

The Committee received and considered the report of the Treasurer / RFO.

The matters referred from the County Hall Museum Management Committee, requesting £15,000 from the central property budget for required building works, and the request from the Amenities and Recreation Committee for £14,000 from the central budget towards the cost of purchasing new vehicles were approved, both of which have been included in the 2018/19 budget proposals.

The proposed budget for 2018/19 was discussed by Members ahead of further consideration at the January 2018 meeting.

Cllr Sandy Lovatt requested, following the recommendations of the various committees, that a schedule of proposed fees and charges be included in the papers for the next meeting and this was agreed.

Resolved that:

- (i) The management accounts for the period 1st April to 30th November 2017 be approved.
- (ii) The County Hall Museum Management Committee be approved to use £15,000 from the 2018/19 pooled property budget for CCTV upgrade and replacement fire doors;
- (iii) The Amenities and Recreation Committee be approved to use £14,000 from the 2018/19 central pooled budget towards the cost of purchasing two new vehicles.

F39 **Schedule of Accounts**

The committee received and considered the report of the Treasurer / RFO.

Resolved that the schedule of accounts for the period 1st September 2017 to 30th November 2017 be approved.

F40 **Publicity**

Cllr Alice Badcock requested that information on the repairs to the bridge at Ock Valley Walk be publicized.

F41 **Dates of meetings for 2017/18**

The Committee noted the dates of the meetings for 2017-18:

- 9th January 2018
- 27th March 2018

F42 **Exclusion of the public, including the press**

The Chairman moved and it was **resolved**:

That in accordance with section 1(2) of the Public Bodies (Admissions to Meetings) Act 1960 (as extended by Section 100 of the Local Government Act 1972), the public (including the press) be excluded from the meeting because of the confidential nature of the business to be transacted.

SECTION II (Excluding the public and the press)

F43 **Confidential Appendix to the Minutes**

Members received and considered the confidential appendix to the minutes of the meeting of the Finance and General Purposes Committee held on 3rd October 2017.

It was **resolved** that the confidential appendix to the minutes of the meeting held on 3rd October 2017 be approved.

F44 **Property Matters**

Members received and considered the confidential report of the Town Clerk in relation to the above.

The Town Clerk updated the committee regarding the draft Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the Council, Oxfordshire County Council and Vale of White Horse District Council. The Committee agreed that work on this should continue. Following discussion Members felt that they wished to consider the feasibility of bringing the Abbey Hall back in to use at an early date before signing the MOU. The Town Clerk confirmed that the MOU was still in its draft stages and the survey and report should be completed by end of January 2018.

The Town Clerk reminded Members of the extent policy of the Council “to explore the potential for alternative community uses on the land occupied by the modern part of the Guildhall (the Abbey Hall).” This had been supplemented at the October 2017 meeting by an instruction to investigate the feasibility of bringing the Abbey Hall back in to use at an early date. In this regard Members considered the confidential report of the Town Clerk and discussed the commissioning of a report in relation to necessary building works.

In response to a question from a member the Town Clerk stated that although clearly there had been recent surveys and reports in relation to the Abbey Hall, what the Council was now requesting was quite different. The previous investigations related to substantial improvements whereas what was now required, in order to bring the Abbey Hall in to “early use,” was to ascertain what was needed to be done to bring the Abbey Hall up to an acceptable standard for it to be used and in particular to ensure that it complies with all relevant regulations and guidance.

A Member also queried the confidentiality clause in the proposed contract with the property and construction consultants, Ridge and Partners. He considered that the report considered by the Committee should be in the public domain. The Town Clerk responded that the terms and conditions were the standard ones used by Ridge. The Town Clerk would be bringing a report back to the committee but on the face of it he did not consider that it would need to be confidential. However it would, in terms of timing, be brought forward at the same time as a report on the financial implications of bringing the Abbey Hall back in to use at an early date. It was important that any decisions were made by the Council when a comprehensive view of the feasibility had been taken.

It was **resolved** to commission the survey and feasibility report (essential repairs and uplift plus enhancements, separately detailed and costed) from Ridge and Partners, as detailed in the quote, subject to confirmation in relation to the confidentiality clause (above). *[Subsequent to the Committee meeting the Town Clerk confirmed that Ridge had stated that the all or part of the report could be published by the Council as it wished and the report was commissioned.]*

The Town Clerk explained that the building survey will result in a costed list of necessary works. The working assumption was that the feasibility of making the Abbey Hall available at an early date was for it to be available for hire to

customers during the period when the Council continues to work with its partners in taking forward the resolution of January 2017. On this basis a cost-benefit analysis would be part of the report coming forward and would include consideration of the revenue costs against the benefits of making the Abbey Hall available for hire whilst the longer-term future of the Hall is being explored.

The meeting rose at 8:00 pm.

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Chairman

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Date