

DISTRICT COUNCILLOR REPORT TO ABINGDON TOWN COUNCIL  
JUNE 2020

Since the last Vale councillor report to Abingdon Town Council there have been a lot of changes – and we are still not back to “business as usual”

The South and Vale Councils office at Milton Park was closed in March and all staff started working from home. Many staff were moved from their normal work into the Covid-19 response team.

The role of the Council in responding to the crisis was not determined by the usual democratic process. The Local Resilience Forum for Oxfordshire declared an emergency which mean that instructions came directly from Government via the LRF to the council. The LRF is a partnership of Government, NHS, MOD, Police and Councils. The main task of the District Councils was to ensure people could stay at home to reduce infection rates and minimise hospital admissions.

Volunteer groups were set up throughout the district and, in order to be able to respond quickly and flexibly to requests for funding, every Vale councillor was given a small sum of grant money. Much of this money has not been spent – but remains available as the virus is still with us and there may be needs that we have not yet identified.

The Vale Council has also had a role in supporting those on the NHS shielding list who received an official Government letter. Any of these who did not respond to the letter were contacted by Vale officers to check that they had support arrangements in place. The Vale Council delivered food parcels to those whose needs were not being met by the Government food parcels.

During the crisis, South and Vale councils’ waste contractor Biffa continued to carry out waste collections as usual, with only minimal disruption due to regular staff begin unable to work. There was a short pause in some services, eg bulky waste collections

The Planning service has continued throughout the period, but with fewer officers. Virtual planning committee meetings are now being held to determine those applications that are not decided by officers. Members of the public are not yet able to speak at these meetings, but are still able to make written statements which are circulated in advance or read out at the meetings.

The financial situation at the Vale has been badly affected by the Covid 19 crisis. The combination of additional costs and lost income (mainly car parks and leisure centres) means that the council is about £3.5m down for the current budget year – about 25% of the total annual budget.

The government originally promised to reimburse councils for all their losses due Covid- - but this hasn’t happened yet.

As lockdown is easing, the council is moving towards a “new normal” Staff and councillors are still home based with virtual meetings, but some officer visits are now taking place when this can be done safely. This includes environmental health, waste and planning.

Council officers are in discussion with our leisure contractor GLL to plan for the phased reopening of leisure centres. I expect there will be more information on this later this week (or possibly even before you read this.) We are also looking at alternative opportunities for keeping active eg through cycling and walking.

It is expected that the Community Support activity will continue for several months and officers are determining the number of staff needed to do this. They will also be in contact with volunteer groups to discuss the ongoing support needs of the community.

Immediately before the lockdown began, the Vale councillors and senior management had been working on the new Corporate Plan. This work has been reviewed over the last couple of weeks and the main themes agreed. It is now ready for review by Scrutiny Committee and Climate Emergency Advisory Committee before final approval by Cabinet after which the main Themes will go out to consultation.

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Vale Councillor for Abingdon Abbey Northcourt Ward  
22/6/20