

ABINGDON-ON-THAMES TOWN COUNCIL
FINANCE AND GENERAL PURPOSES COMMITTEE

16th JUNE 2020

REPORT OF THE TOWN CLERK

Agenda item 8: Covid-19

The local government response to the crisis is led locally by the Local Resilience Forum and the District Council and County Council. However the Town Council has been involved in the response at a number of levels. There has also been a major impact upon the way in which services have been delivered. This report aims to summarise some of the actions taken and issues being faced. A separate report has been produced by Susan Whipp in relation to the financial position.

Direct work in relation to Covid-19 pandemic

Working with the community groups

This section of the report has been provided by Louise Brown.

Abingdon has a very strong Coronavirus Response group which includes at least 3 area representatives, 29 neighbourhood coordinators and 500 active volunteers providing a range of assistance and support. Another group, Abimed, deliver prescriptions from a number of pharmacies. The Abingdon Fridge, the community foodbank, has also expanded its work as a result of the crisis.

The Council, through its members and staff, have worked with all the local support groups. Louise Brown has been the lead staff member in speaking with both groups on a daily basis. A Facebook post from the Coronavirus Support Group on 16th April stated:

“Another HUGE and long overdue THANK YOU to the Abingdon-on-Thames Town Council. These guys have bent over backwards to help us. Not only have they given us shedloads of time helping with admin (turns out you need a lot of spreadsheets, forms, databases and organisation in order to set up and safely run a town-wide response within a month 😊😊).

They've also FULLY funded soon-to-arrive branded high vis jackets and hand sanitiser for volunteers, to reassure residents who we are, help with accessing shopping, and ensure we can all be hygienic as we deliver.

They've also just been really nice, kind, encouraging and helpful which is worth its weight in gold!”

Louise has been helping the Community group with some Admin tasks, when a member of the public fills in the ‘Offer of help’ form online it is added to a Google doc the group have set up. She calls any new volunteers to thank them for volunteering

and to establish what sort of assistance they might be able to provide. Once that has been established she runs through the various options available to the volunteer. She then updates the spreadsheet and the various Co-ordinators for each Area pick up the new volunteers' details from there.

As the weeks have gone on the number of new volunteers has slowed down significantly and so Louise has been speaking to the community group about other Admin tasks she can help with. Going forward she will be predominantly in charge of the spreadsheets, checking the google doc daily to ensure it is up to date with the latest information and that the new volunteers have been correctly added to the Google doc.

Louise has also undertaken printing for AbiMeds, Dementia Friendly Abingdon and worked with Abingdon Fridge to compile a list of useful contact details for various authorities within Abingdon.

Town Council information leaflets

The Council produced an information card for hard to reach properties which might not have received the information sent out by others . These properties were identified by councillors. The initiative was led by Cllr Gabby Barody, who arranged for printing of 1,500 cards. Leaflets were delivered by members and staff. Some cards have been delivered by Royal Mail and cards are available at the Abingdon Fridge.

The card is shown below:



ABINGDON TOWN COUNCIL

COVID 19 SUPPORT AND CONTACT NUMBERS

If you or somebody you know needs help these are the important phone numbers.

Please be assured the Town Council are actively meeting to identify any needs to support you and the community groups.

Name	Contact	Availability
IF YOU NEED HELP and have an NHS letter	Telephone: 01865 897820 Email: shield@oxfordshire.gov.uk	Mon-Fri 8.30am - 8pm
IF YOU NEED HELP and don't have an NHS Letter	Telephone: 01235 422600 Email: communitysupport@southandvale.gov.uk	Sat, Sun & BH 9am - 5pm

Emergency out of Hours contact	0800 833 408	Outside above hours
Citizens Advice	0300 330 9042	Mon-Fri 9am-5pm

Information

Early in the crisis the Council created a section of the website providing a range of information in relation to Coronavirus. This is supplemented by regular new items and social media updates. There is a comprehensive a range of information which is helpful for residents and compares favourably with other town councils.

The [June Edition of the Town Crier](#) has been published and contains important information about both community groups as an extra way of ensuring everyone is reached, even those who may not be on social media or the internet. The publication also includes coverage on the Virtual VE Day celebrations Abingdon undertook and information on the Museum’s activities during Lockdown.

The Council has submitted a paper to the County Council in relation to temporary measures to make streets more pedestrian and cyclist friendly to assist in social distancing in response to the Covid-19 pandemic and creating safer public spaces. This will be considered at the Traffic Advisory Committee on 17th June 2020.

Existing Council services

The impact on the Council’s services has varied and matters are under constant review as government regulations and guidance changes. With the current easing of the lockdown we are working to look at how we can re-open buildings and facilities in accordance with government advice that they should be “Covid-19 secure.” Consequently the summary is quite brief in places as work is ongoing and there is little point in outlining all concerns/ options until more is known.

Democratic

The pandemic meant that from 20th March to 21st May 2020 the Council delegated Council decisions to the Town Clerk, as at that stage Councils were not permitted to hold meetings remotely. In exercising the delegation, the Town Clerk consulted with an Emergency Consultation Panel comprising Cllrs Gabby Barody, Charlie Birks, Samantha Bowring, Cheryl Briggs, Grace Clifton and Jim Halliday. Thanks are due to the panel for their work during this period.

The panel met weekly and in terms of the decisions made with financial implications these were:

1. To establish a Covid-19 grant fund for local groups and initiatives in relation to dealing with the pandemic, the fund amounting to £20,000. So far these have been allocated as follows, all the purchases being made directly by the Council on behalf of the groups:
 - Abingdon Coronavirus Response Group – for high viz jackets and hand gel for volunteers: £2,883.
 - Abingdon Fridge – new fridge for storing food: £406

The office has also been assisting with photocopying.

2. To publish and distribute the Information Leaflet as above.

The Group also considered a range of ongoing operational matters including the management of the Monday market, the outside areas and cemeteries.

Planning recommendations were also delegated to the Town Clerk but for much of the period there was an informal virtual weekly meeting with Members to discuss the applications and advise the Town Clerk.

The Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020 now enable local councils to hold remote meetings (including by video and telephone conferencing) for a specified period until May 2021 and formal meetings recommenced with the Guildhall Committee on 21st May 2020. Meetings in person are not permitted.

Following work undertaken by the IT Working Group, Web Ex was been chosen as the meetings platform.

Meetings recommenced on Thursday 21st May with the Guildhall Committee and at that point the delegation to the Town Clerk to administer the Council's services automatically ended, the last delegated action being to re-institute meetings.

During this period I have been in regular contact with a number of members but especially the Leader of the Council, Cllr Samantha Bowring to whom thanks are due for the support and time she has given.

The Council may now wish to decide how we deal with any urgent business that might be unduly delayed by awaiting a committee meeting should there be a second peak or local outbreak at a future date. Existing arrangements do allow for special committee meetings to be called.

We await further advice regarding when "in person" council meetings are permitted and we need to risk assess how this may be undertaken in a Covid secure manner.

When moving to physical meetings the council may wish to consider the potential for hybrid meetings, i.e. meetings which enabling mix of physical and virtual presence. The council is reasonably well placed in this regard having an audio-visual system in the Guildhall although consideration will need to be given to improving the internet connection by linking it to the Roysse Court the leased line.

Note that the Finance and General Purposes Committee at its meeting of 26th May 2020 considered the calendar of meetings for 2020/21. Members are encouraged to take a look at the draft and contact Nina Ozdemir, nini.ozdemir@abingdon.gov.uk if any of the dates need further consideration.

Outside areas

This section of the report has been provided by Steve Rich.

The Works Team have continued to work throughout the lockdown period of the pandemic. However certain activities have had to be curtailed or altered due to the pandemic restrictions on social distancing.

We had to take a decision not to install hanging baskets in the town. The reason for this is that hanging baskets require three or four men to work in proximity when installing them. For the same reason there will not be barrier baskets along St Helen's Wharf or Thames Street. However the flower beds and the new containers in the town have been planted up and will be maintained throughout the summer

Work being carried out on the arboriculture report the Council received late last year on the stock of trees the Town Council is responsible for has been delayed. Again, social distancing was the main reason work ceased and then the nesting season started.

The cemetery was closed to visitors except during funerals early in the lockdown. Instructions had been received from central government which were ambiguous, and many Councils read them in different ways. Abingdon Town Council decided to close the cemeteries because members of the public had begun using the cemeteries as meeting places and areas for exercise. However nationally the government soon came under a barrage of complaints and a minister announced, at the Saturday press conference, that cemeteries should reopen subject to regulations. The Town Council duly obliged and re-opened the cemeteries with restrictions on the number of mourners at graveside funerals, no exercising and maintaining social distancing.

In terms of burials the cemeteries have been busy although the expected number of burials did not materialise. We will be able to supply an update on the number of interments at the meeting. It is not possible to quantify how many burials have taken place due to Covid-19 as this information is not given to the burial authorities.

The Works Team have been able to maintain grass cutting as this is a job which can be carried out without close contact with members of the public or other staff. Where members of staff have been approached they have asked people to keep their distance.

During the period of lockdown each member the Works Team has been assigned their own vehicle to avoid contagion. Where vehicles are jointly used it is thoroughly disinfected before and after use. To avoid problems of cross contamination and to increase the Council's ability to dig more graves an extra excavator was hired to ensure the burial service was maintained and to cover most eventualities. As the number of burials was not as great as expected this machine was returned at the end of May 2020.

Government regulations are that play areas should be closed. Consequently they have been locked where the areas are enclosed and, where not, notices have been attached to the play equipment saying it should not be used to avoid contamination and the spread of Covid-19. We await government instruction and guidance to re-open these areas and specific guidance has yet to be published regarding making play areas Covid-19 secure. However during the long period of shutdown it will be increasingly hard to keep young people from using the equipment.

Office

The office in March 2020 and since then staff have been working at home. Although there was very little time to prepare for the lockdown we have been able to maintain a service through linking to the council server and diversion of office lines on to mobile phones .

That is a regular presence in the office for staff who have to or prefer to come into the office in order to keep up to date with the post, undertake photocopying, pick up files etc. Staff communicate when they are coming into the office and necessary PPE (disposable gloves , sanitising gel, face masks etc) are available for all staff across the council.

Current government advice is that where you can work from home you should continue to do so. However plans are being made for when more staff can work in offices and in this regard Steve Rich is currently working through the guidance as we have and on the risk assessments. It is likely that more guidance will also be received. In general terms the requirement is that any office which reopens should be made Covid-19 secure. We are aware of some challenges in relation to matters such as the reception area, staircases and toilets . We are also liaising with the registry office who occupy the ground floor. It is likely that there will need to be some works undertaken in order to comply with requirements.

Fishing

The fishing season commences on 16 June 2020. Permits for 2019/20 will remain valid for the upcoming season; new permits will be issued by email.

Abbey Hall/ cinema

During the period of the lockdown Jo Blackmore has been undertaking regular inspections of the property in relation to the Guildhall complex and ensuring that all routine maintenance tasks I have been continued. Since the lockdown has been easing phone a number of contractors have undertaken works on site , with

appropriate social distancing precautions in place. The cinema proprietors have also been undertaking regular visits.

The government have indicated that the relaxation of restrictions in relation to cinemas will not be before 4 July 2020 and reopening would then be subject to ensuring that the service is operated in a manner which is Covid-19 secure.

The Abbey Hall is leased to the Regal Evesham for use as a cinema and they have indicated that they might be reopening sometime in July 2020 subject to “social distancing and proper precautions.” They will be responsible for Covid-19 secure arrangements but in its role as landlord, the council will be liaising with them.

Guildhall

The Guildhall has also been closed. The facility is managed and operated on behalf of the council by the Regal Evesham. Consequently the relationship is different to that in relation to the Abbey Hall. During the period of lockdown there have been regular building security patrols and staff have undertaken regular building maintenance checks.

The government have indicated that the relaxation of restrictions in relation to community halls will not be before 4 July 2020 and reopening would then be subject to ensuring that the service is operated in the manner which is Covid- secure. We await further advice in relation to this matter but some of the issues surrounding reopening will be in relation to a more intense cleaning regime, likely significant reductions in room size capacity, concerns over user flows in relation to room orientation and staircases and operation of the toilets.

Museum

The museum closed to the public the week before the lockdown and again reopening will be not before 4th July 2020. During the period of the lockdown there been a regular presence in the building from management staff who have been checking the building and undertaking an increasing amount of work based on the premises. The Operations Officer, Dan Sancisi, is working on the risk assessment and plan for reopening. As with the Guildhall there are some major challenges in terms of the building and how it would be possible to maintain a Covid- secure environment. At present we do not have a reopening date and are awaiting further government advice.

Local bus service

As members will be aware the council funds the town 41 service which is operated by Thames Travel. The service continued to operate during the lockdown and it is understood that this service has been reliable, with only three cancellations during the year to date. However there has been a reduction in passenger numbers for obvious reasons. The average weekly number of passengers during the six weeks before the lockdown was 357 whereas the average during the lockdown of the 11 weeks up to week ending 6 June 2020 was 93 passengers. However passenger numbers have been increasing and there were 121 for the week ending 6 June 2020.

Markets

During the period of the lockdown, only 15% of markets operated nationally. However the Abingdon Monday market and Farmers Market continued to operate as food markets, which was permitted by government regulations. Following a change to the regulations non-food stalls have been reintroduced and we are anticipating that from Monday 15 June 2020 there will again be a full market although some traders for a variety of reasons are unable to attend for now.

The Monday market has been a trader operated market for some years but during the period of the pandemic the management of the market has been taken on by the council with Matthew Colliere of Oxford Security Services managing the market on the ground. In order to make the market Covid secure a number of measures have been put in place including reorientation of a number of stores in order to allow for social distancing, signage, markings on the ground to enable for queuing and stewarding on the marketplace. In relation to the pandemic open-air facilities are much safer than indoor facilities the council's work in this area is constantly being reviewed so that the market remains as secure a place as possible to shop.

The Local Excellence Market in May and the Craft Market due to take place later this month have been cancelled by the Chamber of Commerce, who operate these markets. The Chamber is intending to recommence its markets with the next one due in September 2020.

Neighbourhood Development Plan

Work in relation to scoping of the neighbourhood plan has been taking place led by the council's consultants Ferrier Urbanism. The lockdown has meant that there has needed to be a major change in the way in which this is being done, with everything now being done virtually, online. We are anticipating a separate update from the consultants at agenda item 10.

Events

Members will be aware that events during the period of lockdown have had to be cancelled or postponed. This included the council's VE Day commemorations and also fun and music in the park. Consideration should be given to commemorating VJ day in August although as it stands public gatherings are still not permitted. We also await further advice in relation to the annual fairs and other events later in the year.

Concluding remarks

Members will note that with regard to the reopening of services many of these matters are "works in progress" and we will need to keep members up to date as the advice

changes and plans, hopefully, for reopening of the various services progress. If this requires special meetings of council committees then these will be called.

Members are requested to consider this report, asking questions and making suggestions are appropriate, and endorse the actions taken to date.

Nigel Warner
Town Clerk
14 June 2020 .