

Abingdon-on-Thames Public Meeting

Draft minutes of the Public Meeting held at 7.30pm on Monday 22nd January 2018 in St. Helens Church, Abingdon-on-Thames.

Present:

Cllr Jan Morter Mayor of Abingdon-on-Thames and Chairman of the Special Meeting

108 residents of the Parish of Abingdon-on-Thames and 6 non-residents. 13 of those present had also attended the Special Parish Meeting of 15th January 2018).

(Note for information: Total number of different people attending the meetings of 15th and 22nd was 200: residents 191 and non-residents 9).

1. **General Introduction**

The Mayor of Abingdon-on-Thames, Cllr Jan Morter, apologised to all those who had tried to get in to the Special Parish Meeting at the Guildhall the previous Monday. Unfortunately, the Abbey Hall was not available for reasons she would explain later on. She thanked everyone for their patience and also thanked those who had kept their dignity online and those who moderate online forums. She stated that at the previous meeting there had been some pushing of her including her chain being pulled. This was done by just a few and she thanked those who were not involved for keeping their dignity.

The Mayor then made the following statement:

“Good evening everyone and welcome to this public meeting. I would like to start the meeting with a few introductory comments, first of all regarding the status of this meeting and how I intend to manage proceedings and, secondly, regarding the position in relation to the two matters on the agenda.

A special parish meeting was held on 15th January 2018 to discuss the Guildhall and the Abbey Hall. Due to space constraints not everyone was able to get in to the meeting. Consequently, I have organised this evening’s meeting primarily for those who could not get in to the meeting last week.

If you had a wasted journey last week I do apologise. However, being unable to get in to a building for meetings, functions and activities is something which is faced every single day by those in a wheelchair or who cannot get upstairs and being unable to get in to the meeting last week gives us all a very small indication of how that must feel. I hope you can appreciate why this Council is wanting to make its facilities fully-inclusive.

I need to stress at this point that this is not a meeting of the Town Council. Whilst there are some Town Councillors in the audience this evening, they are here as members of the public and not councillors. We are here to listen and

get your views but not be answering questions this evening. This meeting is not a parish meeting as last weeks was, but I am intending to run the meeting in a similar way. Any comments made at the meeting will be minuted by the Town Clerk and will be taken forward to the appropriate committees as necessary. It is intended that minutes of this evening's meeting be published on the website within the next two weeks.

The Guildhall is a parish facility, provided by the Council tax payers of Abingdon. Consequently, only electors of the parish will be entitled to speak at this meeting.

Mindful of last week's parish meeting, if you wish to speak I shall be giving preference to those who tried to attend last week's meeting but could not get in, then to those who could not come last week for other reasons and finally, if there is time, to residents who attended last week. The meeting should finish by about 9pm.

In the first instance I will only allow each person to speak once to the two matters under discussion – the Abbey Hall and the Guildhall. Please limit any speech to a maximum of three minutes. When making any comments, please state your name and the road in which you live so that the meeting is aware of your eligibility to speak prior to making any comments.

If you are not a resident of Abingdon you are still entitled to be at this meeting; however, you will not be entitled to speak.

I would ask that when people wish to make a comment they indicate by putting their hand up and I will call them in the order in which hands are put up. However, you will need to be patient. I would ask that everybody speaking be polite and respectful of one another's views. As Chairman, I will be managing the meeting and my ruling on any specific item will be final. We are keen to hear from everyone and wish to listen and are interested in all your views.

I would like to place on record at this point my disappointment that some of the comments which have come forward via e-mail and social media have been discourteous and misleading, accusing us all sorts of things. I was also surprised by the conduct of some of the residents prior to last week's meeting. I understood their frustration at not being able to get in but would rather not be jostled and shouted at. As Councillors we are volunteers and give our time to serving the people of Abingdon. Please remember this.

It may be helpful though for me to explain that last week we were unable to move the meeting in to the Abbey Hall as there is currently no disabled access. Building works have commenced in the car park behind the Abbey Hall meaning that the lift cannot be accessed at present as it is part of the building site. You may also be aware that there was also previously a chair lift from the Abbey Hall foyer to the Abbey Hall but due to the age and the difficulty in obtaining parts for the lift with any warranty this was taken out of commission by the previous Guildhall Committee I believe in 2013.

I now move onto agenda item two, the Abbey Hall and the Guildhall. As I stated previously this agenda item is to discuss the following matters:

- (a) The urgent need for the Abbey Hall to be re-furbished and re-opened in the near future in order to provide, once again, a much-needed community facility for the people of Abingdon;*
- (b) The need to both improve inclusive access to all parts of the Guildhall complex and, equally importantly, to preserve and protect the historic fabric of the building, which is one of Abingdon's civic treasures.*

At the entrance to the Church you may have seen some display boards which explain the Council's current position in relation to some of these matters but I thought it would be helpful to give a broad overview in relation to where we are."

The Mayor stated that it was intended that minutes of the meeting would be circulated within two weeks of the meeting and asked that those present could be proactive in assisting in the circulation of the minutes which would appear on the Council's website. She also stated that all 19 councillors were committed to the reopening of the Guildhall. There have been various rumours regarding its future and she stated that there was no intention on behalf of the Council to close the facility.

2. **The Abbey Hall and the Guildhall**

The Mayor gave an update to the meeting, which is attached as an appendix to these minutes. She also drew the attention of the Meeting to the display boards in the foyer which explained the Council's current position in relation to some of these matters under discussion.

The Mayor then opened the matter to debate commencing with item 2 (a).

2 (a) The Abbey Hall

The urgent need for the Abbey Hall to be re-furbished and re-opened in the near future in order to provide, once again, a much-needed community facility for the people of Abingdon.

For each of the two items I would:

- (i) Ask for if anyone who tried to get in to last week's meeting would like to speak;
- (ii) Then anyone who could not make last week's meeting (i.e. who did not turn up);
- (iii) Then (if time allows) open it to anyone who came last week.

We have a list of those who came last week and also the register of electors if necessary.

Anne Smart, resident of Abingdon

Question for consideration

- What types of community use are being considered in relation to the Abbey Hall?

The Mayor stated that she was unable to answer at this meeting but all these questions and comments would be forwarded to the appropriate committee for their consideration.

Town Council response: The Town Council is working with Oxfordshire County Council and the Vale of White Horse District Council to explore the provision of a new community hub which integrates multiple public services such as the Library, Information Centre, joint front of house and associated facilities.

Commented [SW1]:

Dr Philip Kenrick, resident of Abingdon (Note Dr Kenrick submitted a copy of his comments for the record)

Comments and Questions for consideration

Madam Mayor:

- I urge that constructive community uses of the Abbey Hall be sought urgently, both in the short and in the long term. At the same time, I would remind you that the Council has long been aware of the inadequate sound-proofing of the building. Any proposal for interim use of the building in its present state – and I am thinking, in particular, of the new cinema proposal – must take appropriate account of this possible constraint.
- This occasion has been advertised and summoned by yourself as a Special Parish Meeting, which the local government electors of Abingdon “are invited to attend and take part in discussions” related to the Abbey Hall and Guildhall. You have however also stated just now that, while listening to the opinions of electors, you would not be answering questions. This is not a discussion. The Council would do well to pay attention to the guidance of the National Association of Local Councils on this matter – and I quote: “Even if the parish or town council disagrees with the issues raised, or related arguments, the council members’ attendance and involvement in the parish meeting would demonstrate that the council is prepared to take account of local residents’ views.” Your approach suggests the contrary.

- If the Council is considering “exciting” proposals, both for the Old Magistrates’ Court and for the Abbey Hall, but is not in a position to share them with the electors, you are again failing honestly to engage in a discussion. I ask that as soon as you are able to formulate such proposals, you will publicise them appropriately to the local electors and either arrange or respond to a request for another Parish Meeting at which electors can express their opinions.

Town Council response: As proposals come forward and at key stages during their further development the Council and its partners will publicise these proposals and undertake full public consultation. The Council will give further consideration to the format of the consultation at the appropriate time.

Frederick Evans, resident of Abingdon

Comments for consideration

- Last week was a fiasco. You must have realised that more people would be interested in attending the meeting than the small venue could accommodate; you wondered why you were jostled!
- This (the Church) is an adequate place but you have a place down there which could accommodate everyone.

Town Council response: The Abbey Hall was not available for the Special Parish Meeting as there is currently no disabled access. Building works have commenced in the car park behind the Abbey Hall meaning that the lift cannot be accessed at present as it is part of the building site. There was also previously a chair lift from the Abbey Hall foyer to the Abbey Hall itself but due to the age of the lift and the difficulty in obtaining parts for the lift with any warranty, this was taken out of commission by the previous Guildhall Committee in 2013. In relation to the point on parts and warranty, whilst it had been possible to obtain parts the experience was that the lift was very unreliable and parts could not be obtained with any guarantee. The parts were expensive and considerable sums were spent on trying to maintain the lift but parts would wear out or malfunction very quickly and in the eventuality the Council took the decision that with major capital proposals pending in relation to the Abbey Hall and the existence of the hydraulic lift on the south-east corner of the building, that the chair lift should no longer be used.

- You talk about cost. Last year £41,000 of this Local Authority’s money was wasted on leaflets which ended up in landfill or recycling.

Town Council response: We are not sure where the figure of £41,000 came from as this far exceeds the total expenditure of the Council on printing of leaflets, and indeed on any marketing / publicity / advertising. Specifically, in relation to the printing and distribution of printed media, which includes leaflets, the Council’s accounts indicate as follows for last year. Last financial year, 1st

April 2016 - 31st March 2017: total of £5,536. The expenditure comprises printing of leaflets for Abingdon County Hall Museum, printing and distribution of the Town Crier magazine in the spring of 2016, distribution of the town map to all households and a contribution of £150 to the Abingdon BID events leaflet

- You seem to be knocking down the town. The staircase has been there for decades, you are ruining a beautiful building, you don't care.

David Thomas, resident of Abingdon

Comments and Questions for consideration

Mr Thomas also stated that he was speaking in his role as Secretary of the Abingdon College and District Film Society.

- On a positive note you have mentioned that the cinema operator who is at the Unicorn is interested in taking on the Abbey Hall on a more permanent basis. The Abingdon College and District Film Society fully supports this initiative and hopes that the Council can make it happen.
- In your speech you mentioned the Abbey Hall and the number of hires. However, it will also have been used for Council meetings etc; has this been given a value?

Town Council response: *There is a value to the use of the Abbey Hall for Town Council meetings. During 2013/14 which is the year when the maximum income was received by the Town Council from hirings of the Guildhall, the Abbey Hall was used by the Town Council on five occasions.*

The Council's regular uses have been for the Annual Meeting / Mayor Making, the Mayor's Ball and other fundraising activities and the occasional council meeting when the Council Chamber or the Roysse Room has been unavailable.

In relation to the venues currently used by the Town Council instead, the Annual Meeting / Mayor Making currently takes place in St Helen's Church which has been proved to be an excellent venue for the ceremony. The Mayor's Ball and fundraising activities have also been very well served by going to other venues which in many respects have advantages over the Abbey Hall in terms of cost, ambiance and convenience.

Camilla Ryan, resident of Abingdon

Comments for consideration

- The Abbey Hall is a much-needed facility. I much enjoyed adult ballet classes and music. Dancing and singing are important activities, especially for older adults. This is an important use of the hall.
- I was not at the last meeting because I was away and not because I did not turn up. There is a difference.

Mike Gould, resident of Abingdon

Comments for consideration

- You have mentioned the lack of hirings. I have a friend who operates vintage fairs and they stopped using the Abbey Hall because of poor customer service, especially problems in loading and unloading trailers.

Town Council response: *The organiser of the vintage fairs stopped using the Abbey Hall when it was no longer available for hire.*

- It may be that we may need to be bolder in what we do and this could involve taking the current building down and starting again.

Julie Kelly, resident of Abingdon

Comments for consideration

- I have been a resident of Abingdon for 20 years so am not a local person. However, all the surrounding villages have lovely village halls. The Guildhall is our village hall. We need to invest in it for the town, this is particularly important as the town has grown exponentially in the last 20 years.

David Wynne-Jones, resident of Abingdon

Comments and Questions for consideration

- The Mayor spoke earlier about timing and cost but did not tell us the answer to both questions. Why is so much of the conversation about the future of the Guildhall in confidential session of Town Council meetings? I understand the need to be careful about matters such as commercial tenders, staffing etc but options for the future should not be discussed in confidential sessions. We need more open discussion. We are not having that here.

Town Council response: *Discussions with the County Council and the District Council are ongoing. It is intended that feasibility work would be carried out over the next few months with the potential, should the project move forward, that design procurement / construction would follow over the next 24 months. The completion date will depend upon the extent of the works. Consequently, any short-term use would need to work round these dates.*

In terms of cost, the revenue and capital costs in relation to the potential re-opening to hire / activity of the Abbey Hall on a short-term basis is addressed

in the report of the Town Clerk to the Finance and General Purposes Committee of 26th February 2018, agenda item 6. Cost in moving forward with emerging proposals in relation to the long-term use by public sector partners will be brought forward as the proposals emerge, bearing in mind that it is anticipated that the Town Council's revenue costs will be reduced should the proposals for a community hub come to fruition.

In relation to the point regarding confidentiality: the questioner is correct in that many financial matters have to be discussed under confidential session in order to protect the business interests of both the Council and its partners. Clearly, any business or individual which is putting work out to tender for instance would not supply interested contractors with their detailed estimates. However, as a public authority clearly the Council does need to be more transparent and open than a private company would be and the Council's officers are now looking very carefully at what information should be treated as confidential and how to ensure that there is less discussion under confidential session. Having said that, the vast majority of Council decisions are made in public session and it is usual that those decisions which are made for necessary reasons in confidential session are then summarised and publicised within the publicly available minutes.

Tim Hunt, resident of Abingdon

Comments and Questions for consideration

- Following up on the point made to the Guildhall being Abingdon's village hall – in Harwell the extension and refurbishment of the village hall has been financed by housing development and I suspect other halls locally have been financed in the same way. There is lots of housing proposed for the area around Abingdon, could this assist in funding the refurbishment?

Town Council response: *Housing developments currently underway are not in the parish of Abingdon-on-Thames and there are no developer contributions or other funding available from these developments to assist with the costs of improvements to the Abbey Hall. However, depending on proposals which come forward for community use of the Abbey Hall in the future and any future housing development there may be some scope for developer contributions.*

Gwyneth Lewis, resident of Abingdon

Comments and Questions for consideration

- I remember when the Abbey Hall opened and there were various activities I went to including Gilbert & Sullivan performances and discos. It was ugly at the time.
- I understand the Council wishes to rationalise matters but the figure quoted of an annual running cost of £200,000 between 198 hirers is not true. You were not selling it as a decent place. You were saying that people did not use the Abbey Hall but the Council did not care about bringing people in to use it. You need to make it more attractive and hire someone to market the hall. If you did this lots more would use it.

Town Council response: In the years prior to it being unavailable for hire the cost of running the Guildhall complex (i.e. the historic Guildhall buildings as well as the 1966 extension which includes the Abbey Hall) amounted to approximately £200,000 per annum. The questioner is correct that this does not wholly relate to the cost of running of the Abbey Hall.

- Do not agree that there are lots of alternatives for larger organisations.
- Invest in the Abbey Hall, sell it properly with decent marketing to give us the hall that we want rather than saying that it is not bringing people in.

Susie Howard, resident of Abingdon

Comments for consideration

- The previous lady said much of what I was going to say.
- I was a member of several organisations who stopped using the Abbey Hall because it was so unfriendly and badly run. The Council should employ a good, dynamic manager who is creative and let them get on with running the Abbey Hall. Then it would be chock-a-block with users.

Iain Littlejohn, resident of Abingdon

Comments for consideration

- I wish to speak to the financial aspects as I think we are being slightly misled. The total cost of the Guildhall complex according to the current budget is around £158,000 per year, the Guildhall complex including the Abbey Hall and all the other rooms. We need to look at the whole building and not just the Abbey Hall.

- The point I wish to make, particularly in relation to re-opening the Abbey Hall in the short term, is that we need to look at the marginal costs. There are three main categories of expenditure: rates, utilities and staffing. The property is a single entity and most of the overheads will be the same regardless of whether the Abbey Hall is open or closed. The staffing costs of running one extra room are not material.
- It is not true that it would cost £200,000 per year to re-open the Abbey Hall.

Town Council response: The costs relating to the potential reopening of the Abbey Hall in the short term are referred to in the report of the Town Clerk to the Special Meeting of the Finance and General Purposes Committee of 26th February 2018, agenda item 6.

Ruth Weinberg, resident of Abingdon

- Who is the lady to the left of the Mayor? She was not introduced and like lots of council business, we have half a story.

The Mayor introduced Mrs Susan Whipp, the Council's Treasurer. The Mayor stated that she was grateful for Susan's presence as she often has to assist during evenings and weekends and this evening was taking notes along with the Town Clerk.

Terry Boswell, resident of Abingdon

Comments for consideration

- I am representing the Vale Disability Access Group. Anxious that the Town Council tries to remove barriers and enable access. Do not want a second mistake like when English Heritage overturned the plans in relation to the Museum.
- The weight of public opinion can make Historic England back down. You need to have everyone pulling our weight on this. Historic England is supposed to serve the public good and it requires a concerted effort from everyone.
- Plans will cost money and there are arguments about the figures. To re-open the Abbey Hall will require funding – would it be cost effective, I don't know and none of us does. But what we do know is that the future of the Guildhall, the old and the new parts and how they are used depends on decisions which will be made now.

David Hunt, resident of Abingdon

Comments for consideration

- There has been lots of talk about costs. There is need for more marketing and publicity. I was lucky enough to go to the cinema at the Unicorn in December. The cinema proposal from those who run the Unicorn, the Regal in Evesham, is fantastic. They transformed the cinema in Evesham and will be a total asset for the town. There is a cinema in Didcot and Oxford. A golden opportunity is being presented on a plate. The cinema will pay and make some money for the town.

Patrick Loneragan, resident of Abingdon

Comments for consideration

- Reference has been made to how other villages, such as Steventon, manage to run their halls. In Steventon there is one hall. In contrast, in Abingdon there is competition for the Guildhall which includes Preston Road, North East Abingdon Community Centre, Long Furlong, Hadland Road, Northcourt and numerous church halls. All of these are voluntarily run.
- The other point made is why was the Guildhall not promoted? To say that it was not promoted is not true; we had a manager who, as part of her remit, did her best to promote the Guildhall but to say it was not promoted is not true.

Town Council response: *The point made is correct. Guildhall income (hire charges, refreshments, bar income and ticket sales from organised events) increased from £73,019 in the financial year 2011-12 to £106,664 during the financial year 2014-15 and much of this was driven by the Council employing a manager with the specific role of driving up usage of the facility. Unfortunately, the overheads incurred in generating this additional revenue also increased which was why the previous (2011-2015) Council took the view that it was not possible to operate the venue, specifically the Abbey Hall, in the same way as it had been operated in the past and that new thinking and usages were required. This resulted in the consideration of two capital projects which, in the eventuality, the Council took the view were unaffordable. In that respect the current Council's policy is a continuation of this in that the Council takes the view that without major capital improvements to the Abbey Hall, which are unaffordable for the Council, it is not possible to deliver a service at a cost which is commensurate with the benefit. This is compounded by the fact that historic usage of the Abbey Hall was low and that most of those usages can be accommodated within the historic Guildhall or at other venues in the town.*

Nicholas Regaard, resident of Abingdon

Question for consideration

- There has been some confusion over numbers this evening. Can you put on record the costs of running the Guildhall complex?

Town Council response: *The net expenditure of running the Guildhall complex as shown in the cost centres which are the responsibility of the Guildhall Committee are as follows:*

- 2012/13 £160,960
- 2013/14 £215,034
- 2014/15 £197,404

All of these running costs have been published in the management accounts which are brought forward in public session to every meeting of the Guildhall Committee. However, note that the true cost of running the service is higher than the costs attributed to the Guildhall cost centres for the following reasons:

1. *The Council does not allocate overheads from its offices at Roysse Court to the individual services. If management and administrative support were not received from the Roysse Court offices then the Guildhall service would cost more to run.*
2. *Some property costs were funded directly from the Council's central pooled property fund.*
3. *There is an anomaly in that rent received from Oxfordshire County Council in relation to the Abingdon Registry Office is credited to the Guildhall cost centres but costs incurred in relation to the Roysse Court property are costed against office administration.*

Bryan Brown, resident of Abingdon

Question for consideration

- I quote from the Council's own words in the Abingdon for All Community Led Plan: "*making a commitment to public consultation.*" Can the community have assurance that consultation will take place in relation to the short and long-term plans for the Abbey Hall before final decisions are made?

Town Council response: *Consultations will take place as appropriate.*

Sue Hodgson, resident of Abingdon

Comment and Question for consideration

- Could consultations be advertised more and last for longer? I remember the last consultations were in odd places for two hours.

Town Council response: *The request that consultations be better advertised and last for longer is noted. The Council would point out that in the past consultations have taken place at weekends to enable those who work during the week to have their say and the Council has made use of online consultation. The Council is not sure what is meant by the comment in relation to “odd places”; over the years the consultations have taken place in the Guildhall itself, at Tesco, the Market Place and Waitrose. However, the Council is always receptive to suggestions regarding how it may consult in a more effective manner.*

2 (b) The need to both improve inclusive access to all parts of the Guildhall complex and, equally importantly, to preserve and protect the historic fabric of the building, which is one of Abingdon’s civic treasures.

Judy White, resident of Abingdon

Comments for consideration

- I am disappointed that the Council is still fixated on removing the beautiful 18th century staircase. It is part of Abingdon’s heritage and regardless of Historic England’s position, it would be tragic if it were removed.
- The Council has been keen to dismiss other ideas, for instance the lift of the outside of the building; the steps to the outside of the Council Chamber are handsome but they are only 1950s, it would not be disastrous if they were removed.
- There was a stair lift which could take you from the Roysse Room to the foyer area up to the Abbey Hall. We are told that it is not possible to repair this but you could put in another stair lift.
- If you come in through entrance way to the Abbey Hall there is a good passageway through the new side through to the first-floor complex of the old Guildhall; this will not be accessible if you close the Abbey Hall.
- I have a feeling that the Council is not interested in any solution except for the removal of the staircase which is the one which the public does not want.

Terry Boswell, resident of Abingdon

Comments and Questions for consideration

- In response directly to the previous speaker. I know the Mayor is unable to speak due to the limitations of her office. In relation to the staircase there are still some questions about its age. Parts of the staircase are 18th century but other parts appear to be somewhat newer. If you try

and mount the staircase it is, from personal experience, very difficult. It is not safe of fit for purpose.

- You mentioned accessing the building via the new entrance but this does not give access to the whole building. Why should the whole building not be available for use by the whole of the community?
- In wishing to change the staircase the Council wants to enable every part of the Guildhall to be open and available.
- With regard to the idea of a lift at the far end of the Council Chamber as suggested by Historic England this would make any user of the lift feel segregated and inferior. It would split up families. Anyone in a buggy or wheelchair would have to go out of the main entrance and enter the building at the far end of the Council Chamber. This is not inclusion. It would make those using the lift feel alienated and excluded.
- It is unfortunate that the Council has not shown the plans for the lift. They are inclusive.
- I am sorry if this is not what everyone wants to hear but there is too much misinformation about these plans.

Susan Davis, resident of Abingdon

Comments and Questions for consideration

- Concerned that if there is only one lift to the building what happens in the case of a fire?

Draft Town Council response (subject to approval): The Guildhall and the Abbey Hall are subject to relevant statute, regulations and guidance in relation to fire and as part of this a full fire risk assessment is carried out. As plans emerge relevant regulations and guidance will be taken into account and are required under building regulations.

It is not unusual for a building to have one lift. At present the Guildhall itself does not have any lift although the Council is, at part of its current building project, will be providing a platform lift which will enable the Old Magistrates' Court to be accessed by those in wheelchairs, buggies etc for the first time.

The Council's proposals to make the rest of the Guildhall fully inclusive have been opposed by Historic England and the Vale Conservation Officer.

In relation to the Abbey Hall, the hydraulic lift at the south east corner of the building is in operation and would be available for future use; the Council may wish to consider making this a "fire lift". The internal chair lifts are currently non-operational and would require replacement if lifts were desired in these locations in the future.

The lift at the south east corner of the building requires those in wheelchairs to enter the building through a different entrance and with the assistance of staff. A lift which cannot be accessed unaided is considered far from ideal, and this is another reason why the Council is very concerned regarding the proposals from Historic England / Vale Conservation Officer for a similar arrangement in relation to the Council Chamber. In terms of the longer-term use of the Abbey Hall as a “community hub” the Council would be working with its partners to ensure a much better inclusive solution to accessing the building.

Richard Tarrant, resident of Abingdon

Comments for consideration

- I am speaking on behalf of my daughter, Dr Jenny Schuler, resident of Abingdon. My daughter has a small disabled child. I am concerned that we are getting into a situation of confrontation rather than seeking a solution.
- Historic England has a statutory duty; the Town Council has a public-sector equality duty. There has to be a compromise and the parties need to get around the table and discuss matters. The Abbey Hall and part of the building are currently out of use. Historic England will compromise and I am sure the Town Council will compromise. I urge you to do so because until then the hall remains closed and there is no access for anyone – all lose out.

Dr Jim Halliday, resident of Abingdon

Comments and Questions for consideration

- We all realise that the Guildhall is a historic listed building. I understand that the plan is to open the Roysse Room in July and if the staircase is deemed to be satisfactory then the other historic rooms will also open at that time. What is not clear is that the Council decides to proceed with the removal of the staircase it will then require listed building consent, and will need to go out to tender. Having opened the historic rooms will the Council then need to close them again? This does not seem logical.
- Draft Town Council response (subject to approval): *The Council would like to re-open the rooms in the Guildhall at the earliest opportunity. However, the timescales to carry out potential building works to provide equal access for all are uncertain with the project still at feasibility stage. If the Council were to proceed with its proposals for the removal of the staircase, and its replacement by a lift and a new staircase then the main reception and Roysse Room would remain open as these two areas are*

unaffected by the proposals. However, there would be no alternative the other rooms for the duration of that works.

- Until recently the Guildhall had two ramps, one at the front and one at the rear. Last week the rear ramp was demolished.
- Potentially the building is very accessible and what the Council could do is to make some rooms, more than at present, but not all the rooms, accessible. There are many challenges with the building and many different levels.
- Finally, disability has many forms and not just mobility. We should remember them all.

Mike Gould, resident of Abingdon

Comments for consideration

- I am a steward at the Sheldonian Theatre. At the Sheldonian there is disabled access to the ground floor only. Access to the top levels is very difficult, even for able bodied people. No one is suggesting that there is a lift at the Sheldonian.
- Would reiterate my comments that there is a need for bold thinking. If this means that we have to take down the Abbey Hall and replace it with a building with access for all, let's think about it.

Elizabeth Simpson, resident of Abingdon

Comments and Questions for consideration

- I did not know I was going to say anything this evening but wish to make these comments. How are we going to use the access to the Guildhall? For meetings? We want the Abbey Hall, a larger space.
- Agree with Dr Jim Halliday that the best solution is to provide access to a few of the rooms. We should not pull down the ancient staircase. What are you going to do with the Guildhall? Is it there for guided tours? Will it be another museum?

Draft Town Council response (subject to approval): The Guildhall has a long established existing use for hosting public meetings, meetings of clubs and societies, weddings, business meetings, etc. This is its primary use and when the facilities are again available for hire, it is the Council's intention that it will seek to increase public use of the improved facilities.

Whilst the primary use of the Guildhall is for the hiring of its historic rooms to the public it is an historic building and an asset in its own right. The Town Council acts as custodians for this building for current and future generations. The Guildhall also houses a significant collection of works of art and has in the past, and will in the future, provide a home for the Civic Plate. Consequently, there is a role for guided tours of the building and its contents and these have taken place in the past. Heritage Day openings of the Guildhall, which took place over the years have proved to be very popular. This was the case again in September 2017. When the Guildhall has been open to hire then requests for members of the public to view the historic rooms, the works of art and the Civic Plate have always, subject to the various rooms not being occupied and staff being available, been accommodated and we believe that more formal tours may be something which would be appreciated by people who wish to learn more about the building and the town's history, as well as visitors. However, this is not the primary purpose of the building, its function to provide meeting rooms.

It also follows from the above that whilst the Guildhall is a valuable historic asset, the Council does not intend to turn it into another museum. It already has an excellent museum at the Old County Hall and one which the Council has invested in and successfully developed over the years.

Camilla Ryan, resident of Abingdon

- I apologise that I did not address you as Madam Mayor but you did not introduce yourself as such at the meeting. Nor did you introduce the gentleman on your right.

The Mayor stated that the gentleman on the right was the Town Clerk, Mr Nigel Warner, and motioned to the large signs in front of her, Nigel Warner, and Susan Whipp, indicating each person's name and status.

Mars Street, resident of Abingdon

- You made the point at the start of the meeting about a lack of courtesy from some of those attending the meeting last week. Suggest that your behaviour shows a lack of respect in not introducing others properly and making snide comments when people are speaking.

The Mayor, Cllr Jan Morter, thanked all those who attended. She stated that it was intended that the minutes of the meeting would be published on the website in two weeks' time and asked that those present be proactive in making this known to others.

The Mayor made the following concluding comments:

As a Councillor I was first elected in 2007. I lost my seat in 2011 and then came back onto the Council through a by-election in 2013. I am in the privileged position of being the town's Mayor. I can share with you the number of emails on the subject of the Guildhall that I have received, I have been on the Guildhall Committee itself and received no emails in relation to the Guildhall. It is important that you engage with your councillors, we all have email addresses and my email address is jan.morter@abingdon.gov.uk .

A member of the public then stated that she had sent emails to the Mayor regarding the Guildhall. The Mayor accepted this comment.

- If you email in and I can answer your question, I will answer it as best I can. I am unable to answer questions this evening and your questions will go forward to the relevant committee for answer.
- The next meeting of the Guildhall Committee is 1st March 2018 and you are welcome to attend.
- The Council is interested in engaging with residents and you may wish to come along to the next Council meeting which takes place on Wednesday 24th January 2018.
- Every Council and Committee meeting is open to the public unless we have to go into confidential session. We do not intend to be secretive and sorry if we give that impression. We are open and you can email your councillor.”

The ended the meeting by stating that she looked forward to seeing people in the town and once again thanked them for coming. She reminded all those present to sign the attendance list.

The meeting rose at 8.45pm.

APPENDIX 1

Statement made by the Mayor to the Public Meeting, 22nd January 2018

Earlier in the month the Council commenced its improvements to the historic rooms of the Guildhall. In terms of works which have now commenced there are three major parts to the building work.

Guildhall: First of all, an extension is being built to the rear of the Roysse Room and the Roysse Court building. This will provide ground floor toilet facilities for the Guildhall Information Centre visitors and will also provide, for the first time, toilet facilities for the first time for the Registry Office. Importantly this will make the Roysse Room a much more accessible room. The extension will also provide a link which will reunite the Guildhall with the Roysse Court offices. Immediately behind the Roysse Court offices a purpose-built archive (muniment) room will be built which will enable us to return the town's historic archives, dating back to 1556, to Abingdon. Next to the archive room will be a reading room which will be used by our much-valued Town Archivist, Jackie Smith, and visitors who wish to inspect the archives.

Secondly, there are major improvement works to the reception area and a replacement of the old heavy doors at the Bridge Street entrance with automatic doors, enabling all visitors, including those in wheelchairs or with pushchairs, to access the building unassisted. Looking ahead to the Council's plans for the Old Magistrates' Court, the internal door between the Guildhall and the Old Magistrates' Court has been reopened and a platform lift will enable disabled people and those with walking difficulties to access the Old Magistrates' Court unaided for the first time.

The final major part of the building works which have just commenced are improvements to the Roysse Court Gardens. The rather tatty and tired paving will be replaced and the wall fronting on to Bridge Street will be repaired. The steps on the south side of the gardens will be taken away so that level access is achieved and the area is fully accessible. We will be placing more seating in the area for people to enjoy the gardens and lighting of the exterior of the Guildhall at night will make the area more visually attractive as well as improving security.

In addition to these major building works there are also other important developments which are planned including improvements to the commercial kitchen, provision of Wi-Fi throughout the building and a proper Hearing Loop system, improvements to the heating system, replacement furniture and equipment, security improvements (including CCTV for everyone's safety) and a new display cabinet in the Roysse Room for the town treasures.

All of these works should be completed in June so that we can make the Roysse Room available for hire in the summer of 2018.

Old Magistrates Court: There are also exciting plans for the Old Magistrates' Court. This is currently vacant but the plan is to make this area fully accessible to the wider community, including those in wheelchairs and with walking difficulties. It will house

some of the town's museum exhibits and treasures and it is planned that the area be used for exhibitions.

To give context to the plans for the Old Magistrates Court the Council very much regrets that, with the exception of the basement and the undercroft, the Museum at the Old County Hall is not accessible to those in wheelchairs or indeed to anybody with walking difficulties. It is timely to remind ourselves that what was perhaps a once in a lifetime opportunity to make the building accessible was, in 2009 scuppered by English Heritage (EH) who, at the last minute and following a planning application having been submitted to the District Council with the agreement of the EH regional office, objected to the plans for an external tower lift to the Sessions Hall, a lift which had attracted Heritage Lottery Funding. Our plans for the Old Magistrates' Court would go some way towards rectifying this position. We would also be intending to return a substantial amount of the Museum's collections which are currently held at the Standlake Museum Resource Centre back into Abingdon which will yield a financial saving.

Access issues and the staircase: Moving to the two specific items on this evening's agenda, I will now turn to the Council's plans for access to the Guildhall more generally. The Council is aware that there is always a balance to be made between access to buildings and services and conservation. At present it is not possible if you are in a wheelchair, if you are a mother with a buggy or if you have difficulty walking, to access most of the Guildhall, i.e. the Council Chamber, the Abbey Room, the Bear Room and the Mayor's Parlour. We are very proud of what we have inherited at the Guildhall but there is no access to the building for many of our townspeople. This is not right. I and the whole Council are passionate about the need to make our facilities and especially the Guildhall, fully inclusive and accessible.

Currently access to is via an old staircase, not particularly well-constructed and not in particularly good condition.

The staircase is, even for those who can climb it, difficult to negotiate with uneven steps, a low balustrade and only one side to hold on to. The Council's proposal is to remove the staircase and install a lift which would serve the historic rooms and then rebuild in a sensitive design a staircase which is more fit for purpose and for the 21st Century.

The pre-planning advice from Historic England, who took over various functions from English Heritage in 2015, raises strong objections to the Council's plans. It is not clear as to how detailed their consideration of the historic staircase was but they did come back with some suggestions as to how access could be obtained to the historic Guildhall. These include a suggestion to access the Council Chamber by knocking down the outside steps (which date from the 1950s) and installing in its place a lift tower by which a disabled person could enter the Council Chamber; and the installation of a platform lift in the corridor between the Bear Room and the Parlour. The Council has serious concerns as to how these suggestions would work "on the ground" and they are not good solutions for those who have difficulty accessing the building. There may be some surprise from residents that there are proposals from

HE to remove the stone staircase which, whilst only dating from the 1950s, is very much part of the Abingdon street scene.

The Town Council takes the concerns of Historic England seriously and has therefore commissioned Asset Heritage Consultancy to report on the significance of the existing staircase. At the same time the Council has serious concerns regarding whether the current staircase is fit for purpose, inclusive and safe for all users and is taking advice in relation to these matters. When reports are received back and considered the Council will then be able to make a decision on the way forward to make the Guildhall fully accessible and a decision can be taken regarding whether the Council Chamber, the Abbey Hall and the Bear Room can be re-opened for hire in the summer of 2018.

The Abbey Hall: I turn now to the Abbey Hall.

In the years prior to it being unavailable for hire the cost of running the Guildhall complex was in the region of £200,000.

Unfortunately, the Abbey Hall was greatly underused for many years. In 2013/14 – which represents a typical year before some of the customers were making arrangements to go elsewhere - there were 198 hires of the Abbey Hall – not even four a week.

Some of the customers were in the Abbey Hall simply due to convenience or reasons of access rather than requiring a room of that size or the facilities within the Hall. 88 of the hires could have been accommodated elsewhere in Guildhall, leaving 110 hires, barely two a week. 60 hires (almost a third) related to the Ceroc dance group, who on occasion also used the Council Chamber and have, since the Abbey Hall has been unavailable, used other premises. There were only three regular hirers of the Abbey Hall (regular defined as 12 or more a year) of which only one was an Abingdon-based community group. So, the number of Abingdon residents using and benefiting from the Abbey Hall was relatively small.

The Abbey Hall is a 1960s addition the Guildhall, a building of its time and one which poses many challenges. The challenges of the building include: numerous different levels, a difficult configuration and the age of the building meaning a need for major essential and improvement works (electrical, plumbing, heating, roofing works, windows/doors, sound proofing) throughout. Only a major improvement scheme can make it usable for the future. The Council has rigorously and carefully considered two major projects to improve the Abbey Hall but regrettably both proved to be unaffordable for the Council tax payer, one costing c. £4 million and the other c. £3 million.

The Abbey Hall is in a key town centre location and the Town Council is in discussions with Oxfordshire County Council and the Vale of White Horse District Council regarding alternative community uses for the building. The Town Council hopes to be in a position to be able to announce details soon. Potential proposals are exciting and we may have a once in a lifetime opportunity to change the use of the building to enable a much wider community benefit.

The proposals would make much more efficient use of the building so that it could be used by many Abingdon residents not just a few. Many of the hirers who previously used the Abbey Hall could be accommodated in the newly improved Guildhall. The small number who cannot be accommodated in the Guildhall have other local options.

Importantly, the utilisation of the Abbey Hall for other community use would help to secure the longer-term viability of the historic Guildhall for future generations.

The Town Council is currently undertaking an investigation into the operational and financial feasibility of bringing the Abbey Hall back in to use during the period when alternative community uses are being investigated.

On 12th January 2018 the Council received a proposal from a cinema operator regarding showing films and live events at the Abbey Hall for the period until a long-term decision on the Hall's use is made. As yet this obviously has not been considered by the Council and I can make no further comment on the offer.

Please note that all of this information and more is available on the website.

DRAFT