

Abingdon-on-Thames Special Parish Meeting

Draft minutes of the Special Parish Meeting held at 7pm on Monday 15th January 2018 in the Roysse Room, Guildhall, Abingdon-on-Thames.

Present:

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

95 residents of the Parish of Abingdon-on-Thames, 4 non-residents.

1. General Introduction

The Mayor of Abingdon-on-Thames, Cllr Jan Morter, welcomed all those present as follows:

“Good evening everyone and welcome to this Special Parish 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 which electors have petitioned this meeting to discuss.

A Parish Meeting consists of the local government electors of the parish, obviously in our case Abingdon-on-Thames and the purpose of the meeting is to discuss parish affairs. This Special Parish Meeting has been convened following a request by 11 electors of the parish for me to call the meeting. After full and careful consideration, I called this meeting and that is why we are here this evening. Agenda item two specifies the items to be discussed.

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, we are here to listen and will not be answering questions this evening. The Parish Meeting does not have any powers in relation to the two items on the agenda but any comments made at the meeting will be minuted by the Clerk and will be taken forward to the appropriate committee as necessary. The meeting is being minuted by the Town Clerk and he is here in the role of Minute Secretary rather than the Council’s Chief Officer. It is intended that minutes of this meeting be published within the next two weeks.

As I stated earlier, this meeting is a meeting of the local government electors registered for the Parish of Abingdon. Consequently, only electors of the Parish are allowed to speak at this meeting. When making any comments, please state your name and the road in which you live so that the meeting is aware of your eligibility prior to making any comments. If you are not an elector of Abingdon you are still entitled to be at this meeting, which is a meeting which

is open to the public regardless of where they live; 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.

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.

The Mayor stated that unfortunately Mr Harry Gable, resident of Abingdon, was unable to attend the meeting due to illness but she read out the following statement on his behalf:

“Thank you to Madam Mayor for allowing me the chance to give my opinion on this topic despite not being able to attend the meeting in person.

As both a wheelchair user and a young person living in Abingdon, I feel that it is extremely important that all residents are able to fully partake in community events, and play an engaged part in the life of the town. The challenge of encouraging such engagement is sizeable, but worthwhile in order to build a community that reflects its members, and brings people together.

For this to be possible, it is essential that all groups feel welcome and able to make their voice heard, without having to worry about access barriers which actively discourage such participation. Whilst I appreciate the need to value and preserve historical architecture, I do not believe that this is incompatible with accessibility. The Guildhall is an important venue for the town, and given the need to modernise and renovate the building anyway, I believe that it is of paramount importance that it is accessible, and welcoming, to all that want to contribute to the community.”

Residents made the following points, these are recorded in these minutes in the first person in a “close to verbatim-style.”

Susan Williams, resident of Abingdon.

Comments and Questions for consideration

- Noted that the Town Council was in discussions with County Council and District Council regarding the long-term use of the Abbey Hall. It would have been useful to have an idea, in order to put discussions into context, regarding the timescales for these discussions so that people know what period of short term use of the Abbey Hall would be considered. This would make a big difference to people’s perceptions in relation to its use.
- This evening has shown that Abingdon needs a large capacity civic hall; no other room in the Guildhall would have been able to accommodate the meeting this evening, other than the Abbey Hall.
- The way in which the Council has evaluated the use of the Abbey Hall has excluded an organisation of which I am a member from being classified as a regular user, although they used the Abbey Hall for 11 months a year for 20 years.

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 moved 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 would need to work round these dates.

Tony Legge, resident of Abingdon

Comments and Questions for consideration

- The prolonged closure of the Guildhall is a threat to the long-term viability of the community. It is the only town centre venue that can accommodate 100 people. This continued closure will have Abingdon venue owners rubbing their hands with glee. It is not good for clubs and societies and culture which are seriously weakened.
- I am not aware of any properly constructed long term plan which is what a serious business planner would have. We need to know the cost / benefit of the facility. It would probably show that there is a price to be paid for community use, such a facility will never show a profit. As a council you owe it to us to show us the costs and benefits of a properly executed operation. We want to see your plan.

Town Council response: In January 2017 the Council considered a project for the improvement of the Abbey Hall and its continued use as a venue for hire. The proposed capital works were accompanied by a business plan which included the operation of a café / bar facility at street level. Following careful consideration of the capital costs to be incurred in order to deliver the plan for the Abbey Hall the Council decided not to proceed. Taking into account the major costs involved in converting the Abbey Hall to a modern venue which was fit for purpose, the availability of rooms in the historic Guildhall and the increase in other venues locally, the Council at that point decided to seek other community uses for the Abbey Hall.

The Council's plans for the Abbey Hall will be developed with its partners over the coming months with the timescale as set out above in the answer to Susan Williams.

Brian Page, resident of Abingdon

Comments and Questions for consideration

- Having been resident of Abingdon for 37 years I always thought that the new part was a complete eyesore which would be best solved by sticks of dynamite. Can you assure us that the Council has not already made up its mind?

The Mayor reiterated that the Council would not be answering questions this evening.

Town Council response: The Council's policy is very clear and was given wide publicity when the decision was made in January 2017 that it would work with other authorities to seek alternative community uses for the Abbey Hall. This work is going forward and in relation to these alternative community uses the plans, which will consider all options, will come forward over the coming months, as detailed in the timetable above, and the public will be consulted at key stages of the project.

Virginia Parker, resident of Abingdon

Comments and Questions for consideration

- Abbey Hall has been shut since the summer of 2015 for a long-term project although we do not know what is meant by long-term. What reasons does the Council have for not using it in the interim as it has done before? This would allow community groups to use the facility and would prevent them for looking for other venues and also bring in income.

Town Council response: *The previous Council took the decision to close the Abbey Hall and the Guildhall for hiring on 31st August 2015. This was with the expectation that capital works would commence in the autumn of that year which included the building on a single screen cinema extension to the south of the Abbey Hall and improvements to the new buildings, with the Abbey Hall as a second cinema screen. Following a tender exercise and taking into account the costs involved the Council decided not to proceed. Whilst works were not proceeding in relation to this project the Council reluctantly confirmed the closure date to as 31st August 2015. This was on the basis that the Council was aware of the need for urgent improvements to facilities at the throughout the Guildhall and Abbey Hall, improvements which had been deferred for a number of years pending a major capital scheme. In addition, many groups had already made alternative arrangements.*

Whilst the Abbey Hall and the Guildhall closed to hirers on 31st August 2015 the building has continued to be used for the Council's Information Centre / Reception, office accommodation, council meetings in the Bear Room and the Roysse Room, storage of works of art, treasures and historic furniture.

The need for urgent improvements, with a focus on the Abbey Hall, were considered as part of a reduced-scope capital project commissioned in July 2015. This project itself, despite very careful consideration, was also in the eventuality considered unaffordable. As a result, the premises have not been available for hire for a much longer period than may have been originally anticipated.

The Council is now considering the feasibility of allowing the Abbey Hall to be used on an interim basis whilst its longer-term future as a community facility is resolved. The Guildhall itself is due to reopen in the summer of 2018.

Mr Ian Smith, making a statement on behalf of his father, Mr Eric Smith (note Mr Smith submitted a copy of his speech for the record)

Comments and Questions for consideration

- I have witnessed real destruction of buildings whilst living in Berlin assisting the Berlin Airlift so I am interested in a discussion around proposed changes to the Guildhall that might be causing concern to Historic England. I am 89 years of age and retired with my wife to Abingdon. I purchased a house that would meet or could be adapted to meet our needs. Have used wheelchairs whilst recovering from illness. My late wife used wheelchairs due to illness and my partner today is registered blind and finds difficulty in all sorts of ways including climbing stairs. My visiting daughter-in-law used arm crutches and wheelchairs, mobility scooters and adapter cars and could holiday all around the world

and even go in the London Eye. But she could not visit the most expensive pubs and restaurants locally in much of the town centre. I remember trying to visit the refurbished Abingdon Museum and found that I was faced with impossible flights of stairs and a lift that only descended to a café. The Museum remains unvisited. I heard that some people objected to the lift. In which case why was the Museum not located to an alternative fully accessible venue as the law clearly states? It is the service that has to be delivered from an accessible venue; not to have to use an inaccessible building to deliver a service. The law is clear on that distinction.

Town Council response: The Council did consider the relocation to an alternative venue, as part of a project circa 2005, whereby the Museum would have been relocated to the Old Police Station as part of a wider community-based facility at the Old Gaol. In the eventuality this did not proceed but during this process it became very clear that if the Museum was relocated there would be a major problem in finding an alternative use for the Old County Hall which at that time was in urgent need of refurbishment and had very poor access. It was as a result of this that plans went forward to improve the disabled access to the Old County Hall.

The missed opportunity following the change of mind by English Heritage has been fully documented elsewhere. Whilst it was to the Council's great regret that it could not install the lift to the County Hall as previously agreed with the English Heritage South East Region Office and the District Council's Conservation Officer, the Council can prove that it has made reasonable adjustments under the Equality Act 2010 and great attempts to make the building fully accessible, this including a fully costed and funded scheme for a lift serving all floors with the exception of the roof.

The Council is aware that the balance between inclusivity / access and conservation is constantly changing. Whilst the opportunity to provide for wheelchair access was missed in 2009 the Council will be reviewing this situation in the future and may again put forward its plans to improve access.

- It appears the Council has made great advances and does not wish to make this mistake with the Guildhall. I understand that investigations have been made and a very reasonable scheme put forward that would preserve the building and potentially deliver a normal accessibility to all major floors.
- I have mentioned my age and I, like others in my generation, did not perhaps give accessibility its due consideration except in more recent times. As a retired branch bank manager, I fully understand numbers

and statistics. These days I understand that 40% of the population have their decision-making process influenced by disabling barriers, acting either directly or indirectly on spouse, family friends and relatives. A country pub visit, historic town centre, coffee or charity shop, tourist information centre, library or parkland. These decisions are made every minute of every day of every year, influencing where people work, relax, shop and spend their monies on entertainment and at social events

- (The Mayor reminded Mr Smith that he had 30 seconds left to speak.)
- There is an obligation on the Town Council for full accessibility if the building is to be used for public use. The Museum situation must not be repeated. A listed building today only freezes the building in some arbitrarily chosen moment in time. In many ways it is an unnatural situation.

Jim Hines, resident of Abingdon

Comments and Questions for consideration

- Read with interest the information on website and listened to the speech by the Mayor. It had been stated that there had been a rigorous and careful consideration of matters over two major projects and the leader had stated that the Council had been “beaten by the building twice”. How do we know that this won’t happen again?

Town Council response: *The Council is currently working with its partners to seek alternative community uses for the Abbey Hall. Mr Hines is correct that there have been two major projects proposed in recent years, as summarised above, and neither has proceeded because the Council has considered them to be unaffordable. The consideration of the current project is at an early stage and there can be no guarantees that it will succeed in providing alternative community uses.*

- If there are exciting potential plans as a result of discussions with the County Council and District Council then why have they not emerged before and why has the building been closed for so long and closed prematurely?

Town Council response: *In relation to why potential plans have not emerged before, clearly with any plans there will be a point at which they are conceived; the fact that they have not emerged before does not mean that those plans are not worthy of further consideration. If this*

were the case then no plans would ever be progressed on the basis that they had not been thought of previously and nothing would change.

The question regarding the length of the building's closure for hire and the timing is detailed above in the response to Virginia Parker.

The statement indicates exciting proposals and that a small number of people cannot be accommodated by the proposals and will have to go elsewhere. Why do these exciting proposals not include a large enough space for those here this evening who need it?

Town Council response: Two previous projects sought to continue to make the Abbey Hall available for hire but unfortunately were unable to proceed because the Council considered them to be unaffordable. Major works would be required to update the hall and make it fit for purpose. Whilst the Council acknowledges that there is some demand for the Abbey Hall, the hirings over recent years could not justify the considerable sums involved in providing an updated modern facility.

- Refer back to contribution by Tony Legge. The original decision was that the Guildhall should pay for itself and should not be seen as a community asset. It may have cost £200,000 a year but so, I understand, does the Museum. The council tax should be spent on people here, now. Many of the plans relate to Museum / archive / exhibition of artefacts and storage and there is not enough emphasis on people here now. The balance is misplaced.

Hilary Green, resident of Abingdon

Comments and Questions for consideration

- The year taken as an example for Abbey Hall bookings, 2013/14, was the year prior to the building being shut down. Bookings had already run down by that stage due to the cost of hiring the building outpricing those who wished to use it, meaning they were going elsewhere.

Town Council response: During the period of time that the Town Council has been responsible for the Guildhall and the Abbey Hall the income related to hirings, bar etc increased from £73,019 in 2011/12 to £106,664 in 2014/15, the last full year before the Guildhall became unavailable for hire. In fact, 2013/14 was the year where the income in relation to hires, bar etc was the highest. It should be noted that during the period 2011-2015 the Council did not increase its room hire charges and rates and costs of catering were also reduced to many users when the Council reinstated the ability of hirers to use their own caterers subject to their

adherence to proper catering standards evidenced through the holding of necessary insurances, food hygiene certificates etc.

Angela Thomas, resident of Abingdon

Comments and Questions for consideration

- I understand from what was said earlier that a commercial venture is prepared to open the Abbey Hall. If they can do this why can the Council not do it?

Town Council response: Consideration of potential interim uses of the Abbey Hall and the offer from the Regal at Evesham is part of the separate report to the Finance and General Purposes Committee of 26th February 2018.

Terry Boswell, resident of Abingdon

Comments and Questions for consideration

- Understand that opening the Abbey Hall would cost money, more than any revenue which was generated. Do we want to subsidise every venue, particularly a venue which is not fully accessible for all or fully inclusive? Does not agree with everything that the Council is doing but the Council is trying to meet needs as best it can from its resources.
- The archives are not currently accessible and, as a previous speaker said, maybe they do not need to be. But they are costing us money. It is better to bring them in house and give people the opportunity to access them. Similarly, with the Museum. In the past with the Museum there had been a missed opportunity, don't make the same mistake again, do something that is available for everyone in the longer term.

Mr Brian Eastoe, speaking on behalf of Mr & Mrs Aylward, residents of Abingdon, who were unable to attend the meeting

Comments and Questions for consideration

- Have been asked by Mr & Mrs Aylward to raise the possibility of the Abbey Hall being used as an indoor market. The Guildhall could benefit financially. The Oxford indoor market has been a great success for many years and there should be an investigation to whether it would be possible to provide an indoor market at the Abbey Hall which could host collectibles, arts, crafts, workshops etc. Many new businesses cannot afford rent, rates, etc and the risks entailed in finding a property and the Abbey Hall could provide a suitable venue. The idea was also

supported by one of Abingdon's long- established businesses who also cannot attend this evening.

- Suggest that a small committee could be formed to look into this matter, to look at the finances etc. The electricity supply to the building would need to be increased. It would be good to trial this for at least a year. The Abbey Hall is available and the facilities underneath could be used for workshops making pottery, wood carving etc.
- This could become a thriving area which people would come into town to visit. It could be a good attraction instead of it sitting doing nothing.

Rosemary Perrow, resident of Abingdon

Comments and Questions for consideration

- Had been in a conversation with a lady from Witney who had been visiting Abingdon. The lady had said that Witney had good facilities, it is nice but it lacks the culture of Abingdon and therefore she comes to visit Abingdon regularly.
- Aware of two venues who had been approached by community organisations when the Guildhall closed. What sort of survey had been carried out of users and potential users by the Council as it seemed the Council was not fully aware of all the potential users for the Guildhall?

Town Council response: In response to this question it is assumed that the word "Guildhall" refers to the Abbey Hall. The Council has not undertaken a survey of users and potential users of the Abbey Hall. The Council clearly has records of the users of the Abbey Hall previously. In relation to potential users, it is not the role of the Council to take trade from elsewhere.

Patricia Wynn-Jones, resident of Abingdon

Comments and Questions for consideration

- Is the Town Council taking up the offer from the Regal Cinema Evesham to use the Abbey Hall for cinema and live events until the Council has decided the long-term future of the Abbey Hall?

Town Council response: The Council is currently in discussions with the Regal Cinema Evesham in relation to the potential use of the Abbey Hall during the interim period referred to. It is anticipated that, subject to their consideration of the building condition survey, the Regal Cinema Evesham will come forward with a formal offer which will be considered by the Council in March 2018.

Dr Jim Halliday, resident of Abingdon

Comments and Questions for consideration

- When the Town Council took over the Guildhall from the Vale of White Horse District Council it received a grant of £1.2 million for capital refurbishments. Despite asking questions over the years I am not clear how much of this remains, but suspect it is approximately £1 million. When the property was transferred in 2011 the Council at the time had plans to refurbish the Abbey Hall for a fraction of that. These plans would have included audio-visual equipment, soundproofing, Wi-Fi, etc. Have the Town Council looked at these plans again? They were fully costed. A refurbishment could be done at much less than the £3 or £4 million being quoted. A key factor is cost.

Town Council response: The plans from 2011 referred to have been reviewed as part of the work recently undertaken by Ridge & Partners.

It should be noted that these plans were a quote obtained from one supplier and were at an early stage. The plans were essentially for an upgrade of the Abbey Hall. They did not include Wi-Fi. They did provide for soundproofing through the installation of a suspended ceiling with a grid system and a high acoustic rating. The plans included a number of provisional sums for unscoped/ unquantified works.

The plans, taking into account the requirement for professional advice through the process, contingency and building inflation since 2011, were for a project of £438,000. At the time it was also identified that there was a requirement for additional works in relation to electrical upgrade, lighting, heating, sound systems and access improvements.

- At the Finance & General Purposes Committee of 19th December 2017 I asked the Committee what the additional running costs of the Abbey Hall would be? I understand that there are costs to refurbishment. Was surprised I could not be given the answers. Had been told that the income generated from opening the Abbey Hall would be less than the running costs but had also been told that the information was not currently available.

Town Council response: The additional running costs of the Abbey Hall are referred to in the report to the Finance and General Purposes meeting of 26th February 2018.

The answers could not be given at the meeting of 19th December 2017 as the Council did not have this information. The Guildhall and the Abbey Hall always being operated as one single entity and costs have never been

allocated to the individual rooms. The report of the Town Clerk to the meeting of 26th February 2018 further considers this matter. In summary it is very difficult to accurately establish the marginal revenue costs operating the Abbey Hall but whilst the building remains one entity these are not considered to be significant. If the Abbey Hall was the responsibility of another organisation as part of a Community Hub there would be savings.

- Understands that there are “exciting opportunities” in relation to the Abbey Hall but no one knows what they are or what the cost of them is. When the Town Council knows what these “exciting opportunities” are I suggest that the Council holds another meeting, in a larger venue, to present the various options and undertakes consultation.

Town Council response: *The Council has committed to undertake consultation in relation to the plans for alternative community uses of the Abbey Hall.*

- Maybe these “exciting opportunities” are the best options but no one knows what they are. Cannot judge until we know. Understand that the Town Councillors are all volunteers but they are representatives of the people and should keep the public fully informed. What we do now will affect the next generation.

Jill Gant, resident of Abingdon

Comments and Questions for consideration

- Echo the comments of Rosemary Perrow. Fantastic amount of community groups in Abingdon, particularly in relation to arts and culture.
- The 2013/14 figures appear to be a remarkable underestimate of usage of the Abbey Hall.

Town Council response: *The 2013/14 figures are correct and 2013/14 was the best year for the Guildhall complex in terms of income from hires, bars, events etc.*

- Have attended lots of events there – hustings, consultations, ADFAS, Mayor’s Ball, concerts, National Trust meetings etc. If the venue were promoted / advertised it would be better used. If it were refurbished there would be a better sound system, better seating, perhaps raked – it would be a good venue for theatre and music and an exciting community gathering place.
- The Abbey Hall is very important for a town of this size. Why can Wantage and Wallingford have such a venue and we don’t?

Town Council response: In relation to the Civic Hall at Wantage this is a much larger hall than the Abbey Hall, capable of accommodating 348 persons seated and 440 persons standing. However, Wallingford is much smaller, the largest room in the Town Hall being the Council Chamber which accommodates 60 persons, this being smaller than both the Council Chamber and the Roysse Room in the Guildhall.

Whilst the Council policy is not to continue to use the Abbey Hall in the long term as a civic hall facility, there are a number of venues within Abingdon which are of significant size and some of which are larger, including churches, school halls and other community centres.

- A passionate believer in community although only been in Abingdon for 20 years, there are others who have been here longer. Love it as a town and the community spirit.

There being no further speakers the Mayor then moved on to the next part of the agenda item:

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.

Brian Page, resident of Abingdon

Comments and Questions for consideration

- Why does the Council value 1950s concrete above 17th Century woodwork? I would like to understand the rationale.

Draft Town Council response (subject to approval): Council's intention is to make the Guildhall as fully inclusive and accessible at possible. At present the best option to do this is to install the lift and remove the staircase in the Guildhall as under the Council's current proposals. This appears to be acknowledged by those who are against the removal of the staircase.

Terry Boswell, resident of Abingdon

Comments and Questions for consideration

- In response to the previous speaker I have seen some of the plans and if you had seen them, the proposal for the external lift is not at all inclusive for those visiting the building. Heritage England's proposal is somewhat ridiculous.

- Has enormous sympathy for those trying to access the building. Has restricted mobility myself and has experience in these matters from running her own B&B. The current building is inaccessible. Applauds the Town Council's efforts to provide access at a reasonable cost. I am a council tax and business rates payer.
- Understand the reasons given by Historic England for suggesting the external lift but these suggestions would make those having to use this lift feel excluded and inferior. The proposals are totally against the spirit of equal opportunities and equal rights and are not acceptable. The installation of the second lift does not provide access to all rooms. The proposals from Historic England would be very confusing and not financially acceptable when the current proposals from the Town Council are on the table.
- Do not feel that it is right for a building to have priority over people. Mistakes have been made in the past –do not repeat them. We need a solution for the future and the community to make the building fit for community use and available to all.

Brian Eastoe, on behalf of Mr and Mrs Aylward, residents of Abingdon, who were unable to attend the meeting

Comments and Questions for consideration

- Before embarking on this expenditure did you do a market survey of who are going to use the Guildhall? Was in a group that was priced out of the building and subject to restrictions being imposed on it. Group could not use items without having to pay – charges for the number of chairs being used, tables, being charged extra for being in the building after 10pm, charged for bringing sandwiches in etc. Prices were also higher than other venues. Are we going to make the same mistakes again? Who is going to use the Guildhall?

Draft Town Council response (subject to approval): *The project in relation to the Guildhall is to undertake essential improvements to the property and also to provide a muniment room which will enable the archives, dating back to 1556, to return to Abingdon.*

Many of these improvements are long overdue and are necessary in order to ensure that the Guildhall remains viable for the future. The Council is not sure what would be gained by undertaking a market survey of who is going to use the Guildhall. The Guildhall is a long-established facility and has over the years been used by many clubs and societies, by businesses for meetings and by residents for weddings, family parties etc. It is anticipated that this established use will continue and develop over the years in response to improvements in

the service offer at the Guildhall as well as in the light of other facilities available in the town.

In relation to the charges for hiring the Guildhall. The Council will be considering and publishing its list of fees and charges ahead of reopening the Guildhall later in the summer. Since 2011 fees and charges have been frozen by the Town Council and in certain areas were reduced, e.g. through the Council allowing groups to bring in their own caterers rather than insisting on an in-house caterer. Clearly there is a difficult balance to maintain in levying a correct charge for use of the Guildhall, bearing in mind that even if it were to be more fully utilised it is highly unlikely that the majority of council tax payers would be using the Guildhall in any given year. However, we acknowledge that the previous schedule of fees and charges was too complicated and in comparing the Guildhall with similar venues, the Council's officers will be recommending a simplification of the fees and charges which are likely to include sessional charges rather than charges by the hour.

In relation to the previous charges, we are not aware of charges being levied depending on the number of chairs and tables required. The Council scrapped the additional charges for use of the building after 10pm some years ago and when the catering contract was ended the Council also scrapped any charges for bringing food, including sandwiches, into the building, charges in relation to external caterers related their use of the kitchen. Consequently, all of the comments regarding the previous fees and charges are out of date.

Hester Hand, resident of Abingdon

Comments and Questions for consideration

- The Mayor mentioned at the start of the meeting that it is very unfortunate that there was not a large enough room to accommodate everyone this evening but you do have an accessible room large enough and with disabled access, the Abbey Hall.

Draft Town Council response (subject to approval): *The Mayor stated that the Abbey Hall does not have disabled access at present.*

To elaborate on the Mayor's comments: building works have now 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 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 in 2013.

- Agree that we must provide as much inclusive access as possible. There are options to do this, at least partially, by maintaining the link between the old and the new sides. By severing the link, you are severing options.

Draft Town Council response (subject to approval): *Proposals and plans in relation to the Abbey Hall will emerge in due course and will be subject to good publicity and public consultation. However, there are no proposals to permanently sever the link between the old building and the new building. The Council has considered removing the wide modern internal steps which lead from the Roysse Room up to the Abbey Hall foyer but did not proceed with this proposal for the precise reason that it did not want to rule out options for the future.*

Jim Hines, resident of Abingdon

Comments and Questions for consideration

- Would like to come back to the question as to who is this for, the present or the past? Delighted to hear of “exciting plans” for the Old Magistrates’ Court but it is not clear the extent to which these will go to meet the Museum’s problems. The Old Magistrates’ Court is currently vacant and I declare an interest in that for 13 years I was involved in a society which brought hundreds of people into the building until they were evicted.
- The Old Magistrates Court is a useful big space which understand will be predominantly used for the storage of Museum artefacts and archives. Would be pleased to be proved wrong if it is made accessible for disabled people to visit exhibitions. This is a space which can accommodate 50-60 people in it with disabled access and it will be a waste of space in the town for this to be used as storage.

Draft Town Council response (subject to approval): *The Guildhall dates back to the 15th century and houses many of the Council’s treasures. The Borough archives, the treasures and works of art date back to 1556. Clearly the Council must maintain the building and its contents as its custodians, looking after what has been inherited from previous generations so that they can be passed on to future generations. At the same time the Council is keen that the Guildhall is a facility which can be enjoyed by residents now and is a fully inclusive building and facility. So, the answer to the question is that the Guildhall is there for the past, and the present, but also the Council’s plans are looking to safeguard its viability for the future.*

Bobbie Nichols, resident of Abingdon

Comments and Questions for consideration

- Why is so much being discussed in confidential sessions of committees? Understands that financial matters have to be discussed in confidential but why not a bit more discussion in the open so the public understands what is going on?

Draft Town Council response (subject to approval): 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 might be and the Council's officers are 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.

Sue Richards, resident of Abingdon

Comments for consideration

- When English Heritage would not allow the lift at the Museum, was so incensed that I wrote to complain to them. The Town Council went ahead and put a café in the basement. This could be a good area for the storage of artefacts as not sure that it is successful as a café. Would hate to see the same happen again. We cannot preserve Abingdon buildings just as buildings and artefacts to be mothballed. We must make them work for all the people of the town.

Mr Ian Smith, making a statement on behalf of his father, Mr Eric Smith (note Mr Smith submitted a copy of his speech for the record)

Comments for consideration

- There is an obligation on the Town Council for full accessibility if the building is to be used for public use. This is not a miniscule responsibility. The Town Council is trying to achieve this.

- A listed building today only freezes the building at some arbitrary frozen moment in time. In many ways it is an unnatural situation. I am aware in some detail that one scheme would be a reduction in the width of the staircase and the heightening of a handrail to minimum building requirements for safety. There would be the addition of a modern lift and with carpets re-laid I doubt if anyone would notice the difference.
- Historic England will not be held to account in the future. It is the people of Abingdon who will be left with buildings that are a dead weight around our necks: all neatly listed by Historic England.
- The Town Council is required not to discriminate against people when planning service delivery and selecting from which buildings it might be appropriate to do so. To quote from a national UK newspaper in the last 24 hours: *“Equality isn’t a grey area. It is a universally acknowledged value. You either believe in it or you don’t.”* You are either committed to it or you are not.
- However, by statute Historic England is excused from having to think about people and equality. The fabric of a building is the be all and end all. Nothing else. The building safe for the nation, without regard to people. The choice should be ours and having seen enough crumbling ruins in Berlin to last countless lifetimes, I know which way I want to see the Guildhall go in the future and hopefully enable myself and my partner to visit, before it is too late. I am also sure Historic England can find an inclusive way forward if enough people wish it.

Roger Thomas, resident of Abingdon

Comments for consideration

- I used to work for Historic England. Historic England has received a lot of stick this evening but what needs to be understood is that it is not Historic England who is against this, it is government policy. The National Planning Policy Framework states that “substantial harm” to a listed building should only be permitted in exceptional circumstances. If you persist with these plans they will end up being refused by an inspector and the Council will spend lots of money in the process. I urge you to think again.

Chris Waite, resident of Abingdon

Comments and Questions for consideration

- Endorse what Jim, Sue and others have said about a need for archives. It is very important that they are accommodated somewhere. If Historic England did not give permission for the external lift to the Museum then

why would they suggest an external lift on the outside of this iconic building? Why did Historic England suggest this when it would be visible to so many? Surely the steps are more beautiful than a lift?

Draft Town Council response (subject to approval): These are questions for Historic England. There was some surprise when the proposal came forward from Historic England to remove the outside steps although this is probably primarily on the basis that the steps only date back to the 1950s. Although the officer from Historic England has made the suggestion to remove the outside steps this is, of course, not to say that if the Council did proceed with this proposal, which appears to come forward as a response to issues surrounding conservation as opposed to access, there is no guarantee that these plans would eventually be approved by Historic England. The Council's experience in relation to the County Hall suggests that the contrary may be the case.

- Agree fully that we must accommodate everybody so that they can visit these beautiful buildings and make use of the facilities so desperately needed in the Abbey Hall.

Rosemary Perrow, resident of Abingdon

Comments for consideration

- Cannot believe that we are having this debate about heritage against the use of a listed building in this day and age. There must be a sensitive alternative to destroying historic fabric.
- Concern that regrets over previous experience with the Museum is leading to a “not the Museum over the road”. If Council is so worried about accessibility to the Museum then consider moving the Museum and finding another use for the County Hall. The wish to make up for past mistakes by creating half a museum is disastrous.

Lesley Legge, resident of Abingdon

Comments for consideration

- Wherever you put a lift in the new or old part of the building it will not reach all the rooms. It is too complex a building and it is not possible. Also, the requirement in relation to disabled access is for the Council to do its best.
- There was previously a lift which went up the stairs from the Roysse Room to the Abbey Hall as well as the external lift. There need to be improvements. Having a large venue for disabled people is very important. The Roysse Room is accessible and the Old Magistrates’

Court could be made available. We need to look at ways in the future to reach the other floors. There was a complex plan previously involving both the new and the old buildings, a fantastic plan but way out of reach of the Town Council. You have to do the best you can. It is important to have a large community space available for those who are mobility impaired.

David Perrow, resident of Abingdon

Comments and Questions for consideration

- Has a cost benefit analysis been done on bringing the archives back? Archives are expensive and although they are Abingdon archives, archives are a County Council function. Have a great interest in the archives, speaking as a historian and a librarian of 40 years standing. However, suggest that given the competing needs of the space the Council carefully looks at the cost of the archives relative to the costs and benefits to societies and organisations.

Draft Town Council response (subject to approval): The town's archives have been housed in Abingdon since 1556 and have only been temporarily relocated to the Berkshire Records Office whilst the Council has been working on the project which will see a new muniment / archive room being built, fitted out and available for use this year as part of the Guildhall. The Council's policy, stated publicly in its minutes, is that it will continue to act as custodians for the archives for the benefit of current and future generations. Clearly there is a cost for this. However, the Council has no plans to give the town's archives to either Oxfordshire or Berkshire Records Office.

As stated above the archives are currently held at the Berkshire Records Office in Reading. The Berkshire Records Office has been funded, since the abolition of Berkshire County Council, by the unitary councils in the historic county of Berkshire and the Town Council has over the years received excellent professional support from the Berkshire Records Office. However, on a long-term basis the Berkshire Records Office would not be able to take into its collections the Abingdon archives because it simply does not have the space.

When the Town Council was looking for a temporary home for the archives investigations were made as to the annual cost of a professional archive storage company looking after the archives; these costs ranged from £27,000 to £60,000 per year (not including storage of the map chest including the Charters) and access to the archives would have been limited because any individual papers and documents required would have to be ordered up and couriered to the Council at additional costs.

Dr Jim Halliday, resident of Abingdon

Comments and Questions for consideration

- Understands that the Vale Conservation Officer also had concerns about the proposals in relation to the lift and the staircase but these were not mentioned in the report read out by the Mayor.

Draft Town Council response (subject to approval): Dr Halliday is correct in that the pre-planning application advice from the District Council Conservation Officer indicated that she objected to the removal of the staircase.

- The Town Council is the custodian of the town. Listed buildings are national assets, I live in one and they are a responsibility, sometimes an irksome responsibility and one which costs extra money. Agree with Lesley Legge that the responsibility is to make best efforts to improve access, you do not have to make everything accessible; for instance, the toilet in the foyer has a step to it.
- The Town Council needs to be careful not to set a precedent – if they can go against the advice of the Conservation Officer then owners of other listed buildings will also feel that they can. The Town Council should release into the public domain the report which it has commissioned on the staircase. The reports have been paid for by the people and we should be able to see them.

Draft Town Council response (subject to approval): It is right that the Town Council to consider the best option for obtaining fully inclusive access to the Guildhall. There is clearly a balance to be struck between conservation and access. In this case it would appear that the likelihood is that current planning policy means that the balance is in favour of conservation. However, there is absolutely no possibility that the Town Council would proceed with any of its plans without planning permission and listed building consent. We also acknowledge that it is at this stage unlikely that planning permission and listed building consent would be granted given the opposition of officers at Historic England and the Conservation Officer. Nonetheless this does not mean that this advice cannot be re-considered in the light of additional work taking place and information coming forward.

The report which has been received from Asset Heritage Consulting is included together with the report of the Town Clerk in the reports going forward to the Guildhall Committee meeting of 1st March 2018.

Dick Richards, resident of Abingdon

Comments for consideration

- Thank you for your (the Mayor's) statement but this evening was a missed opportunity as there were so many questions and no responses were given. Think about this for the second meeting.
- With regards to the 1960s building this is what Prince Charles would call a carbuncle. But it is our carbuncle and whatever plans are in place for it, please get on and do it so we can use it.

Draft Town Council response (subject to approval): The Council agrees with this statement. Building and improvement works in relation to the Guildhall are now well underway and plans in relation to the Abbey Hall are moving forward with Oxfordshire County Council.

The Mayor then concluded the meeting with the following comments:

- The Council will be answering your questions. I am very frustrated that I was not allowed to answer your questions this evening but we will take all of your questions away and they will be considered in a very reasoned manner.
- As I came into the meeting I was shouted at by some people and also pushed. Please do not do this again.

APPENDIX 1

Statement made by the Mayor to the Special Parish Meeting, 15th January 2018

Last week 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 to 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 regretfully 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 Friday afternoon (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