

**ABINGDON-ON-THAMES TOWN COUNCIL**  
**WEDNESDAY 27<sup>TH</sup> JANUARY 2021**  
**LEADER'S BUDGET SPEECH**

As a town, Abingdon has been through much: wars, famines and plagues but it has been a long time since there has been a crisis like the one we presently face, which affects absolutely every resident in the town.

The Covid-19 crisis struck just before the start of the 2020-21 civic and financial year and became something that lasted the entire year. This has been an unprecedented challenge to staff and councillors and has led to many changes in how we work. This council is committed to working with other authorities to respond to this, for example we have offered our staff and buildings for use via the local resilience framework and we are offering grants and administrative support to community volunteers.

For the coming year, we are budgeting for a turnover of £2,004,465.

**SERVICES**

We will use this to manage our services, including eight play areas, recreation areas, football pitches, cemeteries, the Guildhall complex including the popular Abbey Cinema, and the County Hall building in which our museum is housed. We are still running the Monday market within Covid guidance rules and we are exploring ways of delivering other events and community support in new ways.

**STAFFING**

37.2% of our budget goes on staff. We have increased staff capacity this year, knowing that new development is set to increase the number of homes in Abingdon by over 1,000 in the next three or four years. This will more than cover the cost for increased staffing but more importantly it gives us the capacity to service these communities from the start. This is part of our approach to budgeting over multi-years rather than just twelve months ahead.

We currently employ 12 full time and 13 part time staff.

We are committed to paying the living wage. We do not discriminate based on age or sex, we pay staff under 25 the living wage and we reward experience through our increment scheme. And I am very pleased that this year we have promoted five members of staff to take on more senior roles.

Our gender pay gap this year is 3% in favour of women and the ratio between the highest and lowest paid members of staff is 3.25.

**SERVICE AND ASSET MANAGEMENT**

We have this year rolled out our procurement policy and investment strategy as part of our commitment to manage our finances well.

We have modernised our payment processes. this year we will bring in options for residents to pay fees by card, online and by phone. This is indicative of our commitment to fiscal responsibility, modernisation and efficiency.

We will continue to keep our assets in a good state of repair and will continue to improve the Guildhall building to make it both financially and ecologically more sustainable. Already capital investment last year in the Guildhall building is reflected as a revenue saving in energy in this year and all subsequent years' budgets. Although the payback will take several years, this does not deter us from investing in this way as long-term planning rather than a quick political pay back is this council's approach.

We are committed to improving bio-diversity and taking into account the climate emergency in our stewardship of the green areas.

### **THE BUDGET FOR 2021-22**

Putting together this budget has not been easy. We don't know how the Covid crisis will play out this year. We are budgeting for what we are certain to need from precept. We don't want to take more than we have to in council tax and have tried to minimise the rise but in case the pandemic does continue far into the new budget year we have estimated a maximum that could be necessary and put it in as a figure to be drawn from reserves as needed.

The main impact of Covid upon our budget is loss of revenue but there is some spending including enhanced stewarding of the Monday market, security of buildings and supporting staff and councillors to work remotely. We have also committed funding for Covid related grants to help the community support each other.

When we can we work with community partners. For example, we have just heard how by working with Christ's Hospital and local businesses we have helped to enable schools to provide a laptop to every child that needs one. Thanks to Cllr Foulsham and Cllr Barody and to everyone who made that happen.

This reflects the Town Council's core mission to work with community partners to support those who are vulnerable and in need and to create opportunities to increase social inclusivity.

This strand has been woven through this budget.

### **SUPPORTING OUR COMMUNITY**

The impact of the pandemic since March has intensified issues such as domestic violence, parents' mental health and alcohol and substance abuse – all factors that put children at greater risk. When schools and other places children normally go are closed, the most vulnerable children become invisible. I am therefore pleased to say that we will continue to provide the core funding for Abingdon Carousel Family Centre for their work supporting families with young children.

We know that for some the pandemic has meant a reduction or even loss of income for many. We are committed to continuing our support for Abingdon Citizens' Advice, who can offer help navigating the complex world of benefits claims, advise on rent and tenancy matters and the myriad problems which have grown because of the Covid crisis.

We will continue to support Be Free Young Carers to help support their work with children who have the extra load of caring for an immediate family member on a daily basis. During lockdown, when we add isolation to needing to provide care for a relative, I think it is self-evident why it is so important to support these children.

We are supporting the neighbourhood plan, which gives residents rather than the council a say in future development of this town.

When children cannot access sports clubs or do P.E. at school, when adults are not walking as part of their commute and cannot go to gym or fitness classes - our recreation areas become more important than ever. We will continue to maintain them and have a budget bid to add an additional £20,000 of capital money to the reserve for playground and outdoor gym equipment with a view to enhancing some of our areas used for exercise and leisure which is so important for the physical and mental health of our residents.

We also have a small budget bid of £5,000 to seed fund a community project to raise funds to install a bandstand in honour of the Platinum Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth II. This is very different to our other budget bids but we believe it is important to still look forward with positivity - for these troubling times will not be forever. We want Abingdon to emerge from the present crisis as a vibrant town with cultural and leisure opportunities. This is a beacon of hope to bring people together and supporting community arts.

## **YOUTH SERVICES**

Youth services have not traditionally been part of this council's remit. However, we have watched as decreasing levels of government funding for youth support have slashed budgets for all kinds of reasons. We have watched as the NHS has defunded the Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services and we have watched as schools take on ever more complex issues outside of tradition learning and teaching.

I am not talking about young people not getting a new ping pong table for the youth club or missing out on a trip, I am talking about vital support for vulnerable young people, support for students with additional needs and a crisis in young people's mental health as they navigate a world way more complicated than the one I grew up in.

And that was before the Covid crisis struck.

Imagine being in your final year of school having worked towards exams that would no longer be sat and then being asked to make decisions about your future. Imagine that you were expecting to look for work to a course but instead found yourself in lockdown. How do you start a first job, or commence university or a vocational course?

How do you contribute to society when you are shut away at home? What if home is not a safe haven, or you have to care for younger siblings not at school so your parents can still work, or you have to care for your parent and the only place you can go for information and socialising is the internet where not everyone has good intentions and not everything is true?

A couple of weeks ago, the Prince's Trust annual survey of young people's happiness and confidence returned the worst findings in its 12-year history. Jonathan Townsend, the trust's UK chief executive. said "The pandemic has taken a devastating toll on young people's mental health and wellbeing. Many believe they are missing out on being young and sadly we know that the impact of the pandemic on their employment prospects and overall wellbeing could continue far into their futures." More than half said they always or often felt anxious, rising to 64% among those not in work, education or training.

I call upon Oxfordshire County Council to reinstate adequate funding for youth services but in the meantime, I am proposing a new budget line of £30,000 for supporting young people. We plan to work with community partners with Abingdon Bridge and Damascus taking a lead to develop ways of supporting young people in this town.

Alongside this, we will be setting up a youth forum or youth council - the details will be decided by the young people themselves; we're not telling them what to do. We are committed to listening to what comes out of this and taking it into account when we set this council's plans.

## **CONCLUSION**

Council, I ask you to agree this budget which continues to deliver the town's services, reflecting the additional pressures caused by Covid-19 and to invest more in young people for the annual sum of £140.60 for a Band D property, about 38.5 pence a day.

Councillor Samantha Bowring  
Leader, Abingdon-on-Thames Town Council  
27 January 2021