



Abingdon-on-Thames Annual Town Meeting

Thursday 2 March 2023

Minutes

Present:

Cllr Andy Foulsham

Cllr Gabby Barody

Cllr Samantha Bowring

Cllr Cheryl Briggs

Cllr Neil Fawcett

Cllr Jim Halliday

Cllr Eric de la Harpe

Cllr Pat Lonergan

Cllr Andrew Skinner

Mayor of Abingdon, Chair of meeting

In attendance:

Andy Crick

Paula Lopez

Victoria Moore

Alan Rouse

Democratic Services Officer (clerk to the meeting)

Locum Deputy Town Clerk, Abingdon Town Council

Properties and Events Officer, Abingdon Town Council

Town Clerk/Chief Executive, Abingdon Town Council

21 members of the public

Apologies were received from Cllr Margaret Crick and Georgina Hicks from Abingdon Carousel

1 General Introduction

The Mayor of Abingdon, Councillor Andy Foulsham, opened the meeting and presented an update on his activities during the year.

2 **Minutes of the Annual Town Meeting 28 April 2022**

It was **proposed** by Terry Boswell, **seconded** by Bobbie Nicholls and **AGREED** that the minutes of the Annual Town Meeting that took place on 28 April 2022 be signed by the Chair as a correct record. The Mayor signed the minutes at the meeting.

3 **Reports by Town Council Committee Chairs**

Reports were received from the Chairs of town council committees.

Community Committee – Cllr Neil Fawcett

Cllr Fawcett noted that there had been a strong focus on the Platinum Jubilee celebration at the start of the council year and the end of the year has seen a growing focus on the forthcoming coronation of King Charles III.

The town council has a good track record of support for youth groups including The Abingdon Bridge, Damascus and the Abingdon Carousel family centre. The town council is at its strongest when working in partnership with other groups. Cllr Fawcett's report includes example of working with groups in Abingdon and he thanked all those who had contributed to activities through the year.

Environment and Amenities Committee – Cllr Gabby Barody

Cllr Barody echoed the comments of Cllr Fawcett on partnership working.

She acknowledged the work of the town council's Outdoor Services Team in many areas through the year. The Outdoor Services Team worked through the year to maintain playgrounds in Abingdon and Cllr Barody mentioned the planned major improvements to Caldecott Recreation Ground which will take place later this year.

It is hoped that work to create a community woodland would commence shortly and Cllr Barody thanked Lucille Savin for her work on this project.

The town council-supported Green Forum works on four themes through the year and its latest theme is active travel. A new active travel map is being finalised and will be published soon.

A biodiversity competition has been held for a second year, this year focused on school projects. The results of the competition will be announced at the annual Mayor-making event on 15 May 2023.

Town Infrastructure Committee - Cllr Andrew Skinner

Cllr Skinner highlighted the value of working with local groups and mentioned in particular the Neighbourhood Plan, which has been driven almost entirely by non-councillors. The Central Abingdon Regeneration Framework, which is being led by the Vale of White Horse District Council, was mentioned and demonstrates that Abingdon is moving in the right direction.

A decision on the proposed 20mph speed limit in Abingdon has been delayed to enable consultation to take place with local bus companies and the town council has met with representatives from Oxford Bus Company to discuss this.

The county council-managed parking scheme has been successful and the town council has received many positive comments about it.

Plans to restore and add to the Stratton Way underpass mural were delayed following the death of Her Late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II but this project will progress further this year. The existing mural will be restored, not replaced.

Finance, Governance, Asset Management Committee – Cllr Samantha Bowring

The Finance, Governance and Asset Management Committee takes an overview of the other town council committees to ensure that projects are funded. Town council funding comes from: fees and charges; the community infrastructure levy (CIL) – a developer fund which is used for a range of capital projects including play equipment and active travel; council tax, of which the amount due to the town council represents the smallest proportion charged to residents.

The town council is prudent in its financial management. Energy contracts have been negotiated well and the town council continues to improve its office systems and IT. The town council faces inflation pressures like other businesses and residents but manages its resources well to keep council tax bills as low as possible.

4 Abingdon Neighbourhood Plan

The Mayor, Cllr Foulsham, introduced the Chair of the Neighbourhood Plan steering group, Simon Hills, who provided an update. The Mayor commended the work of the steering group and mentioned the dedicated website for the neighbourhood plan.

Simon Hills introduced the Neighbourhood Plan (NP). The NP establishes the principles that the planning authority must take into account when determining planning applications. The NP can help to identify elements such as changing work patterns and demographic changes such as an ageing population.

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The NP steering group has undertaken engagement exercises including publicity in local media, work with local schools and public meetings. These activities have been reported to previous parish meetings.

The steering group aims to go to formal consultation, looking at six key themes – travel access and movement, business and employment, families and young people, green spaces, character areas and town centre. 53 one page character assessments are being written up with the help of the civic society.

The next step is a 'regulation 14' consultation period, a town council-managed exercise with support from the consultants appointed to manage the NP process. The NP will then be revised and submitted to the Vale of White Horse District Council for review and statutory modification. After this, the NP will be submitted to a town referendum.

5 **Abingdon Green Forum**

A report was submitted by the received from the Chair of the green forum, Anne Smart, who noted that the forum is a collaboration between the town council and voluntary groups.

6 **Presentations by Community Groups**

The Council gives a number of grants each year and the recipient groups were invited to make presentations to the meeting. Some groups were unable to attend the meeting.

Abingdon Carousel

Lesley Wix gave a presentation on behalf of Abingdon Carousel, which was set up to continue the work of South Abingdon Children's Centre when it had to close in 2017 due to the removal of funding. Abingdon Carousel supports children, parents and carers and provides a community hub for partner organisations to provide services, as well as signposting people to other services.

A new manager, Georgina Hicks, began in May 2022 and has been working to bring policies and training up to date. Abingdon Carousel has supported 99 new families this year and helps 204 families overall. The centre has increased its offer to families with special educational needs and disability (SEND) and is now working with 'Swings and Smiles' a Berkshire-based charity supporting disabled children and families.

Carousel runs a Saturday breakfast club which is so popular that there is a waiting list.

The garden has been refurbished.

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Carousel is looking for volunteers in all areas, is seeking a user trustee and hopes to establish a parent-teacher type organisation. The charity is actively working to improve community links and works with local schools. This winter, Carousel has introduced warm spaces.

Funding is challenging and the charity is currently using some of its reserves.

South and Vale Citizens' Advice

Debbie Watts, the Chief Officer of Citizens' Advice Oxford South and Vale of White Horse made a presentation.

Citizens' Advice is an independent local charity which is locally funded. 123 volunteers provide free, impartial advice, with a small staff team to support them. Citizens' Advice has a key worker available from the Trussell Trust and helps district councils to distribute the housing support fund.

There is great demand at the moment, with people coming in with multiple issues. Citizens' Advice has resumed face-to-face appointments over the last year, which is especially good for vulnerable people. The biggest area of demand in Abingdon is Caldecott ward. The most frequent issue raised is access to benefits, especially personal independence payments. The top debt issue at the moment is fuel debt. 40 per cent of people who seek help from Citizens' Advice are vulnerable.

Citizens' Advice is also involved in research and campaigns, activity which is supported through the collection of local data. A recent example is the pre-payment meters campaign.

The next few years are likely to be tough, with a cost of living crisis continuing.

A new website is being launched next week.

Debbie Watts thanked the town council on behalf of Citizens' Advice for the funding provided. The Chair, Cllr Foulsham, thanked Citizens' Advice for the service provided to residents.

Abbey Buildings Trust

Bobbie Rigg provided a written report to the meeting.

7 **Abingdon Integrated Youth Support Project (AIYSP)**

No representative from the youth support project attended the meeting.

8 **To discuss town affairs**

Questions were invited from attendees at the meeting. Three questions were sent in before the meeting.

Stephen Rich, Kysbie Close – question sent by email

On 17 December 2021 your Finance Officer informed the Town Council that the average budget for the main 5 towns surrounding Abingdon was £4.6 K to spend on the Jubilee celebrations the following June. The Council then went on to set a budget 11 times higher at £52,410.

On 23rd May 2022 at a Special Council Meeting only two weeks before the events took place the Council added another £70k to this budget.

The total spend for these events was £118,878 nearly 26 times the average budgets reported for other local towns.

The Leader of the Council phoned me on Sunday 8th May 2022 only 5 weeks before the events, asking if I would consider working on a consultancy basis to return and sort out the mess the Jubilee celebrations were in. My response was no as I had other commitments and, in any case, would be out of the country during to jubilee.

Bearing this in mind would the Council now inform the residents of the town the Council's real reason for the gigantic overspend and why they needed to discuss this matter in a confidential sitting. Was there any income for these events from sponsorship and why did tickets and advertising not happen until the last minute?

Answer

Cllr Neil Fawcett noted that the financial information on the Platinum Jubilee was all in the public domain. The town council is planning a thorough, independent review of the overspend and issues which may have arisen. These discussions will need to be held in confidence as they may contain commercially confidential information.

Income for the event was far lower than planned but the town council is not concerned about spending significantly more than other towns. The town council wanted to run a large event following the disruption of recent years. The town council will review the decision-making for the event. Although there was a plan for the event, this was not finalised and confirmed until a very late stage. It is important to learn from what happened and as much information as possible will be placed in the public domain.

The Platinum Jubilee had been an excellent event and Cllr Fawcett commended staff for their work, in particular when faced with significant last-minute problems which had arisen.

Kathryn Mylrea - question sent by email

Please could you add this topic to the agenda - in particular how the council can support a longer opening time for the pool this summer.

Answer

The Mayor noted that management of the outdoor pool is under GLL, which has been contracted by the Vale of White Horse District Council.

Cllr Neil Fawcett responded to the question. Due to the contract with GLL and current energy costs, the time the pool opened in 2022 was very short. The Vale of White Horse District Council is looking at energy saving measures, such as a pool cover to help retain heat and improved energy efficiency.

The contract with GLL will run for two more years and the district council is looking at options for future management of the pool. Cllr Fawcett noted that a community management model may be worth considering but concluded that there is no simple solution to the future management of the pool.

Hester Hand, Abbot Road - question sent by email

Thank you for all of these reports. They certainly present a very positive and upbeat impression, but I am not convinced that they give a full picture. Many of us know that, for various reasons, the Council has had a difficult year and there are many things which you have not been able to do, or not as quickly as you had hoped.

One example close to my heart is the new noticeboards – promised and approved more than 4 years ago, but still not there – but there are others and many of your major projects have slipped way behind schedule.

The evidence of the lack of delivery is in your accounts: the papers presented at the January Finance meeting show an overall underspend of around 30% this year, with the Environment Committee more than 40% underspent and the Infrastructure Committee even more so. This is money you have raised from us, the public and should be spent on services or facilities for the town. [There is also around £160k of uncommitted CIL money, but that is a different question.]

It is eminently clear from tonight's reports that the areas where delivery is actually happening are those where you have developed successful partnerships with other organisations of various kinds and they are doing the delivery.

My questions therefore are:

- Given the extent of this year's underspend, how can you justify increasing the precept for next year?
- Can you demonstrate to us how you plan to actually spend the money in the coming year?
- Would you be willing to build on what has worked and discuss with third sector and community organisations ways in which they might be able to help further?

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- Similarly, would you be willing to work with other Councils to jointly fund projects which currently fall down the cracks between you?

Answer

Cllr Samantha Bowring responded. The underspending on the 2022-23 budget and the precept increase for 2023-4 reflect the need to properly fund ongoing projects which may not have begun to date, such as the community woodland. There have been delays to some projects for a number of reasons, including covid-19 related issues and labour shortages.

Funding for specific projects has been committed and retained, rather than being transferred to the revenue budget, which would not be responsible. Pending projects include planned major works on the Guildhall, the community woodland, a new cemetery, an infant burial area at the current cemetery, playground refurbishments, improved sport facilities, a museum lift and an accessibility audit of town council buildings. Money committed each year for such projects is placed into an earmarked reserve if it is not spent.

The town council funds training and development for staff and uses outside contractors where appropriate, such as for the neighbourhood plan. It has a successful track record of working with other councils, such as support for the children's centre in South Abingdon following funding cuts at Oxfordshire County Council. The youth project was started by the town council and is run by partner organisations The Abingdon Bridge and Damascus. Investment in youth development offers residents a long-term saving through the support and opportunities provided. The town council also took on responsibility for the museum.

The town council supports a wide range of services for residents and works closely with a number of third sector organisations, including youth groups, the Climate Emergency Centre and Abingdon Carousel.

The town council is happy to listen to ideas from residents. Town Councillors are residents themselves and most of them had experience of working with community groups before becoming councillors. The town council is always looking for partnership working and this is stated in the council's aims and objectives.

Nigel Luker, The Motte - question sent by email

Can I congratulate the council and the work force team on their prompt actions to deal with fallen trees in the woods in recent times and the current on going works to replace the footpath walkway adjacent to the River Stert.

Also the regular bin emptying and litter picking is much appreciated.

Could I ask if there's a current plan to plant any trees in the woods to replace those which have been blown over or suffered storm damage and are therefore nearing the end of their natural lives?

There is at least one large space available that would benefit from some native trees being introduced.

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I additionally wanted to ask if contractors could be requested to keep as much debris as possible away from the River Stert when trees are being felled etc as the temptation to push logs into the river proves to be tempting for some.

The net result of which leads to blockages and flooding & this then requires local residents who have the river flowing through their property like myself issues in trying to clear it with the assistance of the Environment Agency.

I have taken some photographs to illustrate the point.

Answer

Cllr Gabby Barody responded to the question and provided the following information from the town council's Cemeteries and Outdoor Services Manager:

'This is something that has and unfortunately continues to happen. When trees are cut most of the arisings are taken away especially if the tree is on the bank of the Stert. You'll notice that most the branches in the pictures haven't been cut by chainsaw and look to be dead/broken. Recently we did have some large sections of timber left by a contractor for some time, but this has now been cleared.

'In our efforts to maintain some biodiversity in the woodland and create habitats we do have to leave deadwood and occasionally a small amount of stacked wood further into the woodland. Some of this will always find its way to the river as children like to play at making bridges and dams.

'We do periodically clear the river, as do the Environmental Agency. To my knowledge debris from the woodland has thankfully never caused a serious issue further downstream. We will continue to clear branches and perhaps it would be a good idea for us to implement some kind of rota to ensure it happens on a more formal basis and reassure residents that we are proactive in trying to prevent any blockages.

'Natural regeneration is taking place in the woodland. It's important to remember that woodlands aren't only about upright living trees. There are many varying habitats that are all of great value and importance to wooded areas. It isn't always necessary to intervene when trees fall and create space. It is very much in the nature of a woodland for trees to fall, let in the light and allow other species to thrive in the interim until those self-seeded trees that are waiting to reach the light win the fight and the cycle begins again. This can already be seen happening in the area where the large poplar came down. This is a small valuable wetland area where many varied plants and saplings are now flourishing and in time, so will the larger tree species once again.

'I will of course continue to monitor the woodland and if ever there is a fitting opportunity to introduce other native trees that will add to the woodland's biodiversity I will certainly jump at the chance knowing I have the support of the council and the financial ability from the arboriculture budget which enables the continued care and replacement of the town council's tree stock.'

Terry Boswell, Jackman Close – question asked at the meeting

Ms Boswell asked about the Bun Throwing plans and about the use of the title 'Abingdon-on-Thames' by the town council.

Answer

Cllr Neil Fawcett advised that the date of the Bun Throwing would be Sunday 7 May 2023 and further details will be announced in due course. With regard to the changed name for Abingdon, this is being introduced when the opportunity arises but it had not been top of the agenda in recent years.

Hector Minto, Wootton Road - – question asked at the meeting

Mr Minto asked about the numbers at the Platinum Jubilee.

Answer

Cllr Fawcett noted that there had been a capacity attendance of 5,000 visitors on each day, a figure in line with plans for the event.

Hector Minto, Wootton Road - – question asked at the meeting

Mr Minto commented that the streets in Abingdon were not in the state they should be and asked for this to be fed back to the county council. He asked for the town council to acknowledge this.

Answer

Cllr Fawcett welcomed the work of groups across the town to tidy and maintain the cleanliness of streets and would look into how the town council could support this work. The county council is focused on other areas due to limited budgets.

Roundabouts are in a very poor state but there are specific concerns over working on them. Cllr Fawcett thanked anyone willing to keep the town tidy.

Hector Minto, Wootton Road - – question asked at the meeting

Mr Minto asked who was responsible for the Abbot on the roundabout on Marcham Road. He noted that residents pay council tax and should expect things to be done without councils seeking to pass over responsibility.

Answer

The Mayor, Cllr Andy Foulsham responded to Mr Minto's earlier question to note that the Vale of White Horse District Council's rubbish contractor carries out periodic deep cleans and he had been able to request this in his local area. He noted that the councils all work together on this.

It was noted that the Abbot had been purchased by the town council as part of an earlier 'Britain in Bloom' competition. The Mayor noted that the Abbot was not

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designed to last for 20 years and it needs extensive repairs. It therefore cannot simply be stood up. The only people who can access the roundabout are county council staff. The town council is not authorised to carry out work in areas managed by other authorities but it had been consulting with the county council to resolve this issue.

Martin Eggleston, St John's Road – question asked at the meeting

Mr Eggleston noted that the Bun Throwing is unique in the country and he would like to see the event promoted more widely.

Answer

Previous Bun Throwings had been televised and local media had been extensively involved. There has been a lot of publicity in the past but the number of people who turn up is at capacity so the town council needs to be careful to ensure the safety of the event. This is why the date is not shared too far in advance. The Bun Throwing is a unique event which residents of Abingdon should be able to enjoy.

Stephen Rich, Kysbie Close – question sent by email

Mr Rich noted that the fair service had been attended by five town councillors and remembrance by 10 town councillors. He commented that it would be good to see more town councillors at such events.

Answer

The Mayor agreed and noted that the numbers may have been reduced following recent disruptions to normal events.

The Mayor thanked everyone for attending and closed the meeting at 8.43pm.

Signed.....

Date.....