



Abingdon-on-Thames Annual Town Meeting

Wednesday 10 April 2024

Minutes

Present:

Cllr Gwyneth Lewis
Cllr Gabby Barody

Mayor of Abingdon, Chair of meeting
Deputy Mayor of Abingdon, Chair of Environment and Amenities committee

Cllr Elio Astone
Cllr Cheryl Briggs
Cllr Penny Clover
Cllr Margaret Crick
Cllr Neil Fawcett
Cllr Mark Giddins
Cllr Tom Greenaway
Cllr Murali Gunarajah
Cllr Jim Halliday
Cllr Pat Lonergan
Cllr Lorraine Oates
Cllr Colin Sanderson
Cllr Andrew Skinner

Chair, Community committee

Chair, Finance, Governance and Asset Management committee

Chair, Town Infrastructure committee

In attendance:

Cherie Carruthers
Andy Crick
Victoria Moore
Ron Spurs

Town Clerk/Chief Executive
Deputy Town Clerk temporary (clerk to the meeting)
Properties and Events Officer
Locum Governance and Projects Officer

28 members of the public

Apologies:

Rita Atkinson
Simon Hills
Anne Smart

Abingdon Damascus Youth Project
Chair, Neighbourhood Plan steering group
Abingdon Green Forum

1 **General Introduction**

The Mayor, Councillor Gwyneth Lewis, opened the meeting and presented an update on some of her activities during the year. Abingdon has over 108 voluntary groups, a sign of a vibrant community.

The Mayor noted that the town council had a new flag policy which was available to view on the town council website. The new policy demonstrates the commitment of the council to inclusion and diversity. It is hoped that a QR code can be provided at the museum to advise people which flag is flying and why.

The Mayor's charity for the current year is 'Reducing the Risk', which offers advice and support to victims and professionals dealing with domestic abuse. The Mayor noted that services in Abingdon are not always linked up. The Mayor has met with representatives of the charity and officers from Oxfordshire County Council and the Vale of White Horse District Council to consider how to develop services and to provide more counsellors and safe spaces in Abingdon.

The Mayor thanked the Deputy Mayor and town council staff for supporting her during her year in office.

2 **Minutes of the annual town meeting on 2 March 2023**

Cllr Jim Halliday proposed a correction to the minutes, which had recorded the Abingdon Abbot wooden sculpture on the Marcham Road roundabout as being owned by the town council. Town council officers had advised that the sculpture was sponsored and installed by Abbey Press. The town council hopes to be able to address the state of the monk with the support of local businesses.

It was proposed by Terry Boswell, seconded by Cllr Andrew Skinner and **RESOLVED** that the minutes of the Annual Town Meeting as amended that took place on 2 March 2023 be signed by the Chair as a correct record. The Mayor signed the minutes at the meeting.

3 **Reports by town council committee chairs**

The Chairs of town council standing committees submitted reports to the meeting and were invited to introduce them.

Community committee – Cllr Neil Fawcett

Cllr Fawcett thanked councillors who worked on the committee and town council and museum staff. Cllr Fawcett in particular acknowledged the work of the Properties and Events Manager on events through the year. The coronation in 2023 followed immediately after the council elections, which created logistical problems for organising the Bun Throwing which were successfully addressed.

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Cllr Fawcett thanked community groups for their work in Abingdon and noted that the Community committee supports a number of voluntary organisations in their work, including Abingdon Carousel, The Abingdon Bridge, Abingdon Damascus Youth Project, and Oxfordshire Play Association. Smaller grants are provided to a number of groups or events.

Cllr Fawcett noted the commitment made in 2023 to undertake an independent review of the Platinum Jubilee. This had been conducted by the locum Governance and Projects Officer, who has extensive experience of running large events in Oxfordshire. The report had been accepted by the committee and was published on the town council website.

Environment and Amenities committee – Cllr Gabby Barody

Cllr Gabby Barody thanked committee members, staff and community groups who were involved in the work of the committee. The committee had been working with One Planet Abingdon and Anne Smart, a co-opted member of the committee who links with the green forum. A new active travel map had been published, developed by Sustrans working with Abingdon Liveable Streets and other local groups.

Cllr Barody commended the outdoor services team for their work through the year. The team had built an infant burial area at the cemetery with a letterbox for letters to be posted to those loved ones who had died. Playgrounds managed by the council require constant maintenance and new equipment. The multi-use games area (MUGA) at Caldecott Recreation Ground has been the biggest project this year and the council aims to undertake one major project like this each year.

The committee is running another biodiversity competition this year. The planned community woodland is being finalised and planting is expected this year.

Town Infrastructure committee - Cllr Colin Sanderson

Cllr Colin Sanderson thanked committee members, in particular the Deputy Chair, Cllr Andrew Skinner, who had been asked to stand in as Chair when needed.

Cllr Sanderson commended the work of Cllr Penny Clover to improve access to toilet facilities in the town centre. The accessible toilet under the Guildhall arch has been out of action for some time and has now been re-opened.

Speed indicator signs will be installed shortly to help enforce the new 20mph limit. Cllr Elio Astone and Cllr Mark Giddins were thanked for their work on the working party.

On a trial basis, the town council will take over maintenance of two roundabouts on Marcham Road for one year only. The roundabouts are the responsibility of the county council. The town council will seek sponsorship for this work.

Finger posts are being refurbished and tidied up and new cycle racks are planned for the Market Place, to be installed once the location has been agreed.

Finance, Governance, Asset Management committee – Cllr Jim Halliday

Cllr Jim Halliday noted that the town council spends around £2m each year. Income comes from council tax, fees and charges and the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) a fund obtained from major developments. Fees and charges had been frozen for the current year and grant funding increased. £150,000 had been earmarked for the planned refurbishment of Abbey Hall. The town council's council tax had been increased by 4.7% in 2024-25.

CIL funding can only be spent on capital projects and in the past year has been used to provide astroturf at Carswell School, a planned refurbishment of the section of the Ock Valley Walk owned by the town council, the active travel map and the MUGA at Caldecott Recreation Ground. In the past year the town council has spent around £151,000 of CIL funding on projects in the town.

Cllr Halliday noted that there had been much change in leadership at the town council but a permanent Town Clerk had now been appointed.

A two year lease had been agreed with the Regal Cinema Evesham Ltd until 2025. After this, significant refurbishment of the Abbey Hall will take place. A working party has been set up to tender for future use and to refurbish the building based on agreed plans. The aim is to close the building for the shortest time possible.

The town has had a new contract for Christmas lights which experienced significant difficulties due to a serious accident on the contractor team. Town council outdoor services staff were able to resolve the problems so that the lights could be switched on.

The County Hall museum is working on a project to improve access to the building with the installation of a lift but the listed status of the building requires the work to be conducted sensitively.

Outgoing councillors and newly elected councillors were thanked for their work for the town council and residents.

4 Abingdon Neighbourhood Plan

Cllr Andrew Skinner provided an update on the Neighbourhood Plan. He noted that the neighbourhood plan is driven by residents and sponsored by the town council. All the work so far on the new neighbourhood plan has been done by volunteers.

The town council does not have any planning powers but a neighbourhood plan would give greater influence to the town council over planning decisions. If a community has a neighbourhood plan, the level of CIL funding increases from 15% to 25%

Cllr Skinner noted the comment from the Chair of the steering group, Simon Hills, that many residents had nominated their favourite green space but had not provided a justification for this nomination. Residents were invited to contact Mr Hills to do this. The neighbourhood plan website can be viewed at www.abingdon-neighbourhood-plan.org.

A draft neighbourhood plan will be published very soon.

5 **Abingdon Green Forum**

A report was submitted by 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 several grants each year and the organisations which receive larger grants from the Council were invited to give a short presentation.

Christ's Hospital of Abingdon submitted a report but no representative was present.

Abingdon Damascus Youth Project

Roxy Elford, former youth worker, now trustee, and James Quartermain, frontline worker made a presentation. The town council was thanked for its ongoing funding.

Damascus is a grassroots project which works on the streets. Youth workers set up a gazebo with chairs and tables to help build relationships with young people and to better understand issues in the area. The charity encourages young people to take up positive activities, with workshops offered which relate to issues identified by young people.

Damascus works with generations as they come up: building relationships with one generation encourages positive relationships with the next generation. Youth work is a powerful tool, being where young people are. The work is embedded in the community which helps youth workers to see different sides of young people and their subcultures. The work enables youth workers to challenge poor behaviour and to offer support and care.

Abingdon Guild of Town Criers

Lesley Legge, Master of the Guild, gave a presentation on the activities of Town Criers. New volunteers are welcome and anyone wishing to volunteer was invited to contact Lesley Legge or Patrick Bird, the secretary of the Guild.

The Abingdon Bridge

Gary Hibbins, the CEO of The Abingdon Bridge (TAB), and Holly Freeland, Assistant Manager, attended with four young people to give a presentation. MR Hibbins thanked the town council for its support.

TAB is now 30 years old and the town council has been the biggest supporter. The support from the town council helps to draw in new funding. Recently, TAB has been successful in receiving a grant of £0.5m from the National Lottery. Funding has also been received from Children in Need.

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TAB supports over 250 young people in Abingdon and continues to provide open access support and counselling for young people. TAB offers open drop in spaces created for young people.

The young people attending spoke about the safe space they have access to and the importance of being able to speak to someone. They thanked the people who had helped them. Town youth ambassadors have grown up and are now training new ambassadors. People of similar ages can relate to each other and it is easier to speak to each other.

Emma Birch, Sergeant, Thames Valley Police

Sergeant Birch introduced herself as the new neighbourhood police sergeant for Abingdon. She recommended that residents check facebook and the Thames Valley Police website to find out about the work they do.

The police have identified four priority crimes to address in the area: violence and sexual offences, retain theft and financial scams, anti-social behaviour and public order. The local team will focus on the night time economy.

The police have undertaken a lot of plain clothes work to identify possible offenders to try to prevent crimes and the 'storenet' intercom system has been very successful.

The police are working with Age UK and care groups to provide support and protection against financial scams.

Oxfordshire South and Vale Citizens' Advice

Joseph Mailler, Advice Services Manager, Abingdon and Didcot, gave a presentation. Oxfordshire South and Vale Citizens' Advice (OSVCA) is an independent charity which relies on funds from councils. The charity has received a grant of £450,000 from the district councils for the next four years. Additional funding is always needed.

OSVCA has around 40 volunteers and sees over 10,000 clients a year. Advice is offered in person, on the phone and online. The main issues they deal with are benefits and tax credit, housing and employment.

Mr Mailler thanked the town council for its ongoing support.

Abingdon Carousel

Cllr Penny Clover, trustee of Abingdon Carousel Family Centre, attended the meeting to provide an update. Abingdon Carousel is a charity which took over the county council-run family centre with support from the Town Council over 5 years ago. Abingdon Carousel received a grant of £35,000 from the town council to fund core services.

529 families are registered with Abingdon Carousel, with an average of 40 new families per month. The centre has an average of 243 visitors to the centre each week. Around 50% of

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these are from the Caldecott ward, 48% from other parts of Abingdon and 2% from surrounding villages.

Services have been extended over the past 12 months, with play sessions to include a Crawlers and Explorers Group and a Spanish speaking playgroup. The centre has expanded its Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) offer with regular play sessions and a trained team member offering support/guidance to SEND families. Most stay and play groups run at capacity and often have a waiting list. A new 'Relaxation Station' has been opened, a quiet, sensory room for both adults and children.

Nine other organisations run family services from the centre, with the building in use seven days a week. Users include play therapists, the health visiting team, Oxfordshire County Council's Special Educational Needs Support Service, youth groups and more.

Partnerships are being developed with other local organisations, including Oxfordshire Play Association, Oxfordshire Adult Learning, Mental Health Natters/Makespace (arts and crafts group for parents and carers), and Host Abingdon (supporting asylum seekers and refugees to access the centre and to integrate into the local community).

One Planet Abingdon

Michelle Charlesworth and Daniel Scharf gave a presentation. Volunteers at One Planet Abingdon (OPA) have put in 5,557 hours in the past year. The report submitted highlights projects undertaken by OPA, which is a nudge space.

The town council was thanked for providing the premises and for ongoing financial support. Residents were invited to visit the OPA website to see how they can support OPA and volunteer.

A future event was highlighted: 15 June 2024, One Planet Living Festival, Market Place. Heather Brown was thanked for her work with Abingdon Events Partnership.

The Mayor closed this section of the meeting by commenting on what a wonderful place Abingdon is to have so many groups.

7 Abingdon Integrated Youth Support Project (AIYSP)

The two groups involved in the youth support project spoke earlier.

8 To discuss town affairs

Terry Boswell, Jackman Close

Ms Boswell asked about the new scheme whereby certain precinct shops are offering access to their toilet facilities to be used by people and what was being done to facilitate accessible toilet amenities for people with disabilities – especially wheelchair users.

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Answer

Cllr Sanderson noted that the new scheme introduced is great but not the whole answer. The key problem with public toilets is vandalism. Radar keys can be purchased to allow residents to use the Space for Change toilet available but the dilemma is to reduce the risk of vandalism so this cannot be widely promoted to minimise this risk.

Cllr Fawcett commented that the Vale of White Horse District Council had spent around £30,000 in the past year to repair vandalised toilets. When toilets are repaired they are vandalised again, often within days. The planned toilets at the Charter are expected to include a nominal charge for their use to reduce this risk. It is not the role of the town council to police the accessibility of toilets in the new scheme but they can look into this.

Ms Boswell noted that there is a Vale Access Group which could advise on accessibility in various buildings, not just physical access.

Terry Boswell, Jackman Close

Ms Boswell raised the issue of people riding bikes in the Precinct, a hazard to other users which needs to be addressed. This may be an issue for the police to address.

Mike Gould, Jackman Close

Mr Gould asked about the new coat of grey paint on the Abbey Hall.

The Town Clerk advised that offensive graffiti had been put on the side of the building. Removal was attempted but without success and the town council's contractor advised on using anti-graffiti paint. The Town Clerk acknowledged that some residents were unhappy with the work which had been carried out and advised that the town council is looking into rectification.

Bobbie Nichols, Mattock Way

Mr Nichols asked about progress with the Neighbourhood Plan and the work of the consultancy appointed to support this project. Ms Nichols asked what the anticipated timescale for the completion of the plan was.

Cllr Skinner advised that the Neighbourhood Plan was being prepared by volunteers and covered a broad range of topics. It was hoped that the plan would be concluded by the next parish meeting.

Brian Smith, Caldecott Road

Mr Smith is a member of Ock Valley Flood Group and advised the meeting that some members were flooded in January 2024, mainly gardens. The group has met with district

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and county council officers. The flooding risk is a worry for residents, in particular as they are concerned that they may not be able to get flood insurance.

Mr Smith asked the town council to work with other councils to seek to address this issue. The district council owns the land that flood water comes through so it should be their responsibility to mitigate flooding on their land. Flooding is mainly from Sandford Brook: the Environment Agency is responsible for the River Ock but not Sandford Brook.

Cllr Fawcett noted that around 12 houses had been affected this time for different reasons. The meeting Mr Smith referred to had highlighted possible issues with the sewage system. The lead flood authority is Oxfordshire County Council, which means that it is responsible for trying to coordinate a response. The Environment Agency has responsibility for main rivers. Advice given to residents has not been successful and the town council will try to work with other authorities to act on this issue. The town council has identified a project to put sandbags in storage locally to be quickly available for residents.

Chilton Close

A resident from Chilton Close Asked about provision of sandbags in that area. Cllr Fawcett responded that the council could look into this.

The resident mentioned possible contamination of water in Sandford Brook which is flooding allotments and affecting water used on allotments. He asked about responsibility for the land and the possible dredging of Sandford Brook to mitigate this flooding.

Terry Boswell, Jackman Close

Ms Boswell asked about building work at north Abingdon which is affecting flooding in that area. It would be useful for that to be looked at as well.

Cllr Astone advised that the culverts in the area had been blocked. This had been investigated and ownership traced to ARE, who would undertake clearance.

Hector Minto, Wotton Road

Mr Minto mentioned the report on the Platinum Jubilee, in particular the cost of security, which was very large.

Cllr Fawcett noted that this was evidence that the report was clear and honest. The event was scheduled to run over four days, with additional time to set up and take down, so 24 hour security was required. A clear budget at the start of the project would have helped to better plan the project and there was much to learn for future events, in particular with regard to proper costings at the start of the process. Clear project planning was needed and that has been taken on board.

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Hector Minto, Wotton Road

Mr Minto noted that the new 20mph limits were proposed with no additional costs. He asked how the cost of new speed indicator signs could be explained.

Cllr Fawcett said the decision on the new speed limit was supported by all of the Abingdon county councillors. The town council chose to back up the speed limits, using Community Infrastructure Levy funds to fund the new speed indicator signs. This was a decision the town council made to help enforce the new limits.

Steve Rich, Kysbie Close

Mr Rich welcomed the report on the Platinum Jubilee.

Cllr Fawcett acknowledged the right of residents to raise questions over costs and any other issues of concern and noted that it was important for the town council to review projects and to learn lessons.

Steve Rich, Kysbie Close

Mr Rich asked the town council to consider a feasibility study of Abingdon Common, its size and its suitability for a wind or solar farm including the existing lease.

Cllr Halliday said the boundary of this land needed to be confirmed and the town council could examine the land title. The site was not very good for wind generation but solar energy could be explored. The key question was whether there was a good connection to the national grid.

Hester Hand, Abbot Road

Ms Hand commented that residents may not know what the town council does and mentioned the importance of communication and community involvement. A communications strategy and a communications review have been planned. Noticeboards are important to many residents and plans have been agreed for new noticeboards on the Market Place and at bus shelters. Ms Hand asked when these would be installed and when the communications review would happen.

The Town Clerk advised that the communications review would be the responsibility of the new Deputy Town Clerk. The town council was actively trying to improve communications and a new role would be advertised for a community and business engagement officer, to include communications.

Hector Minto, Wootton Road

Mr Minto asked about clearance of vegetation from pavements, with hedges and weeds affecting accessibility. Ring road pavements had been cleared but encroaching greenery

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had damaged pavements. Similar issues affected pavements and gutters across Abingdon. Mr Minto asked if the town council could communicate the need for this work to the responsible authority.

Cllr Halliday advised that pavements are the responsibility of Oxfordshire County Council and town centre street sweeping is undertaken by BIFFA for the Vale of White Horse District Council. Regular clearing is undertaken and residents were asked to advise their local councillors of areas of concern. There is a related issue of lorries and heavy vehicles parking on pavements causing damage. Councils are limited in what they can fund.

The Mayor thanked residents for their attendance and closed the meeting at 9.06pm.

Signed.....

Date.....