

Draft Minutes



**Abingdon-on-Thames Annual Town Meeting
Wednesday 10th March 2021, 7pm
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Town Councillors present: The Mayor, Cllr Charlie Birks
Cllr Gabby Barody
Cllr Samantha Bowring, Leader of the Council
Cllr Cheryl Briggs
Cllr Grace Clifton
Cllr Andrew Coveney
Cllr Margaret Crick
Cllr Neil Fawcett
Cllr Andy Foulsham
Cllr Alex Greenaway
Cllr Jim Halliday
Cllr Eric de la Harpe
Cllr Pat Lonergan
Cllr Lorraine Oates
Cllr Helen Pighills
Cllr Andrew Skinner

Officers:
Elin Bornemann, Museum Collections Officer
Louise Brown, Communications, Marketing and Events Officer
Andy Crick, Committee Clerk
Nina Ozdemir, PA to the Town Clerk and Mayor's Secretary
Dan Sancisi, Museum Manager
Nigel Warner, Town Clerk
Susan Whipp, Deputy Town Clerk / RFO

The meeting was attended by around 40 members of the public, including those representing local groups.

Apologies were received from Cllr Emily Smith.

1 **General Introduction**

The Mayor, Councillor Charlie Birks opened the meeting at 7.03pm.

2 **Abingdon Video**

A video showcasing the work of the Town Council in the community over the last year was shown. The video is available on the [Town Council website](#).

3 **Minutes of the Annual Town Meeting 10 March 2020**

The minutes of the Annual Town Meeting which took place on [10 March 2020](#) were proposed by Cllr Cheryl Briggs, seconded by Cllr Jim Halliday and approved.

The Town Clerk presented a report which addressed questions raised at the meeting in 2020. The table is available as an [appendix](#) to these minutes.

4 **Reports by Town Council Committee Chairs**

Reports were received from Chairs of Town Council Committees.

Amenities and Recreation Committee. The Chair, Cllr Jim Halliday noted that the report included photos of the work of the committee, including new noticeboards, cycle racks, bus shelters and planters. He thanked the Outdoor Services Team, who had worked throughout the pandemic and were the people behind the scenes who keep the town looking good. Cllr Halliday also thanked Steve Rich, who retired as Deputy Town Clerk in December 2020 after 19 years and who was a mainstay of the Amenities and Recreation Committee.

Community Services Committee. The Chair, Cllr Neil Fawcett commented that it had been a challenging year, with all events in the town cancelled. The committee is looking forward to future events, with the Queen's Platinum Jubilee in 2022 and the return of a range of activities in the town. Cllr Fawcett thanked residents for their contribution to Abingdon and referred to presentations by charities as a demonstration of how important it is to support young people. The Town Council planned a major project for the coming year, raising funds for a bandstand to mark the Jubilee. Cllr Fawcett offered particular thanks to the Communications, Marketing and Events Officer for her support of the committee, especially preparing the Town Crier magazine which is distributed to all residents.

County Hall Museum Management Committee. The Chair, Cllr Patrick Lonergan referred to the virtual work which had been undertaken during the period of lockdown to ensure that residents and visitors from outside the town could still access the museum. Cllr Lonergan noted that the museum café had now closed.

Green Advisory and Scrutiny Committee. The Chair, Cllr Gabby Barody noted the ambition to make Abingdon carbon neutral by the end of 2030. Policies being developed and introduced included the [single use plastic policy](#) devised by Cllr Andrew Coveney, working with Abingdon Carbon Cutters and especially Anne Smart. The committee planned to undertake a biodiversity audit in the coming year. Cllr Barody thanked all the residents and local groups who offered support and input to the committee.

Guildhall Committee. The Chair, Cllr Margaret Crick said that it had been a difficult year due to lockdown. Cllr Crick thanked the staff who have helped run the Guildhall complex and the working group led by the Mayor, Cllr Charlie Birks. Cllr Crick thanked Town Council officer Jo Blackmore in particular for her work and mentioned her experience, knowledge and support for the new Properties Manager.

Planning, Highways and Consultations Committee. The Chair, Cllr Lorraine Oates noted that the committee had met every three weeks throughout this difficult year. The Neighbourhood Plan had begun, and she thanked Cllr Grace Clifton for her work on this. The Albert Park appraisal had also been undertaken and she thanked Cllr Jim Halliday for his work on that project. The reports on these two projects are included in the committee report. Cllr Oates thanked the committee for their support and Town Council staff for their work.

- **Finance and General Purposes Committee.** The Chair and Leader of the Council, Cllr Samantha Bowring commented that the committee wanted to do as much as possible to support the town but was always aware of the need to maintain sound finances. It had been a very difficult year due to lockdown and the Town Council had offered support for local groups, especially The Abingdon Bridge and DAMASCUS Youth Projects. Cllr Bowring noted that there will soon be a Youth Council for Abingdon. The Neighbourhood Plan had gone ahead, despite challenges. The Town Council had also invested in IT to ensure that services could continue to run during lockdown. Cllr Bowring mentioned how the museum has managed to use technology to continue to engage with residents and other visitors. Cllr Bowring thanked Town Council staff who have had to adapt to a new way of working and noted that many staff have caring responsibilities. Cllr Bowring thanked Councillors for their efforts in a difficult year and residents for giving their time to support the community in many different ways.

5 **Abingdon Neighbourhood Plan**

The Neighbourhood Plan was launched at the Annual Town Meeting in March 2020. An update was provided by Simon Hills, Chair of the Steering Group.

The steering group included seven residents and Cllr Grace Clifton and aims to produce a neighbourhood plan by March 2022. The plan is important because if it is agreed by referendum it must be taken into account in planning decisions. The initial work was place assessments by residents of neighbourhoods. There were some gaps which Mr Hills invited residents to volunteer to fill. Following the place assessments, eight focus groups were established to develop ideas for the town. They hope to engage with young people after Easter 2021.

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There are some emerging themes:

- how to better connect the town centre with the river;
- mobility and tensions between cars, bicycles and pedestrians;
- a more blended town centre with more people making the town centre their home;
- ensuring Neighbourhood Plan recommendations are inclusive and sustainable as we build back better.

It is hoped that a draft of the plan can be produced by June 2021 for further discussion.

Mr Hills thanked the steering groups for their work and the Communications, Marketing and Events Officer for her support to the meetings, as well as those who took part in place assessments. He also thanked Feria Urbanism, who had been advising the steering group. Mr Hills invited more people to get involved.

6 **Platinum Jubilee 2022**

2022 will mark the Platinum Jubilee (70th Anniversary) of HM The Queen's accession to the throne. The Council will outline proposals over the course of this year for celebrating this event and proposals for a permanent commemoration.

7 **Presentations by Community Groups**

The Council gives a number of grants each year and there were short presentations from several organisations which receive larger grants.

- **Abingdon Carousel.** Heather Brown noted that core funding from the Town Council enables the charity to bring money into the town from elsewhere. The charity is based in South Abingdon. It has been a strange year because all the staff have their own caring responsibilities. Despite this, services have continued, including an online Saturday club and a Facebook page with about 52 stories to choose from. 'One to ones' have been offered online and these have increased. Staff have been very glad to be able to support people. They have also spent time training staff, which means that the charity will leave lockdown with more high-quality staff able to deliver a better service. Ms Brown thanked the Town Council for its continued funding.
- **Be Free Young Carers.** John Tabor thanked the Town Council for its ongoing support for the work of the charity with young carers in Abingdon. It had been a difficult year for charities: lockdown meant that they had lost support so Town Council funding was very important. Being confined to their homes had put young carers under even more stress than normal.

The charity had responded to changed circumstances by switching to online support, which had enabled it to support young carers and families through online 'Zoom' befriending. They had kept in contact with all the families that they supported in Abingdon, Didcot and across South Oxfordshire. This was very important as they could identify those most at risk under lockdown. The charity had developed exercises and creative activities for young carers to do at home. Many families had

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been communicating through Facebook as they did not have access to IT. The charity had collaborated with other charities to provide essentials such as food to families. Young carers were initially locked in their homes with no access to education and this had created great stress and anxiety. This had focused the charity on giving people broader horizons.

The charity had engaged with restaurants to provide recipes for young carers. A creative writing project with Fusion Arts has been hugely successful and the young people had been so creative. They continued to circulate a quarterly newsletter and in the lead up to Christmas they delivered mental health resource boxes to young carers most at risk. After Christmas, the charity had been involved in the campaign for laptops for young carers and had come across a large number of young carers struggling to do home-schooling on smart phones, with some young carers with siblings trying to share one machine.

The charity had received support from local businesses. They had held an online Christmas party with around 30 young carers. Volunteers were commended for their enthusiasm and commitment. There were around 100 young carers in Abingdon and the charity had have been in touch with them through the year.

- **The Abingdon Bridge (TAB).** Gary Hibbins introduced Adam, a youth ambassador for TAB who has also been supported by TAB. Adam was now a student nurse and spoke about the support and help he had been offered by TAB. Mr Hibbins thanked the Town Council for its support and noted that the charity needs this core funding to continue. Mr Hibbins also introduced Talia, who had worked with TAB for two and a half years. She had not been in school at the time and TAB had been the only service to support her. The charity had offered a welcoming, friendly, comfortable environment which had helped her to trust people and open up about her feelings. TAB had supported 230 people like Talia and Adam last year and supported over 500 people in workshops and counselling, 111 people in wellbeing programme and others in educational workshops. Over the next year TAB and other youth organisations will be able to support young people and Mr Hibbins said that he was proud to be supported by such a proactive Town Council.
- **South and Vale Citizens' Advice (CAB).** Jon Bright gave a presentation. There were 79 volunteer advisers who had needed to be equipped to work from home over the past year. 22 out of 26 advisers have been able to continue providing advice through the year and there had been a recruitment drive to recruit 40 new advisers, at least 10 of whom were for Abingdon. The CAB provided training to new volunteers during the year. It was responsible for allocating winter support grants on behalf of the County Council and District Councils and this had been very intensive work over the past few months. They had responded to changed circumstances well: Abingdon CAB has been able to offer advice to a similar number of people to last year – around 3,700 clients who have brought over 5,000 separate issues. This offers some idea of the scale of the work. Mr Bright noted that Abingdon CAB supports communities outside of the town. Demand had been lower in the first lockdown, about the same in the second lockdown and much higher in the third lockdown. Employment queries have been high throughout the year. Mr Bright thanked the Town Council for its support throughout the year.

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- **Christs Hospital.** Gillian Kent, Clerk to the Governors of Christ's Hospital, gave a presentation. The charity was set up in 1553 and is the private owner of Albert Park, a park available for public use. The charity has received funds from the Town Council towards the cost of the upkeep of the park, which is around £80,000 per year. This includes costs related to surrounding roads, verges and gates for which the charity is also responsible. The majority of expenditure goes on the maintenance contract, the part-time park keeper's salary, waste collection and maintenance of equipment. The charity must keep to the highest standards of expertise for its work to comply with Conservation Area and Listed Park status. During 2020, the charity undertook to re-map and tag the 400 trees in the park at a cost of £1,800.

Lockdown has seen use of the park increase significantly and this has increased work and some challenges such as social distancing. The charity plans to maintain the park as a safe, open space to welcome everyone. Ms Kent noted that the park is provided in addition to the main charity objectives to support 30 alms houses in Abingdon and to provide grants to those in need in Abingdon. The charity works with many other groups in the town. When money is spent on the park this detracts from other charity activities so the charity welcomes the support of the Town Council. Ms Kent thanked Cllr Margaret Crick, Cllr Helen Pighills, Cllr Cheryl Briggs and the Mayor, Cllr Charlie Birks for their support on the Board of Trustees of the charity.

- **Abbey Buildings Project.** Bryan Brown, the Chair of the Friends of Abingdon Abbey Buildings Trust introduced the project which owns and manages the historic Abbey Buildings. Due to lockdown, little has happened with the project over the past year. The Abbey Buildings closed in March 2021 and have remained closed since, with all activities ceased. Staff have still been needed to manage the buildings, including dealing with cancellations and new bookings. The National Heritage Lottery Fund (NHLF) closed for all grants this year to focus on emergency grants. The charity has been successful in getting some emergency funding during the year and the NHLF has now reopened. The charity has achieved match funding with the help of the Town Council and has used this to secure funding from other bodies. The charity hopes to proceed with the project and Mr Brown noted that the National Lottery post-Covid guidelines reflect the Town Council's own priorities closely. He thanked the Town Council for its support and hoped that the project could be progressed later this year.

8 Youth Services and Youth Council

During the last year the Council has been working with its partners on the future of youth services in Abingdon. Youth services have been the responsibility of Oxfordshire County Council but funding has been restricted in recent years. In her budget speech to the Town Council in January 2021 the Leader, Cllr Samantha Bowring, called upon the 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." Cllr Bowring went on to state: "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." This work would include the establishment of a Youth Council for Abingdon.

Roxy Elford of the DAMASCUS project and Gary Hibbins and Holly Freeland of The Abingdon Bridge made a presentation to the meeting regarding the way forward. Roxy Elford introduced the work of DAMASCUS, which uses a gazebo to engage with young people in their communities. She mentioned services they would like to see and asked for someone from the Town Council to work on the youth council. Holly Freeland of The Abingdon Bridge and two youth ambassadors, Luke and Ollie, spoke in support of the youth council.

9 **To discuss Town affairs**

Questions from residents to Town Councillors.

Food at Town Council events

Kat Kelly asked the Town Council to ensure that food provided at Council events is low carbon, moving towards more plant-based options. She suggested that beef should be removed as a first step as it has by far the highest carbon footprint of any meat.

Cllr Bowring noted that the Town Council has made responding to climate emergency a priority and the request would be looked at with regard to future events. Cllr Eric de la Harpe advised that the Town Council's Green Advisory and Scrutiny Committee was drafting a food policy and he invited Ms Kelly to get in touch to contribute to the development of this policy.

Northcourt play area

Ms Pat Bryden asked if the Town Council would consider providing a playground and park for the people of Northcourt by buying the northern part of Abingdon Vale Cricket Club. Ms Bryden noted that such a project might be crowd funded.

Cllr Bowring said that the Town Council and the Vale of White Horse District Council manage eleven playgrounds around the town as well as other outdoor amenity areas such as football pitches and fitness trails. The Town Council has prioritised services and activities for young people in the face of County Council cuts and the Town Council Amenities Committee has a capital reserve of nearly £60,000 in its forward plan for a programme of replacing play equipment across the town and generally improving play areas and outdoor fitness equipment. However, the cost of purchasing the proposed site would be significantly higher than this. New playgrounds tend to be built as part of new developments and the cost of landscaping and equipment, initial maintenance and the substantial cost of the land is not met by taxpayers. The cost of any such development would increase the Council Tax for Abingdon considerably. The Town Council is sympathetic to concerns about the welfare of children and the Town Council's Amenities and Recreation Committee would review the steps and the likely timescale required to undertake such a project.

Boxhill Woods

Mr Nigel Luker asked about plans for Boxhill Woods following the recent felling of two large trees and some smaller ones, as well as the collapse of some older trees. Mr Luker asked if there was a plan to clear some of the ground and plant some native species of tree to keep the wood growing as it is a valuable resource and enjoyed by lots of residents using the footpath. He also asked if there is a policy to manage the edges of the wood where it extends over the boundaries onto private properties.

The Chair of the Amenities and Recreation Committee, Cllr Jim Halliday advised that the ownership of Boxhill Wood is split between the Vale of White Horse District Council (the Vale) and the Town Council. The Vale owns and looks after the trees to the west of the River Stort and the Town Council the trees to the east of the River. In 2019 all the Council-owned trees in Abingdon were professionally inspected by an external specialist who submitted a detailed report listing all the works that should be carried out.

The Town Council's Outside Team have already carried out some of the work and, after a tendering exercise, the remainder has been contracted to specialist tree surgeons who are tackling the trees in the order specified in the survey. For many years the Council has treated Boxhill Wood as a self-regenerating natural woodland – it is noticeable that a recent removal of a large tree has caused much more light to enter the wood, which in turn has stimulated much natural growth. Council-owned trees on the fringes of the wood have been inspected and, where recommended, works have been, or are being, carried out. When trees have to be felled in Town Council play areas, the policy is to consider what species is most appropriate for the location and to source replacements accordingly.

Restoring the town's vitality

Ms Hester Hand asked what the Town Council planned over the next year to help to restore the town's vitality as a lively market town which was a good place to live.

Cllr Bowring said that the Town Council was aware that coming out of lockdown much needs to be done and there needs to be a vision for the town. The Neighbourhood Plan is a great mechanism for agreeing a vision for the town which the different levels of council can work on with residents and businesses. There are various financial packages and projects for the town centre administered by other levels of government and businesses have been contacted about these. If any businesses needed information, this could be passed on.

The Vale of White Horse District Council (the Vale) has teamed up with social enterprise Makespace and other councils to help bring empty shops back into use with a £1.9m fund. The project, called 'Meanwhile in Oxfordshire...', will go towards helping high streets across the county to bounce back from the effects of Covid-19 by bringing new independent shops, cultural venues, creative studios and co-working spaces into the town centre. The aim is to provide affordable premises to accommodate more than 100 organisations, which will create or secure at least 300 jobs across Oxfordshire and help to give people more reason to shop in town centres. Vale officers have been heavily involved in developing the Oxfordshire Economic Recovery Plan which supports a range of projects to support retail and tourism businesses. Now that the county-wide plan has been published, the District Council is looking at developing a district recovery plan to offer support to all sectors of the economy. This is in addition to the significant amount of funding distributed by the Vale through the various government schemes.

Local Information Centre

Ms Bobbie Nichols asked about the future of the Local Information Centre.

Cllr Bowring said that the Town Council is exploring different options for the Local Information Centre. Since the Town Council took on the service the way in which residents and visitors interact with it has changed greatly, probably because much of what they used to go to the office for is more easily available online. Responding to the changing needs of residents and visitors is important to offer the most useful service.

The physical office has been closed for the past year and the Town Council has been developing a new website, which will go live shortly. Social media has been used to disseminate services and new noticeboards have been placed in the town centre and at busier bus stops. The Town Crier magazine continues to be delivered to every home in Abingdon.

The information centre itself is to be rehoused. The Town Council wants it to be as accessible as possible and will make sure the new space is visible and well signposted and publicised. The Town Council is currently in discussions with its partners at Oxfordshire Registration Service, who lease part of the premises, to provide a shared facility on the ground floor of the Roysse Court offices. This would provide a reception and information centre for the Town Council as well as reception and information for the Registration Office. Such a facility would be of great benefit to both parties, making most efficient use of the premises and providing accessible and suitable accommodation for the information office and reception facilities for the Registration Office

Mr Robin Tucker asked about plans for 20mph speed limits?

Cllr Neil Fawcett commented as a County and Town Councillor. Oxfordshire County Council has passed a motion supporting 20mph speed limits in principle and will support town councillors in identifying schemes. Funding for new schemes is relatively low and will mainly support Town and Parish Councils in developing schemes, not funding them directly. The three Abingdon County Councillors have submitted ideas which came from residents. Both the Town Council and the Vale of White Horse District Council are in favour in principle; the challenge will be finding the funding to make the physical changes to make them work on the ground. There is growing support for 20mph zones but funding is not available. It may be possible to use funding from the Community Infrastructure Levy to help draw in resources from other places, such as new developments and new government funding.

At the end of the meeting the Mayor, Cllr Charlie Birks, thanked everyone for their input and noted that the online meeting system had worked well.

The meeting closed at 9.15pm.