

Abingdon on Thames Town Council
Wednesday 29th September
Agenda Item 8 - District Council report

Council Meetings

Since the pandemic meeting arrangements were removed in May 2021 the District Council has returned to meeting in person, with the opportunity for members to participate remotely but not vote. We had a similar experience to the Town Council in that we had found it easier to widen participation in local democracy by having meetings online and have sometimes found it hard to adapt to a hybrid way of meeting. We have fed back to central government our experiences of holding meetings online and included a realistic picture of the advantages and disadvantages of doing so. We have yet to hear of any proposed changes to allow more online or hybrid meetings, and as the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government has been renamed as the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities we can only hope that local government has not disappeared from their priorities as well as their name.

The Women's Tour Cycling race

We are very excited that the A J Bell Women's Tour cycling race is coming through Abingdon next Monday, as it is a brilliant opportunity to highlight the benefits of cycling as exercise and as a means of active travel. Studies have shown that there is one thing better than a high-profile cycling event at encouraging cycling and that's a high-profile cycling event happening on our doorsteps! I hope that many members and local residents will take this opportunity to see some world-class cycling. It is a tribute to all the hard work done by Cllr Helen Pighills as Cabinet Member for Healthy Communities and Cllr Eric de la Harpe as Vale District Council cycling champion that we have the opportunity to welcome the race to Abingdon, and I must also add my thanks to the Town Council officers who have worked so hard to design the route so that it isn't affected by the Michaelmas Fair in town at the same time.

Brown bins service

One of the trickiest areas of bringing services back to normal have been the Garden Waste collections which were suspended at the start of August when Biffa found that they had insufficient drivers to provide a full service and so activated their contingency plans. This was in part a consequence of COVID infection rates and in part due to the national HGV driver shortage.

The Biffa contingency plan prioritised the collection of food waste, general waste and recycling at the cost of not collecting the brown bins of garden waste. This was compounded by the way that we were left without an effective way of communicating with the brown bin scheme customers - as when the administration was brought back in house in April 2021 it became clear that one of the cost-cutting measures when the 2014 contract was signed was that there was no provision for a customer communications system (also known as a CRM

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system). This saved a tiny fraction of the overall cost but meant that we had only email addresses for 37% of customers (and many of these addresses – particularly those of long-standing customers – had not been confirmed). Sending out letters would have been costly when information was changing day by day as officers met with Biffa, and so it was decided to wait until we knew what was going to happen.

Just over a week ago it was confirmed that collections were going to recommence, but on a 4-weekly basis temporarily, with residents able to leave out twice as much garden waste each time, and letters to customers have gone out explaining this, and asking residents to give or confirm their email addresses to aid future communications. To make up for the lack of regular service this year, garden waste customers will be given three months of free service next year. I know that this episode has been troubling for many residents and that many members will have received queries about it. I hope that the work that has gone on to ensure that we can communicate effectively with brown bins customers will mean that nobody is left in the dark about changes in service in future.

Neighbourhood Plan

And finally, can I mention Neighbourhood Plans? The District Council is always delighted when we see a Neighbourhood Plan presented for a local referendum (where they are usually adopted with a sizeable majority), because we know that it is the culmination of a huge amount of work by local residents and the commitment of the individuals who have steered it through the process. It shows the local residents are engaged with how their community grows and changes in the years ahead. Therefore, I am really pleased to hear about the progress that the Abingdon Neighbourhood Plan is making and want to take this opportunity to thank the chair of the neighbourhood plan group, Simon Hills, and Cllr Grace Clifton who has spearheaded the work of the Abingdon Town Council in this area, together with the expert advice of Richard Eastham from FERIA Urbanism. The work that they have put in together will shape Abingdon for decades, and they deserve all our thanks.

Andy Foulsham
District Councillor for Abingdon Dunmore
26th September 2021