

Annual Town (Parish) Meeting – Wednesday 10th March 2021
Report from the Chair of the Finance and General Purposes Committee and
Leader of the Council

This year has been the most challenging year in living memory faced by the community in Abingdon and by this Council. The Covid-19 crisis struck about a year ago now, just before the start of our 2020-21 civic and financial year and is an ongoing crisis. This has been an unprecedented challenge to staff and councillors and has led to many changes in how we work. However I am pleased to report that we have risen to this challenge.

The Finance and General Purposes Committee has an overview of the Town Council and manages the resources between the different committees and is responsible for budgetary and financial matters. Our responsibilities and those of the other committees are detailed in the committee's [terms of reference](#). Despite the pandemic we have made good progress in relation to delivering on our Council's vision and its key objectives which is set out at the head of our agenda this evening and we have kept up the momentum by setting a budget which enables us to deliver further on our plans for the upcoming council year from April 2021.

OUR SERVICES AND OUR RESPONSE TO COVID-19

The Council manages and operates a number of services, full details of which are listed in appendix 1 to this report. Reports from the other committees will give you more detail on these.

During the year we had to run our services under the restrictions in place. This particularly affected our indoor services at the Guildhall, the Cinema and the Museum and led to the cancellation of many of the events including the annual Michaelmas Fair.

However many of our services were able to continue with less interruption. Our outdoor services – the play areas, open spaces, the cemetery, the residents' parking scheme and fisheries, remain open and the works team has continued to work normally throughout most of the pandemic, with appropriate precautions in place in terms of PPE and working practices. This will continue and as lockdown eases then the risk assessments will be reviewed as appropriate.

Our markets have been operating within Covid-secure guidelines throughout the pandemic, but with the Council taking on the management from the traders. There have been periods when we have by law had to restrict the stalls to being food-only but we hope next month to return to a full market.

For most of the year the office staff have been working normally but from home, with modern technology enabling the staff to continue to work efficiently and effectively.

Since the start of the pandemic we have worked in partnership with the local community to support residents through this period. This work has been led by the Covid- response group and amongst the work undertaken was:

- Working in partnership with the Abingdon Coronavirus Response Group, including providing 500 tabards to help identify members of the Group and assisting with administrative work. In a Facebook post in April 2020 they stated: *“Another HUGE and long overdue THANK YOU to the Abingdon-on-Thames Town Council. These guys have bent over backwards to help us. Not only have they given us shedloads of time helping with admin (turns out you need a lot of spreadsheets, forms, databases and organisation in order to set up and safely run a town-wide response within a month 😊😊). They've also FULLY funded soon-to-arrive branded high vis jackets and hand sanitiser for volunteers, to reassure residents who we are, help with accessing shopping, and ensure we can all be hygienic as we deliver. They've also just been really nice, kind, encouraging and helpful which is worth its weight in gold!”*
- Assisting other groups such as AbiMeds with printing and the “Abingdon Fridge” with a new fridge.
- Early in the pandemic, printing 1,500 information cards giving contact details for local support in relation to Covid-19.
- Dedicated information section on our website.
- Regular updates in the Town Crier magazine.
- Provision of a Covid support grants scheme.
- Working with Christ's Hospital of Abingdon who have recently funded an initiative that enables schools to provide every child in Abingdon access to the equipment they need to effectively carry out home learning during the pandemic, and beyond, providing 143 laptops or tablets.

Covid-19 has had a major devastating impact on Abingdon residents and as we move into the next phase of the pandemic the Council is considering its response so we continue to support to the community.

STAFFING

To deliver our services we require staff and this accounts for 37.2% of our budget. 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 the longer-term 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. Our staff retention rate is very good and this year our Assistant Town Clerk Steve Rich retired after 19 years' service and when the current phase of

the pandemic eases we hope to have an event at which we formally thank him. I am also 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 continue to identify efficiency improvements to improve services and save money.

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 biodiversity and considering the climate emergency in our stewardship of the green areas.

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.

OUR PLANS FOR 2021-22

On 27 January we approved [the budget for next financial year](#). Putting together this budget has not been easy. We do not know how the Covid crisis will play out this year. We are budgeting for what we are certain to need from precept. We do not 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 as I detailed above it has been necessary to increase spending on matters such as the Monday market, security of buildings and supporting staff and councillors to work remotely along with funding for Covid related grants to help the community support each other.

When we can we work with community partners such as with Christ's Hospital on the scheme to enable schools to provide a laptop to every child that needs one. 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 working with the community to create a neighbourhood plan in order to meet our objective to develop a resilient, sustainable town which will provide a home for residents now and in the future. This gives residents rather than the council a say in future development of this town. I am pleased to report you will hear from the Chair of the Steering Group shortly regarding the progress which is being made.

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 set aside £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. Again you will hear more about the launch of this project later in the meeting.

Responding to the climate emergency is a major priority. We have ambitious targets to reduce our carbon emissions and are using our resources to deliver this objective in a sensible way. In many cases this will save us money in the long term.

We continue to budget for capital expenditure which will bring long term revenue savings. including investing in our buildings. To do this we have increased the budget for the fabric of our buildings and will use reserves if the anticipated revenue savings are greater than potential interest on reserves. This year we have replaced the boilers in the Guildhall Complex of buildings, as detailed in the report from that Committee and other initiatives we are progressing include: replacing the badly insulated Abbey Hall roof; introducing solar panels; switching to LED lighting and more double glazing. With 70% of our energy costs relating to the Guildhall, addressing the problems of this building is our most urgent action in addressing the climate emergency.

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 months 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 we have created a new budget 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 are 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. We have been working with the Abingdon Bridge and the DAMASCUS project on this and I am pleased that we will received a presentation and updated from Gary and Roxy at agenda item 8.

THE COUNCIL TAX

The budget we have agreed for 2021/22 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.

CONCLUSION

I would like to conclude by thanking all the councillors, staff and volunteers for their dedicated hard work. This has been a busy year for the Council and I am aware that the coming year will prove to be just as challenging.

Councillor Samantha Bowring
Chair Finance and General Purposes Committee/ Leader of the Council
9 March 2021

APPENDIX A

OUR SERVICES

The Council currently provides the following services:

- Abingdon County Hall Museum and the County Hall
- Abingdon in Bloom
- Adverse weather assistance (salt bins and snow clearance)
- Allotments (three sites operated through allotment associations)
- Historic archives, treasures and works of art of which the Town Council is custodian
- Subsidised local bus services, the current bus service subsidised being the number 41
- Bus shelters and some other street furniture
- Two cemeteries and considering plans for a new cemetery
- Christmas lights
- Civic and ceremonial
- Closed churchyards
- Communications including the website www.abingdon.gov.uk , the Town Crier magazine and noticeboards
- Acting as consultees for Abingdon related matters in relation to transport and health services
- Events. Organising the annual Fun and Music in the Park and working in partnership with others in relation to events such as Heritage Day, Christmas Extravaganza and Abingdon Pride
- Fairs and Markets
- Grants to organisations. This includes a community grants scheme available by application and annual grants to organisations including the Citizens' Advice Bureau, Abingdon Carousel, the Abingdon Bridge and Christ's Hospital (in relation to the Albert Park)
- The Guildhall including leasing part of the premises to the Abbey Cinema
- The Information Centre
- The Market Place
- Planning, including conservation area appraisals and considering undertaking a Neighbourhood Development Plan
- Police Community Support Officer funding
- Publications including the Town Guide and Map and the Town Crier
- Recreation and open spaces including eight play areas, Boxhill and Caldecott Recreation Grounds, Boxhill Wood and the Ock Valley Walk
- Roysse Court Offices
- Residents' Parking Scheme (operated under an agency agreement with Oxfordshire County Council)
- The Guild of Town Criers
- The Works Depot