

Annual Town (Parish) Meeting – Thursday 28 April 2022

Report from the Chair of the Finance, Governance and Asset Management Committee and Leader of the Council

KEY HIGHLIGHTS 2021 -2022

- A Climate emergency centre now operates from the museum basement.
- We created an accessible Local Information Centre for residents and visitors on the ground floor of the Roysse Court Offices.
- We are developing plan for a new community woodland.
- We are working with Damascus and The Abingdon Bridge to support and involve young people.
- We have managed finances to minimise council tax rise.
- We continue to manage our assents to a high standard.

This has been another challenging year for the Council and our town as the pandemic has continued. However I am pleased to report that we have risen to this challenge. My report as Leader includes an update on the specifics of my Committee's work and an overview of the Council's work more generally.

OUR VISION AND KEY OBJECTIVES

The work of the Council is guided by our Vision and our Key Objectives.

Our vision is to develop an inclusive community so that Abingdon is the place where everyone wants to live and where the wellbeing of residents is prioritised. In developing this community, the town will be one which is environmentally sustainable, vibrant, resilient and safe.

In delivering this vision we have four key objectives:

- KO1. To respond effectively and speedily to the climate emergency
- KO2. To develop a resilient, sustainable town which will provide a home for residents now and in the future.
- KO3. To manage the Council's assets efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of the community now and in the future.
- KO4. To work with community partners to support those who are vulnerable and in need and to create opportunities to increase social inclusivity.

GOVERNANCE

This year we undertook a review of our corporate governance systems and the way in which we organise our decision-making through the council's committees. The aim was to create a structure which would better enable us to deliver on our vision and our key objectives, ensure absolute clarity in terms of responsibilities between the committees and speed up decision-making. The new committee structure was implemented on 1st September 2021 and we will shortly be reviewing its implementation but so far I feel that it is delivering improvements across the council.

The finance, governance and asset management committee has the following purposes:

- (1) **Strategic:** Define and oversee projects, programmes and services which work towards the Council's objective "To manage the Council's assets efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of the community now and in the future."
- (2) **Operational:** Agree performance standards for identified functions set out below and periodically review process efficiency and operational performance against those standards.
 - (a) Consolidation of the Corporate Plan
 - (b) Corporate Management
 - (c) Central Services, administration and Roysse court office
 - (d) Corporate Governance
 - (e) Democratic Services
 - (f) Finance, Budgeting and Risk Management
 - (g) Property Management (except where specifically delegated to other committees.)
 - (h) HR and staffing

Consequently the committee takes an overview of the Town Council's work and manages the resources between the different committees and is responsible for financial and property matters. Our detailed responsibilities and those of the other committees are detailed in the [Council's scheme of delegation](#).

FINANCES

OUR SERVICES AND OUR RESPONSE TO COVID-19

Despite the pandemic we have made good progress in relation to delivering on our Council's vision and its key objectives 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 2022.

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.

In relation to the pandemic, this year we had to run our services with some restrictions in place in relation to our indoor services at the Guildhall, the Cinema and the Museum. However many of our services were able to continue with less interruption. Our outdoor services – the markets, play areas, open spaces, the cemetery, and fisheries, remained open. In the autumn we welcomed back the Michaelmas and Runaway Fairs and were able to commemorate the Remembrance Day.

Our office and information centre remained open throughout the year with appropriate precautions in place.

STAFFING

We currently employ 11 full time and 14 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 excellent.

Our gender pay gap this year is 2% in favour of women and the ratio between the highest and lowest paid members of staff is 3.19, both indicators having reduced in this last year.

FINANCIAL, PROPERTY AND ASSET MANAGEMENT

We continue to identify efficiency improvements to improve services. Our [procurement policy](#) has been implemented and our [investment strategy](#) reviewed, as part of our commitment to manage our finances well. Further improvements have been made to our IT and the vast majority of our payments are now made electronically which improves efficiency and saves money. We are committed to fiscal responsibility, modernisation and efficiency.

With the new Committee system in place our finance team has worked hard to overhaul our management accounting systems to reflect our new structures.

We 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 for such improvements 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.

At our Roysse Court offices we have opened our new tourist Information Centre which also acts as a shared reception for the town council and the Abingdon registration office. This makes our own services much more accessible as we now have a ground floor reception and also is of great benefit by helping to safeguard and improve the services which are offered by our colleagues in the Registration Service.

Also at Roysse Court the Council's historic archives have been returned to our purpose built Munament Room . The archives are once again accessible to the public in Abingdon and our investment in the archive room means that they are properly stored and conserved for future generations to enjoy.

We are pleased to have continued working in partnership with our colleagues at the Abbey cinema and are currently committed to negotiating a longer-term lease for the building so is it the cinema service continues in Abingdon and we deliver the best value for council tax payers.

In September 2021 we were pleased to be able to welcome to climate emergency centre who now operate their services from the museum basement. The centre, operated by [One Planet Abingdon](#), is a hive of activity and is a major part of this town's response to the climate emergency which threatens us all.

OUR FURTHER PLANS FOR 2022-23

Councillors are keen to see our playgrounds improved and more opportunities created for outdoor leisure. Creating a town that enables healthy lifestyles is important to us and the desire for outdoor activities is not likely to abate any time soon so we have increased our budget for play equipment improvements to £90,000 of which we have earmarked to spend £60,000, in the first instance, of our developer contributions on play equipment and sports and exercise equipment to improve our recreation areas.

There has been a nationwide move to reduce traffic speed within towns for reasons of safety, emissions and traffic flow, especially in roads close to schools. For this to be successful for all road users we need supporting infrastructure. We are therefore planning to use some of our developer funding for speed indicator devices and will consider other schemes to make roads safer and promote active travel as they are suggested.

The safety of our community is paramount, which is why I am delighted to say we are making a contribution to the soon to be enhanced CCTV scheme in the town, cameras are being upgraded from analogue to digital, some of you may even understand what that means.

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. This will save us money in the long term. We are also committed to improving biodiversity and considering the climate emergency in our stewardship of the green areas. As part of this we will be developing a new community woodland and are expecting to reveal the plans for this project later this year.

Our improvement of our properties will continue and we intend to develop the Old Magistrates Court to become the council's civic and community wing, where our meetings will take place.

We hope that as Covid regulations are lifted we will be able to implement our policy of differential charging for stalls on the market place to discourage the use of single use plastics.

We are exploring the possibility of extending the County Hall Museum Building lift up to the museum galleries.

We encourage any organisations that are supporting vulnerable people to get in touch to find out how we can offer support.

We are in touch with organisations such as Abingdon Liveable Streets and Sustrans and will support initiatives that make it easier for residents to walk or cycle safely around Abingdon.

Her Majesty the Queen celebrates her platinum jubilee in June and we have organised a series of events at the Rye Farm Meadow from Wednesday 1 June to Saturday 4 June, full details of which are on [our website](#). Wristbands for the events are now on sale. Our historic and much-loved bun-throwing ceremony which takes place on Sunday 5 June – assemble on the Market Place from about 4pm onwards ready for the main event at 5pm when Buns will be thrown!

SUPPORTING OUR COMMUNITY

The impact of the pandemic has intensified issues such as domestic violence, parents' mental health and alcohol and substance abuse – all factors that put children at greater risk. 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.

Work has continued 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. You will hear more about this at agenda item 5.

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.

YOUTH SERVICES

Youth services are now firmly part of this council's remit, in accordance with our key objective. I have previously stated that 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.

The pandemic has made matters much worse. As Jonathan Townsend, the Prince's Trust UK chief executive has 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."

In 2020 we created a new budget of £30,000 for supporting young people. We have made great progress on this, working with our lead partners with Abingdon Bridge and Damascus, to develop ways of supporting young people in this town. This has resulted in the creation of the Abingdon Integrated Youth – Support Project and there will be a presentation on this at agenda item 7 which will give you full details of what has been going on.

THE COUNCIL TAX

In January we approved the budget for the financial year from 1 April 2022. This posed us many challenges during a time of increasing financial pressures, rising prices and the ongoing pandemic. We are very mindful of the cost-of-living crisis faced by our residents so do not want to take more than we have to in council tax and have therefore worked hard to keep the increase to the council tax to a minimum.

However I am pleased to report that the budget we have agreed for 2022/23 continues to deliver the town's services whilst reflecting the additional financial pressures outside of our control and allowing us to move forward on our vision and key objectives. We agreed a precept of £1,755,659 with £75,000 from developer funding. This has resulted in a council tax of £141.76 for a Band D property, about 39 pence a day and representing an increase of just 0.8% on the council tax.

CONCLUSION

I would like to conclude by thanking all of our team - 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, Governance and Asset Management Committee
Leader of the Council

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
- The Guild of Town Criers
- The Works Depot