

ABINGDON TOWN COUNCIL

Report to	Town council
Meeting date	20 March 2024
Report author	District councillors
Agenda item	8

Report from Abingdon Vale Councillors to Abingdon Town Council

1) From Cllr Helen Pighills

At the Vale Council's first meeting of 2024, a motion opposing Thames Water's proposed price hike was passed. The motion, put forward by Cllr Emily Smith, noted the council's concerns around Thames Water's proposal to increase household water bills to an average of £735 by 2030, an increase of 60% in cash terms. The motion included a request for the leader to write to the Chair and Chief Executive of Ofwat and to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, setting out this council's opposition to the proposed Thames Water price hike and to send a copy of this letter to the MPs for Oxford West & Abingdon, and Wantage constituencies.

In response to a question about charging entrance at some of Abingdon's Vale operated toilets, the following response was given by Cabinet member Cllr Mark Coleman:

'Historically, the public toilets in the Charter have been vandalised/abused and have sadly attracted antisocial behaviours making it uncomfortable for the public/users and for our own cleaning staff to undertake their work. We have recently spent £37,718 renovating one unisex toilet at this site and to try and reduce the amount of vandalism and gathering of groups in the area, a 20p charge has been introduced. A charge will also be introduced at Abbey Meadows.

'Disabled users will be able to access these facilities without charge using a RADAR key.

'In the first six months of 2023/24, we spent £7,368 on vandalism repairs to toilets from a £9,100 budget for toilet repairs and maintenance. This is often from people blocking pans or ripping off the toilet roll holders or graffiti inside the toilet areas. Additional staff cleaning costs have also been incurred. When toilets are vandalised, there is often a period of time when the toilets are then not operational and by introducing a small charge, we hope to ensure that the toilets are accessible more of the time.

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'The use of facilities where a charge is being introduced will be monitored to see what the effect is on usage and vandalism.

'Due to the issues with cash collection, banking and risk of theft, all charging is now processed using contactless payment cards, so no cash is stored in the facilities.'

The EV car club pilot that was launched in April 2023 is being extended until September 2024.

2) From Cllr Andy Foulsham

The first two months of 2024 have been busy with the "Regulation 18" consultation on our Preferred Options for the forthcoming Joint Local Plan 2041, which closed on 26th February. This is the first time we have done a "digital first" consultation for such a major engagement exercise, and we were delighted with the response, with around 1300 responses from individuals, parishes and interested organisations. This is a far higher level of engagement than we have seen under previous consultations and showed good use of both the full consultation and the "JLP in a nutshell" tool. We appreciated the comments from Abingdon Town Council about the problems at the in-person event at Pablo Lounge, and this informed how a similar event was run in Didcot (we asked for more space), and led to the displays being made available separately. All the comments are now being worked on by the Planning Policy team and will be fed into the plan that will go out for "Regulation 19" consultation in early autumn.

A separate consultation will launch in the next few days - one on the "Leisure Needs Assessment" and "Playing Pitch Strategy", which will go into great detail on how the district's sports facilities need to grow and change over the next 15 years. Please have a look at <https://theconversation.southandvale.gov.uk/> when the consultation goes live, and encourage any players and teams that you know to contribute so that their voices are heard on this important subject. This will also form part of the evidence base for the Joint Local Plan.

3) From Cllr Rob Maddison

As you're most likely aware – especially those on the Planning Panel who have already commented - an application ref. P23/V2861/O has been made to build up to 40 houses along with a nursery and a care home at the circus field site by the new Aldi store. I've been keeping an eye on the progress of the application and have been advised by the planning officer that it's unlikely that a final decision or recommendation will be made imminently as officers are still reviewing.

As the site has been allocated in the Local Plan, I consider it likely that we will see development there. Given this, I think that a reasonable suggestion would be that a condition is included to limit the number of occupied dwellings prior to the completion of work at Lodge Hill, as suggested in the response already given by the Town Council. It might be judged that the nursery & care home along with the 40 dwellings wouldn't introduce enough additional traffic to justify a condition

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like this. Nonetheless I'd say it's worth raising. If officers recommend approval, the application should come to the Planning Committee because of objections raised by the Town Council and the officer's report will clarify areas of discussion likely to be covered when the Committee meets.

4) From Cllr Andrew Skinner

This committee met last month to consider, amongst other things, a change to the Brown Bin scheme. The Vale claims to prioritise 'Digitisation and Customer satisfaction'.

A paper was presented which in essence issues people who pay for a Brown Bin with a sticker which they apply to their bin which identifies it as eligible for collection.

This involves an outlay of £100k for each of the next 3 years - what happens after that was not considered. These costs represent the secure printing of a sticker and postage.

The system will be dependent on a Customer Relationship Database (CRM), to flag who pays. I suggested that they look at placing RFID chips in the bins, which would eliminate the need for annual sticker printing and distribution. This had not even been considered (so much for digitisation).

The Committee found this too exotic, so we moved on.

Where a number of members, including myself, expressed a strong opinion, however, was with respect to Direct Debit payment. Evidently the administration has severe problems with DD, largely because of the way they have implemented the payment rules.

Members had no issue with new methods of payment being introduced, but felt that DD must be retained, changing the rules if necessary. This would obviously relate to the Customer satisfaction objective, as many people (though, like most relevant data, not quantified in the paper) already pay for their Brown Bins by DD.

This has been completely ignored and if you want a Brown Bin you will have to go online every year and pay for it. Evidently Customer Retention is not a problem the Administration has experienced.

5) From Cllr Oliver Forder

At the full Vale Council meeting on 21st February, I was elected as Vice-Chair of the Vale. Under the constitution, this meant that I had to resign immediately my position as Chair of the snappily titled Community Governance and Electoral Issues Committee. This had been taking, and continues to take, the lead on the Council's response to the Boundary Commission's decision to review the distribution of wards in the Vale. The current position is that the Committee is finalising its representations to the Boundary Commission before the Commission issues its own draft proposals for consultation. The Vale's representations need to adhere to detailed guidance

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set out by the Commission. As a result of slower than anticipated population growth, Abingdon is likely to see its number of District

Councillors reduced from 10 to 9. The current draft representation to the Commission, which will be finalised at a meeting of the Committee on 18th March, suggests that the Abingdon wards should be reorganised as 3 3-member wards.

Oliver Forder
March 2024