

Finance, Governance and Asset Management Committee (FGAM) Report to the Annual Parish Meeting 2024

Role

Abingdon Town Council funds a number of services and looks after a number of assets on behalf of residents. These include: Eight play areas - Recreation areas - Football pitches - Ock Valley Walk - Old and new cemeteries - The Guildhall complex - The County Hall building in which our museum is housed - The Market Place and the regular Monday market - Community events - Floral displays - Christmas lights - Street furniture - Communications and funding for community led support - Other types of grants.

Finance

In 2023-4 the town council planned to spend £2,136,960 (net). This was funded by a “Precept” (ie money raised via the Council Tax) of £1,823,515, income from fees & charges and rents, and use of “Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL)” funds.

The Council receives CIL funds from developers of new properties built within the town. Prior to 2022/23 the Council had received £173,911 in CIL funds, and during that financial year (2022/23) received a further £106,958 and spent £12,000 (on a contribution to the refurbishment of the 30th Abingdon Scout’s hut, and a contribution to the installation of astro turf at Carswell School). During the last Financial Year (2023/24) the Council has agreed to spend a further £155,216 of CIL funds on the Speed Indicator Signs, resurfacing work on the Town Council’s part of the Ock Valley Walk, production of the Active Travel Map, and the installation of further play equipment and the creation of a Multi-Use-Games-Area at the Caldecott Recreation Ground. (CIL funds can only be spent on “capital” projects which improve the Town’s infrastructure.)

Governance

May 2023 saw elections to the Town Council : some councillors who had served the town with commitment and dedication for many years decided to stand down – they deserve our grateful thanks for the many hours of effort they had spent working to make Abingdon a better place to live in. In turn they have been replaced by new councillors, who have brought a wealth of knowledge and experience from many varied backgrounds.

After a period of transition following the retirement at the end of 2022 of the Council’s long-serving Town Clerk, Nigel Warner, during which Alan Rouse, Paula Lopez and Ron Spurs acted as Town Clerk, on 1st February 2024 Ms Cherie Carruthers was appointed as the Council’s Town Clerk/ Chief Executive whilst continuing to act as the Council’s Responsible Finance Officer (RFO). Subsequently the recruitment of a Deputy Town Clerk is nearing its completion. The Council welcomes the stability that these two appointments will bring.

Asset Management

One of the early tasks of the new Council was to negotiate a fair and equitable lease with the Abbey Cinema Ltd. This was achieved after much work by councillors, Council staff and the owners of the Abbey Cinema. Everyone realises that the Abbey Hall, having been built many years ago, is in need to a major refurbishment – not least to improve its energy efficiency. The Council have set up a dedicated

working party (chaired by Coun Forder) to oversee the tendering of a long-term lease for the Abbey Hall and to prepare detailed plans so that the building can be thoroughly refurbished in late 2025, and then open again as quickly as possible.

The Council has also been active on many other fronts – some (such as the plans for the new Community Woodland, the major upgrade of the equipment at the Caldecott Play area, the three-year deal for the installation of Town’s Christmas lights, and the investigation of possible sites for a new Cemetery) are described in other Committee Reports. FGAM has overseen the commissioning of detailed studies about the feasibility of installing a lift into the County Hall and the discussions with Historic England about what they would find acceptable.

Partnership Working

The Town Council places great emphasis on actively working in partnership with local bodies – in the last year we have interacted with many bodies including Abingdon’s Police Community Support Officers, the Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group, the Abbey Buildings Trust, Christ’s Hospital of Abingdon, ATOM, the Friends of Abingdon Civic Society, the Twin Towns Society, the South and Vale Citizen’s Advice Bureau, the DAMUSCUS Youth project, The Bridge, Be-Free-Young-Carers, the Abingdon Foyer, One Planet Abingdon, SOFEA, and the Abingdon Carousel - you will read more about the financial support the Council gives some of these bodies and other groups, in the Community Committee’s report.

We are also striving to ensure that the Market Place – the heart of our beautiful town – is used to the fullest possible extent, and so actively encourage local clubs and societies to use the area to promote their groups and to fund-raise.

The year ahead

In January 2024 the Town Council agreed its budget for the next year (2024/2025). The Council will continue to provide significant funding for key community groups, but has decided to freeze all its fees and charges, including the Cemetery charges, and the fees paid by our Market Traders. The Community grants budget has been increased, as have the sums allocated to green and biodiversity projects. The Council will continue to use its own funds and those obtained from housing developers (the CIL funds) to invest in a number of capital projects – including further provision the bike racks in the town centre, bus shelters, footpaths and more equipment at the town’s play areas, and has put aside a sizeable sum for the refurbishment of the Abbey Hall. Councillors were very aware of the cost-of-living crisis which is affecting everyone, and consequently managed to limit the Council Tax increase to 4.7% (equivalent to an annual increase of £6.90 paid for a Band D house).

Finally, I wish to conclude by thanking the Council’s staff and my fellow councillors for their commitment and the work that they do to make Abingdon a place we can all be proud of.

Councillor Jim Halliday
Chair of the Finance, Governance and Asset Management Committee
1 April 2024