

## **Civic Pride article – January 2019**

### **By Hester Hand – Friends of Abingdon Civic Society**

'The future of the High Street' is a regular concern in local and national media. Shopping habits are changing, and the government has just launched a £675 million fund to help struggling town centres. How does Abingdon fit into this picture?

Every year since 2007, the excellent Abingdon Blog (<https://www.abingdonblog.co.uk/>) has published a review of the changes in our town centre shops and business – what has opened, what has closed. This always makes interesting reading.

2018 was a good year, with more gains than losses – a net gain of 3. Only one shop closed, while most of the closures and new openings were eateries or beauty places. Interestingly, despite yearly fluctuations, we now have exactly the same number of town centre businesses as in 2007.

While many people would like to see more shops, Abingdon is following the national trend towards more 'non-shop' businesses (eating and drinking places, and services such as hairdressers). With few retail closures and an overall increase in occupancy, Abingdon is also doing better than many towns.

The role of town centres has always been evolving. For many years Abingdon was a typical market town, with few actual shops, but thriving markets, many manufacturing businesses and a great many breweries and pubs. By the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, manufacturing businesses and breweries had decreased, while shops probably peaked in the first half of the twentieth century. People lament the loss of traditional pubs, but these are now being replaced by coffee shops and restaurants, repeating a pattern which occurred in the 17-18th centuries.

Nationally, there is a clear move towards "multi-functional" town centres: places which provide leisure and recreation, employment, tourism, heritage, culture, housing, education, health and wellbeing, as well as retail. But it takes effort to make this work well. As one recent report says "Multi-functional centres draw people in for a much wider bundle of benefits than just shopping. This requires all stakeholders to work together ... to deliver a better collective experience".

Abingdon is starting to move in that direction: the Abbey Cinema, Abbey Meadow play area and Open Air pool (in summer) are bringing more people in, and this will be helped by the Smokehouse gin bar in the High Street and the Old Gaol wine bar, both due to open soon.

What else could help to create a "better collective experience" for Abingdon's residents and visitors? Could any of our empty historic buildings be brought back into productive use, possibly as new community facilities? Do we need an arts centre and a music venue? And is there enough parking for everyone? Tackling questions like these needs concerted effort. As the town's Civic Society, we would like to work in partnership with the Councils, businesses and interested members of the community, with the common goal of making Abingdon an even more attractive place to live or visit.