

Civic Pride

A great place to live, but together we can make it even better – Hester Hand



I saw a wonderful example of civic pride in Abingdon last week. Someone posted on Facebook saying they were thinking of coming to live here and asking what it was like. She received well over 100 comments, the overwhelming majority of them extremely positive.

People were honest about the traffic problems and about the fairly limited selection of shops, but most people said that the upsides – especially for people with young families – far outweighed these. One particularly encouraging theme was the number of respondents who had moved here in the last year or two and are loving living here; similarly, there were people who had had to move away but would come back if they could.

People are proud of our schools, the library, the leisure centre, the Abbey Meadow play area, the outdoor pool, lots of local walks, good bus services to Oxford and Didcot, the river, nice pubs and restaurants, the cinema, Masons, the Abingdon Blog, market place events and traditions — and more. There were also many, many comments about how friendly the place is.

This was really refreshing, since social media so often seems to generate negativity.

However, as has been highlighted frequently in this column, there is plenty more that needs doing. The Town, District and County Councils each have responsibility for different facilities and activities in the town, but their resources – both money and people – are thinly stretched so the many community groups make a vital contribution. Carbon Cutters, for example, are helping with the town's aspirations to combat the climate emergency, AbiBinit is doing sterling work on the litter problems, Dementia Friendly Abingdon seeks to make our businesses, shops etc. more aware of the needs of dementia sufferers, the Chamber of Commerce promotes the town shops and businesses, the Friends of Abingdon Civic Society works to protect and promote our heritage, and there are numerous groups doing wonderful work for young people.

Many of these groups receive grants from the councils as a contribution towards their work, and these are greatly appreciated. But we know from experience elsewhere that there are ways for community groups and councils to work together even more closely, so that we can really make a difference and regenerate our neighbourhoods. The community groups can bring specialist knowledge, experience and creative ideas to help councils tackle challenges, and in some cases they can access grant funding not available to public bodies; the councils can provide infrastructure (especially in terms of communications and publicity) to help community groups reach out to a wider public.

Joint working between community groups, commercial organisations and the Town Council brought the cinema to our Abbey Hall. There are some interesting ideas around for other projects, and new housing developments will generate large financial contributions for the town. Community groups and the councils, working together, can achieve things which will really benefit the town, making it an even better place to live.