

Civic Pride article – February 2020

Living with Beauty – by Bobbie Nichols

In January this year *Living with Beauty – promoting health, well-being and sustainable growth*, the report of the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission, was published. This report is the latest in a number of efforts over many years to urge, or perhaps force, developers to improve the quality of design in all housing developments. This is of particular interest to people in our area where a number of major developments are being built, are about to be built, or are still in the planning stage.

Far too many new developments are soulless places, frequently based on the principle of how many units can be squeezed into a given area. To combat this, the Commission proposes ‘a new development and planning framework, which will ask for beauty, refuse ugliness, and promote stewardship’. The main points of this framework can be summarized as follows.

- Speed up the planning process for ‘beautiful buildings’ through a new ‘Fast Track for Beauty’ rule for councils.
- Recognise that some developers can abuse ‘permitted developments rights’ to produce accommodation of the lowest quality. New homes should meet minimum standards for space, amenity and comfort.
- Increase democracy and involve communities in local plans and planning applications, including using digital technology such as virtual reality and 3D modelling to help local people shape their own areas.
- Recognise that a lack of resources and expertise in local authority planning departments is contributing to wider design-evaluation problems.

The Commission advocates ‘an integrated approach, in which all design matters relevant to placemaking are considered from the outset and subjected to a democratic or co-design process. And we advocate raising the profile and role of planning both in political discussions and in the wider debate concerning how we wish to live and what kind of a country we want to pass on’.

We will have to wait and see whether the Government and local authorities turn the report into action, but if they do we can look forward to new developments which are beautiful to look at, pleasant to live in and foster a sense of community, linking to existing towns while having a character of their own.

In the light of these ambitious proposals, it is pleasing to see that the Vale of White Horse District Council has recently requested the withdrawal of an application to build 61 houses on a small plot of land in northwest Abingdon (known locally as the Circus Field) on the grounds of a lack of amenity space around individual houses. If the application had not been withdrawn, it would have been refused. This is a good start – long may it continue.