

Civic Pride Column – June 2020

by Roger Thomas – Friends of Abingdon Civic Society

Our world is undoubtedly going to be very different at the end of 2020 than it was in January. At present it's hard to know what the main changes will be, or how permanent they'll turn out to be. But how may life in Abingdon be affected?

Some shops may struggle. High Street trading was already difficult, and the lockdown will have driven yet more customers to online shopping. We can help by using our local shops, especially independent ones. A wish to avoid using public transport may help, if it keeps shopping local.

Abingdon's hospitality sector – cafes, pubs, restaurants – was doing well, but social distancing rules will pose considerable challenges. Wetherspoon's is reportedly trialling new measures in The Narrows, its Abingdon pub.

Covid-19 seems likely to have huge impacts on patterns of work and travel. Home working is set to become much more common. That may bring new requirements for space at home, and for reliable fast broadband. It should also mean a reduction in daily commuting, whether to Oxford or further afield. Less traffic on the road, and people spending more time in their communities – these are positive things.

The traffic-free roads and cleaner air of the lockdown have led many to appreciate the pleasures of cycling and walking. Whether simply for recreation, or as a safe and healthy way of getting from A to B, it will be good if this change can be permanent. By contrast, air travel may be more difficult and more expensive in future. More British people may choose to take their holidays in the UK.

Very positively, lockdown has helped many of us to appreciate Abingdon more, and to value our neighbourhoods, and our neighbours. The community effort to support each other has been fantastic. It will be wonderful if this change is a lasting one.

So, life will be different, and there are undoubtedly huge challenges ahead, but also opportunities for some very positive changes. Many of these will centre on the importance of local areas and community networks. New kinds of infrastructure and facilities, such as better cycle routes and more community buildings, may be needed.

By good chance, Abingdon Town Council is just starting work on a 'Neighbourhood Plan' for the town. Such Plans cover planning matters and can add specific local requirements to the district-wide Vale Local Plan. These could perhaps include a policy against excessive 'infilling' on housing estates, requirements for pedestrian/cycle routes, or policies on change of use for vacant retail or commercial properties. Neighbourhood Plans can also identify other community needs and wishes, and propose projects to meet them.

The Plan is supposed to be written 'bottom-up', and there will be publicity from the Town Council on how you can get involved. The Civic Society intends to play a full role, and we encourage as many others as possible to do the same. This is a very timely opportunity to help shape the future of our town in a changed world.