

## **Civic Pride Column – December 2020**

### **Abingdon and the Planning White Paper – by Richard Tamplin, Friends of Abingdon Civic Society**

During August the Government published its White Paper, “The Future of Planning”, which sets out proposed fundamental changes to the present planning system. This sounds a pretty dry subject, but the proposals will affect everyone living or working in Abingdon in one way or another if they become law.

In Abingdon, the Vale of White Horse District Council is at present mainly responsible for deciding what development should be granted planning permission and where this should take place. This is because they prepare and approve the Local Plan. This shows on maps the locations where new building is acceptable in principle, and has policies showing how all applications must be considered in terms of criteria such as design, traffic, height, appearance, open space and so on.

Today, decisions on all planning applications in Abingdon and the wider Vale are based on what the Local Plan policies say and on the Government’s National Planning Policy Framework. Decisions must also take into account other considerations, including what applicants say and the views of the public, including neighbours and local organisations. Decisions on planning applications are made by elected councillors, who can delegate them to officers, and the applicant has a right of appeal against those decisions.

In future, there would be just one plan on which the Vale will have to show the entire District divided into one or other of three categories. These would be, firstly, Growth Areas where “substantial development” can go ahead, subject to very little control. Neither the public nor councillors in these areas would be able to object to the principle of new building, and councillors would only be able to consider the design and appearance of new buildings to a limited degree.

The second category, Renewal Areas, would be “suitable for development” where “gentle densification”, such as infilling spaces in residential areas and building higher in town centres, could go ahead. Again, the public and local councillors would not be able to object to the principle of this kind of development, only to its design.

It would be only in the third category, Protected Areas, where the public and local councillors would have a say, much as they do now, on whether new building or change of use can be allowed. Protected Areas would include conservation areas, Green Belts and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

Although the White Paper proposals would fundamentally change the present planning system, there have already been major changes in the last two years. These include allowing shops, offices and industrial buildings, for example, in town centres and on industrial estates to be converted to residential use without requiring planning permission.

This has meant that neither councillors or the public are able to object to or prevent such changes being made. The White Paper proposals will extend this situation greatly and have aroused strong opposition amongst amenity societies and many MPs. Watch this space!