

Civic Pride – January 2021 – by Hester Hand

In our April column I wrote about the community spirit being fostered during the pandemic. In June Roger Thomas expanded on this and talked about the need to build back differently to recognise social changes that have taken place, some of them likely to be permanent.

The “sunlit uplands” may still be some way off, but the New Year seems a good moment to remind ourselves of some positives from the recent months and to think about how we can capitalise on these for the future.

Most striking has been the growth in neighbourliness in many areas, with informal groups being set up to support one another, practically and emotionally. The most visible signs were socially-distanced events such as VE/peace celebrations, “Abingdon Zoo Day” and other family trails, doorstep tributes, and recently Christmas lights, Advent windows and carol singing. But we have also looked out for one another - picking up shopping, passing on things we no longer need, lending tools or equipment, providing technical support. All of this can – and I am sure will – continue post-pandemic.

Many of us also found a new appreciation of our surroundings: our beautiful parks and riverside, the footpaths and green spaces between housing estates, the easy access to the countryside - and the historic buildings and sites around the town. Facebook groups are full of pictures celebrating all of this.

Then there has been the wonderful work done by voluntary groups: existing ones such as the Foodbank, the Community Fridge, Citizens Advice and Carousel, and others set up to meet needs created by the pandemic. Abingdon Community Response provides a lifeline to those without their own support networks, and Abimed helps people with prescription deliveries. All of these groups have welcomed many volunteers who have not previously been involved. That too bodes well for the future community spirit of our town.

Credit too to the Town and District Councils who provide practical and financial support to the volunteer efforts and especially to those of their staff who had to move suddenly into completely new roles.

So, what of the future? Many people think we should not go back to life exactly as it was before: the pandemic has shown us ways of working more flexibly and living in a more environmentally-friendly way. Are our local councils recognising this when they look at future plans for developments, employment and transport, or are they continuing blithely on making decisions based on outdated criteria and plans? Are they listening to the views of local people, or taking note of imaginative solutions being developed elsewhere? Are they willing to harness the energy and enthusiasm of community volunteers and work with them?

The Town Council’s Neighbourhood Plan project and their recent decision to set up a Youth Council are encouraging steps: we wait with interest to see how they develop and whether the District Council can also find ways to genuinely engage with the community to make Abingdon an even better place to live in 2021.