

Town Centre Housing

There was an interesting article in last week's Herald about the early 20thC demolition of Wallingford's slum courts because they were not deemed to be fit for human habitation. Abingdon had its own equivalents – with courts off Ock Street and West St Helen Street and close-packed slums in other areas, including around what we now know as the medieval Abbey Buildings. Most of the Abingdon slum clearances were done just before and after the second world war, with good-quality replacement housing being built in both the South and the North of the town.

It is interesting therefore to see that many of the same areas, especially along Ock Street and Stert Street, are now being repopulated with developments of tiny flats, with little or no outside space (not even a balcony) and in some cases limited light. Many of them are below the minimum space standards for a 2-person dwelling (50 sq.m) although thankfully they do have better sanitary provision than their predecessors.

Another trend is towards replacing town centre retail or business use with residential accommodation: current examples include the former Eileen's clothing shop and the Job Centre, and there have been several others in recent years.

As well as the size issues, these also raise the question of town centre vitality. Abingdon is not alone in seeing a decline in town centre retail but there is widespread recognition that town centres still have a vital role to play in providing services and especially in providing places where people can meet and interact. I have heard this described as "bumping points" or "where commerce and community meet".

In the past, market towns were important social hubs for their area and that human interaction element remains important today. Indeed it will be more so if, as expected, the trend towards homeworking continues but if shops, offices and businesses are replaced by homes, what will bring people in to town?

There are some difficult issues here. We all know that more homes are needed, particularly ones that are affordable for younger people. But do we need to consider whether these are the right sort of homes? Large developments are being built around Abingdon, and in the villages, but they are mainly providing larger and less affordable homes. Are we moving (back) towards a society where the young or less well-off are crammed in to the town centre? Should they not also have a chance to live in more spacious surroundings?

The situation is made worse by changes in legislation which remove many of the controls on change of use. Most such changes will in future take place without any chance for the community to comment. However Local Authorities can have policies against which proposals would be assessed.

Rather than just letting events unfold, should we be having a conversation about these issues to decide what we want our town to be like, then encouraging our Local Authority to enshrine that vision into enforceable policies?

Hester Hand