

Civic Pride column – June 2022

Hester Hand – Friends of Abindon Civic Society

Understandably local councils' activities over the last couple of years have been dominated by dealing with the pandemic – but it is reassuring to see that renewed attention is now being given to longer-term issues affecting our area.

The Vale of White Horse District Council (VWHDC) has recently started a “Central Abingdon Regeneration” review, looking at the area roughly bounded by West St Helen Street, Stratton Way, Abbey Close and the river. In early May they held two stakeholder consultation meetings with representatives from community groups, healthcare providers, faith groups, the new owners of the Bury Street shopping centre, transport operators and others. These will be followed by public events later in the summer.

It was good to see that the review is building on the work already being done by the Neighbourhood Plan team, rather than duplicating it, and some creative and interesting ideas were put forward.

It was made clear, however, that the outcome of the review would not in itself make any of the ideas happen – projects will need approval and funding will have to be found – but the openness to creative ideas and the involvement of such a wide range of stakeholders gave those present reason to hope that this will be more successful than some of its predecessors.

Another local development is the decision by the Vale and South Oxfordshire District Councils to launch a joint Local Plan. This seems to be an indication of much needed joined-up thinking and will hopefully avoid future problems like the SODC decision to build 3500 houses at Culham without any apparent regard for the impact on Abingdon, just a couple of miles away. A public consultation on the overarching themes of the Plan is under way till 23 June; there will be further consultation on the detail next year.

This new Local Plan may be quite different in scope from its predecessors, depending on decisions taken at national level. Government proposals for radical changes to the planning system, made in 2020, met with widespread opposition and were withdrawn. A White Paper earlier this year hinted at a new approach and following this month's Queens Speech a new “Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill” has been published, proposing sweeping changes to the system.

Press reports have suggested that top-down mandatory house-building targets might be dropped, with local authorities able to set their own targets according to local needs. If true, this could be welcome news for this area, but the bill is long (325 pages) and complex and we will be watching its progress with interest to see how it will affect us.

In the meantime, it is really important that local people make their views known via these reviews: as was demonstrated with the North Abingdon developments, once approval in principle is given via the Local Plan, subsequent consultations are only about the details.