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Abingdon Neighbourhood Plan, by Simon Hills

Abingdon's Neighbourhood Plan is moving towards completion. After a further round of consultation in September it will be finalised, then submitted to independent scrutiny to check it has been properly prepared. At a referendum next year we will all have the opportunity to approve it, voting on its vision for the future of Abingdon.

The Neighbourhood Plan matters because it establishes principles which the planning authority must take into account as they consider future planning applications.

After successful consultations last summer and in the spring - thanks to all who participated either in person or on-line – three more topics are now being worked on. These are Travel, Access and Movement, Families and Young People and Business and the Employment. Linking these topics is a recognition that our town centre is overloaded. It will only become more so unless we plan now for the inevitable and necessary increase in housing provision, most of which will be just outside Abingdon's boundary.

So the Abingdon Town Neighbourhood Plan steering group, which I am privileged to chair, is suggesting that the Abingdon of the future should be planned around the concept of the '20-minute neighbourhood'. This recognises that Abingdon now comprises a number of distinct, almost exclusively, residential areas but in the future all a person's daily needs, including employment spaces, should be available within an easy walk from their front door. Integrating employment opportunities into residential areas will reduce the need to travel, decreasing traffic congestion and pollution, strengthening community bonds and improving mental and physical health. Tangible examples could include shared working spaces, small scale workshops, bookable community rooms, localised healthcare facilities and space for autonomous, 'last-mile', mobile locker, delivery vehicles.

Our town centre and business parks will retain their importance so it will be important that they are connected to where people live. The travel, access and movement element of the current online consultation proposes changes to streets and spaces that will make cycling and walking more convenient, attractive and safer. The plan also proposes that a 20-mph speed limit be applied across most of the town. Smaller roads with less traffic will become more welcoming for those wishing to walk or ride a bike, recognising that over the next decade or two personal car ownership is likely to decline as our country seeks to meet its 2050 net zero target for greenhouse gas emission.

The Neighbourhood Plan looks forward at least decade so is being prepared for future Abingdonians. The Families and Young People topic emphasises the importance of investing in child friendly places, encouraging walking and cycling to school, with play-on-the way opportunities and creating places for teenagers to sit and chat.

Please do engage with this phase of the development of our Neighbourhood Plan through the website. The more of us that join in, the better the Neighbourhood Plan will be and the closer we'll get to my own aspiration for it, which is to make an even better Abingdon for generations yet to come.