

January 2023 Civic Pride article

2022 Progress report by Hester Hand – Friends of Abingdon Civic Society

Last January's column was in the form of a wish list for 2022 – things which Santa couldn't deliver but which hopefully our local councils could. So how did they do?

Town centre vitality: one of the most common concerns, but sadly there has been little sign of progress. The District Council is developing a strategy – the Central Abingdon Regeneration Framework - but after a public engagement exercise last summer, there has been no further information. Once agreed, the strategy will not have any actual force, but will provide a background against which future proposals for key areas such as the Charter, Shopping Centre, Upper Reaches etc will be assessed. There is at present no sign of such proposals coming forward and some smaller-scale projects have been refused, presumably because of the uncertainty over the bigger picture.

As in many other towns, there are still many vacant shop units, although interestingly the Abingdon Blog's annual survey shows that the number only increased by one during the year. They continue to give the town a depressing appearance and, although many of the properties are privately owned, it would be good to see a concerted effort by Town and District Councils to help/encourage landlords to re-let them or make them available for community use.

Traffic and travel: slightly more progress here. The various Councils have been working with community groups to improve walking, cycling and public transport options: new maps of routes have been devised and should be published shortly; bus routes have been updated and although there have been teething problems, they should provide better services when they are bedded in. Reduced speed limits have been agreed in principle, but implementation has been delayed while details are finalised. Revised plans for the Lodge Hill slip roads have been submitted. These are still contentious so we must wait to see if they are approved.

Eyesores: work is now well under way on converting Old Abbey House to a hotel and although it is a shame that it will not be open to non-residents, at least we will soon be able to enjoy having an attractive building in this beautiful setting. Sadly, there is no such positive news about the Upper Reaches. Following pressure from the Civic Society and others, the District Council did require the leaseholder to improve the security and overall appearance of the site but it remains a disgrace. The terms of the lease give the Council very little leverage but we will continue to encourage them to use their enforcement powers to improve the situation.

New developments: some of the new houses are now complete and we hope that their occupants will be happy here. The Town Council receives many thousands of pounds in "Community Infrastructure Levy" money from the developers: they plan to use this mainly for projects to encourage healthy living and biodiversity and also to prioritise facilities for children and young people. We look forward to seeing the results.

Happy New Year.