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## NewsFeature

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# Civic PRIDE

## Shaping our future, but learning lessons of past on housing

CHANGE is a constant feature of any town. Buildings are put up, adapted to meet new needs, or demolished and replaced.

Open ground may be built over, or buildings demolished to make open spaces. All of this is needed to meet society's evolving needs.

Photographs of Abingdon in the 1960s and 1970s show how much has changed. Some show empty, boarded-up houses, or vacant plots where unwanted buildings have been demolished and nothing new built.

Now, the picture is very different. Few buildings in the town centre stay empty and vacant for long and vacant plots are rare.

A buoyant local economy and a significant need for housing have raised the value of development land. This makes it financially viable to convert buildings to residential use and build houses and flats on unused land.

The conversion of the Old Gaol to flats, which also involved building new blocks next to the Gaol, is a visible example. In other cases, a few more flats or small houses have been squeezed on to existing properties, often behind the street frontage.

Offices have been converted to flats, such as New Abbey Court in Stert Street. Changes to planning rules mean some office-to-residential conversions get permission automatically, making it difficult for the council to refuse such schemes.

How should we feel about all this? People need homes and town centres are good places to live. Most facilities are within walking distance and Abingdon has fairly good public transport (although a railway station would be even better).

Building in town centres and converting empty offices makes good use of available land, and may help reduce pressure to build on the countryside.

On the other hand, increasing the town centre population can bring problems. Parking is an obvious one. Parking space is at a premium and some developments have no allocated parking. If residents can't find a place to park legally, they may be tempted to park illegally, causing nuisance and perhaps even danger.

It is also undesirable to squeeze too many people into small areas. In the 19th century, many 'courts' of very small houses were built behind Ock Street and elsewhere. By the 1930s, a slum clearance programme and council-house building was needed to tackle the cramped, poor living conditions.

There are no easy answers of how to house a growing population. Making full use of town centre land and buildings can help, but we need to be careful not to repeat past mistakes. Decisions about what development to permit where are taken mainly by the Vale council, but any resident can comment on applications.

The Friends of Abingdon Civic Society will certainly be taking a close interest in how much more housing can sensibly be accommodated in Abingdon's town centre.