

## **Civic Pride**

### **Challenges for the New Local Councils**

#### **Bobbie Nichols**

It has been all change in the make-up of Abingdon Town Council and the Vale of White Horse District Council, with control passing from the Conservatives to the Liberal Democrats. Welcome to all the councillors, both those returning to the fray and those newly elected.

Both Councils face a number of challenges over the next four years, including the expansion of Abingdon to the north, the much delayed construction of the south-facing slips at Lodge Hill, the possible impact of the Oxford–Cambridge Expressway, flood defences, and the sadly neglected Old Abbey House and Upper Reaches Hotel.

Plans are already being submitted for the first tranche of housing in North Abingdon. The planning committees of both the Town and District Councils must make a strong stand against cramped over-development and shoddy design in these estates.

There has been much public disquiet about the North Abingdon developments in general, particularly as the sites identified were on Green Belt land. Therefore it is essential that they are well designed and well integrated into the rest of Abingdon, not drab speculative estates tacked on to the northern edge of the town.

Good design helps with a sense of belonging, which is important in developing civic pride and helps to explain why some estates are well looked after and sought after as places to live, whereas others are sad and uncared for.

It is important for both Councils to press hard to ensure that appropriate infrastructure, including the Lodge Hill diamond interchange, is provided to support the large increase in Abingdon's population as people move into the new houses.

The developers must not be allowed to renege on promises to provide premises for schools, medical centres and local shopping centres, or to leave unfinished access roads as has been the case in some other local developments.

There are also many challenges within Abingdon itself. The plight of Old Abbey House and the Upper Reaches hotel is well known, and it was encouraging to see manifesto commitments to make better use of these assets.

Many of Abingdon's most attractive parts are in its three Conservation Areas – the Town Centre, Albert Park, and Northcourt. We need to cherish them, so it is pleasing to see that members of both Councils have said they intend to implement long overdue Conservation Area reviews.

These are just a few of the challenges our new councillors may face in the coming months, all against a backdrop of national political chaos and funding restrictions.

The Friends of Abingdon are pleased that there is a commitment from the Liberal Democrats to working with community groups. This chimes with the growing movement, powered by Civic Voice, the umbrella organisation for Civic Societies, encouraging people to collaborate and interact with the place where they live. This is celebrated on National Civic Day (22 June this year, which has also been announced as 'Abingdon Pride' day). We look forward to working with both Councils in the coming years.