

SHEPTON MALLET TOWN COUNCIL

Meeting	Full Council Item 9.6
Date	8 th September 2020
Author	District Councillors
Subject	Update from District Councillors

PURPOSE OF REPORT

To receive written reports from Councillor Kennedy and Councillor Hobbs

Report to Shelton Mallet Town Council on Mendip District Council activity

UNITARY SOMERSET

The dominant theme at Mendip has been the acceptance that all four district councils in Somerset County Council's geographical area will, along with the County Council in its present form, cease to exist within a year or so. Chris Inchley and I have prepared a separate distillation of the lengthy documents that have been recently published by the County and District Councils. We have attempted to predict what this might mean for our Town and Council in our Working Party Report.

“RE-WILDING”

I support having wild flowers and a more natural environment, but Mendip has rolled out a genuinely well-meant initiative to “re-wild” many green spaces in towns and settlements across the district. With other councillors, I gave my support but on the understanding that there would be public engagement before and during any change to how land and green space was to be managed. There was also to be a public information campaign to explain what was possible, and appropriate in different and very well defined areas.

During Covid-19 lockdown the MDC groundcare contractor, idVerde, was unable to maintain their normal grass cutting schedules, and when lockdown eased, people expected the grass that had previously been cut and maintained to be dealt with. Unfortunately, no public information and engagement campaign preceded what looked to residents as neglect and a cost-cutting exercise when MDC withdrew grass cutting to allow a more “natural” ground cover.

I'm not a big fan of the expression “re-wilding”. It's somewhat misleading since it can suggest reintroducing tigers and wolves back into Britain. What was being proposed when I gave my support was much more nuanced and never seen as a cost cutting exercise.

I went to a well attended meeting with residents in Tadley Acres and the District Councillor who is responsible for “Neighbourhood Services” at Mendip, Cllr Nick Cottle. Residents were able to say they wanted the areas round their homes to be looked after and the grass cut as they had paid their council tax for this service. There were some there who were very keen to support green initiatives like re-wilding, to encourage wildlife including pollinators to flourish.

Chris Inchley also had meetings with residents on the Ridgeway Estate and we have together managed to get the grass cut again to quell residents' concerns and even their anger. Mendip now plan to consult with local people to try to ascertain where it may be appropriate for wild flowers to grow, and to keep members of the public informed at all stages. This should of course have preceded the rollout of this green initiative.

Signage and explanation hopefully will accompany test areas during next season. Chris, Edric and I will be monitoring Mendip's introduction of the re-wilding initiative and will keep the Town Council informed.

CHANGES TO PLANNING LEGISLATION

The government in Westminster is likely to withdraw local control over many aspects of local planning and the result will likely be, if not a free for all for developers, a significant reduction in Mendip councillors being able to prevent unsuitable developments including housing estates springing up wherever developers choose. Clearly this may well produce waves of protest and I would hope that the Town Council can add its voice where it may be able to speak up for our residents if rapacious developers threaten our green spaces or build homes without heed of the need for infrastructure and services.

I'm happy to answer any questions on the above or any other matters or concern.

Garfield Kennedy
(MDC Shepton East)

Cllr Inchley and Cllr Hobbs spent an hour with Hayley Wilkins to discuss our displeasure at the way the grass cutting has been implemented this year. We have been given assurances that the Autumn grass cutting will commence this week and be completed by October.

There will be a review of the area left fallow before the Spring to make sure we are not in the same situation next Summer.

As you know we met with County Highways last week to discuss the way forward with the town centre resurfacing and we have been told the pot is big enough for a resin bonded surface over a tarmac base for the whole area. Highways hope to carry out the work in the Spring, ideally we would like it before Easter.

Edric Hobbs