

Chairman's Column 31st January 2019

We have just held the first meeting of the town council in 2019, and it really is a fresh start with new staff joining us and a set of new challenges. After two very successful years, Sam Winter leaves us this week to take up her new position as Town Clerk in Burnham-on-Sea and Highbridge. Sam's legacy includes procuring the Skate Park and BMX track, winning the Green Flag award for Collett Park and building good relationships with our partner councils. We wish her well in her new post.

Last year the council brought itself into line with the best practice of neighbouring towns by separating the rôles of Town Clerk and Financial Officer. It gives us a route to clearer professional financial planning for the long-term future of the town. Charlotte Starkie joins us in February from Chippenham Town Council as our Town Clerk, and accountant Louise Hughes has already joined us as the new Financial Officer.

The Town Council has set our budget for the next financial year. Matched to the Retail Price Index (RPI), our portion of the overall council tax will increase by just over 3% to allow an ongoing level of service provision. The budget includes money for town events and essential improvements for the town centre; also money to complete plans for the future of Collett Park, and increased support for key community groups, including Citizens Advice, the Tourist Information Centre and the Youth Club.

The YMCA will run our regular youth club and do outreach work in the community including online contact with young people. We have agreed a three-year funding formula with the YMCA based on a new Service Level Agreement designed to deliver high quality youth work. The town council is committed to achieve value for money and this agreement will monitor and measure the success of this important initiative.

The council has also agreed funding for Bowlsh School for an ambitious performing arts project that will reach many children. We recognise the importance of young people having access to the arts as a key part of their education and development, and I'm looking forward to seeing this project come to fruition. It complements our commitment to fund the Art Bank, and our support for a range of events and festivals that offer opportunities for young people.

Last but not least, the Town Council is championing Shepton's Neighbourhood Plan and we recognise this will demand officer time and resource, and thus have budgeted for a review of our staffing levels.

Chris Inchley, Chair, Shepton Mallet Town Council