

Chairman's Report

Last week local people who expressed an interest in producing a Neighbourhood Plan for Shepton met to form a steering committee to take the project forward. I am delighted that Matt Harrison has agreed to chair this group to make a success of this important initiative in the coming year.

The Neighbourhood Plan is an opportunity to influence development in our town over the next decade and beyond. After spending a couple of bitterly cold days drumming up interest at recent Sunday Markets in the Town Council's gazebo, it was a pleasure to know that our community warmly welcomes the broad aims of the plan. We still need wider representation on the steering group to better represent all aspects and interests in the town. In this regard, I hope that we can encourage young people and more women to come forward to participate in planning Shepton's future.

The steering group will meet again on Wednesday 20th March and I look forward to more members of our community joining the existing core group.

It's been nearly 13 years since the Town Council adopted a Community Plan for Shepton Mallet called "At a Crossroads". This had been developed by a group of local people calling themselves Shepton 21. Following the elections in May, it is important that the new town council review, update and incorporate the best elements of "At a Crossroads" into the successful development of the Neighbourhood Plan.

Over the decade since Shepton 21 produced their report, we have made progress with at least some of the issues raised. For instance, we have fewer empty shops; we have more events in the town and park, including the Sunday Markets; we are working to improve the surfacing of the town centre, and there is definitely a new found confidence in the community.

The Town Council has played its part. In the last four years, we have invested in a variety of festivals and events, and in our Sunday Markets that have attracted many more people to use and visit the town. Currently we are planning to rationalise and improve signage throughout Shepton, and make significant investments in the public realm where we identify a need.

Another important element of "At a Crossroads" was the aspiration to improve transport links. Regrettably, a series of cuts to bus services have made things worse, not better, in past years. However, it was encouraging to see the headline in last week's Journal, where Mendip Council are again considering the possibility of bringing a railway link back to the town. This was a key proposal in the Shepton 21 document.

Progress has been slow on another "At a Crossroads" recommendation. This identifies the need to improve and extend cycle tracks, and to complete the Strawberry Line footpath and cycleway in our area. The Town Council now has a fund to help link Shepton to the completed sections of the Strawberry Line in Somerset. This extensive cycle path and tourist trail will attract visitors to Shepton and benefit the town in the coming years.

We all want to see our town and surrounding area thrive, and many of the changes that have been recommended by Shepton 21 are happening more slowly than we may wish, but by revising a positive vision and plan for the future, and by working together, we will make Shepton better.

Chris Inchley, Chair, Shepton Mallet Town Council

