

Chairman's Report 15th August 2019

The Town Council held an extraordinary meeting to discuss the future of Shepton's library last Tuesday. It was heartening to see so many residents taking time to show their commitment and support for this important community facility.

Ever since Somerset County Council raised the spectre of either shutting the library, or transferring it to offices in the Mendip District Council SHAPE building, the town council has been actively campaigning for the service to stay in the centre of town. Without a JobCentre and with many users relying on the library for internet access, let alone children and adults having the benefit of a central drop-in point for study, reading and education, our library performs a vital function in our town.

The campaign to keep the library in the town centre has been a long one. With other councillors, I have produced surveys that showed there was overwhelming support for the library to remain in situ. We have encouraged residents to respond directly to the County Council, and worked in partnership with the revitalised Friends of Shepton Mallet Library (FoSL). The Town Council has paid for promotional material to drum up support for retaining the facility in its present location, and it has become abundantly clear that the vast majority of residents want the library to stay in the centre.

Over several months of research and number-crunching, former councillor Jon Hardy had built up a strong business case for the library to stay in its current location. He spent many hours setting up meetings with potential sponsors to bridge the gap in the finances that the County Council said it needed to cut from its budget. With the generous support of Michael Eavis and the owner of the library building, Kevin Newton, who has also offered a generous financial contribution, Jon made the case that if the town council contributed £14,000 per annum then the library could be saved. Last January, councillors agreed to make this commitment.

Building on Jon Hardy's impressive work, the Friends of Shepton Mallet Library presented their own business case to seek additional funding from the town council for the final submission to Somerset County Council. Lesley Rowan from FoSL outlined plans for the library to serve as a community hub, replacing existing bookshelves with moveable units that could allow space for community meetings and events.

Their proposal includes the formation of a community interest company to develop the facility. Scores of residents who attended the special town council meeting were delighted that councillors unanimously gave their support to increase the town's contribution to £15,000 per annum to save the library.

Since the town council was involved from the very start of the library campaign, we had already set aside the money to maintain a centrally located library service. The decisions taken last Tuesday will have no further impact on council tax bills.

The Town Council has delivered on its promise to do all it can to save our library. It's now time for Somerset to do the same.

On a less positive note, we have had a recent spate of fires in and around the town. Last week our Town Clerk, on her own initiative, extinguished a fire next to Collett Park on the Millennium Way footpath. The consequences of these fires can be extremely dangerous and could result in damage to property, or worse. If anyone sees anything suspicious, or has any information relating to these

incidents, please act now and report it to the police. We need to stop this dangerous and irresponsible behaviour before someone gets hurt.

Chris Inchley, Chair, Shepton Mallet Town Council