

Chairman's Report 17th October 2019

Last Wednesday I attended a meeting in Wedmore, arranged by the former Wells Constituency MP, Tessa Munt, to discuss how town and parish councils can work more effectively to help alleviate the social and environmental problems our communities are suffering from.

As the first tier of local government, town councils, like ours, are having to pick up the pieces when higher authorities cut services. This is as a direct result of decisions taken by central government and the principal local authorities, Mendip District and Somerset County Councils.

At the Wedmore meeting, the Chair of Martock Parish Council, Neil Bloomfield, explained how they felt they had to take a lead in social care provision. Despite Martock having a population less than half that of Shepton, they now employ several members of staff to support social care. By helping people with benefit claims, and by establishing a Job Club to assist residents to find jobs, they are filling some of the gaps left by the remote and cash-strapped levels of government. They are also improving people's chances of receiving the training they need to obtain better paid work.

Anna Francis, Frome Town Council's Resilience Officer, then spoke about the need to reduce carbon emissions by cutting back on energy use by improving insulation in homes and by setting up small local renewable energy companies. She recommended that all new housing developments should be equipped with solar panels that can also supply power back to the National Grid.

Anna showed how community share schemes can be used to buy land or acquire assets for the collective benefit of citizens in parishes and towns. She sighted the example of a plot of land that has been purchased by Frome Town Council to save it from development. This area is now protected for the future and is a resource for the enjoyment of local people and a space for wildlife supporting a wider ecosystem.

The county of Somerset has around 7% of its land covered in trees. This compares to a national average of 10%, although much of this is non-native conifer plantations. Only a fraction of our ancient broadleaf woodlands remains intact, and these are the only forests with the widest range of flora and fauna.

The government estimates that we will need to plant 1.5 billion trees across the whole of the UK to have any chance of the country becoming carbon neutral. This ambitious target is achievable if we return native forestation to much of our higher land including the Mendip Hills. This will also have the benefit of reducing the chances of catastrophic flooding on lower land like The Levels since trees dramatically slow the outflow of water into rivers and streams after periods of high rainfall.

Years ago Shepton Town Council initiated a far-sighted plan that turned the lower part of Gold Hill into a small community woodland. The trees have now grown and today Gold Hill provides a wonderful habitat for wildlife. The Town Council, supported by Shepton's Neighbourhood Plan, needs to embrace further schemes to increase native broadleaf tree plantations across our region.

We hope to develop an ambitious and long term policy that addresses how we find a balance between development, open space, forests, nature and farmland. How successful we will have been in managing and planting trees and enhancing our environment may well be how future generations judge us. We are open to learn and take advice from those towns and parishes that have developed innovative projects to improve their communities.

Our Council is already developing a plan for at least the next 4 years. We have now heard from many residents who have taken the time to reply to our recent short survey. I will report back on your suggestions and concerns in next week's Journal.

Chris Inchley, Chair, Shepton Mallet Town Council