

Chairman's Report 31st October 2019

Increasingly the higher authorities, including Somerset County Council, are cutting back on many of the services we thought we could rely on. This includes withdrawing support for youth services, reducing or even closing our library, failing to maintain roads and allowing public transport to decline. If we value these services, then only the Town Council is in a position to protect what we have in Shepton. Many of the growing pressures on the town council to serve our expanding population of currently around 11,000 people simply cannot be ignored.

Last February, we were fortunate to recruit Charlotte Starkie as our full time Town Clerk. Coming from Chippenham Town Council, Charlotte has brought a breadth of knowledge that has enabled us to regularise our policies and systems, and vastly improve our ability to react to fast changing circumstances.

One of the tasks that I asked Charlotte to investigate on her arrival was the level of staffing and what we needed as an appropriate officer structure. For me this was important because for many years we have asked part-time staff, with severely limited hours, to perform an unrealistic and ever increasing workload. It became crystal clear that without professional officers with sufficient hours to fulfil the demands on their time, we were incapable of supporting many of the services that people want us to deliver.

The last town council rightly made the decision to split the Town Clerk and Responsible Financial Officer (RFO) rôles. This falls in line with neighbouring settlements like Frome and Wells that fulfil their legal obligation to have appropriate internal checks and balances. Earlier this year, we struggled to recruit the right person as a part-time RFO. We have therefore made the strategic decision to expand the job to become a full time post. The job definition now includes a focus on community matters alongside the responsibility to control the council's finances.

This month I am glad to report that we have appointed Liz Evans to become our Assistant Town Clerk for Community and Finance. Liz brings a wealth of local government experience to our council, and, of course, has a background in finance. Alongside her RFO responsibilities, she is looking forward to working with many groups and societies to support events and increase the vitality of our community.

Paula Robertson has supported our Town Council through some difficult times, and will now take on the lead rôle on planning and many services including the ongoing management of Collett Park and our allotments. She becomes Assistant Town Clerk for Planning and Neighbourhood Services.

Becky Kingston-Wood came to Shepton Mallet Town Council in a temporary position during the time that our Administration Assistant, Abbie Riggs, was on maternity leave. Becky has excelled in this rôle and is now very much part of our team. We have now made Becky into a permanent member of staff and she will manage the civic elements of the council's work and give administrative support when needed. Abbie Riggs returns to work in the new year, and will take up her job again as our Admin Assistant to give other staff members the time to achieve positive improvements for Shepton Mallet.

But even with 2 full time officers and 3 part time members of staff, the Council is still under enormous pressure. We are now considering creating a new rôle for a Projects Officer to help deliver many of the key priorities of the new Town Council.

Our survey, that many residents responded to recently, points to what people want us to deliver. Everything from improvements to the High Street, to safer pathways and space for community activities is high on your wish list. The Council is working on our new Corporate Plan and we need high quality professional staff to be able to fulfil community aspirations.

Chris Inchley, Chair, Shepton Mallet Town Council

PICTURE CAPTION

Shepton Mallet Town Council staff from Left to Right: Becky Kingston-Wood, Liz Evans, Town Clerk Charlotte Starkie, Paula Robertson and Abbie Riggs (currently on maternity leave).