

Chair Report 21st November 2019

This weekend sees the return of our Sunday Market. This is after a break of a few months to allow time to rebrand and relaunch this important community event as “The Shepton Experience”. So far the Sunday Market has been managed by Mendip District Council, but similar to the “Frome Independent” monthly market, it will now be run by a non-profit community interest company. Under its new management, the Shepton Experience is being widely promoted under the banner: “More than just a Market”.

Jude Jackson, who leads the new company, has worked extremely hard to prepare for this Sunday’s re-launch. Leaflets have been posted to thousands of homes. Banners and branding have been designed to boost attendance at an event that offers many more traders and attractions. The new Sunday Market will allow Shepton people and visitors to enjoy a lovely, relaxing day in our town centre. It’s a wonderful opportunity to browse, buy, eat and enjoy great music and entertainment.

This Sunday’s inaugural Shepton Experience is Christmas themed so it’s taking place in plenty of time to buy original and imaginative gifts. The day will feature live music, street food, market stalls, children’s activities and, of course, Father Christmas will be making a flying visit. The sparkling range of festivities starts at 10am and finishes at 3pm. Make sure you’re there and bring your friends to show them how lucky we are to live in Shepton!

Your Town Council supports many local groups with a wide variety of grants. One of the organisations we support is Citizens Advice which is based on the SHAPE site next door to the town council’s office. Citizens Advice provide an essential service, often acting as a lifeline for significant numbers of Shepton residents.

We live in the best of times for some, and the worst of times for others, with many people struggling to make ends meet. It is vital that people have an independent source of advice and help. Shepton has a disproportionately high demand on the services that Citizens Advice offers. While Citizens Advice have the expertise and trained advisors on hand to deal with a wide range of subjects and areas, by far the greatest problems that people present with are issues related to debt and benefits.

The Town Council’s support has become particularly critical ever since Somerset County Council withdrew their grant to Citizens Advice. At a time when demand on food banks is at record levels, and poverty levels have increased after years of government austerity, the County Council’s cutbacks could have seen the closure of Citizens Advice in Shepton. This would have been catastrophic for many. It would have happened despite the depressing statistic that more people here feel compelled to seek help than in any of the other towns or city in Mendip.

Town and parish councils often have to make many difficult choices with many groups seeking support. We often have to prioritise those areas where the need is greatest. It should come as no surprise to learn that Citizens Advice is a service that the town council fully supports.

In another part of my work as a local counsellor, I lead the Mendip District Council Scrutiny Board Sub-Group on deprivation in our area. Currently we are looking at the root causes of deprivation and how we can find solutions that could alleviate the many problems suffered by people that have to go without.

Recently Citizens Advice gave evidence to our deprivation working party based on their direct experience of dealing with a wide variety of people’s problems. One of their core activities is to

conduct research and offer advice to councils and other groups, in the hope of influencing and changing policy to address some of the most pressing issues.

One of our working group's earliest findings is that councils themselves need to look at how they communicate with the public. Far too often the paperwork that is sent to those seeking help is complicated and off-putting, and could be much clearer and simpler. Giving our support to Citizens Advice is not just about helping individuals, it is also about influencing and changing the way that councils and government communicate and how they treat their customers.

Chris Inchley, Chair, Shepton Mallet Town Council