

Chairman's Report 5th December 2019

Last Tuesday the Town Council met to discuss the overall financial settlement for the next twelve months. This is a detailed process that is based on the budgetary recommendations that come from various committee meetings. This includes the Open Spaces, Collett Park Management, and Policy and Resources Committees. This year we have also taken on board the views of a broad cross-section of people from the town. By issuing a widely distributed questionnaire, that asked what the town's priorities should be, we have been able to gauge what many want us to deliver as we plan for the future.

In the recent past, the Town Council had lagged behind other settlements in Somerset in not having a strategic plan or the resources to deliver some of the services that many people now expect us to provide. Over the coming weeks we will be prioritising work on the Town Council's Corporate Plan, creating a blueprint for the next four years.

Today, we are being asked to do much more and take on greater responsibilities following the severe cuts in funding for local government by Westminster, and the very poor state of the finances at Somerset County Council. Meanwhile at Mendip District Council, they are trying to generate more income through investments in commercial property, or be forced into making severe cuts to services.

Today, if the Town Council is not prepared to invest in our town, then no-one else will. Here in Shepton, we have no other income other than the annual precept. This is the fraction of council tax that is spent only in Shepton. The rest of the annual bill goes to pay for Somerset County Council and Social Care, Mendip District Council, flood defences, the Police and Fire Service.

We can either let the town stagnate and decline, or if we believe in Shepton, plan and prepare for a positive future. The Town Council has already made a series of decisions that will allow us to continue to protect vital services that will give Shepton the chance to grow and flourish.

We have a wonderful park with paths that need attention and ageing facilities that need investment. We now need to deliver on the action plan and feasibility study we commissioned and took to the public last year.

Recently the people of Shepton demanded that we protect and save our library and keep it in the centre of the town. This was after Somerset County Council wanted to make significant cost cuts. The Town Council now also funds the Youth Club and has significantly increased its support for Citizens Advice after these services were drastically reduced by the County Council.

As I have reported before, the Town Council are also being asked to finance a significant part of the cost of upgrading the surfacing of the Market Place. The County Council Highways Department own the pavement and road surfaces yet they are so cash-strapped that they are unwilling to do anything if we don't make a contribution of at least £100,000. It is with great reluctance that the Town Council is having to use its capital budget to make this project happen.

We have a wonderful new skatepark but nothing lasts forever so the town council is now setting aside a rolling fund to support its upkeep and eventually upgrade this facility when it needs to be replaced. Historically the County and District Councils paid for signage in town, and Mendip funded floral displays which we now provide. We wish to modernise all the confusing clutter of out of date signs around the town centre, yet the sad reality is that the district council, along with the county council, has not got the money since they continue to suffer severe central government cuts.

The demands on the Town Council's office staff has had to grow to manage these additional challenges. We are still understaffed and will be appointing a Projects Officer to increase our ability to deliver a high quality professional service.

The budget that we set last Tuesday offers the town the chance to deliver on its priorities. The sad truth is other councils are unable to help us. If we wish to maintain the culture and quality of life and make Shepton even better, then we have little choice but to increase the town precept. We have settled on a £3 a month rise for a Band D property. We know this is never to be welcomed. However, unlike all the other parts of your council tax bill that will show increases, we will be protecting valued and vital services that have been cut or curtailed by the other authorities.

Chris Inchley, Chair, Shepton Mallet Town Council