

Chairman's Report 19th December 2019

For the vast majority of readers, Christmas is the most wonderful time of the year. It's the excitement of gatherings of family and friends, the opening of presents, trying to avoid eating too much Christmas pudding, watching the Queen on Christmas Day and feeling grateful that we have people who care for us. This week, the Shambles Carnival Club has already brought Father Christmas to Shepton, and our Labrador puppy, Herbie, has given him his Christmas list. I'm pretty certain that he'll get everything he wants!

At this time of year it is right that we should think of those who are less fortunate. If you know of older or vulnerable people, please try to visit them over the festive period. Just having a chat and checking that they are okay can make a big difference to people living alone.

There are people in our community who cannot afford the luxuries that we take for granted, and many may need the support of food banks. I think it's a national disgrace that people should require free food just to survive, and can't afford vital necessities that should be a right in a civilised society.

Like others in Shepton, my partner Sarah and I have donated staple food items during the year. But it's not only food that people struggle to buy. Tesco are appealing for people to donate sanitary products for women who simply haven't got the money to purchase these essentials.

Organisations like the Salvation Army and the Trussell Trust do what they can to help the most destitute. I find it shameful that these groups even need to exist, but very sadly, I expect their services will be needed more in the coming year.

Again, at this holiday time, we should remember our remarkable public servants in the Fire Service and the Police, our ambulance paramedics and the doctors and nurses who will be working throughout Christmas and New Year. These professionals are there for us when we are at our most vulnerable 365 days a year. They have families too, so at Christmas, let's give them special thanks for their services.

I was very pleased to have conducted the Tourist Information Christmas draw, this raised much needed funds for the centre, well done to all those who entered and those who won prizes, helping a much respected local organisation.

We have an amazing Christmassy weekend coming up with the Lantern Festival this Saturday. The parade of amazing paper, willow and string creations starts in Collett Park with folk gathering there from 5pm. The last "Shepton Experience" market of the decade follows on Sunday from 10am to 3pm. It may be your final opportunity to find presents for your loved ones before Christmas Day.

This week many residents, including town councillors, attended a presentation at St Peters and St Pauls Church. They had come to find out about ambitious plans to alter the interior of the magnificent Grade 1 listed building to make it more accessible and therefore better able to serve the community. The audience were treated to the first screening of a 9 minute animated "walk-through" film to show what the proposed alterations will look like.

Existing fixed pews will be replaced by moveable seating to allow the building to be used for a wider range of activities. Under-floor heating will raise the height of the floor to its original level and make the interior completely flat. A kitchen and serving area and restrooms are proposed, with easy access for the elderly and disabled. It is hoped that all the money will be raised in time to complete the project within two years in a scheme that will feed into the ongoing regeneration of Shepton.

Last week was a momentous turning point for our country with the certainty that we will now soon leave the European Union. The General Election delivered an emphatic victory for the Conservative Party that will allow them to pursue their policies as they see fit. It is appropriate that I should congratulate Mr Heapey on his re-election as our MP and commiserate with those candidates who were not successful.

As your Town Council, we will remain focussed on doing what's best for our community. We hope that the sweeping reductions in public services throughout the last decade including cuts to public transport, the police, the NHS, youth services, libraries and care for the elderly can now be re-appraised and reversed.

Finally, I would like to wish all residents of Shepton Mallet a Merry Christmas and a peaceful and happy holiday.

Chris Inchley, Chair, Shepton Mallet Town Council