

Chairman's Report 9th January 2019

As we return to a more normal life after the Christmas and New Year break we can look forward to some pressing challenges and changes, including some that give grave cause for concern. The troubles brewing in the Middle East make for a frightening start to the new decade. This month our hearts go out to the many Australians who have seen their homes and livelihoods ravished by out of control fires. Surely few can now doubt that we face a crisis in our climate.

While the scale of these problems may seem distant, we as individuals and our community cannot escape the consequences that stem from these global issues. How our government reacts to these and many other challenges that are closer to home, including Brexit and the ongoing problems in providing adequate social care and supporting the NHS, will be critical in the year ahead.

Despite all the uncertainty that the immediate future holds, the Town Council will continue to support initiatives that help develop our local economy. If we have a positive and thriving town, we can be more effective in managing the changes and challenges that lie ahead for all of us.

Locally, your Town Council has been developing a detailed business plan for the next four years. High up the list of priorities is our wish to develop the local economy.

Shepton is a small, but growing, market town, and despite losing many manufacturing jobs over the past decades, today we have a local economy that has remained surprisingly resilient and strong. The town council puts a lot of effort into supporting town centre businesses and services. We seek to find ways to encourage people to visit Shepton to boost footfall. We have invested in our markets, provided the recent Christmas lights, pay for floral displays and support high-quality events to make the town a vibrant place to live in and visit.

Shepton already has a healthy mix of service and manufacturing jobs. Many of us can attest to the exceptional work of local trades-people. This could be your plumber, electrician or mechanic: people that most of us use on a regular basis. Nearly all are small businesses in their own right that offer good value and friendly and reliable service. But we still need to plan for a future that has a wider range of local jobs that pay well and can expand the local economy.

We should try to ensure that there is good quality careers advice available for all ages to allow individuals to achieve their full potential. This includes encouraging people to develop their own businesses with the potential to create wealth and provide opportunity within Shepton and the wider area.

The town council also believes in offering high-quality services in the town centre. This is why we have allocated £15,000 per annum to support Shepton Mallet Library after it was again under threat of removal or closure. The Library will now evolve into a community hub, with a greater rôle to play in the cultural and social life of our town and hinterland.

Shepton has bucked the national trend of job losses and shop closures. Our local independent shopkeepers have fought hard to offer a choice of merchandise. Landlords have spent money cleaning and repairing shopfronts and the town council is committed to a scheme to resurface the central pedestrian area. We are also setting money aside for footpaths and cycle routes, and to rationalise the current confusing mess of signage in town. We know there is still a long to go, but I hope we can make 2020 the best year ever in Shepton, despite all of the many local, national and global challenges.

Chris Inchley, Chair, Shepton Mallet Town Council