

Chairman's Report 16th January 2020

Like many others in Shepton, my partner and I have been struggling with a pretty unpleasant virus that has swept through the town. Our local General Practitioners have been extremely busy dealing with people feeling unwell after Christmas. It was not the best way to start a new year!

At the weekend we went for a walk from Morrison's in Wells to Dulcote on the old Strawberry Line railway. This is an excellent, safe, multi-user path and the perfect place for our Labrador pup, Herbie, to stretch his legs, and also for Sarah and I to get some fresh air after our debilitating illness.

Of course the Strawberry Line is far from complete. It remains a key aim of the Town Council that Shepton should eventually have a continuous off-road route to Wells, and beyond to Cheddar. There are many benefits to providing safe, healthy alternatives to connecting our settlements without reliance on cars.

To support this longer term aim, the town council has been setting aside money each year, earmarked for footpaths and cycle routes in and around Shepton. With my fellow District Councillors, we are demanding that Mendip also invest in this project, making the completion of the Strawberry Line one of their highest priorities.

But we also need high quality, reliable public transport. Yet past support by Somerset County Council for even the current bare minimum of bus services has been successively whittled away. This has left many people in our rural communities isolated, unable to connect with hospitals, doctors' surgeries and Job Centres, or just to meet up with friends.

The national charity, the Campaign for Better Transport, has shown how the loss of public transport contributes to a crisis in loneliness, especially in rural areas. If communities have affordable transport it improves quality of life, contributes to the rural economy and protects the environment.

The County Council is struggling to fund many of services they used to provide, and cuts in support of bus routes is just one of many areas where service provision has been reduced or even abandoned.

In Shepton we have seen the consequences of this, with the town council picking up the tab for youth services, now having to contribute to the cost of maintaining our library, as well as funding repairs to the bridge at Eden Grove, and resurfacing the town centre pedestrian area. This serial relinquishing of responsibilities by the County Council, that we thought we were already paying this higher authority to deliver, has put pressure on Shepton's tax-payers.

As a community, we can either allow the town to suffer from cut after cut, or find ways to protect essential services. Compared to the county council, the tax base of town and parish councils is minimal. We feel we have been given a choice of "sink or swim". We have collectively decided that we will not turn our backs on services that our community needs.

With the County Council in crisis, the spectre of a Unitary Council has again risen its head this week. Somerset has three levels of local government: County, District and Parish (including the towns and the City of Wells). The County Council now wants to abolish all the mid-tier district councils, including Mendip, to form a super council with the aim of making savings. Unsurprisingly the four district councils in Somerset do not seem very supportive, and with some good reason.

All of the Somerset district councils have been more effective in the control of their finances than the Taunton-based County Council. The district councils wish to maintain their middle level of

local government. By working more closely together, they think this would be a better way to serve residents, than put all eggs into the basket in Taunton.

At the level of parish and town councils, we also have concerns. Increasingly we are being forced to take on new tasks and deliver services that were once the sole responsibility of both of the upper levels of local government. Yet there has been no devolution of the necessary finances to deliver road surfacing, floral displays, youth services and all the rest. If the District Councils are abolished, then we as the Town Council will demand our just share of the monies required to take on the range of services that our community must have to stay safe, healthy and vibrant.

On a happier note, the 10th anniversary of the Shepton Lantern Festival will now be held on Saturday 1st February. This was after the event was postponed due to heavy rain just before Christmas. Then just two weeks later in February, the Shepton Snowdrop Festival bursts forth again. The Town Council is delighted to give financial support to both of these magical annual celebrations that are run by teams of hard working and dedicated volunteers.

Chris Inchley, Chair, Shepton Mallet Town Council