

Chairman's Report 30th January 2020

Shepton Mallet is fortunate to be served by committed and professional emergency services staff. They have to deal with any number of situations at a moment's notice. Alerted by parkrun personnel, they responded promptly and appropriately to the very sad incident in Collett Park last Saturday. Everyone from the police, ambulance and fire services assisted by parkrun volunteers did their very best in difficult circumstances. We should thank them all for their efforts.

The Town Council also recognises the need to have well trained officers to give high quality service to Shepton's residents. They also provide support for councillors and assist in the better functioning of our parish level of local government. I am pleased to report that two members of our staff have completed the "Introduction to Local Council Administration" course. Other members of the team are studying for relevant qualifications and this bodes well for the future.

At the Council meeting last Tuesday, we established a Climate Change Group that will be led by Councillor Tristan Faith. This working party will report back on how our community can best respond to the now widely accepted climate emergency.

At the higher levels of local government in Somerset, the District and County Councils have already declared a climate emergency. Tristan and his group will need to work closely with them to establish a way forward. On 15th February a drop-in session run by the Somerset Climate Action Network will be held for all local residents in the Mendip Council Chamber. Please come along to be informed, ask questions and give your opinion, and become involved in reducing our impact on our environment.

One of the most controversial parts of being a councillor is our rôle in determining planning decisions. At the level of town and parish councils we are asked to consider and comment on planning applications. We can make recommendations to the District Council but have no power to decide on planning outcomes. Mendip councillors on the Planning Board, or even just the Chair and Deputy Chair of Planning, have the right to recommend acceptance or refusal for all developments presented to their committee.

On the face of it, local district councillors decide on planning applications, but often the rules that the Planning Board have to work to are in conflict with community wishes and local needs. Planning law and advice to councillors comes from Central Government through the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). This sets out the Government's planning policies for England and how these should be applied.

It means that at times councillors are forced into making unpopular decisions on the recommendation of council officers. Rejecting applications against legal advice can lead to a process called "Judicial Review" with the risk that substantial costs will be incurred by councils, and ultimately paid for by local taxpayers. It's hardly a surprise that to many, it can appear that we, at the local level, are powerless to stop or influence some of the more contentious developments.

We will soon have plans submitted for the development on the Mid-Somerset Show-field site next to Cannards Grave Road. Outline planning for up to 600 new houses has already been agreed by the Mendip Planning Board. No-one denies that more homes are needed, but too often, developers want to maximise profits, rather than provide the range of dwellings that best match local need. For example, this can result in too few bungalows for older residents being built or inadequate social housing provision.

The NPPF provides a framework within which locally-prepared plans for housing and other developments can be produced. It means that Mendip District Council can influence the NPPF policy for our area to establish the mix of homes that get approval through a “Local Plan”. In other words, a Local Plan becomes the development document that planning applications should be judged by.

Residents will have until the beginning of March to give their views on the Local Plan for Mendip. This can be found on the council’s website (<https://www.mendip.gov.uk/localplanexamination>) or by calling into the council offices on the SHAPE site on Cannards Grave Road.

Our ever popular Snowdrop Festival is fast approaching. On the weekend of the 15th-16th February we again celebrate the life’s work of local horticulturalist John Allen. There are many events to enjoy and volunteering opportunities for residents. Full details are on the Festival website: <https://www.sheptonssnowdropfestival.org.uk/whats-on-2020.html>.

Finally don’t forget that the delayed Lantern Festival and Parade will take place this Saturday starting at 6pm in Collett Park. I hope to see you all there!

Chris Inchley, Chair, Shepton Mallet Town Council