

Chairman's Report 13th February 2020

What a wild weekend the tropical storm Clara gave us! Many sporting events had to be cancelled, and yet again floods inundated communities in England. Thank goodness, Shepton got off relatively lightly this time. We did have a minor incident in Garston Street when a branch fell on power lines causing quite a spectacular light show. Western Power responded with the help of our local fire service, and the issue was dealt with speedily.

Extremes in our weather caused by the warming of the planet and our oceans, is a challenge we all face wherever we are in the world. If we don't act decisively and with urgency we will be judged by future generations as selfish and recklessly irresponsible.

Just because we weren't badly affected by the storms this time around, we should allow no room for complacency. We are experiencing more frequent extreme weather events, with an associated marked increase in danger to life and damage to property.

At the most recent meeting of the Mendip District Council Cabinet, 14 year old Grace Maddrell from Frome spoke with passion in public session to implore councillors to take action on climate change. Grace told us that the time for talking was over and we needed to act immediately to drastically reduce our carbon output to give future generations a chance to survive.

Mendip District Council has already declared a climate emergency and this Town Council has formed a working party to advise on our local response to the major climate challenges confronting us. The new Liberal Democrat and Independent administration at Mendip has appointed a full time Climate Change and Resilience Officer and created a new Portfolio Holder for Strategic Policy and Climate Change. One of their first steps has been to produce a wide-ranging report that identifies the current carbon footprint of every main settlement in our area. This detailed document reveals that household heating and power, together with transport account for over half of all the carbon produced locally.

The report highlights that a third of all carbon in our region comes from vehicles. It points out that less than 1% of our cars are ultra-low energy electric. However, without sufficient car charging points any increase in that number will be slow to materialise. Encouraging the rolling out of electric charging points throughout the district becomes a priority if we are to have less carbon emissions from personal travel.

Equally, government and councils are going to have to rethink the level of commitment they give to public transport. Having regular high quality buses and trains in rural areas is the main way to get us out of our addiction to the motor car. It is surely unacceptable in rural areas not to have a well regulated and reliable public transport network like London enjoys.

Other transport solutions that could deliver a safer, healthier, sustainable rural environment here include the Strawberry Line. The old abandoned railway line has the potential to provide a continuous safe pedestrian, cycle and tourist route to link Shepton and Wells, and stretch beyond to Yatton. The Strawberry Line offers us an important environmental and sustainable transport solution to reduce car journeys.

Recently I met the campaigning group for the Strawberry Line who want to see the cycle path complete across Somerset. Along with the Leader of Mendip Council, Ros Wyke, we discussed the blockages that are currently preventing a safe off-road connection between Shepton and Dulcote, and Shepton and the Royal Bath and West.

A current planning application for West Shepton wants to remove a section of the existing Strawberry Line embankment between the Sidings and the bridge at Kent to build 9 houses. This would take away any chance of a safe off-road multi-user path on that section. All of this important pedestrian and cycle way needs to be prioritised and protected. It will be unforgivable if we miss this opportunity to complete it.

Mendip's Climate Report reveals that only a tiny fraction of our homes meet the top levels of energy efficiency. We still throw far too much rubbish into our bins, and this includes a staggering amount of food waste that is not being recycled.

Just this week, Somerset Waste Partnership launched its campaign to shrink the "waste line" of the food we discard. This summer will see the rollout of an improved scheme to recycle plastic waste. New recycling trucks will be used that will separate more of our rubbish into its components. Improving waste food recycling will reduce what goes to landfill so all food waste can be used to produce methane to generate electricity.

Mendip District Council are staging a series of Climate Emergency Workshops. The next will be held at the Council Chamber on the SHAPE site next to Cannards Grave Road between 10am and 4pm on Saturday 14th February. It's a chance for everyone to find out about what we all can do to tackle the climate emergency. The good news is, with the right knowledge and help, we can make changes to how we live to lower our own and the district's carbon emissions.

Please don't forget the magical Snowdrop Festival and the Shepton Experience Sunday Market that take place this weekend. Hopefully Hurricane Clara will all be a distant memory by then.

Chris Inchley, Chair, Shepton Mallet District Council