

Chairman's Report 19 March 2020

In recent weeks and days, we have seen the coronavirus reap havoc on financial markets and generate fear throughout the UK. At the time of writing, there are no reported cases of Covid-19 locally, and we hope this continues for some time. However, it behoves every one of us to take responsibility to try to prevent the spread of this infection, especially to vulnerable groups including older residents and all who are at higher risk.

It's important that we follow scientific experts' advice, and not listen to uninformed speculation on social media platforms. At the simplest level it means regularly washing our hands for 20 seconds in warm water. If we sneeze, we should use a tissue and then dispose of it in the bin, and if we don't have a tissue, we are advised to sneeze into our sleeve.

Locally we have seen food shop shelves stripped through panic-buying of household essentials. Retail staff have been run ragged keeping food staples available in their stores. They are baffled by people's obsession with buying up all the toilet rolls that people can lay their hands on. All the major retailers are telling us that they will continue to keep shops supplied if people behave responsibly and buy only what they need. If panic sets in, then the more vulnerable in our communities will be the first to suffer.

It's not all bad news though. For a start, it is heartening to see people within Shepton making contact with neighbours they think may be more at risk. Volunteers have already been making offers of help should the outbreak of coronavirus take hold. The Town Council is also concerned that we support individuals and groups that are statistically at greater risk. This includes many older residents and everyone in our community with underlying health issues.

Councillors and officers in the Town Council have a particular focus on all who decide to self-isolate, especially those without close family or friends to ensure they remain safe. For anyone who has already decided to self-isolate, or who decides to do this in future, we want to encourage at least one neighbour or volunteer to check up on them regularly, and do whatever is necessary to support them.

In conjunction with the Journal, we have included a short form to complete and cut out, and then drop into a neighbour who you think may be at risk, or anyone who may value your support and assistance. It's a mark of a caring community that we make sure no-one is alone and forgotten, especially through these difficult times.

The Town Council are making contingencies that will allow us to continue to function. We can anticipate that our emergency services will be stretched to the limit. Regrettably this is likely to be especially true with our current severe shortages of doctors and nurses after 10 years of public sector underfunding.

We can predict that our health services will come under massive pressure, but I know, within the resources they still have, they will do their very best for our communities. Under these exceptional circumstances, it is vital that Shepton Community Hospital continues to offer its existing range of local medical services.

Since many experts suggest that the spread of the virus is likely to peak in 10 to 14 weeks, we have taken the decision to cancel Collett Festival in June. While we know this will be very disappointing, especially for many children, we simply can't put the public at risk. On a more positive note, we will ensure next year's Collett Festival will be bigger and better than ever and we have already started to make early arrangements with artistes, sponsors and traders for 2021.

I attended the Shepton Chamber of Commerce's first breakfast meeting in Peppers Restaurant last Thursday with Councillor Garfield Kennedy. It was a great success with an exceptionally wide range of businesses and entrepreneurs in attendance and a plan to hold similar events in future. With all the uncertainties that we face with the Covid-19 virus, we need to give whatever support we can to local businesses to ensure they survive and even thrive through the challenging times ahead.

Last week the first meeting of the Friends of Collett Park was also held. The Town Council already holds the only Green Flag Award in the Mendips and our aim is to get the park ready to serve our community for the next 100 years. The meeting was well attended and there was a desire expressed to meet again to discuss how the group could make the park even better. In the coming years Collett Park will see some exciting projects, and I am looking forward to working with the Friends group. I know they will welcome anyone who loves and cares for our green spaces to join them.

Chris Inchley, Chair, Shepton Mallet Town Council