

Chairman's Report 2nd April 2020

Last Thursday evening, in every street in Shepton, you could hear clapping, cheering and the banging of pots and pans. This was all part of the countrywide initiative to express our profound sense of gratitude and show support for the staff in the NHS and caring professions. I felt it was also a public gesture of thanks to all who work in the many essential services that keep our society functioning.

As we have been forcibly reminded, the list of vital people across many industries and organisations is very extensive. It includes all in the retail food chain from farmyard and warehouse to the supermarket check-out, from refuse collecting and recycling staff to emergency services personnel, and many many more. It seems to have taken the pandemic for us to rediscover that there is such a thing as "society".

Shepton residents have responded well to the government's advice to stay at home. I am particularly proud of the way that our community has joined together to support neighbours and friends, especially those who are more at risk and isolated. It remains important that all of us reach out to our neighbours who we may have concerns about.

It's still the case that too many older and vulnerable residents are going out to shop for themselves. Well over 100 local volunteers have already offered to help anyone at risk to do their shopping, collect prescriptions, post mail etc. I have been in contact with the Shepton Mallet Coronavirus volunteer group to see how the town council can complement and assist their efforts in supporting our community.

Ensuring that people in all our towns, villages and rural communities get the support they need in the days, weeks and months ahead is vital. We are working with Mendip District Council on the challenge of co-ordinating the efforts at all levels of government from Westminster right down to the volunteers at street level.

We have recognised that it is important to provide reliable sources of advice and signposting to the correct professional services that already exist or have been set up specially for this emergency. This can be for everything from medical emergencies to dealing with domestic violence and abuse, or arranging for neighbours and volunteers to collect food and medical supplies or take a dog for a walk.

Working with government, Somerset County Council and Mendip District Council, have identified many of those who are at higher levels of risk of getting ill or being hospitalised. Using the food services company, Brakes, deliveries of food and essentials are being arranged to many of these vulnerable people.

The Town Council is examining other ways of offering support to our residents. We now have our freephone line 0800 061 4089 manned 7 days a week from 8am to 10pm to direct people to the best places to get help and advice. Banners with the freephone number and email contact are up outside the main food stores and other locations reminding everyone to "Stay at Home, Protect the NHS, Save Lives".

Within the next few days we will be launching a dedicated Coronavirus website for Shepton and the surrounding area that will give regular updated information on key local and national contacts and sources of help and advice.

Our local food retailers are doing all they can to keep essential items on their shelves. However it is extremely disappointing to see evidence on social media that some people have been throwing away bin-loads of food. Needless panic buying has resulted in some of our older and more vulnerable neighbours being unable to purchase basic necessities. One can only hope that this madness will now stop. As I have previously stated, if people shop responsibly then our food retailers are more than capable of maintaining supplies.

Together we can beat this virus. If we follow the advice of the scientists and epidemiologists we can save many lives. The more we listen to the real experts and ignore the babble of often misleading advice on the Internet, the sooner we can slow down the spread of Covid-19.

There is one silver lining in all this: Our roads have become so quiet that once again we can hear the singing and chirping of nesting birds.

Chris Inchley, Chair, Shepton Mallet Town Council