

Chairman's Report 16th April 2020

In the words of Geoffrey Chaucer, "There is an end to everything, to good things as well." This will be my last report as the Town Council will be voting today to appoint a new Chair.

It's normal that councillors reappoint or vote to replace the Chair of the Town Council in May each year. However I have decided to stand down a little earlier since I believe it is time for new leadership before we may have to face the worst of the coronavirus pandemic.

I believe this is sensible to avoid a change in council leadership at a time when there may be the greatest need in our community. The government has recently changed the law to permit us to hold meetings via video and audio conferencing. It means that the council can appoint a new chairperson today. It will give whoever takes over the opportunity to take on their new responsibilities to be ready to serve Shepton through a period of great uncertainty.

It has been a privilege to serve as chairman during the last two years. It's been a time when we have appointed a new administrative team, lead by Town Clerk, Charlotte Starkie. One of the historic criticisms of our Town Council was that it didn't appear to be doing enough for Shepton. This was in great part due to a lack of sufficient money and staff to do anything other than barely cover the basics. The Shepton Mallet community was rightly demanding more from its Council.

Working with Charlotte, we have managed to professionalize the workings of the council with much improved risk management and a higher level of financial scrutiny. Every policy is now rigorously assessed, giving taxpayers much greater assurance that all projects and initiatives are judged against short and long term risk and whether they are value for money.

We have recently conducted a detailed review of our staffing and we have recruited a project officer to increase our capacity to deliver tangible and long term benefits for our citizens. This new member of staff will manage many of the key initiatives contained in our Town Plan.

It's the first time that Shepton has had a Town Plan. During the last year we reached out to the community to get your feedback on the need to develop strategies to bring real lasting benefit to the town. Your responses have been enormously helpful and will be used to shape and guide our priorities for the future.

The work of the Project Manager will become even more important in a post-coronavirus world as we rebuild and deal with the aftermath of this grim and dark period in our history.

One of the great joys of being Chair of the council has been seeing the wonderful work of the many volunteers in our community groups. Whenever I can, in this column, I have tried to name the people who've made a real contribution to the vitality of the town. There are so many individuals who work tirelessly, often without recognition, and that's why we have decided to launch an annual awards initiative when this terrible disease subsides to say thanks from all of us.

Being a town councillor is a voluntary position, with no financial reward and, from time to time, we receive a deal of criticism! Yet most of my colleagues work hard, putting in many hours because they want to see Shepton improve. Their time and commitment rarely gets the appreciation it deserves. I want to thank them for their service and their support during the work we have done and the progress we have made during the past two years. I will of course continue to serve as a councillor and give support to my successor.

In the last month, we have seen how people have mobilised to help others. 150 volunteers have joined Shepton Mallet's Coronavirus Support group to help vulnerable people cope and stay safe during the lockdown. Their neighbourly behaviour is a great credit to all involved. The town council has responded to the coronavirus emergency by purchasing leaflets for this support group and has underwritten their expenses.

The pandemic and lockdown are making life difficult for every one of us, whether it be worries about money, loved ones, loneliness or medical or mental health problems. The Town Council recognises that we have an important role to play in ensuring no-one slips through the net during the pandemic and what follows. We have launched the Shepton Mallet Coronavirus Network website: **www.helpshepton.info** to direct people to government and medical sources of help and signpost the wide range of specialist organisations and dedicated charities where support is available. We are also manning our coronavirus freephone helpline **0800 061 4089** every day from 8am to 10pm.

I must thank the vast majority of Shepton residents who have responded well to the government's advice to maintain social distancing and stay at home. We must continue to do this for the foreseeable future, not just to save ourselves, but to support NHS and care home staff, workers in the food chain, recycling crews, bus drivers, post office workers and all the many people, often in poorly paid jobs, who are risking their health and lives throughout this emergency.

When Corvid-19 leaves us, I hope my successor can take Shepton forward to become an even better place to live.

Chris Inchley, Chair, Shepton Mallet Town Council