

26 May 2020

Report of the Town Council for the year 2019/20

Last year, this newly-elected Town Council set the target of opening Council business up to far greater community participation...

- We have so far held two well-attended café-style “*Town Matters*” Council Meetings, in September and November. We are now reviewing our Committee structures with view to streamlining, and making our activities even more accessible.
- I am delighted that we have such a strong line-up of Community Groups represented this evening to demonstrate Bruton’s energetic life. One of the most powerful things a Town Council can do with your Precept is providing grants to catalyse community inspiration.

The 2019/20 year just completed was can be mentally and physically distanced into before and after Coronavirus (or Covid-19) became a word of everyday usage.

[Before Coronavirus](#)

Following the declaration of a Climate Emergency by the previous Council, on 26 March last year, our Climate & Ecological Emergency Working Group delivered the first stage of our commitment by presenting the draft *Carbon Neutral Bruton by 2030 plan* to our September “*Town Matters*” Meeting, which the Council adopted at October Full Council.

I would like to thank and commend Jane Durney for leading this work, on behalf of what became the new One Planet Bruton CIC, and thank all of the Members of the Bruton Community and Councillors who have been involved. There is much ongoing work with fellow Towns & Parishes, and the County and District Councils. Councillor James Hood was appointed our SSDC Environment Champion in January.

We have moved two major Land & Property projects forward, with the completion of...

1. A 15-year Lease extension on the Station Road Car Park from Godminster Farms, which will enable us to modernise this site;
2. A 99-year Lease on Abbey Ponds from King's School, which will enable us to add a safe year-round path between the Town Centre and Hauser & Wirth Gallery, and to work with Bruton Conservation Trust to begin restoring the ponds to something approaching their former glory. This will also include planting of a new boundary hedge of native species. OPB led a work party to do similar at our Cuckoo Hill Cemetery & Allotments in March.

Both of these Leases are thanks to the hard and diligent work of our new Town Clerk, Stephen Hill, who has just this month received notification of his CiLCA Clerk's qualification. This, along with having a fully elected set of Councillors, enabled your Town Council to declare a "*General Power of Competence*" in the Annual Town Council Meeting just before this one. The General Power of Competence enables the Town Council to do anything that is not prohibited for any individual under the Law, whereas previously it has been restricted only to powers explicitly granted to Parish & Town Councils.

I was incredibly proud of the way that the Bruton community pulled together on two separate issues in October...

Firstly, in making the case to Somerset District Council (SSDC) that the pedestrian access proposals for a development along Brewham Road could be "*deadly*". A team of Town Councillors Members of the Community succeeded in convincing SSDC's Area East Committee, in October, of reasons for Refusal under Planning Law – but we then sadly failed November's Regulation Committee hurdle, in the face of SSDC's fear of the risks of a successful Appeal awarding costs against our District Council, under the National Planning Policy Framework's "*presumption in favour of development*".

Secondly, with the Town again rallying round in unified support for Sexey's School, opposing the Regional Schools Commissioner (RSC)'s plans to force a transfer to the Sherborne Area Schools Multi-Academy Trust (MAT). An Emergency Town Council Meeting on Wednesday 16 October led to the Town Council writing to the Regional Schools Commissioner, and David Warburton MP, which helped the Town's only state secondary school win sufficient time to join a MAT of its choosing. This will hopefully be achieved soon, with the transfer to Sexey's preference: Quantock Educational Trust.

Since March

Everything changed in mid-March. On Wednesday 11th, I was visiting the Shepton Men's Shed with Sue Crisfield, the SPARK Somerset Social Prescribing Co-ordinator, together with a couple of interested Bruton men. By the Friday, as extent of the coming pandemic, and its impact on our daily lives, became clearer, I was in the Community Office digging out the Emergency Plan and "*Bruton Buddies*" volunteer scheme developed in response to 2010's big freeze.

We started working with Community Groups, and the Health Coaches at Bruton Surgery, to develop a local Bruton Coronavirus Response.

- A regularly updated list of **Coronavirus (COVID-19) local resources**, including health contacts, latest opening hours of shops, contact details of those delivering food and other supplies to those in self-quarantine. This list has been assembled, and is maintained by, **One Planet Bruton**.
- A **Coronavirus Local Resource line** to support people without internet access, or who know anyone who they think needs help.
- A volunteer-led **Food Drop** for people in Bruton who have lost their jobs, or otherwise been severely affected financially as a direct result of Coronavirus.
- **Neighbours' Support Pods** to provide a resilient means of mutual aid, covering the nearest 20-or so homes, building upon Bruton's strong community spirit. These Support 'Pods' complement local services, and are co-ordinated by volunteers, following One Planet principles.
- "**Phone Buddies**" telephone support for those who are feeling isolated, lonely or worried; organised by volunteers from St Mary's Church, Bruton.
- Many more than 100 Brutonians have responded to our **Call for Volunteers** to date, for all of the above local initiatives – Thank you all!

This has been an exemplary demonstration of Community Resilience, for which all Members of our Community, and Bruton's Community Groups represented her tonight should be congratulated.

The Lockdown has also led to significant changes in the way the Town Council operates. We last met physically on Saturday 21 March; to pass a Business Continuity Resolution delegating authority to the Town Clerk to progress ongoing matters and projects, in consultation with myself and the Vice Chair, Justin.

At that time the Local Government Act did not permit remote attendance of Town Council Meetings. After some effective lobbying from the National Association of Local Councils (NALC), new Regulations were enacted by the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, and came into force on 4 April to enable this. We sprang into the 21st Century on 28 April, with our first virtual Full Council Meeting over Zoom, while broadcasting on our new YouTube Channel, as we are this evening...

There is a specific challenge for responding to Planning Applications, as SSDC now only give us three weeks from the date of publication, acting on Government advice that the Planning Pipeline must continue the “*principle in favour of development*”. We received news this morning that the proposed Development to the north side of Brewham Road has been withdrawn... for now, but we will Stay Alert for potentially controversial Developments, and publicise all of our Town Council Meetings via our website and Bruton’s social media channels.

Returning to Bruton’s exemplary Coronavirus Response, it became apparent to many of us in mid-March that many people in Bruton had suffered, or were just about to suffer, severe reductions in their usual income. Government support was becoming available for businesses, but many Bruton families faced a wait of many weeks before Universal Credit would reach them.

Bruton has rallied round again, so far raising approaching £10k to fund our new Food Drop Service (including £2k from Somerset Community Foundation), providing food for 60 adults per week. A “[GoFundMe](#)” has been launched – please donate to that if you can spare some money...

One learning for Bruton has been from our neighbours Castle Cary, who [raised £14k](#) (including £2.5k from Somerset Community Foundation) very quickly, through the simple resilience preparedness of having a Parish Charity in place. We need to collectively ensure that Bruton is better placed to handle such crises, in addition to the more predictable infrastructure and services that require more than the Town Council Precept.

Last May, we proposed a “*Bruton Fund*” to make the necessary investments for Bruton to get fit for the 21st Century – making Bruton carbon neutral by 2030 along the way. UK local government finance does not currently offer generous funds, so the resourceful Bruton community must take this challenge on ourselves. We will bring

the “*Bruton Fund*” proposal to our July Finance Committee meeting – please get in touch if you can offer business skills as a Director of a Community Interest Company?

The final thing that I wanted to mention is our new “*Safe walking and cycling*” Group, established under One Planet Bruton to deliver the Town Plan 2017 intention to “*develop proposals for a wider network of safe and easy walking routes to the town centre,*” plus the One Planet Bruton Goal of “*making it easy and attractive for people to walk and cycle*”. These objectives have found even greater resonance in a Coronavirus world of physical distancing, with a new £2.5bn “*Active Travel Fund*” announced by the Secretary of State for Transport on 9 May. James Hood is leading efforts on behalf of the Town Council to ‘join up’ thinking across Somerset, and ensure that fair share of this new funding reaches our County, and Bruton’s immediate surrounds.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'EJ' followed by a long horizontal stroke.

Ewan Jones,
Chair of Bruton Town Council and Mayor of Bruton.