

Town Council Report

Town Forum 2024

In many ways it's been a quiet year for the town council, we've perhaps learned from previous years not to bite off more than we can chew. We have concentrated on what you might call our core activities: helping to fund many of the groups here tonight, providing allotments, the cemetery and car parking, running Jubilee Park, operating the speed indicator device you see around town, organising the Christmas evening and our annual Remembrance parade. Supporting the community office and its volunteers in answering day to day queries and helping direct people to find solutions to their problems.

Our Town Clerk Lisa, who joined us early last year, has brought an era of stability and she has been joined by a new Assistant Clerk, Sam. Along with the redoubtable Patrick, we now have an excellent, if small, team who can get things done.

As well as the additions to our staff, we also have two new councillors, Russell Bateman and Karen Dunn – welcome to them.

A great deal of our staff team's time has been spent meditating with the new Somerset Council, particularly over highways matters.

Everyone will be familiar with the seemingly never-ending roadworks at Library junction which we hope are now finally sorted. We're now looking to see what we can add to the new pedestrian area to enhance its appearance and safety. There are a number of proposed changes in the pipeline around disabled parking spaces on the High Street and restrictions on dangerous parking on Station

Road which will be out for consultation shortly. We have also been discussing how to improve pedestrian safety, particularly on Shute Lane.

On the subject of Somerset Council, it has introduced a new level of local government called Local Community Networks or LCNs, which bring together organizations in an area smaller than the old district council but larger than an individual parish; we have been grouped with Castle Cary, Wincanton, Milbourne Port and the surrounding villages. The first big project our LCN is taking on is to improve the facilities for youth in the area, and we hope that we'll have a shared youth worker in place in a few weeks. We'll be able to share more about what exactly they'll be doing very soon.

As you probably know, Somerset Council is in dire financial straits and is looking to offload some of its responsibilities onto town and parish councils. We have so far declined to take on any additional responsibilities; this is something we may revisit in the future when it becomes clearer exactly how county cutbacks will affect us, and whether there may be opportunities for sensible consolidation of resources.

The Town Council has spent a great deal of time this year trying to ensure that the views of the people of the town are put forward to the various powers that be, and that as many people as possible get to hear about changes that are being proposed. For example, we have hosted meetings around planning applications for the proposed development off Brewham Road, the Prickly Pear and most recently for another development off Cuckoo Hill. We also

hosted a lively discussion about the future of the Bruton School for Girls site with the trustees.

We have worked with Pitcombe parish council to try to get the BSG astro turf registered as a community asset, to allow a community group to attempt to take it over. This won't come into effect until a sale is agreed, which seems some way off given the statements of the Charity Commission.

I'm not sure if anyone from the BruBowl is here, and I won't steal their thunder except to say that obtaining planning for the skate park falls to the town council to manage. The application has been made and the requisite archaeological surveys have been commissioned.

Just around the corner at Abbey Ponds, we have recently had approval from Historic England for our plans to manage the site, which is a scheduled ancient monument. We hope to be able to increase its value as a public amenity whilst preserving its historical significance.

Lastly for this year, after a long, complex and ultimately fruitless debate about ownership with Somerset Council, the Town Council has repaired the footbridge on Riverside Walk. It's been a case study in how hard it can be to get apparently simple things done when the legal position gets complicated.

So to the future. As I said at the start, we have I hope learned our lesson about getting a few things done rather than starting many projects and not getting very far on any of them!

But there are some key areas we hope to make progress on.

One is youth facilities. I mentioned already the LCN youth worker and BruBowl, but we recognise that the standard of play equipment for primary age children is not good enough, especially since we have recently had to retire some equipment for safety reasons. We now have a group looking to see what we need, how much it will cost and how we might fund it, and they will be involving parents and children in the discussion.

A second area is to try to tackle the issues around walking from the north east end of town to the High Street and the primary school. This is only going to get worse with the in-progress and proposed developments which could see as many as 150 extra families at that end of town. The Town Council has a long-standing scheme to use the Somerset Council owned fields which run behind Townsend to provide a safe walking and cycling route to the town centre. There are many hurdles to jump for that to become a reality, but we will try.

Finally, an increasing priority needs to be the appearance of our town. It's probably the most commented on thing we hear as councillors. There is some fantastic voluntary work going on removing litter, weeding and planting and the Town Council needs to figure out how to support that as best we can and to expand it into areas where volunteers may not be enough. This could well be an area where Somerset Council's cuts force us to take action.

Stuart Anderton

Chair, BTC