

ANNUAL REPORT

Cllrs Gwilym Butler and Simon Harris: Cleobury Mortimer Division

SHROPSHIRE UNITARY COUNCIL

The last year 2021/22 will hopefully be remembered as the last year of the pandemic. I am pleased in the way the Council has responded to the pandemic. Rachel Robinson our Director for Public Health has taken an outstanding role in co ordinating our response to the vaccination roll out. This has included a general roll out at centres but also all Care homes, Key workers, Schools and mobile units travelling around as recently seen at Cleobury Fire Station. We are constantly monitoring the ongoing situation and will be ready to act should we need to.

Our economic development team have co-ordinated the further roll out of Government support grants to businesses as detailed in the government guidelines. This approach has seen the economy in Shropshire bounce back well with good levels of employment.

The draft Local Plan for planning and development has been approved by Council and is currently with the National Inspector. We have to maintain a land supply for building of 5 years under government legislation to enable our planning policies to be upheld - if the supply falls below that we can be challenged by developers; which may lead to unallocated sites being developed. We currently have 5 ½ years supply. We note there is a delay with the return of plans nationally from the Inspector; which we hope will not leave us in a vulnerable position. If the timescale goes to plan we should have the Local Plan fully adopted (post inspector) late summer.

Gwilym has taken on the role of Portfolio holder for Finance and Corporate resources which is a massive portfolio overseeing the budget, staff, governance, legal etc. and takes up a considerable amount of time. The Council in February 2022 delivered its budget for the next financial year and its medium short term financial plan. This shows a spend of circa £595 million including dedicated Schools grant of circa £350 million. Of the funding that is left, ie circa £245 million, it is noted that in the financial year 2022/23 that 85% of that will be spent on Social Care both for adults and children.

The majority of the care spend for adults is for those under 65 with challenging medical conditions that need 'structured' care; this is expensive to maintain. We have had a huge increase in children in care, there are now over 600. This is a national trend following on from the pandemic.

This therefore only leaves 15% of our disposable income to deliver all our other services from Waste collection, Highways, Leisure, Culture and Libraries.

Prior to the pandemic we were on the verge of getting 'fairer' funding from government which would recognise the costs involved in delivering services in a rural county. Presently we are only getting one off annual grants from government and we need a three year funding agreement to enable us to plan for the medium term.

Without any grant from Government we would have a £60 million structural deficit. If we only receive the grant we had in the last round we will still have a deficit of circa £25 million. We have very few areas where we can make further savings without effecting outcomes to people and place. We are constantly lobbying our MPs and Michael Gove Minister for Communities and Levelling up in order to ensure that Shropshire receives the funding that it needs we are not expecting any miracles and will plan for less funding.

We are currently rolling out the £150 Council Tax rebate for those paying Council Tax in Properties banded A to D. If you pay by Direct Debit or have registered for E-billing you will be contacted automatically. If not please contact Counciltax@Shropshire.gov.uk or telephone the help desk on 0345 6789000.

We are also starting a review on our discretionary fund for Council Tax and our Hardship fund which takes into account people's costs in relation to rent, utilities etc against their income. We would urge anyone having difficulties paying their Council Tax to contact the Council.

Simon has taken on the role of Vice Chair of the Audit Committee. He also sits on the Pensions Committee.

The audit of the Council's year end Mar21 accounts has been severely delayed as the result of the pandemic – this has happened across many Local Authorities. We understand that the audit will be 'unqualified' and should be completed by the end of Mar22. We are pressing our auditors to ensure that there will not be a delay in issuing the year end Mar22 accounts; which should be issued no later than end Sep23.

Shropshire Council's Pension Fund has approx £2bn under management. The Fund is fully funded which means that actuarially it is in a position to meet its pension payments. There has been considerable pressure (protest) for the Fund to divest any assets it holds in the Oil and Gas sector in order to support a move to a low carbon economy. The Fund has voted to ensure that its investments are net zero carbon by 2050 – the reduction in carbon emissions will be monitored at the Pension Committee's quarterly meetings.

Waste Collection: the Council has had a positive response to the introduction of wheelie bins (purple lids) for recycled waste ie replacing the black boxes. We expect that these bins will be delivered by the summer. The new wheelie bin for recycling has been approved and the role out will start in the summer with over 70,000 properties already signed up. We are pleased to report the South Shropshire will have the first bins in the role out.

Highways: we recognise that the state of our roads remains far from perfect. Our financial strategy has approved capital funding of £58million over the next 5 years to improve highways. We are already seeing improvement in our roads locally (eg the A4194) and once early summer is here we will see far more surface dressing on repaired roads to help the non occurrence of pot holes. The main A4117 and B4363 in our Division are currently being surveyed to understand what further works need undertaking. The state of some of our minor lanes remains a problem. The increase in usage and the type of vehicles are not making these lanes in some cases fit for purpose and how we sort these problems will be a major challenge. We will continue to press for emergency repairs and look for longer term capital spend (as has happened at Oretton) to upgrade some of the minor roads.

Infrastructure: CIL (community infrastructure Levy) money is available and Parish and Town Councils are encouraged to ensure that the infrastructure that they wish to see in their areas ie spending the CIL money, is clearly identified in the Place Plan.

We are currently developing the Shropshire Plan which will be the corporate plan for the Council. The document can be viewed on the Council's Website and has core strands around Healthy People, Healthy Economy, Climate change and all the deliverable strategies that sit beneath these.

The Council's property development company Cornovii is moving a pace with the first homes sold in Shrewsbury with further sites coming on board. The purpose of the company is to deliver the right homes in the right place not solely for profit but to ensure that the right type of housing, needed in our communities, is delivered - sometimes these are not being delivered by main stream builders. They will also look at smaller sites both for open market housing and / or affordable housing, in various tenure, both in market towns and smaller communities where the need is known and is endorsed by the local community. Should anyone wish to put any ideas or sites forward do not hesitate to contact us.

At the last Full Council Meeting we unanimously endorsed the motion to lobby to improve Ambulance times in the South of the County and the increased provision of First Responders. This has been an issue for many years. The Ambulance authority appear to remain urban centric and have little thought for the rural areas. Working with partners and MPs we will continue to raise our case although the actual delivery is, sadly, out of our control.

The Council is committed to undertake a boundary review of Town and Parish Councils. There are some areas in the county that presently has no governance. The existing Parish boundaries were formed in the 1890s and have not changed since. We have several market towns that have grown and are planned to grow where the new developments do not sit in the existing Town boundaries and how they work for now and in the future

will be part of the consultation. It is important to note any changes will be fully consulted and are not just for now but for the future generations and how they work and deliver for the communities and what creates best value for the tax payer both in cost and outcomes. We believe our local communities needs to have an open an honest conversation on how our Town and Parish councils should look like for the next 100 years and how they will work to attract new councillors and the new ways of working. The process will be suspended from October 22 until October 23 as the Boundary Commission has decided to do a Boundary review of the Unitary Council wards such as ours and therefore no Town and Parish Boundary reviews will take place during that time. Should you wish to discuss the process or have ideas please do not hesitate to contact us.

The council has set up a Social Task force group working with partners such as Citizen advice, Age Concern, DWP, SALC . The purpose of the group is to address the Cost of Living crisis emerging across the country and how we can provide help and guidance to ensure people are able to cope as best as they can moving forward. Gwilym sits on the group in his role as Portfolio holder for finance which includes The Council Tax. We have put together a web page for all agencies that maybe able to help just Google 'Cost of Living Help Shropshire Council' and you will find the link.

The council recently had a full OFSTED inspection of its Childrens Services and I am proud to report that we are confirmed as a GOOD provider. This is an outstanding achievement in difficult times and children in care now standing at 608. My thanks goes out to all the staff involved in achieving such a good service for our vulnerable children in our county.

I am pleased to report that the University in Shrewsbury under Chester University is now delivering to the needs of Shropshire . A few years back we realised we were struggling to recruit nurses and Social Workers. We subsequently negotiated with the university to introduce appropriate courses and the council has supported Social workers courses which is now resulting in our own home grown staff along with nurses for our hospitals and care sectors.

The Council is working endlessly with partners to support the Ukrainian refugees. The information is constantly changing and all information is available at <https://orlo.uk/IJAf4> this will be updated as and when information is available from government and this supports refugees and those who wish to host.

Please do not hesitate to contact us should you have any questions.

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