

## SHROPSHIRE COUNCIL ANNUAL REPORT

I am sure it will not be a surprise to any of you that our major focus for the 23/24 financial year was on financial stability, and this continues into this financial year and no doubt beyond, especially if there are no changes to the national funding agreements for Local Government.

This is not just a problem in Shropshire, Councils across England are suffering, and our plight is made worse due to the rural nature of where we live.

We, like our nearest neighbours in Telford, Staffordshire, and Herefordshire, are having to increase council tax, increase fees and charges and yet cut services which will include making redundancies. Please look at our budget-specific pages on our website which can be found by clicking [Our 24-25 Budget Explained](#)

There is no doubt that for most top-tier councils who have responsibility for social care services, upwards of 75% of their budgets are spent on this area. The demand, cost and increased complexity is pushing up these costs all the time and this is almost entirely the cause of our financial difficulties. Yes, there is a hangover of high inflation but in the main, it is the cost of looking after our most vulnerable people for which we have a legal and ethical responsibility.

Despite the huge amount of work that it takes to make these changes to services and staffing, the Council is still investing in our County and providing a very broad spectrum of services.

### **Finance and Resources Update**

The Council saved £41 million of spend in the 23/24 financial year which is more than has ever been achieved in a single year. The Council is seeing unprecedented demand in Social Care in the current year with demand estimated at £26 million over and above predicted increase in last year's budget. It is being created by demand pressures by more people needing care mixed with the type of complex care they need plus major inflationary pressures in the delivery of the care. This overspend was mitigated using reserves but makes up a part of the further £62 million of savings we must make in this financial year (24/25).

The finances are already cut to the bone and the proposals set out in the budget will see more visual changes to residents than have been seen to date. Council tax will rise, a charge will be introduced for your green bin and parking fees will rise, as will all discretionary fees the Council charges.

There will be a complete review of some service areas. Some services may be reduced, some may cease all together. We will also look to find other ways of achieving savings and all ideas are welcome.

We will also look to leave Shirehall as we will be a much smaller organisation, and this will save £1.5 million a year in running costs. We are looking for temporary accommodation for the Council until the Multi Agency Hub is built in the Riverside development. The decision by Chester University to withdraw its Shrewsbury Campus may afford us more options.

We will certainly be moving into an era where there will be an opportunity for local Councils to deliver more services locally if desired and precept accordingly as Shropshire Council will need to concentrate its delivery on statutory services.

We are constantly Lobbying our MPs and talking to the **Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities** Department regarding fairer and further funding.

The Capital Programme continues, and this is different to annual revenue spend and is funded mainly by developer's contributions and external grants This includes £84 million for housing, £27 million for schools and £40 million for highways.

### **Climate Change the Environment and Transport.**

Grant Funding - The Climate Team has attracted Government capital and revenue grant funding awards totalling £4.3m to date.

Pyrolysis / Biochar – Shropshire Council is currently procuring a demonstrator plant to test the use of pyrolysis to 'cook' (rather than burn) natural woody materials from highway maintenance and garden waste to reduce it to pure carbon 'biochar' which can be used to store carbon in a stable form, improve soil quality and for the manufacture of low carbon building materials such as bricks and asphalt. This is a technology which could be widely deployed commercially in Shropshire to generate 'green growth'.

Green hydrogen feasibility –The Council is working with a range of commercial and academic stakeholders to on a project to test hydrogen refuelling facilities for its own fleet and that of its contractors. In the longer term, the Council hopes to develop a small-scale demonstrator facility to manufacture hydrogen fuel locally.

Leading by example - Several of the demonstrator projects which we are developing are already recognised as being at the forefront of good practice by local authorities in the UK.

Low Carbon Community Buildings – the design of new buildings such as the new swimming pool at Whitchurch is increasingly being informed by information about lifetime energy and carbon performance to minimise carbon emissions and running costs.

Electric Vehicle Chargers – Shropshire Council has one of the largest EV charging infrastructure programmes in the Midlands and will soon own and operate over 300 chargers in its car parks, with a further 500 to come in future years!

Business Support – Shropshire Council is working closely with community climate organisation and local businesses to offer free climate advice and training for local firms and to free consultancy advice on the installation of solar panels on large industrial buildings. The continued availability of these support programmes may also help local companies supplying goods and services to Shropshire Council to reduce their emissions.

Community Climate Action - We have established a positive and constructive ongoing working relationship with community climate organisations across Shropshire.

**Flexible (Demand Response Transport)** – Our first Flexible public transport service started operating on 4<sup>th</sup> December. The zones covered will be the Pulverbatch and Longden zone to the SW of Shrewsbury, and the first service in the Otley Road zone. The service has been well received, usage has increased and is increasing. The aspiration is to implement in further zones, in other areas, as soon as funding allows.

The Council continues to bid for additional funding to help to retain and improve public transport. The £2 single fair (adopted by most providers) is supported via Government funding and will continue until at least Mar 25.

### **Waste**

Waste is the biggest contract in the Place Directorate. There must be significant savings made to the service so difficult decisions have had to be made. This includes:

- Charging for Green Waste (opt in service at an estimated charge of £52 per year).
- Potential Closure of 2 HRCs (consultation needed before decision on which 2 HRCs will close).

Shropshire residents produce a lot of waste. On a national league table SC is listed as the second highest producer of waste per household, so bottom of the table. However, when Green Waste is removed from the equation, Shropshire sits in the Top third. SC is also one of the best Local Authority's for recycling.

**Shrewsbury Town Centre Redevelopment** – The Smithfield Riverside consultation saw a lot of engagement from residents across Shropshire. The first phase (demolition of the Riverside Med practice and Riverside Shopping Centre followed by the development of Roushill Park), has achieved Planning permission. Work should begin later this year.

### **Shrewsbury Movement and Public Space Strategy**

Consultation on the Movement and Public Space Strategy is ongoing. Most respondents have been positive. This project will see improvements to the gyratory by the Railway Station, Active Travel routes, Pedestrian Priority Zones, better Public Transport through the town and a series of traffic loops. These measures, along with the completion of the ring road will provide a safer and cleaner environment in the town centre. There will still be the ability to drive and park in the Town Centre for those who need it. More disability parking will be available.

### **Active Travel**

The Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP) has been in development over the past year and was approved by Cabinet in March. Having this plan in place will attract more funding for Active Travel throughout the Council area.

### **Planning & Regulatory Services**

#### **Draft Local Plan**

This seems to have been dragging on forever. A report came to Cabinet in April confirming our interactions with the inspectors. There will need to be a short period of consultation which will focus on any additions. It is still envisaged that this plan will be adopted in early 2025.

Place plans are being updated and there are several new Neighbourhood Plans in process, more will be coming to Cabinet and Full council for approval.

In Regulatory Services there have been several prosecutions against utility companies, and shopkeepers selling illegal vapes and alcohol to under 18s.

There have also been several prosecutions for the sale of counterfeit goods being sold which ended in custodial sentences. All these have come with hefty fines.

## **Economic Growth**

The Economic Growth Team continue to be involved in a wide range of projects.

Following the Government's decision to stop funding the Local Enterprise Partnerships the new way of working will be led by the Economic Growth Team via the Shropshire Economic Partnership. In the first instance a Joint Committee has been convened between Hereford, Shropshire, and Telford & Wrekin Councils to manage the transition.

The Shropshire Economic Partnership goes from strength to strength and part of the remit is to oversee the roll out of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF). Many businesses and organisations obtained funding in the first and second rounds. The latest round of funding is grants for businesses who employ 1-49 employees and is to assist to purchase capital equipment or to undertake improvements to business premises.

Progress on the Smithfield Riverside Development continues apace with planning approval received for the demolition of the Riverside site and the construction of the pocket park. There has been significant commercial interest in this site and Heads of Terms for the new cinema are being prepared.

Our Business Team have helped over 30 new businesses setup, mainly in the Artistic and Creative industries. Shropshire is widely known as a hub for businesses in the creative industries.

The River Severn Partnership will be launching major plans in the coming months. Alongside this is a series of small projects designed to slow the flow of the Severn. Much of this work is cross border and the Marches Forward Partnership (an informal agreement of cooperation between Herefordshire, Monmouthshire, Powys, and Shropshire) is very involved in the project work.

## **Adult Social Care and Public Health**

Caring for vulnerable adults is one of the Council's most important statutory duties, whether vulnerable adults with learning disabilities or mental health issues between the ages of 18 – 65 or our 65+ residents. We have a duty of care to ensure people are safe and properly looked after, either in their own homes, with domiciliary care support or in residential care or nursing homes. We work closely alongside partners from health, the voluntary and private sectors to deliver the most appropriate support to ensure people can remain in the heart of their communities for as long as possible.

Providing care for both adults and children is by far the most expensive service provided by the Council, absorbing 77% of the Council's overall budget. Shropshire is a very rural county, so travel times are longer and care delivery costs are higher than in the towns. Costs are rising every year as our population grows and our customers develop increasingly complex needs. In order to mitigate costs, Shropshire Council has been developing technological solutions to help our elderly

population stay supported in their own homes and we are working on a transformation plan with partner organisations to improve outcomes and service to our customers.

## **Children and Education**

As you may be aware, we recently had a spotlight return visit by OFSTED. We have formed a Children's Improvement Board to focus on retention and recruitment of social workers to aid not only case management levels of our teams, but address agency spends. We are not alone in this; this is a challenge nationally that all councils are facing and recent media around this has suggested there are as many as 6,000 vacant positions. As a focus we have advertised these positions with a whole host of additional incentives, and we have seen an interest, and applications are coming in and we aim for a fully permanent workforce.

We continue, after significant investment, to reach out to families with our Early Help offer. The teams are focused on making sure that the right support is put in place as soon as it is needed. With the right level of support in a timely way it helps families to achieve the best outcomes. A new improved streamlined service offering targeted support can be reached by calling 0345 678 9021.

We have also increased our offer to Foster Carers and the drop in "Fostering Info Sessions" have been positive across Shropshire and we have seen more interest and additional Foster Panels to support the process have been added to deal with this increased interest. Further information can be found at [www.shropshirefostering.co.uk](http://www.shropshirefostering.co.uk).

We are pleased to also confirm that another Children's Residential Care Homes is near completion and is near opening in North Shropshire which is excellent news. Our Care Homes offer excellent support to children and young people and are all Ofsted rated good and outstanding.

Stepping Stones continues to go from strength to strength, we continue to see this project delivering on diverting children becoming "Looked After" and working towards the step down of children from residential care to foster care or back with their families where they have worked hard to make sustained changes. The work above underpins our vision of all children living in a family where it is safe to do so – whether that family is their own, extended family or foster care.

Families continue to help us shape the future of SEND in Shropshire as we continue to work with our NHS Partners and Education providers to listen to needs and improve the Special Educational Needs and Disability support available in the local area. We have developed an Accelerated Progress Plan following on from an inspection of our Send Services and both NHS England and the Department for Education (DfE) have recognised good progress is being made. As with all local Authorities we have seen a significant increase in demand in this area.

Active Travel around Schools continues with the work we are doing to implement the 20mph outside schools' programme. We have delivered Bikeability training to all but six schools across Shropshire and assessment work continues reviewing all zig-zag lines outside schools. We are also soon to go live on six school streets across the County, all to support safety around schools.

And finally, recent Secondary School places were announced with children across the county finding out what school they were allocated. 2,974 applied and 2,667 were offered their first preference and of all who applied 98.4% offered one of their preferences and 1.6% offered an alternative. Once again excellent news and well done to the team as we aim for a smooth and happy transition for these children.

## **Culture & Digital**

The council has continued to deliver a wide range of facilities and activities across Shropshire. With outdoor recreation sites, leisure facilities, libraries, theatres, museums, armed forces support and more it is very easy to forget how much we provide and are involved with.

There are literally too many highlights to run through individually but one of the things the service should rightly be proud of is the way it opens opportunities to knowledge, entertainment, support and exercise to a wide range of people.

Our staff work hard day-in, day-out to provide the best services and experiences possible and they do this alongside the wide spectrum of partners and volunteers who provide invaluable help and support to these local services.

So, what does this year and the future look like? Financially, tough. We must operate within a reduced budget at a time when costs are increasing. This means the status quo is not an option and we must work to identify any opportunities or necessary changes.

To do this we are going to need help and goodwill from across Shropshire and it will come as no surprise that we will be looking to build upon our partnership work with communities to explore what is possible.

We continue to try and enable people to get things done or resolved as easily as possible when they contact us. People have a range of ways to contact the council and we have been working to improve our digital services for those who can do what they need to do without additional assistance.

We also continue to maximise the benefits of digital behind the scenes within the council to improve productivity and reduce costs.

## **Housing & Assets**

Shropshire Council's two owned housing companies, STAR and Cornovii, are performing well, with over 200 homes under construction across the county. These are delivering a mixture of high-quality affordable homes, low energy homes, local needs homes and specialist accommodation.

During a recent pilot inspection by the Regulator of Social Housing, STAR received the highest possible grade for customer engagement, C2.

Homelessness continues to be an area of high pressure for Shropshire Council, with about 250 households in need of temporary accommodation at any one time. This rise in demand is broadly in line with local authorities across the country, however we are bucking the trend with use of bed & breakfast for temporary accommodation falling in Shropshire due to investment in both support work and accommodation.

Shropshire Council continues to support the Homes for Ukraine project as the Russian invasion stretches into its third year. At the height of the programme almost 800 Ukrainians were living with host families across Shropshire. Some of those have now returned home as areas of Ukraine have

been liberated, others have settled into Shropshire very well taking on jobs and homes of their own.

We recently supported events to commemorate the anniversary of the invasion with a flag raising ceremony at Shirehall and a vigil in the Quarry in Shrewsbury.

The council has received two rounds of funding from central government to buy properties for use by Ukrainian and Afghan families that will become affordable housing open to everyone in Shropshire once the immediate need has passed.

Specific concerns around housing in the most rural parts of Shropshire is the current focus of several projects within the Council. There is work being done to find ways to make small scale development of affordable homes in the smaller villages viable, a team is looking at how we can support housing associations to retain, or at least replace, their properties in rural parts of the county, and the private sector housing team is working with a number of the county's historic estates to improve the standard and conditions of their estate properties.

## Highways

In Highways the major project of the NWRR continues to make good progress with the signing off at Council on 29<sup>th</sup> February of the extra spend necessary to get to the position of Full Business Case hopefully by September although we are aiming for July. The procurement process is in progress, and whilst we are aware there may be an application toward a Judicial review, we are confident in our position, and this has been 'priced in' to the critical path.

The recent announcement by Government of £136.4m extra to spend over 7 years from next year in welcome news. Cllrs and MPs will have a say in how that money is spent, and I envisage a process whereby Town and Parish Council can feed into that process.

We are firmly in pothole season, but since May 21 the trend of outstanding potholes is in a long-term decline of numbers, as you can see from the graph below:



Shropshire Council has been shortlisted for a national award for the impact of its new approach to maintaining and improving the county's roads. The council is one of the finalists for the 'Innovation' award at the LGC (Local Government Chronicle) Awards 2024, with the winner set to be announced in June.

By 2020 the council's previous approach to highways maintenance had resulted in a backlog of 19,000 potholes and other defects on the council's roads. As a result, a new 'mixed economy' model of highway maintenance was introduced, which saw the council review its existing highways maintenance contract with Kier, launch new in-house operations and energise the local supply chain.

Shropshire Council was also the first council in the country to support and use a new procurement system designed to encourage innovation in highway maintenance, enabling it to speed up repairs while reducing procurement costs and ensure compliance. The new approach has resulted in 75% reduction in the cost of repairs between 2019 and 2023 – saving £1.4m per year. Whereas 90% of repairs were temporary in 2019, 90% are permanent in 2023. Residents have recognised the difference the new model has made – year on year, public satisfaction in highways is up 25%, according to the National Highway and Transport Public Satisfaction Survey. We all know of long term, or persistent, or returning potholes. However, I am confident that the 'mixed economy' Highways model that Andy Wilde and his team has developed with Kier is working. We are in a far better place than 2017 – 2021.

Car Parking has been in the headlines recently as we need to increase charges to help us pay for investment in both the parking team and the car park infrastructure. There have been some very well publicised politically motivated campaigns whose tactics are to throw us off course. A new strategy may well have better to have been developed before the implementation of changes to pricing, however budget timings have dictated that we need to go this way around. A new report will go to cabinet in April, where we will demonstrate that we have been listening to business and public concerns. A strategy will follow on later in the new financial year.

### **Local Matters**

Locally, my inbox has been relatively quiet and it was also very nice to get emails from residents who wanted to say thank you, usually I only get complaints!

There is no doubt that the wettest winter on record is playing havoc with our roads and the Highways Team are struggling to keep up with the repairs needed on the A Roads. Despite some stretches receiving minor works our rural roads are not good. This is a problem nationwide, but I do find it increasingly depressing having to respond to complaints time and time again, saying there is simply not enough funding.

The good news is that the road outside the Haughmond Hill Café area has been resurfaced and I am hopeful a Traffic Regulation Order will be proposed very soon to allow double yellow lines to be installed in an attempt to stop the parking (bad parking!) along this stretch of road.

As always it has been a pleasure to work with the Parish Council and I thank you for the time and effort you put in to ensuring the very best outcomes for the Parish.

Lezley Picton, Shropshire Councillor for the Tern Division, May 2024