

ANNUAL REPORT – WITHINGTON PARISH COUNCIL – May 2021

This time last year I reflected upon how things had changed due to the onset of the pandemic. I am sure I would have been gobsmacked if I had known then that 12 months later, we would only just be coming out of our 3rd lockdown and up until tonight we have been meeting virtually.

Although awful, Covid has shown the best of us in our community reactions. The community support groups that have grown up, volunteering, looking out for each other and of course the recent testing and vaccination successes that shines a light to the "new normal". I pay tribute to all healthcare workers who have worked in unbelievably trying conditions, and all front-line workers who have kept us fed, safe, taught our children and frankly just kept us going. I also pay tribute to the staff at Shropshire Council who have had to learn new roles at short notice to react to the pandemic. Council staff are slowly returning to their substantive posts but there is a considerable number of staff that continue to work across track and trace and testing and vaccine centres. I also want to thank everyone who lives in this Parish whose stoicism and fortitude over the past year has been astounding.

The pandemic has brought out the absolute best of our community spirit and kindness and I sincerely hope that this spirit continues well after the pandemic has been controlled.

PARISH ISSUES

Despite the pandemic, issues have still arisen in the Parish and I, alongside the Parish Council, have spent time trying to get these matters resolved. We have had some success with potholes (more of this later) and road issues but there are more matters outstanding than successes and I'm afraid I added a significant number to the list when out and about in the Parish.

BUDGET

The Council's finances have again come under enormous pressure, Covid has played a huge part in this but thankfully funds from Central Government have helped offset some of the expenditure and loss of income but not all. We have seen significant additional pressure in costs for Children's Social Care with the number of looked after children almost doubling in 12 months.

Council agreed in February 2021 to increase Council tax by 1.99% which equates to approximately £3.5M, in addition the government Social Care precept of 3% was requested by the officers but members reduced it from 3% to 2% for this financial year. However, the 3.99% increase in Council tax does not even cover the increased Children's Social Care budget. We continue to lobby government for levelling up funding. Unfortunately, the Fairer Funding Review did not take place due to the pandemic, but we are told it will be undertaken later this year.

HIGHWAYS

Over the past year Highways and the lack of communication and getting the job done has been a real issue for many residents and Shropshire Councillors alike. Shropshire Council has 3,200 miles of roads to maintain, one third are A & B roads, two thirds are C roads or unclassified. Two thirds of the resources are spent on the A& B roads leaving insufficient funds for our C and unclassified roads. We seemed to make really good progress on potholes during the early part of 2020 but by January of this year we seemed to be back at square one. It is very apparent that whilst some roads just need

potholes sorting out many roads require major works. The budget available for this work is not sufficient and a promise has been made by my group to invest an additional 40M over the next four years. We, alongside many other rural councils are also working with our MPs and government committees to instil on the government that more funds are needed for our roads. We are winning some battles, but the war is yet to be won!

Overall, it has been a strange and difficult 12 months for Shropshire Council and whilst there is light at the end of the tunnel in terms of Covid I am expecting it to be another difficult year.

As you are aware this meeting falls a few days after the results of the Unitary elections will be announced. I very much hope that I am re-elected and look forward to working with you over the next four years.

Thank, as always, for your support. It is much appreciated.

Lezley Picton
Shropshire Councillor for the Tern Division