

UPTON MAGNA PARISH COUNCIL

ANNUAL REPORT – SHROPSHIRE COUNCIL

Without doubt 22/23 was a challenging year. There were many highlights, our Good OFSTED rating for Children's Services overall and two of our in-house children's homes being rated outstanding. The award of £18.7m towards the redevelopment of the Riverside Complex in Shrewsbury, winning a number of Industry awards and the results of our Peer Reviews in Finance, Communications and Adult Social Care showing we are heading in the right direction AND less complaints about potholes!

The biggest challenge, as always is budgetary. Despite working hard to ensure we remained in budget this financial year, inflation affects the Council too, and it is likely that we will be facing an estimated deficit between £10m and £17m which has to be cleared before we start the new financial year.

We were already seeking to close a £40m budgetary gap for 23/24 and thanks to inflation that is now closer to £51m. However, we have a plan, The Shropshire Plan, and this plan will enable us to achieve these targets. This plan is not salami slicing nor is it wholesale slash and burn. In many cases it's about doing things differently, it's about shortening customer journeys which will not only save money but more importantly improve outcomes. This plan seeks to protect the services that usually disappear in times of financial hardship such as libraries, leisure centres, arts provision and parks whilst ensuring we fulfil our statutory duty to present a balanced budget.

We continue to spend over three quarters of our budget on social care and this year our providers, particularly those in the adult social care market, are really struggling and we are working very closely with SPIC (Shropshire Partners in Care) to try and rejuvenate the market especially the domiciliary care sector. To give you an idea as to how this can affect the council - if a resident requires care, the cost of a residential placement can be £1,500 a week whereas domiciliary care can be provided for a third of the cost and residents are much better in their own homes. So, what is far more expensive for the council is also not good for the resident but the aftermath of Covid especially the supermarket wars for staff have meant that many care staff have now left the profession. There is no doubt that the crisis in the care market continues.

Our £60m investment into Highways is paying off but the mix of wet and freezing conditions mean that once again we are in "pothole season". However, over the summer we will catch up but as has been reported in national and local news we need significant government investment into road infrastructure.

No Conservative Councillor wants to raise Council Tax, but it is worth pointing out that the Government Financial Settlement for Local Government expects us to take the maximum rise available. With our social care costs and inflation, we simply did not have a choice.

The easiest way to describe the council's revenue budget is to say for every £5 we spend, £4 is spent on social care and then out of the remaining £1, 50p is spent on the waste contract. So, in short everything else the Council does is paid for out of the remaining 50p.

I am well aware there will be difficult times ahead and tough decisions will need to be made but we have made a good start and, as I said, there are plans in place to reach our targets. My aim for 2023/24 is to ensure that Shropshire Council is on a firm financial footing allowing us to move forward with confidence for 24/25.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT BOUNDARY REVIEW

Following agreement by Shropshire Council to undertake a community and Parish review suddenly the Local Government Boundary Commission (LGBC) decided that there needed to be a divisional review of Shropshire. The first stage of the process was for Council to agree on the number of councillors required and the system of governance for the future. The council proposal received cross party agreement and we asked LGBC to consider 76 councillors (3,499 electors per councillor) and to stay with the Cabinet system.

The LGBC came back to us to say they were minded to go with 74 (same as now, approximately 3,700 electors per councillor). The next stage was to look at how the new boundaries should be developed. A proposal, which again received cross party support, was drafted by the council but the LGBC may or may not take any notice of the suggestions made – they didn't!

The LGBC published their draft recommendations on 2nd May. We always knew there would be changes to the Tern Division as they regarded the current division as a “mop up” and they don't like these style divisions. In our own draft the parishes of Upton Magna, Withington, Uffington and Astley were separated from Bomere and Bicton, however, as suspected, the LGBC have had other ideas and have kept Tern largely as before, the change being Bicton Parish now goes to the Longden Division and the Tern Division gains the Parish of Hadnall. In the draft plan there are no changes for the Parish of Upton Magna. However, it should be noted that the division now straddles parliamentary boundaries!!

Further details can be found by following the link by following the link: <https://www.lgbce.org.uk/all-reviews/shropshire>

THE BIG FOUR

The Redevelopment of the Riverside in Shrewsbury

The award of nearly £18.7M for the development of the Riverside area in Shrewsbury has enabled us to move the project forward in terms of time and over the summer there will be a number of public events being held to capture ideas from residents and the general public. We will also be publishing the Movement Strategy very soon. I have often said that the town centre plans are like giant Jenga, you have to get things in the right order and the Movement Strategy is a really important piece of work. Look out for this around the summer.

The Local Plan

The Inspectorate has agreed we have fulfilled our “Duty to Cooperate” which was the big hurdle we had to overcome. The inspection now continues. There is a significant amount of work still to be undertaken but we have recently had the public session which focussed on waste and minerals. We have yet to receive dates for the site-specific examinations.

The Future of Shirehall

It was agreed at a meeting of Full Council that we would be leaving the Shirehall for a new home in the town centre. I have made no secret of the facts surrounding this building, which is expensive to run, no longer fit for purpose and will be very expensive to refurbish in a meaningful way.

The Northwest Relief Road

The final public consultation period has now concluded, and we move closer to getting the application to Committee. I am still expecting the meeting to be held in early summer.

LOCAL MATTERS

The usual minor highway repairs and speed of traffic issues have come across my desk this year alongside chasing up matters reported by the Clerk.

I try to keep my annual Report fairly brief however, I have included (on the following page) a short report on all the things we are doing in terms of climate change etc. There is a lot of interesting stuff taking place so thought this would be a good opportunity to give you an update, but I won't read it out at the meeting!!

As always it has been a pleasure to work alongside Chair Phil, Clerk Alison and all the Parish Councillors.

As always, if there is anything you need to know you only have to shout.

LEZLEY PICTON

Shropshire Councillor for the Tern Division

May 2023

CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE ENVIRONMENT

1. Public EV charging infrastructure - Following on from our recent success in obtaining almost £1m of Government funding for EV chargers in our car parks and streets, Shropshire Council is now hoping to obtain additional Government grant money towards a new post to help develop and implement an EV Charging Infrastructure Strategy and bid for further funding, including installations at additional public car parks, park & ride sites and parish halls. We plan to publish a 'Public EV Charging Infrastructure Strategy' and supporting resources later this year, including a 'toolkit' to help the public and businesses with their understand of the technology. We may also be able to bid for funding to support the installation of a strategic network of more powerful 'rapid' chargers to provide faster top ups for both visitors and local communities alike. This is expected to help ensure that Shropshire towns remain attractive to visitors who may need to charge electric vehicles during their stay. We have recently asked Parish and Town Councils to identify potential locations for public EV chargers in their areas.

2. Community Benefits from Solar Farms – Shropshire Council is working with SALC to develop and distribute guidance to help Parish and Town Councils and Parish Meetings to engage with the prospective developers of new solar farms to help them to negotiate a package of community benefits if appropriate.

3. Roof-mounted solar and the Big Solar Co-op – Shropshire Council already has 27 roof-mounted solar arrays on its buildings and is currently reviewing its own estate to identify potential opportunities for additional arrays. Shropshire Council has also provided a grant to the not-for-profit Big Solar Co-op to provide free advice to businesses and community organisations (including parish councils) wishing to explore the installation of solar panels on appropriate roofs in Shropshire. The capital costs of the installation are also met by Big Solar Co-op and funded through crowd funded investment, with cheap, renewable energy being supplied to the host organisation at 10-20% below market energy costs.

4. Business Energy Breakfast – Shropshire Council recently organised an event at Shrewsbury Town FC (which Ian attended) to provide local business with access to authoritative advice and practical information and guidance on sustainable energy solutions, funding sources and energy and environmental auditing. Additional value has been derived by filming the event and making the footage more widely available through the Council's Youtube channel.

<https://newsroom.shropshire.gov.uk/2023/03/energy-resilience-affordability-and-sustainability-top-of-the-agenda-for-business-leaders/>

5. Cool Shropshire - Shropshire Council has grant funded a local environmental consultancy, E4 Environment, to provide a free environmental support scheme for local micro businesses and SMEs looking to be a little greener and start their carbon reduction journey. Businesses registering with the scheme will receive tailored advice about how they can reduce overheads through increased efficiency, enhance their reputation, and connect with like-minded businesses to collectively make a difference.

6. Biochar plant – Shropshire Council is exploring the potential to develop a demonstrator project around the manufacture of biochar from natural woody materials from grounds and highway maintenance using a pyrolysis plant which cooks (rather than burning) the woody feedstock to reduce it to pure carbon. There is a rapidly expanding market for the resultant biochar, which as well as storing carbon which would otherwise be released to the atmosphere from burning or natural decomposition, can be used to improve soil quality and in the manufacture of low carbon building materials. The process can also generate internationally recognised 'carbon offset credits' for sale to organisations wishing to offset their carbon emissions.

7. Area-based Carbon Insetting – Shropshire Council has recently applied for Government funding to develop and test a mechanism which would provide a local alternative to the purchase of internationally validated carbon credits in rainforest countries, allowing them to invest in projects which reduce emissions or capture and store carbon in Shropshire (including through the manufacture of biochar above). This is called ‘insetting’ as opposed to ‘offsetting’. If successful, this project has the potential to revolutionise how local climate action and carbon reduction measures could be funded.

8. Supply-chain emissions modelling – 94% of Shropshire Council’s carbon footprint is generated by what it buys in from suppliers. The Council has commissioned detailed modelling of everything which it has purchased during the last 3 years to help it to identify the goods and services which generate the most carbon. The Council will then work with its suppliers to help them to improve their carbon performance and proposes to update its corporate procurement policy to identify carbon performance as key consideration in the procurement process.

9. Green hydrogen feasibility – It is widely recognised that current battery technology is unlikely to be suitable for heavy goods vehicles due to issues of range, weight and recharging infrastructure. This is relevant for council buses, gritters and refuse vehicles in particular, but is also crucial for the agriculture, construction and road freight sectors. The Council is therefore working with Kier and their technology partner Protium to explore the potential to establish a small-scale demonstrator hydrogen fuel manufacturing facility, co-located with renewable energy generation on Council owned land. This work may also identify a separate network of potential refuelling facilities in strategic locations. It is expected that, if proven, such a facility could then be replicated locally, for example at the scale of an individual farm business.

10. Battlefield heat network – Shropshire Council has commissioned consultants to develop proposals for a local heat network which would capture and distribute waste heat from the Battlefield Waste to Energy plant to nearby businesses. It may be possible in future to extend the network to include local community buildings and social housing. The study is expected to report later this year and if a business case is established, will inform a bid for Government funding towards the capital costs of the heat network.