

ANNUAL REPORT 2020

Firstly I must apologise for the delay in providing my Annual Report . This has been caused by my absence from work due to sick leave since late January . I am pleased to report that following a long course of treatment I have been given the all clear in July and have started a phased return to work since then taking up my County Shire hall duties as Portfolio holder for Communities Rural affairs and regulatory services .I am hoping to restart my town and parish council meetings in the Autumn .

The last 16 months could not have been predicted ,prior to Covid 19 we were struggling with budget constraints increasing pressure on Highways , Adult Social Care and Children services and our direction was very much in preparation for Brexit following the General election last December and along with Covid I will address these in order .

Highways

With the reduction of the Highways budget by £5 million year on year over the past few years to support Children and Adult services we have seen a huge deterioration in the highways , mirrored with some very wet and cold winters .Following the General election the government has provided the council with an extra £11 million for improvements and we are now seeing far more maintenance on the roads in the south than we have seen for many years , The money granted by government is time limited and this has meant we haven't always been able to provide the normal weeks of notice for upgrades and repairs and they have been done under emergency powers. This was relayed to T and PCs last winter and the overwhelming support was to get the work done .We are constantly lobbying government for more funds and very often they are granted dependent on our previous delivery. Our main contractor Kier has been under scrutiny and we have re negotiated parts of the contract to improve our ability to contract out where services not being reliably supplied and we are in a far better position to monitor the performance of the contract .

There has been criticism of the Council commissioning an external consultant for highways due to the cost involved . I can understand the sentiment however it has certainly been a case of you get what you pay

for . The person employed who has now left has created year on year savings on our methods and commissioning environment which has far outweighed his cost many times over and these are year on year savings . It is now obvious following the departure of The Chief executive that internal restructures were not producing the outcomes both financially and for the delivery of service.

Adult and Children services

Shropshire like other councils nationally are suffering greatly with the rise in costs and numbers of people needing care in the service .In Adult care it is noted that people under 65 who require a high level of care are a severe resource on the council .This is due to those historically born with severe issues now have a greater life expectancy than they did say 20 or 30 years ago . There are more adults receiving care aged under 65 than those over .I believe this trend will only continue one way and unless the government totally overhauls Adult social care the future of local government may be in doubt as this service cannot and shouldn't be serviced and balanced by local council tax increases. Council Tax cost is becoming unaffordable for many families and needs to be supported centrally just like education is delivered.

The support the VCSA in Shropshire plays and our communities makes us a very resilient place to live and this is mirrored in the delivery of services for these sectors .

Finance

Last year the Budget came in virtually on balance on a spend of circa £668 million .This has been after further cuts and modernisation on the digital platform .The next year will be challenge and will be covered in more detail later under the Covid response .

Brexit

We are planning for Brexit which at present is stabbing in the dark and we have received government grant to employ 2 further staff in public protection which will oversee the changes in food production and livestock movements and the new regime of licensing etc when border controls etc change . We have to where possible support the industry and ensure we can keep the economy and food production mobile and constant . Watch this space .

Local Plan

The final consultation on the Local plan is out for consultation until the end of September and I would urge all councils to review their position and respond if need be. The main concern is land supply for housing which we have to submit to government to cover us unto 2038 . To date Shropshire is in the top 20 of councils actually delivering to their plan with Oswestry and Shrewsbury having major growth in housing more than since 1945 on average year on year . The government has issued a white paper on housing which I shall hopefully bring more information in due course .

Boundary review

The council has agreed at full council in February to do a full boundary review of Town and Parish councils starting in May 2021 post local elections . We are all aware of the fact that local boundaries have not been looked at for over 120 years and that there are several issues including councillor vacancies , development boundaries around the market towns , increased responsibility and role of local councils, to name but a few . The time has come to look at boundaries but also to look at the future role and responsibilities of local Parish and Town councils and how they have changed over the past decade since we became unitary .

Rurality

I sit on the national organisation RSN (rural services network) for Shropshire Council which constantly looks at the differential between rural areas and urban areas and lobbies Westminster to change their policies for a more even balance towards the rural areas which are underfunded greatly compared to the urban areas. Prior to Covid we were in anticipation of the fairer funding review to be announced which we believed would have brought some level of fairer funding to the rural areas . This has been halted due to the pandemic and it appears we may be back to square one . The elephant in the room is funding for Adult Social care which takes up around 48% of the whole councils budget . If this is moved to the NHS as muted this may mean a complete overhaul of the role of Local Authorities as a lot of our time , energy , policies are moulded around welfare of our citizens , watch this space! There are several options open to government. However it works out we will constantly lobby for a fairer funding agreement . Post Covid with people working from home as long as we can get good broadband

installed the rural areas may well hold more weight in the overall delivery of GDP for the country and therefore could influence better funding .We are in a very changing world and many public sector bodies believe the pandemic has made us embrace technology and put us 5 years ahead of where we would have been .

Covid 19 Pandemic

As we are all aware this year will be remembered for the Pandemic . The response Shropshire Council has made has been exceptional and I congratulate all the staff for their resilience and ability to respond to local need. The Community Response Team has specifically responded to local needs from delivering food parcels and prescriptions to signposting people to solve various needs which were difficult to facilitate in lock down .I must also congratulate all the Town and Parish councils in their response to their communities along with the VCSA and organisations like COCO (Compassionate Communities) and their response to the pandemic and local needs . The way we have responded has shown us a complete new way of working with the majority of work being undertaken from home with MS Teams and Zoom becoming the norm. To that end I am pleased that Shropshire Council has decided to disseminate from the centre at Shire Hall and give a far more localised support with Local hubs being introduced for staff to hot desk and to have a far more county wide presence than just at Shire hall . Shire hall will be disposed of over the coming years with a new civic hub in Shrewsbury and other styled hubs around the county . This again will introduce savings for the council.

The government has grant funded the majority of local grant supports provided by the council to local business and organisations yet we are still down by £3 million with extra support and staff provided and this is on top of the costs incurred from flooding earlier in the year .

The council has set up Three Covid related committees , Firstly The Covid Engagement group which oversees the pandemic within the county and monitors local data , infections and controls local outbreaks within the county and possible lockdowns. As portfolio holder for communities I sit on this groups and am updated regularly on the county wide situation . How the Craven Arms spike was handled was an exemplar with no new infections in the wider community and it has been seen as an exemplar of good practice by the central Cabinet office of Government.

The other two committees are to deal with the fall out from the pandemic and its impact , the one committee is Business and Economic Development ,with the other being Social Welfare and Community resilience which is the one I sit on . The group is already identifying key issues around employment , anxiety , social isolation , homelessness etc .

Community and Rural strategy

We had started developing the strategy prior to Covid and had consulted greatly with T and PCs and the VCSA and our core outcomes of the strategy to be able to deliver a county wide approach to Shropshire , not leaving any area left out , with developing the place plans to look at the priorities of the strategy as told by the consultees . The core issues are Mental Health at any age, Isolation and loneliness, right job in the right place , same with homes, how to move people around the county ,how do we embrace our large ageing population and see them as an asset , and how do we keep younger people in the county and provide youth provision . The solutions will be different in many parts of the county but how we work with our communities and all partners as an enabler will be key in providing solutions for this great place in which we live .Watch this space .

There are probably many areas I could comment on but above is a brief outline on what is on my agenda at present .I have my portfolio report going to Council in September and will forward a copy of that also in due course.

Thanks to Madge for her help while I have been off ill and for all your kind words of support .Look forward to seeing you soon remotely or in meetings .

Cllr Gwilym Butler