

The year 2020/21 will not be a year that will be forgotten due to the worst pandemic world wide in the last century. How Shropshire council has worked through the pandemic and supported individuals and families in hardship, voluntary and community sector, Town and Parish councils and businesses across the county should be applauded.

Technology has played a large part in this and along with other government services such as Health the progress that has been made places us probably 10 years ahead of where we would have been if the pandemic hadn't happened. This includes remote working and the rapid change in workplace need and the benefits and issues it raises for staff and customer users. How we work in the future with our Towns and Parish Councils may well evolve over the coming months.

The council last Autumn set up working groups to understand the impact of the pandemic and how we should support the county moving forward. This includes working with partners in Health, DWP, Education, Police, and the business sector. We have monitored the impact of unemployment , furloughed staff, universal credit numbers, Police issues with Covid compliance in the communities and the changes needs of our population in the county with access to services but also isolation, mental health concerns, safeguarding for Adults and especially children who have been at risk with the schools being closed . This has seen our count of children in care rise by around 200 hundred in the past 2 years putting extra pressure on our budgets.

We have learnt a lot about our economy and how especially in the south of the county it is heavily reliant on Hospitality, Accommodation, Tourism and self employed SMEs with a lot of people employed in the Gigg economy .This has seen a disproportionate rise in Universal Credit applicants compared with the rest of the Region with Bridgnorth being a particular hot spot in the Region . How this emerges from the pandemic and gets back to some normality is something the Councils hosted working groups are monitoring closely as if not supported will have a huge impact on rent arrears, debt, homelessness and vulnerability of Adults and Children. We are very much in a prevention is better than cure agenda with central government grant being coordinated to support our High Streets and jobs.

I believe as we come out of this pandemic there is going to be a lot of people who will continue to feel anxious and we will need to help our neighbours ,families ,and communities to work together, be kind and help each other to get back hopefully to some normality .

With people now having the opportunity to work from home more which is better for the climate agenda we are already seeing a shift from City life to demand for country living and how this continues and the impact it may have in a positive way on the vibrance in our market towns and local employment can only be seen as positive. However we are seeing a huge increase in demand for housing across Shropshire and prices rising rapidly which in turn creates issues for us to supply suitable and affordable housing for those employed in essential lower paid jobs in our Market towns and especially those supporting our ageing population which is disproportionately high compared to other urban areas . It is concerning that by 2030 only nine years away that our county will have more people over 65 than under, and how we prepare and plan for this is vital.

The signs for the economy are generally good in Shropshire. Up until the elections part of my cabinet portfolio was to oversee the planning process and department. Considering the months of lock down we have experienced in the past financial year it is interesting to see that we have delivered planning income in excess of that in the financial year 19/20 without lockdown .Land searches are also up on the previous year confirming the buoyancy in the housing and building market .It was noted that in March this year we received 621 planning applications in March alone. The highest March figure ever up around 20% on normal. This mirrors the national shortage in some building goods. I would estimate builders and associated qualified trade people will be very busy for the short to medium term and how we translate that need for qualified trade people needs to be a big part of our local education strategy for our upcoming youngsters.

We all know Roads are in need of major attention and although we are seeing some major repairs and resurfacing locally there is much to be done. Historically over the past 3 years we have had to take out £5million year on year out of the High ways budget to support vulnerable people along with not recovering from the impact of the beast from the east has left our rural roads and lanes in disrepair. From a Government funding view we are very poorly funded. our overall population is circa 450,000 people the same as Nottingham city council. However because existing funding calculations are based on density of population to historically help regenerate the cities and slums we get around £175million less funding than Nottingham City.

Prior to the pandemic we had persuaded Government through our involvement with the Rural Services Network to undertake a fairer funding review. That was supposed to be launched in the last financial year but delayed with Local authority budgets now only been forecasted for 12 months ahead making medium to long term planning very hard. We are now seeing the start of the Governments Levelling up agreement and are lobbying hard to ensure the funding for rural counties like Shropshire is included in this agenda and not just the old declined industrial and mining areas. This in turn if included should help our budgets which in turn can get the roads improved.

The rural roads and lanes in many cases actually need a total re build and major infrastructure put in place and that is why many temporary repairs are undertaken until the major repairs are done. This is partly down to the neglect of surface dressings to prevent the decline due to funding but also due to the type and size of traffic using them, especially the increase in size of agricultural machinery. There are far more large ditches on the side of roads made by large vehicles than ever before and this will have to be addressed at some time. It is interesting to note that as we move to electric cars they are heavier than traditional combustion engine cars and what impact that will have on our highways will need to be understood.

Moving forward how the council deals with the climate emergency will be a major part of our strategies and core thinking with intended consequences .

I hope this report gives a taster and overview of some of the things as we move forward and should you want any further information don't hesitate to contact me. Gwilym.Butler@Shropshire.gov.uk 07801099015 and on Facebook.