

Annual Parish Report for Acton Burnell, Frodesley, Pitchford and Ruckley and Langley Parish
Council by Shropshire Councillor for the ward of Burnell Dan Morris April 2021

The Country entered lockdown from 23 March 2020 and Council Services were closed, delivered remotely or moved into emergency provision. Over two and a half thousand Council staff were required to work from home and/or make themselves available for redeployment. Business continuity measures were immediately put into place across the Council. Emergency spend was sanctioned, protocols to support suppliers, contractors and local businesses were implemented and a Council Tax deferral scheme was hurriedly introduced for the months of April and May. Lockdown was relaxed over the summer months followed by a further lockdown from 5 November to 2 December 2020 and a third national lockdown from 5 January 2021. The impact of Covid-19 will not be eradicated before the end of March 2021, meaning that the entire 2020/21 Financial Year will have been completed under unique circumstances with little clarity over how things were managed, certainly in relation to service delivery, as a result of circumstance as existed at that time, what will ultimately 'snap back' in the future and what was a signal of lasting change.

The Government announced multiple waves of funding and initiatives over the year, in response to the Covid-19 outbreak, and overall this funding appeared to cover the direct financial implications for the Council in 2020/21. The longer term implications for Council Tax collection and other vital income sources for the Council such as Business Rates, On-Street Parking and Cultural Services is, however, unknown. The requirement to deliver essential services to vulnerable people, and the infrastructure, overheads and running costs supported by this income have not diminished and have, in many cases, grown.

A look ahead to the 2021/22 Financial Year and beyond indicates the potential for significant change on the horizon for the Council at a local level. Council elections are due in May 2021 bringing to an end the current four year term and with it the need to set a new four-year plan. The Financial Strategy cannot be created in isolation and needs to reflect the Council's priorities, not set them.

There is considerable uncertainty beyond the 2021/22 Financial Year, not only as the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic continues to play out but also due to the following expected changes in local government finance now timetabled for introduction from 1 April 2022:

- Fair Funding implementation – a fundamental re-evaluation of local government finance resulting in a redistribution of government and locally raised funding across local authorities based on needs and demand.
- Business Rates Retention – an expected shift from 50% local retention of business rates to 75% retention, with an equivalent reduction in grant funding and as yet unknown responsibility changes
- Full Business Rates reset – establishing a new baseline for business rates retention, reallocating growth since the previous reset in 2013.
- Comprehensive Spending Review – a process undertaken by HM Treasury to set expenditure limits across government departments and the wider public sector. The impact of this process has the potential to outweigh all other proposed changes.
- A potential further review or removal of the New Homes Bonus system, a mechanism that has helped deliver additional, albeit time-limited, funding for the Council to help offset the additional costs associated with housing growth across the county.

Government funding for Shropshire Council has fallen year on year. This is a fact that cannot be disputed or avoided. The taxpayers of Shropshire are required to fund a greater and greater amount

and proportion of the resources the Council needs to operate every year. In 2015/16 the Council set a net budget of £216m of which 55% (£119m) was funded by local Council Tax. Between 2015/16 and 2020/21 the amount raised by Council tax rose by over £44m raising £164m in 2020.21. The Council's net budget, however, has risen by just £10m over this time and stands at £226m in 2020/21. As a result, Council Tax increases have not increased the amount the Council can spend in real terms; instead a marginally increased net budget is now funded at almost 73% by the local taxpayer. The figures in this Medium Term Financial Strategy show that this trend continues.

At the same time, the cost of delivering services increases each year; partly due to inflationary pressures on staff costs and contractual obligations, but also from increased demand on services and changes in our demographic make-up that increase complexity of delivery and therefore cost. It is well documented that Adult Social Care costs (and increasingly Children's Social Care costs) in Shropshire are growing at an unsustainable rate. With reduced funding from government other service areas can only be cut to fund this growth. In 2020, with the need to manage the Coronavirus pandemic, the impact on Children's Safeguarding has been profound, and associated costs have risen at a faster rate than ever seen before. In 2020/21 64% of the Council's net budget is allocated to Social Care. This compares to just 43% in 2015/16.

On climate change the vision is for Shropshire Council to become carbon net-neutral by 2030 and assist in the ambition for Shropshire as a whole to become carbon net-neutral in the same year. Shropshire Council declared a climate emergency in May 2019 and agreed a Strategy Framework in December 2019 which established the objective of net-zero corporate carbon performance by 2030.

In December 2020 a new Corporate Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan was adopted. The documents outline a strategy to reduce Shropshire Council's corporate carbon footprint and promote adaptation measures to increase the resilience of the Council's services.

Measures to reduce Shropshire Council's carbon footprint and adapt service delivery to address the impacts of extreme weather events will significantly reduce financial risk and generate very real savings to the public finances in the medium to long term as well as delivering on our corporate responsibilities to the environment and our communities. Placing the initial focus on our corporate performance allows the Council to 'lead by example', using its direct and indirect influence to foster a positive response to the challenge of the Climate Emergency by other public and private sector organisations.

Preparation of the Strategy has drawn on both community engagement and in-house expertise. Initially through the Council's quarterly Sustainability Forum and latterly via the Shropshire Climate Action Partnership and the Council's 'Climate Officers Group'. The Strategy summarises the best available information about the Council's current direct and indirect carbon emissions and identifies the scale of reductions and residual offsetting which will be required to reach our objective of net-zero performance by 2030. The Action Plan element of the document reflects the findings of a community engagement workshop in February 2020 and identifies a range of potential actions and a pipeline of specific projects to help deliver progress.

Shropshire Council's investment plans continue at pace across all areas of the county. The big town plan seeks to set out how Shrewsbury will develop over the next 2 decades. The purchase of the shopping centres and re purposing of some of the buildings will seek to address the changing nature of retail and make our county town fit for the future. The North West relief road moves to its planning stages now, Mile end roundabout in Oswestry will receive large investment that will open up the region to housing and employment opportunities, and Ludlow Assembly Rooms (LAR) has recently

been awarded an additional £130,000 from Arts Council England, which will enable the venue to complete the new café's kitchen and purchase a new state of the art digital projector, both vital to its future sustainability. This funding complements Shropshire Council's investment and transform the iconic Ludlow Assembly Rooms into a financially and environmentally sustainable home for Ludlow's flagship rural arts and community centre.

The conditions of the roads continue to be a point of concern across Shropshire council. There is consensus across the council that underfunding can not continue, and I expect to see investment sums put back into the budget in the next term of the Council. In Acton Burnell, Frodesley, Pitchford and Ruckley and Langley Parish Council some repairs have been done, but all too often the same issues come back to revisit us, there is also a backlog of complaints on the MyShropshire website. Rest assured that all council members are fully aware of the shortcomings and continue to press to get real change.

It doesn't seem 4 years since I started on my journey to represent this Parish, and the Ward of Burnell, in Shropshire Council. I am very grateful for the level of support shown to me both by the Parish Council and residents of all villages in the Parish, and whilst I do seek re-election in May 2021, if I am not re-elected I will remain proud of the fact that I have been involved in trying to assist the parish in trying to navigate the complex structures of local Government!!