

SHROPSHIRE COUNCIL REPORT 2024 ---- Nick Hignett.

Pontesbury Parish area is represented by 2 Shropshire Councillors—Myself, Nick Hignett, and Councillor Roger Evans. I have written the report this year, and any errors or omissions are mine.

I am sure it will not be a surprise to any of You that the major focus of Shropshire Council, this year, has been on financial stability, and this will continue into the next financial year and beyond, especially if there are no changes to the National funding agreements for Local Government.

This is not just a problem in Shropshire. Councils across England are suffering, and our plight is made worse due to the rural nature of where we live. We, like our nearest neighbours in Telford, Staffordshire, and Herefordshire, are having to increase Council Tax, increase fees and charges, and yet cut services which will include making redundancies.

There is no doubt that for most top-tier councils who have responsibility for social care services, upwards of 75% of their budgets are spent on this area. The demand, cost and increased complexity is pushing up these costs all the time, and high inflation adds to the financial difficulties.

We have a Legal and Ethical responsibility, whatever the costs, to look after our most vulnerable people.

FINANCE AND RESOURCES—The Council has saved £41 million of spend in this financial year, which is more than has ever been achieved in a single year. The Council is seeing unprecedented demand in Social Care in the current year, with demand estimated at £26 million over and above the predicted increase in last year's budget. This amount makes up part of the further £62 million savings needed for the 24/25 financial year.

The finances are already cut to the bone, and the proposals set out in the budget will see more visual changes to Residents than have been seen to date. Council tax will rise by 4.99%, which includes a 2% adult social care precept. For the average band D property in Shropshire, this will mean an extra £1.57 a week for Shropshire Councils' part of Council Tax bills.

A charge will be introduced for emptying Green bins, and parking fees will rise, as will all discretionary fees the Council charges.

There will be a complete review of some service areas. Some services may be reduced, some may cease altogether.

Shropshire Council will look to leave the Shirehall, as it will be a much smaller Organisation, and this will save up to £1.5 million a year in running costs. Temporary accommodation will be sought, until the proposed Multi Agency Hub is built in the Riverside Development. The decision by Chester University to withdraw its Shrewsbury Campus from the Guildhall gives another option for relocation.

We are quite possibly moving into an Era where there will be an opportunity for Town and Parish Councils to deliver more services locally, if desired, and precept accordingly, as Shropshire Council will need to concentrate its delivery on statutory services.

The Capital programme continues, and this is different to annual revenue spend, and is funded mainly by Developers' contributions and external grants. This includes £84 million for Housing, £27 million for Schools and £40 million for Highways.

CLIMATE CHANGE<ENVIRONMENT AND TRANSPORT—Grant Funding.The Climate Team has attracted Government capital and revenue grant funding awards totalling £4.3 million to date.

Low Carbon Community buildings-the design of new buildings such as the new swimming pool at Whitchurch is increasingly being informed with reference to lifetime energy and carbon performance,to minimise carbon emissions and running costs.

Electric Vehicle Chargers-Shropshire Council has one of the largest EV charging infrastructure programmes in the midlands,and will soon own and operate over 300 chargers in its car parks,with a further 500 planned for future years.

Business support—The Council is working closely with community climate organisations and local businesses to offer free climate advice and training for local firms,as well as free consultancy advice on the installation of solar panels on large industrial buildings.These support programmes may also help local companies supplying goods and services to Shropshire Council to reduce their emissions.

Waste—waste is the biggest contract in the Place Directorate .Significant savings must be made,including charging for green waste,and the potential closure of 2 out of 5 Household Recycling Centres.These closures will be subject to public consultation and scrutiny for alternative cost-saving measures.

Shropshire Residents produce a lot of waste.On a national league table SC is listed as the second highest producer of waste per household,so bottom of the table.However,when green waste is removed from the equation,Shropshire sits in the top third.Shropshire Council is also one of the best Local Authorities for recycling.

Smithfield/Riverside---The first stage of the Smithfield/Riverside regeneration project has been approved,enabling the delivery of a landmark new Public Park in Shrewsbury Town Centre.Financed from the pot of almost £19 million of levelling up fund money secured from the Government,this preparatory work will see the demolition of the Riverside Shopping centre and former Medical practice,paving the way for key enabling works on site for future phases of the scheme.Demolition work is expected to commence in the summer,with construction of the new park due to get underway before the end of 2024.

PLANNING---The Draft Local Plan is still going through due process.A report will go to Cabinet in April or may,and it is likely there will need to be a period of consultation,focussing on any additions.It is still envisaged that the plan will be adopted in early 2025.

CHILDREN AND EDUCATION---Early Help Teams are focused on making sure that the right support is put in place for Families as soon as it is needed.this new streamlined service offers targeted advice by ringing 0345 678 9021.

An increased offer to Foster Carers,as well as drop-in “Fostering Info Sessions” have been held in order to increase numbers.As a result of this initiative,additional Foster Panels have been added to deal with the increased interest.

Active Travel around Schools continues to implement 20mph zones outside allocated schools.

Secondary School places-----2,974 pupils applied and 2,667 were offered their first preference.Of all who applied 98.4% were offered one of their preferences and 1.6% offered an alternative.

HOUSING AND ASSETS---Shropshire Council's two owned housing companies,STAR and Cornovii are performing well,with over 200 homes under construction across the county.These are delivering high quality affordable homes,low energy homes,local needs homes and specialist accommodation.

Homelessness continues to be an area of high pressure for the Council,with about 250 households in need of temporary accommodation at any one time. This rise in demand is broadly in line with with Local Authorities across the Country.

Specific concerns around Housing in the most rural parts of Shropshire is the current focus of several projects within the Council.There is work being done to find ways to make small-scale development of affordable homes in the smaller villages viable,a team is looking at how the Council can support Housing Associations to retain/replace Their properties in rural areas,thus improving standards.

HIGHWAYS---At the last meeting of Shropshire Council,held on 29th February ,finance was approved to enable a Full Business Case to be prepared.This is now being worked on,with a target date for completion of September.

The Government recently announced extra spending of £136.4 million for Highways projects in England,over the next 7 years. Councillors and MPs will have a say in how that money is spent,with Town and Parish Councils expected to be involved in the process.

We are firmly in "Pothole Season",and I know everyone can cite persistent areas of bad Highway,particularly on Rural roads.However,we are seeing a long-term decline in the number of potholes—from over 8,000 in may 2021 to less than 5,000 in February 2024.

Shropshire Council has been shortlisted for a National Award for the impact of its new approach to maintaining and improving the County's roads.The Council is one of the finalists for the " innovation" award at the LGC (Local Government Chronicle) Awards 2024,with the winner set to be announced in June.

FINALLY----- On behalf of Myself and Councillor Roger Evans,We would like to thank all of the Parish Councillors and Officers for working alongside us to represent Our residents.

That concludes My report,but happy to take questions.