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	Public

Healthy People

Healthy Economy

Healthy Environment

Healthy Organisation

Report of the Portfolio Holder Finance, Corporate Resources and Communities

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1. Synopsis

The Portfolio Holder for Finance, Corporate Resources and Communities has responsibility for many functions delivered by the Council including Legal Services, Finance, Workforce, Member Development, Communities, Shropshire Local and Town & Parish Councils, Voluntary and Community Sector Assembly. This report provides an update on key work undertaken since July 2023.

2. Executive Summary

2.1. The Report of the Portfolio Holder Finance, Corporate Resources and Communities provides a comprehensive update on the key work undertaken since July 2023. This report highlights the significant strides made in various areas, including performance reporting, external financial reporting and budget setting, enhancing the visibility of budget planning through automated dashboards.

2.2. The report also underscores the importance of maintaining strong performance in collecting council tax and business rates, disbursing household support grants, and reconfiguring the Legal team to better support the wider organisation. Additionally, it emphasises the ongoing efforts to update the training offer for staff and Councillors, making it more accessible and expanding online/digital training opportunities.

2.3. Looking ahead, the report outlines the aims and objectives for the future, including supporting budget managers to plan on a multi-year basis, repositioning finance business partners as expert advisers, and broadening budget planning and management skills across officer and member groups. The report also highlights the continued focus on delivering Human Resources policy updates, maintaining strong performance in revenue collection, and enhancing the training and development opportunities for staff and Councillors.

2.4. In summary, this report showcases the dedication and collaborative efforts of the Finance, Corporate Resources and Communities Portfolio in driving financial stability, operational efficiency, and continuous improvement across the organisation.

2.5. Some of the key work undertaken within the Finance, Corporate Resources and Communities Portfolio and details of the aims and objectives for the future are provided in the pages below.

2.6. Service areas included within the Portfolio:
- Finance
- Revenues and Benefits
- Commissioning Development and Procurement
- Treasury management
- Insurance
- Corporate Policy
- Legal Services
- Democratic Services
- Elections
- Internal Audit
- Information Governance
- Scrutiny
- Member Development
- Occupational Health and Safety
- HR Admin and Payroll
- HR Advice and Organisational Development
- Risk & Business Continuity
- Programme Management
- Shropshire HR – Commercial Activity
- Shropshire Local
- Civic Crowdfunding
- Town & Parish Councils
- Voluntary and Community Sector Assembly

3. Recommendations

To receive the report and raise any issues as appropriate on the performance and activities of the Finance, Corporate Resources and Communities Portfolio.

4. Finance

4.1. **Finance**
- Supporting an innovative cross-party approach to budget preparations the 'Collaborative Budget Working Group' was formed to enable a more informed discussion to develop amongst senior councillors, which is especially helpful ahead of the imminent local elections. It is hoped that the key elements of this can be translated into other contexts and provide a template for further cross-party working in the future.
- Monthly financial monitoring reports were provided to Cabinet, through an efficient process for drafting and publishing the report based on pre-existing data sources.
- Supported the development and implementation of a range of 'dashboards' including automated data-feeds, availability to all budget holders, and a range of views of financial information including
    - Savings delivery
    - Budget performance (with a range of possible data filters which can be applied)
    - Spending on pay, agency, and supply chain (again, with filters), to individual transaction level
- Developed a new approach to budget planning, focussed around structured conversations with individual service blocks, effectively developing service led medium term financial plans, which can continue to be updated alongside the overall MTFS in the coming year. This helps move financial planning away from a focus on in-year challenges and more to planning longer term service delivery.
- Responded to the annual financial settlement from government and the impact of changes in funding set out in those.

Aims & objectives for the future

- To continue to support budget managers to plan on a multi-year basis using the data published via the dashboards.
- To reposition finance business partners as expert advisers and reduce the amount of low-value work being undertaken.
- To continue to broaden budget planning and budget management skills across officer and member groups.

4.2. **Revenues & Benefits**

- Revenues and Benefits teams were the best performing in the West Midlands region in 2023/24 and look likely to perform highly again this year.
- The team are currently implementing changes to boundaries ahead of billing for 2025/26.
- The benefits team also supported disbursement of discretionary housing payments (£300k) and over £1.6mil in household support fund and flood relief funding.
- The team have implemented a new document management system which is improving the functionality of the revenues database, especially in the context of staff working on a hybrid basis.

- A further innovation was the removal of the in-bound email facility. This was removed because, while it creates an easy way to contact the council, the communication is often unstructured and requires excessive staff time to understand and process the information in the email (which can be complex). This has been replaced by more structured on-line forms which residents can use to provide updates (e.g. personal circumstances, contact details, etc.) This has enabled staffing reductions to be made, but without impacting on the ability to support residents and collect income. Residents can still contact the team through the call centre, as previously – these changes are specific to those residents who already use digital formats to contact the council.

- Plans for the coming year include delivery of similar household support payments and targeting a rapid approach to payment of these claims by using a greater level of automation in processing them. These schemes are a vital part of tackling rural inequalities

Aims & objectives for the future

- Several developments are in hand for the new year, including
  - Returning Council Tax collection rates to 98% and maintaining business rates collection at over 98.5%
  - Reducing the average time taken to process benefit claims
  - Local management of the Household Support Fund
  - Increasing the number of accounts set up for e-billing
  - Increasing take up of direct debit payments for council tax
  - Increasing scope of online contact forms to improve customer journey and the capture of information.
  - Promoting customer self-service where appropriate and possible and enabling more contact to be digital
  - Maximisation of the billable taxbase (e.g. empty property reviews)

4.3. **Treasury Management**

- Treasury management includes the oversight of the Council's day-to-day cashflows, as well as its long term borrowing and investments.
- The Council currently has overall borrowing just over £400m, although £153m of this is 'internal' (i.e. through available cash balances). Reducing cash balances in recent years (e.g. exhaustion of COVID grants) has resulted in the council now needing to take out borrowing externally. Current external borrowing is well within prudent limits and stands at c£330m (a combination of PWLB and market loans).
- A 'buffer' level of available cash is retained to ensure that the liquidity of the council is protected. As appropriate, some of this can be lodged overnight (e.g. with the debt management office, 'DMO') to secure some interest receivable.
- During 2024/25, two of the market loans have been renegotiated to deliver an in-year benefit of £0.977m.
- The council currently has £26m invested, with a maturity structure of between 0 and 1 month, at average rates of 3.76% (weighted average).

Aims & objectives for the future

- Considering the ongoing volatility in the economic outlook, the treasury management team will continue to ensure that the council's banking and financial arrangements deliver the best value for money, taking account of the priorities of security before liquidity, and liquidity before yield.
- In terms of management, the team will transfer to the finance team, where its will be more closely aligned to day-to-day exchequer activity and capital programme estimation and funding.

4.4. Insurance

- The main insurance programme underwent a tender exercise for 1st April 2024, resulting in a change of Insurer across the main classes of business, and annual premium reductions of c.£110k year-on-year.
- High claims volumes continue, with 908 claims registered in 2023/24 and 646 to date in 2024/25 (up 9% year-on-year). 88% of the claims relating to Highways incidents. 256 open claims under investigation, with reserves of £3.35m attached.
- Since the introduction of in-house claims handling, around 1,500 claims have been handled within the team – saving approximately £250k in external fees, plus a further £45k through betterment settlement negotiations.
- Power BI reporting has been introduced to support speed and transparency of claims information.

Aims & objectives for the future

- Continue to manage the insurance programme to ensure that the Council remains adequately protected and compliant with statutory requirements for insurance.
- Continue to explore the availability of Cyber insurance and additional support services.
- Ensure a sufficient internal fund balance is held to support decisions on the programme, and to meet claims exposures.
- Launch of online claim form and adoption of AI to reduce the admin burden on the Insurance Team and support timely processing of claims and their investigation.
- Continue to work with services across the Authority to identify claim exposures and utilise resources available from Insurers in respect of risk consultation days/added value under the contract of insurance.
- Provision of updated web pages and training to ensure transparency and adherence of the requirements under the insurance contracts.

5. Legal and Governance

5.1. Legal Services

- Following a period of staff turnover in legal services the revised structure and leadership has been embedded focusing on aligning support around delivery of The Shropshire Plan with team staff development work taking place. supporting the corporate governance of the Council and specific legal

requirements of service areas, for high-profile projects, extremely challenging planning applications and the challenges arising in the work to transform services to address the Council's financial position.

- Extremely high level of demand for the child-care team in advising on safeguarding cases continues. The high numbers and complexity of cases are not abating leading to significant budgetary pressures arising from the employment of locum staff and counsel fees. The revised structure is now in place with some recruitment success for junior and experienced staff who are proving to be integral to the team caseloads. Workforce planning has identified a need to further increase staff to address locum and counsel spend.

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Aims & objectives for the future

- Continue to support and develop new staff to support service areas.
- Deliver a pilot with other local authorities in the West Midlands to create cost saving collaborative approaches,
- Continue to monitor and review engagement of external lawyers and collaborate with other authorities on joint procurement initiatives with a view to seeking efficiencies and savings.

5.2. Democratic Services

- Supporting the transition of member meetings to Guildhall
- Undertaken recruitment and training of education admissions appeals panel volunteers
- Supported review and lessons learnt regarding activation of London Bridge
- Supported the Elections team with significant national electoral events and now significant work underway to support the delivery of local elections and member transition and induction
- Annual admission appeals process delivered in the face of ongoing significant demand.

Aims & objectives for the future

- Delivery of member transition and induction process in May 2025
- Further develop the member training offer to include a mid-term programme
- Roll out an effective member handbook.

5.3. Elections

- Successful delivery of PCC and snap UK General Election
- Ongoing delivery of reforms under the Elections Act 2022 e.g. voter ID including development of communications strategy.
- Staff trained and using new online portal to authorise voter authority certificates, overseas voter applications, and absent applications
- Completed European voters write out and update in accordance with the revised rules for voter registration post Brexit
- Supported parliamentary and local boundary reviews and prepared revised registers
- Revised team structure in place to develop leadership and management capacity

Aims & objectives for the future

- Successfully deliver local and town and parish council elections in May 2025
- Consolidate team structure and continue to support and develop leadership capacity
- Maintain and aim to further improve canvass return rate.

5.4. Commissioning Development & Procurement

- Completion of re-commissioning of a new model for the procurement of Agency Staff
- Developed further the Council's Social Value approach and offer linked.
- Led on the drafting and publication of the Council's Annual Anti Modern Slavery Statement.
- Development of Commissioning & Procurement approaches to Carbon reduction and contractors.
- Input into the transformation programme around third party spend and potential new model for Commissioning, Procurement and Contract Management
- Training for and preparing our processes to meet the new Procurement Regulations to be implemented in 2024,

Aims and Objectives for the future

- Further inputting into the transformation programme around third party spend and potential new model for Commissioning, Procurement and Contract Management.
- Continue to review of commissioning and procurement strategies considering Transformation, The Shropshire Plan, Social Value and Carbon reduction aims.
- Review updating and publication of Annual Modern Slavery Statement
- Further develop and implement Carbon Reduction outcomes within our Commissioning & Procurement processes.
- Finalise preparations to meet the new Procurement Regulations to be implemented in late February 2025 and ensure we meet all requirements as they come into effect during the following 12 months.
- Enable the completion of a Social Value statement for the Council and develop further other SV initiatives

5.5. Internal Audit

- Internal Audit continues to deliver the agreed plan of Internal Audit work for 2024/25 to provide assurance around Council activities, systems and processes. Performance against the plan is good with a projected 90% of planned works to be concluded by year end.
- Internal Audit continues to add value to the Council in its delivery of bespoke pieces of work, including sharing best practice and providing advice on system developments.
- Whilst the lower available resources has had a significant impact in year, core audit work has been undertaken or is planned in the final quarter to enable the

Chief Audit Executive (CAE) to form an overall opinion on the Council's internal control environment and report this accordingly.

Aims & objectives for the future

- Successfully complete remaining planned internal audit activity for 2024/25
- Develop the 2025/26 Internal Audit Plan following confirmation of the new Council structure and operating model.
- Realign Internal Audit resources to the new Council operating model and structure.

5.6. **Information Governance**

- The central Information governance team continues to coordinate compliance with data protection and FOI/EIR legislation.
- Work is currently underway to implement a new system for FOIs across the Council with an indicative implementation data of the end of March 2025. This is part of the wider Customer Journey programme.
- The team continues to provide information governance advice on new system implementations, partnering arrangements and legislative compliance.
- The team continues to support the Council in its response to FOIs following the 2023 ICO enforcement notice.
- The team continues to implement the Information Governance Framework.

Aims & objectives for the future

- Successfully implement the new FOI system
- Support the Council in responding and adherence to legislative requirements.
- Continue to deliver plans to ensure that the Information Governance Framework is implemented.

6. Workforce & Improvement

6.1. **Occupational Health & Safety**

Wellbeing update:

Our Wellbeing Plan consisted of a number of activities and signposting to support staff wellbeing, as follows:

- Wellbeing webinars on financial wellbeing topics including the promotion of the West Midlands' Financial Wellbeing Week, energy saving advice for winter months mental health at work programme webinars Developing and published onto LEAP – Neurodiversity and further menopause modules.
- The Wellbeing Officer attended a staff conference and team meetings to signpost and support the importance of managing their wellbeing and resilience.
- Work also continues to move the entire 'Wellbeing Corner' over to SharePoint to enhance the user experience.

Occupational Health Update:

- Work continued to support managers with return to work for employees, managing absences and Ill health.
- Commercial activities were increased especially health surveillance for local companies.
- We secured a new fast track physiotherapy service provider for staff with musculoskeletal disorders.

Health and Safety Update:

- Crime Prevention advice and support around rough sleepers, antisocial behaviour and discarded drug paraphernalia within Shrewsbury and surrounding areas.
- Annual monitoring in the summer of health & safety standards on school construction projects.
- Work on the Cardinus system for training and risk assessment of Display Screen Equipment Users and identifying suitable equipment suppliers, following the assessments.
- Health and Safety Policies and Arrangements were review ed and updated.
- Statutory health and safety training and first aid training was delivered.
- Input into the Covid Public Inquiry completed in conjunction with the Director of Health and Wellbeing and Legal and Procurement Teams.

<u>Aims & objectives for the future</u>

We will enable a safe and healthy and resilient workforce through:

- Providing professional and effective advice, guidance, training and monitoring on safe working practices and environments to all service areas considers new ways of working, changes in guidance and accident data.
- We will continue to provide supportive health, wellbeing, and resilience interventions to our employees through our Wellbeing Plan.
  Carry out health and safety premises inspections/interventions
- We will provide access to occupational health support

6.2. **<u>HR Admin & Payroll</u>**

Continued resource provided to support the Council, Maintained Schools, Academies and external customers with all aspects of HR Admin and Payroll associated queries, tasks and development.

Supported an increase in Academy conversions, with the shift towards Academisation looking to continue. Whilst many were planned, complexities in negotiations between the Local Authority and DfE resulted in a number of late conversion date changes

Internal processes continued to be reviewed, supporting the ongoing changing state of the Council, with right-sizing and process efficiencies at the forefront of all activity.

Work allocations under constant review, as a direct consequence of "Getting it Right" (GIR), "Getting Leadership Right" (GLR) and service reviews.

Significant process efficiencies made within the team, generating additional capacity to support increased internal demand linked to right-sizing (VR/Re-Structures/Leavers and establishment control.

The team have taken on a number of administrative heavy tasks from within Children's Services, including the administration of all Fostering DBS checks therefore enabling efficiencies and capacity to front-line teams.

Recruitment activity has reduced slightly throughout the year, with the Council experiencing the same national issues all employers are facing with difficulty in recruiting. Many service areas have continued to require additional support with recruitment activity, which the team have taken steps to streamline, and provide greater visibility, and real time updates to managers. The team continue to explore opportunities to reduce time to hire and centralise some administrative tasks, aiding a better candidate experience.

Internal demand, and ERP system issues highlighted in the Payroll Audit still require substantial support from the team to support corporate and Schools staff in using ERP system to ensure staff are paid correctly. Many system processes remain under review alongside the identification of any possible system improvements. Significant time and resource have been invested in resolving several processes and areas of the system that weren't accurate or working as expected, with focus being made on end-user experience. This work remains ongoing as part of the wider ERP review.

Internal decisions made surrounding the pay structure and salary sacrifice schemes still generate significant additional work for the team, including reconciliation with finance and the need to ensure cost neutral to the Council.

Commercial activity has been limited due to the internal pressures the team faced. During this time, service offerings have been reviewed and costed accordingly. Opportunity for future commercial activity is being considered as part of wider Council-led decisions regarding commercial services. However, with the need to ensure full-cost recovery, it has already become evident that competitors (Telford and Wrekin Council) are in a different position and therefore external customers have been lost as a consequence.

Supported HR Advice & Organisation Development with establishment control work and the VR programme.

Administered backdated pay awards for NJC and Teachers Pay Grades, including associated arrears.

Aims & objectives for the future

- Develop commercial offering and work alongside suppliers.

- Continue with process reviews and support the wider organisation with GIR and GLR at the forefront of all activity.

- Recruitment and retention (links with HR Advice & Organisation Development), attract, hire and retain individuals – development of 'Shop Window' to increase our Employer brand as an attractive employer to work for via our recruitment website, onboarding, development and for those wishing to leave have a positive off-boarding (exit) process.

6.3. HR Advice & Organisation Development

- Won Public Service People Managers' Association (PPMA) award for best learning and Development Programme for the GLR Programme.

- Getting Leadership Right (GLR) Programme – 343 senior managers have completed the first phase of our GLR Programme to develop and address our managers in delivering the aspirations of The Shropshire Plan. Further cohorts planned from 2025 onwards aligned to the new operating model.

- Leading Through Change Essentials, Future Planning for Managers, and Conflict Management training sessions have been created in response to organisational need and wider GLR offer.

- Developed a Single Central Record (SCR) Workshop sessions to support with Ofsted inspection for schools includes onsite SCR audits of SCR/Personnel file.

- Development of our Shropshire HR webpage and a dedicated page on the Shropshire HR webpage created Shropshire HR – Education.

- Trained over 300 people internally and externally via Shropshire HR.

- Policy Development – Capability and Probationary, Smoking at Work, Harassment and Bullying, Domestic Abuse, Recruitment Policy, Redundancy and Restructure, Notice Periods, Special Leave, Maternity, Adoption and Surrogacy, Paternity, Shared Parental and Deferred Pension Benefits.

- Updates to the Pay and Grading structure (schools and corporate) from April 2024 in line with national employer and TU agreement.

- Reorganisation and Recruitment – Supported in the region of 12 organisational changes, 5 academy conversions in the last 12 months. Supported and advised 10 schools on the process of recruiting a new Headteacher during the current academic year.

- Developments in the recruitment website to attract candidates to work, streamlined application form and improvements to the onboarding / induction

process. With development in the off-boarding process to provide valuable data and experience to support in future improvements and our Employer brand.

- Supported PwC with Establishment Control – one version of the establishment and re-sizing activities.

- Development of managers and employee re-sizing toolkits to support with organisational change and future planning.

- Upskill (Apprenticeships) – 75 starts, 72 corporate and 3 in maintained schools. Apprenticeship Levy transfer- supported 6 businesses to access levy transfer: x8 starts in Health and Social Care Sector, x1 in Electric Services, x1 in Digital and Creative, 8 starts in a maintained school who has recently converted to an academy- Education and Childcare, x2 In STAR Housing- Business and Administration, x9 Shropshire Fire & Rescue Services- Protective Services.

Starts by directorate:

Directorate	Starts – Professional Development	Starts New Recruits	Total No. of Starts
People	33	4	37
Place	17	2	19
Health, Wellbeing and Prevention	2	0	2
Resources	10	4	14
Schools	2	1	3
Total	64	11	75

Aims & objectives for the future

- Support our organisation with re-sizing to becoming a more financial sustainable council.

- Continue with the development and embedding of GLR across our managers and workforce within the organisation. GLR will equip our staff to tackle the challenges they face within their service / team and organisationally.

- Support our customer base both internally and externally (including Schools) with their HR Advice and Organisational Development needs.

- Increasing employee engagement and productivity by providing opportunities for skills development and career growth via our Apprenticeship-First approach and our Early Career Strategy to support the next generation entering the workforce.

- Recruitment and retention (links with HR Admin & Payroll), attract, hire and retain individuals – continued development of 'Shop Window' to increase our Employer brand as an attractive employer to work for

6.4. **Risk & Business Continuity**

- Reviewed and modified the Opportunity Risk Management Strategy to reflect organisational changes. 2024-updated-orm-strategy-review.pdf (All priorities).

- After completion of the move of all operational, project and strategic risks into SharePoint together, further development of PowerBI reporting to provide live data and status of our entire risk environment. This enables risk owners to be accountable for their risks and the ability to review, monitor and amend risks when required (All priorities):
  - 11 strategic risks – reviewed and reported on bi-annually (June and December).
  - 103operational risk registers containing a total of 1101operational Risks – reviewed and reported on bi-annually (May and November).
  - 549 current project risks across 52 project/programme risk registers – reviewed and reported on for project board meetings.

- Enhanced our business continuity management arrangements with tactical plans for HR (Human Resources), Finance, Assets & Estates, Adult Social Care and Children's Services (All priorities).

- Maintained and enhanced the Business Continuity Group comprising senior managers to consider business continuity impacts and the management of these to sustain business and service provision (All priorities).

- The team continue to be involved in the activities of ALARM, Embrace Risk (national risk management organisation) both nationally and regionally, which puts the authority at the forefront of risk management for developing best practice. Saskia Richardson is a voting member of ALARM.

- At the ALARM National Conference, the Risk & Business Continuity Officer was awarded the Rising Star Award (June 2024) . Risk Awards | ALARM (alarmrisk.com)

Aims & objectives for the future

- We will review our Business Continuity Programme and all relevant plans (overarching Strategic Business Continuity Plan, Tactical Plans and Business Impact Analysis/Service Recovery Plans)..
- We will review the Opportunity Risk Management Strategy to ensure it aligns with the Target Operating Model.
- We will assess how our strategic risk exposure aligns with the Target Operating Model and Shropshire Plan to ensure we deliver against the priorities and mitigate associated risks.
- We will introduce the roll out of the Risk Assurance module once the restructure is complete.
- Get mandatory status for our Risk Management LEAP module for necessary officers and members.

6.5. **Programme Management**

- The Office of the Chief Executive (OCE) was set up in 2023/24 to act as the 'engine room' of the Council and to support the delivery of the Shropshire Plan. From June 2023, the OCE has been led by a new Assistant Director for Efficiency and Transformation.

- As a priority, the OCE has established a Programme Management Office (PMO) to focus on delivering our transformation programme and ultimately our savings. It does this through providing priority-based project development, resource coordination, delivery, benefit tracking, governance and risk management, all within an agreed best practice project management framework.

- In addition to the in-house team, additional capacity and skills are provided by a Strategic Transformation Partner (Price Waterhouse Coopers). As part of a 'Transformation Ecosystem' they help to ensure pace, delivery and outcomes as well as providing transferable skills and knowledge to the council staff they work with.

Aims & objectives for the future

- A transformation programme is now being delivered, categorised into five cross Directorate themes, each Sponsored by a member of the Executive Management Team. These themes are:
  - Adults
  - Children's
  - Commercial
  - Customer
  - Target Operating Model (TOM)

- The Strategic Transformation Partner has been supporting these transformation themes (as well as savings delivery) in three ways:

- A Digital Delivery Unit that supports the delivery of a more consistent customer journey, that is automated and digitised where possible, resulting in reduced contacts and increased self-service.

- A review of our Third Party Spend, with the ambition to ultimately buy smarter and buy better as well as to look for opportunities to aggregate contracts and stop buying, where appropriate.

- Designing a sustainable Strategic Operating Model and a plan of how this might be implemented. The model is effectively the basis for how we will become the council we need to be for a healthy future for Shropshire, recognising that we will be a smaller organisation overall, doing the right jobs, in the right way to prioritise delivering services for the communities who need us most, in the most efficient way we can.

- Alongside work on the Operating Model, considerable work is taking place across the council to review and resize the organisation. This 'resizing' work includes identifying and removing vacant posts; a voluntary redundancy programme; a senior management restructure and defining opportunities to resize by stopping, pausing, reducing or improving service delivery. After we have taken the steps needed to ensure immediate financial survival in 2024/25, the Operating Model will enable us to achieve longer term financial sustainability and emerge from our challenge as the modern, efficient and sustainable council we need to be.

6.6. **Shropshire HR – Commercial Activity**

- Planned and delivered our fourth Leadership Conference which brought over 120 local, county and nationwide businesses and leaders together for another thought-provoking leadership conference in Shropshire.

- Generated a commercial income of £138,773 via Shropshire HR in the last financial year.

- New contracts for health surveillance established with SME's in Shropshire.

Aims & objectives for the future

- Continue to improve the service offer to external customers as well as developing new business opportunities.

6.7. **Scrutiny**

- During 2023/24 we progressed he implementation of the action pan agreed by Council to implement the recommendations of the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (CfGS) led Scrutiny Improvement review.

- As well as supporting the new Overview and Scrutiny Committees, there was a focus on a smaller number of more strategic topics linked ot the delivery of the Shropshire Plan. These were looked at in greater detail in investigations where smaller groups of Members were supported to do the work. Some notable examples were River Water Quality and Rural proofing of Health and Care.

- Other approaches that have successfully enabled investigations have included looking at topics across a number of committee meetings, allowing the whole committee to develop their understanding of issues and contribute to policy development, such as Social Housing and the Housing Strategy.

- A key feature of effective overview and scrutiny is the following up on progress and impact of the implementation of agreed recommendations. This was flagged as an area that highlighted for improvement with the CfGS. Regular follow-up is now a feature of the work of the overview and scrutiny committees.

- Overview and Scrutiny must have a focus on continuous improvement to help ensure it add value to the Council and communities. A six month review was carried out in December 2023, and was shared, for discussion and agreement, with the Executive Management Team EMT and the Scrutiny Chairs Group, which includes the group leaders, and included recommendations based on the evidence arising. The six-month review sought feedback from Members and senior officers and used many of the same questions that the CfGS asked to help track and evidence progress. Feedback showed a positive direction of travel for the first 6 months of the new approach.

Aims & objectives for the future

- To embed and consolidate good practice in effective Overview and Scrutiny.
- To carry out a 12-month review of Overview and Scrutiny on an ongoing basis.
- To ensure that a focus on continuous improvement of Overview and Scrutiny and achievement of impact is maintained
- To deliver a good and comprehensive New Member Induction programme on Overview and Scrutiny so that committee, members and officers can hit the ground running following the Local Elections.
- To have ongoing Member and officer development in place to support the achievement of effective Overview and Scrutiny.

7. Communities

7.1. Civic Crowdfunding

- Shropshire Council continues to work with Spacehive, a UK dedicated civic crowdfunding organisation and platform. The Spacehive model works with a starting grant for projects, funded by UKSPF, to give groups reassurance that their project could be achievable once donations are received. It becomes clear which projects have community buy-in and generates more information on the issues that are important to people.
- The approach offers the ability to leverage additional funds towards local areas improvement projects and supports community engagement and resilience.
- 15 projects have been fully funded to date, 5 are currently crowdfunding and more are expected to launch shortly.
- To date £85,304 has been raised from nearly 1000 backers to match the UKSPF funding allocated. £55,773 of UKSPF funds allocated for the revenue communities fund have allowed projects to be delivered of a total value of £128,798.
- More than 699 people have been engaged across 12 projects spread across Shropshire, with 124 volunteer roles developed or supported, 64 community events delivered, and 226 hours of training has been provided through these projects.

Aims & objectives for the future

- Complete the current UKSPF programme, delivering the outputs, outcomes and evaluation required for the UKSPF funding streams.
- Hold workshops to promote Crowdfund Shropshire and encourage project ideas to be submitted and assess the next round of project bids to support through Crowdfund Shropshire.
- Exploring a future fund to support further rounds of crowdfunding with town and parish councils using their Neighbourhood Community Infrastructure Levy as the starting grant.

7.2. **Town & Parish Councils**

- The Council has continued to support and engage with the Shropshire Association of Local Councils (SALC), supplying speakers and updates regularly to their meetings, to ensure that this remains a strong channel of communication for the council with key community partners.
- Local councils have contributed positively to council policy development and service monitoring over the last year.
- A brief survey of all local councils in Shropshire was undertaken in 2024 to seek their engagement in addressing the council's challenges in provision of local services.
- As a result of this outreach, a number of local councils are now actively working with Shropshire Council to support different service priorities in their communities, in particular in relation to Street Scene services.
- Some further local councils have also agreed to additional precept charges to support local services provided by the Council, such as Church Stretton's support for the local library and leisure centre.
- The Council is currently working with Shrewsbury Town Council to delegate grounds maintenance functions in the town to them, so that they can take leading responsibility for this activity.

Aims & objectives for the future

- The programme of engagement with town and parish councils will continue to identify and develop opportunities for more efficient and effective local service provision, acknowledging that the financial challenges of Shropshire Council will require broader service and funding responses with community partners in future.
- The planned delegation of services to Shrewsbury Town Council will be monitored, with a view to using the process and final delegation agreement as a template for further delegation or devolution of services to local councils in future.
- Support from local councils in the form of precepts to sustain local services will continue to be sought and applied to priority assets and services, with monitoring reporting provided to funding councils.

7.3. **Voluntary and Community Sector Assembly (VCSA).**

Shropshire Council's work with the Voluntary and Community Sector Assembly continues to play an important part in maintaining strong partnership working between sectors.

Core work includes:

- Co-ordinating the Voluntary and Community Sector Assembly (VCSA), organising quarterly Board meetings and working with the Chair and VCSA Board to set agendas and annual priorities.
- Holding regular meetings with the VCS Assembly Chair and Vice Chair (or Joint Chairs) to support the day-to-day management of the Assembly and manage key issues and requests from members and partners as they arise.
- Supporting the VCS Assembly's Forums of Interest including new forum start-ups and applications to join the Board.
- Responding to representation requests, working to find and organise new representatives. Maintaining an up-to-date record of VCS Assembly representation arrangements.
- Delivering communications to the VCSA members including a weekly newsletter.
- Managing the VCS Assembly website and other webpages, intranet pages and communication feeds such as email addresses, X (twitter) account, Facebook account, and other VCSA social media accounts. Participating in radio opportunities in partnership with InTune Radio.
- Issuing of regular funding round ups using the GrantFinder license.
- Managing enquiries to the VCSS Assembly email address.

Recent events and project work:

- The VCS Annual Assembly was well attended in November 2024. Highlights included the sector's representation on 19 task forces and steering groups, participation in 10 forums of interest, the addition of 35 new members, funding projects through Crowdfund Shropshire, and the distribution of 74 weekly newsletters. Interactive workshops gathered feedback on strategic priorities, and two new co-chairs, Pete Ezard and Bev Baxter, were announced. Presentations included updates on the Community Covenant Pilot Project by Charlotte Hollins and the Rural Art Hub by Joseph Schneider.
- The State of the Sector survey collected data from 52 VCSE organisations in Shropshire, revealing key insights into the sector. 68% of respondents said their expenditure increased and 65% of respondents said the demand for services have increased. It showed that the majority VCSA members were appreciative of the communication and support offered by the VCS Assembly and were confident in collaboration with the Council. Additionally, the survey found that Shropshire's VCS organisations buck the national trend of declining volunteer rates, with most organisations recruiting more volunteers than the year before or remaining the same. This shows the strong community spirit in Shropshire and demonstrates the ongoing commitment from individuals and local communities to make a difference locally.
- Other than the work on Crowdfund Shropshire, a key project more recently has been the development of the draft Shropshire Accord (described in more detail below).

Key Project – The Shropshire Accord

A working group has been developing the Shropshire Accord as a draft document. The Shropshire Accord replaces the Shropshire Compact. Shropshire Council's Compact was last reviewed in 2014 but its effective application continued well beyond that date. It is only in the last few years, particularly since the pandemic,

that momentum has been lost. As Shropshire VCS Assembly started work to review and replace the Shropshire Compact with the Shropshire Accord, work followed nationally to develop The Civil Society Covenant. More information here: NCVO Civil Society Covenant. Shropshire representatives participated in a national consultation which closed on the 12th December 2024.

The Shropshire Accord is a formal agreement between the Shropshire Council, public bodies, and the Voluntary, Community, and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector. The Accord is designed to foster collaboration, partnership, and mutual accountability across sectors to improve services and outcomes for the community. It establishes shared values and principles. The purpose includes strengthening partnerships, aligning priorities across sectors, enhancing opportunities for collaboration and promoting accountability.

The draft Shropshire Accord covers 14 themes:

1. Independence (and political neutrality)
2. Working with Volunteers
3. Equality and Diversity
4. Impact and Social Value
5. Information Sharing
6. Emerging Needs
7. Place-based Working
8. Community Buildings and Assets
9. System Working, Signposting and Referrals
10. Commissioning and Grant Funding
11. Decommissioning Well
12. Capacity Building and VCS Infrastructure
13. Partnership and Representation
14. Communication and Engagement

Aims & objectives for the future

- There are plans to hold a workshop for Elected Members to discuss the development of the Shropshire Accord.
- Engagement is currently underway to present the draft document at various partnership meetings and boards. An engagement survey is open here: https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/ShropshireAccordFeedback
- Work to produce a second draft, finalise and present the Shropshire Accord for approval and sign off will not take place until after local elections in May.
- Work will continue to implement the VCS Assembly's annual action plan and to focus on key issues and activities currently being overseen by the VCS Assembly Board.

List of Background Papers (This MUST be completed for all reports, but does not include items containing exempt or confidential information)

Local Member:	All

Appendices

None