

Councillor Gwilym Butler – Portfolio Holder for Flourishing Shropshire Communities

Introduction

The purpose of this report is to summarise a number of projects and programmes that are ongoing and which contribute to the Flourishing Shropshire Communities Programme. The Flourishing Shropshire Programme is an important component of our transformation and will bring the Council, through Elected Members and partnership, closer to communities.

In challenging times it is vital that the Council draw upon and encourage self-reliance and innovation within our communities. The Flourishing Shropshire Programme is designed to achieve this and learn how we can accelerate and improve our practice in the future.

Capacity Building with the Voluntary and Community Sector

For the past two years, Shropshire's Voluntary Sector Assembly has worked closely with the Council to help make the sector as strong and sustainable as possible, fit for the future in the context of substantially reduced funding for the public sector. This, along with the localism agenda, produces opportunities for the voluntary and community sector.

Shropshire Providers Consortium - www.shropshireprovidersconsortium.co.uk

New commissioners in health and policing, as well as organisations like Shropshire Council, are taking a more commissioning-led approach to work with the sector. Anticipating this shift, Shropshire Providers Consortium has now been launched, bringing community and voluntary sector organisations together to win business for the county's voluntary sector in an increasingly competitive market. It pools their experience, skills and knowledge, and brings commercial skills to fill a gap in expertise.

It is a purpose-built vehicle run by and for its membership, giving them greater negotiating capacity, ability to respond to commissioning and win as much business as possible. It will encourage the development of good practice, and facilitate peer to peer support. It is already submitting bids for key contracts, pooling the collective talents of a range of VCS organisations, each able to play to its strengths. It is being seen as a beacon across the Country and has been used as part of the evidence given to the Government Select Committee on Co-operative Councils.

It means commissioning organisations now have easy access to quality-approved, contract-ready expertise, working collectively for the people of Shropshire. Complementing the creation of ip&e, this will ensure as much spend as possible is captured and retained within the county, as well as winning business from outside Shropshire.

Development of the VCS Assembly

This has focused on strengthening the forums of interest, with new forums being established or considered to support including;

- Criminal Justice (to advocate a clear role for VCS organisations with the new Police and Crime Commissioner)
- Sport and Physical Activity – working with Shropshire Football Association and Energize
- Interfaith – building on the Interfaith Forum and Churches Together Shropshire
- Heritage and Visual Arts Network

Another key priority has been to develop closer links between businesses and the voluntary sector. A ‘Dragon’s Den’ style event brought five local private business ‘dragons’ together with six local VCS organisations and social enterprises. They pitched to the dragons, asking them for pro-bono business support. In the end, all were successful in ‘winning’ this support and, critically, in each case both the business and VCS organization has benefited from working together. This featured in the national press as an example of a new way of working.

As one example, Autonomy, a charity dedicated to raising the awareness of Asperger’s syndrome won help from PCB Solicitors. Autonomy’s aim was to get legal advice on getting legal status. In return they have helped train PCB staff on how to work with to people with Asperger’s syndrome or ADHD.

Parish and Town Councils

Over the past year, Shropshire Council Members and officers have worked closely with the Shropshire Association of Local Councils (SALC) and parish and town councils to build stronger and more effective working relationships and joint understanding.

An example of Shropshire Council working with and devolving responsibilities to Town and Parish Councils is land transfer in Shrewsbury. The Town Council is able to maintain local parks and countryside at much lower cost than Shropshire Council and with greater local accountability through its Elected Members. Consequently, Shropshire Council is transferring parks and countryside to Shrewsbury Town Council which will save a substantial amount of money for the Council tax payer.

Development of the online planning portal now means parishes can access real time information on planning applications, recognising the needs of parish councils. A series of workshops have helped co-design this system and as of now, 26 parish and town councils have moved across, with a further 8 saying they mean to soon, reducing costs and improving access.

With next year's local elections in mind, we are working with SALC to develop and deliver a campaign to encourage interest in standing for election and high voter turnout. This will focus on explaining the new role and powers of parish and town councils, particularly shaping local investment through Place Plans, driving decisions on Community Infrastructure Levy and other funding sources. We are hoping to provide the required training to them.

A new graduate placement, shared with the voluntary sector team is working on improving communication capacity for SALC including use of social media. A highly successful 'Digital Futures' event was held in September, wholly funded through sponsorship, looking at the potential for social media to help transform how organisations like Parish Councils connect with citizens. Following on from this we are starting to work with a small group of interested parish clerks and councilors on what sort of IT capacity parish councils will need in the future.

Local Joint Committees

Local Joint Committees have been meeting for a minimum of twice per year throughout the County. This is an opportunity for both Shropshire and local Town and Parish Councillors to meet and discuss issues with the public.

During 2012, £288,400 of funding has been approved and allocated to important projects locally, ranging from art, festival and sport development to training for young people and the improvement of community assets such as open spaces and village halls. In all just under 400 projects have been funded so far this year with one more formal round of applications to be considered.

Local Joint Committees have been involved greatly in the consultation of the SAMDev, Core Strategy and Local Development Framework. In the future we need to understand this role in producing place plan returns around the market towns.

The Local Joint Committees continue to be a valuable resource for networking with a significant number of public and voluntary bodies.

Equality – Tackling Hate Crime in Shropshire

Shropshire is leading nationally innovative work to increase our awareness of levels of hate-crime through a multi-agency approach – firstly making it as easy as possible to report incidents and secondly – adopting a zero tolerance approach to action. A short film, made by students of Shrewsbury 6th Form College working with the Council and based on real life experience of hate crime in our county will be shown at Council.

Working with a range of community groups and voluntary organisations, we are increasing the number of places across Shropshire where people who feel vulnerable or afraid will be at ease, feel safe and have the confidence to tell someone what they are going through. We are particularly keen to work with disability groups, recognizing that hate crime against people with disabilities is vastly under reported, especially where the victim has a learning disability or mental health issue.

We are also increasing links with schools and colleges – including independent and Academy schools to become more engaged and ensure they have appropriate support in place to support staff as well as students.

Hate Crime is discussed at a local level through Bronze Level Tasking meetings and a multi-agency group, chaired by Cllr Jean Jones, meets every other month to review reported incidents, recommend action and agree the work programme.

Working with communities to help shape the future – Place Plans

Shropshire Council gives communities real influence over development and investment in their areas. At the centre of our approach is the Place Plan - which comes from an annual conversation between the local Shropshire Councillor, parish and town councillors, and the community about key investment priorities – what's really needed in their place to make it more sustainable and meet the demands of development. Place Plans must relate to the consultation with communities in the likes of Town and Parish Plans. Funding from the New Homes Bonus has been put into place to enable communities to create their own plans.

This means that there is now a direct link between a community identifying the potential for new development, and the opportunity for it to draw down money through the Community Infrastructure Levy to pay for infrastructure. Through the leadership of Cllr Mal Price, the extent to which this decision is taken locally, with control given to local Councillors, is a leading example across England. This mirrors how Shropshire is leading the way on localism.

During the last year, resource packs have been developed to explain what needs to happen, as well as a series of training events for councillors leading to more improvements in what we do. A resource pack and funding scheme to support Parishes and neighbourhoods which wish to develop or review community led plans to inform the content and priorities of the Place Plan is also now in place.

Place Plans cover areas identified by communities, representing a best fit of rural parishes associated with one of Shropshire's 18 market towns and other centres identified in the Core Strategy. Communities are increasingly coming together to discuss CIL and Affordable Housing spending decisions collectively and we are looking at how this can be made easier in future. Bridgnorth Town Council and Tasley Parish Council, for example, are coming together to look at the future of the town and their relationship as development happens.

Community Budgets

We are represented on the national challenge and learning network which has, in particular, involved work with Cheshire West and Chester who are developing a whole place proposal.

We are seeking to learn from emerging national practice around community budgets, and apply this to our place based intervention work, and think about the implications of both in the context of how locality working goes forward in Shropshire.

A key focus of Community budgets is to bring public sector partners together with the Business and Voluntary sectors to work collaboratively to improve outcomes for local people. With increasing pressure on public sector finances that means collectively reducing, and permanently removing demand for services by building community and individual capacity and resilience. PBI and family solutions link in on this as locally based projects that are seeking to reduce demand and strengthen partnership working on the ground. At the strategic level, there is a Leaders Board development programme centred around refreshing the Shropshire Community Strategy and strengthening the Leaders Board role as a central hub able to coordinate, support and drive forward collaborative working.

Local Learning/Member Development

The Focused Local Learning Programme was first established as a vanguard in January 2011 with the OPM organisation acting as external consultants, working closely with Members and providing support throughout.

The first phase of the programme involved Shropshire Council Members in eight divisions in the south east of the County. It was designed to help Members provide their communities with the support they needed to be able to do more for themselves in an era of reduced resources.

The programme was based on the beliefs that Members had the democratic mandate needed to provide effective leadership at a time of difficult choices; that they could provide communities with a link into the professional expertise of Council officers; and that Members were well placed in their communities to facilitate conversations and help build networks, whilst not 'taking on' everything themselves. Members, with the support of officers, undertook a variety of projects that enabled them to explore and develop their role as Community Leaders and facilitators. Phase 1 was successfully completed by the end of 2011 and Phase 2 was launched at a workshop event in March 2012.

The overall aim of Phase 2 is to build on Phase 1 and to continue creating social capital through connectivity and creating sustainable networks to enable communities to address local issues as financial resources continue to reduce and our aspiration is to get better value for money for the tax payer. Phase 2 also aimed to clarify the Member role in commissioning at the local level and develop Members' ability and confidence to play their part in commissioning for their community's needs. Phase 2 continues with the place based approach as it was anticipated that this would build the understanding of how locality based commissioning might work and Members' role in it.

A commissioning workshop was held in May with Members participating in the programme invited to attend to learn more about the principles of commissioning and why it is relevant for their role.

This programme is recognised as being nationally innovative. OPM and representatives from Shropshire Council were invited to present a fringe event at this year's Local Government Association Conference in June, entitled 'Unlocking Local Capacity'. Delegates heard about how all councils could make the most of assets, ideas and energies in local communities and how the more active, engaged, responsible society envisioned in the Localism Act needs more to achieve than just councils 'getting out of the way'.

Members participating in Phase 2 have been encouraged to undertake local projects that would both deliver something of tangible benefit to their communities and help to identify the implications for what is commissioned and the Member role in doing this. As with Phase 1 the projects have been varied and have evolved and developed throughout the programme. As a result of this work connections have been made with other work streams such as the Leaders Board and Place Plans.

Phase 2 is ongoing but already useful learning has come out of it and a full report will be available on the completion of the project. This programme has not been about trying to impose a strict method on how Councillors operate, but to encourage them, the officers they work with and other community representatives, such as Parish Councils, to reflect on how they approach local issues and who they involve to achieve solutions to local problems.

Business Transformation

The Council has continued to transform its business across all service areas, looking at how it can do things differently with different people, and how communities can flourish and become more resilient. Co-ordinated through Business Improvement, key areas of interest in 2012 which are covered in this statement have been:-

- Ensuring that the Voluntary Sector, Community Groups and Town & Parish Councils have the skills and capacity to both bid for and provide Council services in the future.

- Ensuring Members are enabled to work more closely with commissioners in their area so that services that are delivered in the area directly reflect that area's needs.
- Identifying the long term budget and service delivery impact of transformational activity in the Flourishing Shropshire portfolio such as changing the role of the Council, its partners, and communities in how they manage and live in their place e.g. through our Place Based Intervention activities.
- Establishing both the financial and social return achieved on investment made in local community projects (e.g. via the Market Town Revitalisation Programme).

Place Based Initiatives

Place Based Initiatives are being led by Area Directors. They are focused in some of Shropshire's most challenging locations. The aim is to bring multi-agency teams together and work with communities to solve local problems and reduce demand and cost to the public sector.

Place Based Initiatives are taking place in Bridgnorth, Ludlow, Oswestry, Market Drayton and Harlescott – Shrewsbury. The projects have been developed in each area to meet the need and demands of local communities. In Bridgnorth partners are working on a community plan, in Ludlow a multi-agency service hub is being developed. The partners in Market Drayton are tackling worklessness by working in a new, customer focused way. In Oswestry a multi-agency service hub is being created. In Harlescott a number of prototype projects are being run by communities and local voluntary groups including cheaper energy to avoid debt, local people into local jobs, recycling and a social enterprise to make beauty therapies affordable and accessible locally. The PBI project in Oswestry is to develop a new way of working to address drug misuse, in particular moving people from treatment (i.e. receiving methadone scripts) to recovery (being drug free). The PBI projects are led by local ward Members linking this work to the Focussed Local Learning programme.

Market Towns Revitalisation Programme

The current MTRP was launched in September 2010 with a capital budget of £3.5m providing 6 Market Towns with a fixed proportion of a £2.5m allocation, 11 Market Towns with a share of £0.5m, and a competitive grant scheme of £0.5m.

Around 94% of the total budget has been contracted with projects to date with the majority due to spend by the end of March 2013. An extension for spend to March 2014 has been agreed by Cabinet for approved grant schemes and for projects within the 6 Market Towns.

The main aims of the MTRP were to put local Shropshire Elected Members at the forefront of revitalising their towns and to deliver economically focussed activities.

The MTRP programme has presented a ground breaking opportunity to get true localism working across all the towns. An important principle of the MTRP is that the process has been led by Shropshire Council Members, working collaboratively with their respective Town and Parish Councils, other local stakeholders especially businesses and members of their communities to identify and prioritise projects.

The types of projects that have been developed to date within the MTRP that can demonstrate tangible economic impact include:

- Tourism and local projects to attract additional visitors / encourage longer stays by existing visitors
- Development of new business office space / incubator units
- Grants to businesses e.g. B&Bs, shop improvements, and grants for start-up and existing businesses.
- Additional training opportunities
- Social Enterprises / Community facilities to provide new training or volunteering opportunities, retain core services or develop new activities to ensure their long term sustainability
- Direct grants to businesses that can evidence that MTRP is the last funding resort for their expansion / growth

The MTRP has led to a Joint Economic Board being established in Oswestry which brings together Shropshire Council with Oswestry Town Council, the Chamber of Commerce and local industry. Although in its early stages a number of initiatives have been explored/established such as:

- the Business Start-up Scheme;
- an offer from a local business for a number of unique metal sculptures;
- the Bed and Breakfast Scheme;
- the Empty Shops Scheme.

These have generated local compliments about the amount of joined-up thinking and working this shows.

Lessons Learnt

The original objectives and anticipated outcomes for the MTRP was too broad resulting in a number of locally led projects coming forward which did not deliver the key economic outputs that were anticipated. In contrast, the Rural Challenge Fund programme was administered through a competitive bidding round. The projects supported within this tranche have brought in significant levels of match funding and many more key economic outputs in comparison to some of the projects supported within the 11 Market Towns. A more focussed approach with specified activities and outputs would have provided better direction for applicants, and would have ensured the achievement of tangible economic impact.

The MTRP programme is a capital only grant scheme which restricted the range of activities that could be supported. A number of the capital projects in development required a long development lead in time or required additional capacity and support. A mix of revenue and capital grants for any future initiatives would enable a wider range of activities to be supported and developed in response to need and geared to deliver focused economic impact.

The matrix management approach has been successful particularly for the larger Market Towns through the nomination of a town link officer supported by a small team of officers collectively led by Business and Enterprise and the Area Directors.

Troubled Families

The national Troubled Families Programme was launched in 2011. In Shropshire we have renamed it the Family Solutions Programme to create a more positive feeling for the families and workers in our programme.

The Government has estimated that there are 455 troubled families in Shropshire. So far we have been able to identify 429. Shropshire is doing considerably better than other authorities in identifying families. Further families will be identified through the work of the Family Solutions Workers. A troubled family is defined as a household with three of the following four criteria:

- 1) A household with someone involved in crime or antisocial behaviour.
- 2) A household with someone who is workless or NEET.
- 3) A household with a child/children not attending school.
- 4) Any other factor which creates high cost/high demand on the public sector.

A cross partner, multi-agency team has been brought together by secondment. This team will be trained and equipped to work in a new way, coaching and encouraging families in chaos to turn around. A 'carrot and stick' approach will be taken.

Early prototype work is reporting excellent results with some of our most challenging families.
