

LEADER'S STATEMENT ON COUNCIL'S PROGRESS

Summary

This statement by the Leader provides an overview of the progress made by the Council in the first 12 months, together with comments on the planned response to the challenges that lie ahead.

Recommendations

- A. Council Members are asked to note the statement and to raise any questions of the Leader they might have on its contents.

The Council's Initial Progress

1. The past 12 months or so have been an increasingly busy time for the new council, as we successfully completed the transition to becoming a unitary authority. Managing these major changes well has ensured minimum disruption for the many local people who rely on the wide range of services we provide.
2. At the same time, we have delivered the significant savings identified as one of the important benefits resulting from having a single council for Shropshire. Equally importantly, we have invested also in a number of service improvements, particularly in these aspects of our provision which were formally the responsibility of the ex-District Councils, to ensure more consistent standards across the County.
3. Our arrangements for financial and risk management are strong, ensuring we provide real value-for-money for local people. We have set our first budget effectively, following extensive consultation, and continue to make major efficiency savings from the way that services are delivered and goods and services are procured.
4. At the same time, we have made successful bids for additional resources, such as the £140 million for extra care housing and have agreed an ambitious capital programme, to improve facilities for local people, including investment in new schools. This involves a longer term "invest to save" strategy also, as part of our Carbon Management Plan, which will reduce future energy costs and the Council's carbon footprint.
5. During this period, the quality of many of our services has continued to improve, with several winning awards and national recognition, such as our Integrated Children's System (Care First). This progress had been demonstrated also in a range of complimentary external inspection reports, including the recent one on our adult social care safeguarding, which cited several aspects of our work as exemplars of best practice nationally.

6. Important new policies have been developed to improve life for local people, such as the single (equalised) concessionary fares policy, and on Speed Management for Urban and Rural Roads, as well as the new Housing Association Policy and Choice Based Lettings Scheme.
7. These are just a small sample of the numerous ways in which the new Shropshire Council is starting to show how it makes a real difference to the lives of local people. The style of the Council is noticeably different too, with a more open and transparent way of doing business, and with greater involvement of local people, including children and young people, in the decisions that affect their lives.
8. The past 12 months have provided a welcome opportunity also to refresh the Council's relationship with its local partners. This has resulted, for example, in more effective collaboration with local Housing Associations, as well as with our local business community – who have welcomed the Council's understanding and support in the current recession. Similarly, we are starting to strengthen our joint working with town and parish councils, not least through the activities of our Local Joint Committees, which are showing greater potential benefits for the future. At a sub-regional level, discussions have started with Herefordshire and with Telford and Wrekin Councils on more extensive joint working in future.
9. Finally, it is worth mentioning some of the changes we have made inside the Council, to strengthen our political decision making processes and to better support elected Members in their various roles. These include changes in the format of Council meetings, to better hold the executive and scrutiny members to account, as well as in the current wide ranging review of our scrutiny arrangements. Work is planned also to review the support needed for the community leadership role of frontline Members, as "cabinet members for their own wards". These are further examples of where the new Shropshire Council is choosing its own ways of working, and is growing in its confidence.
10. For all these reasons, it should be no surprise that Shropshire Council is already being tipped as one of the new unitary counties capable of early success. We have come a long way in the past 12 months, but we know that there is still much to do. All Members can rightly take pride, however, in so quickly establishing a firm base for our future progress.

Fresh Challenges in the Year Ahead

11. Given the scale and speed of the changes to come shortly for public services in this country, there is little room for complacency. The pending "funding crunch" will affect us by next April, if not sooner, and will be the biggest challenge faced by local councils for a generation. It's effects are likely to be with us for at least the next 20-30 years, as the financial resources available to us are cut back significantly.
12. At the same time, public expectations about low taxes and improved services will place greater demands on us, unless there is a proper recognition of the need to create a new kind of "welfare society", (where people do more for themselves, for their family, and for their neighbours), rather than try to perpetuate the current welfare state. For this reason, after the General Election, we will need a fuller and more honest dialogue with local people about what the Council should (and can) provide in future.
13. This will need to take account of the rapid changes in our local population, as the number of older people grows to be greater than that for school age children for the first time. The rising cost of energy and the lifestyle changes we all need to make in

response to climate change will also need to be reflected more clearly in our thinking, as will the continued growth of new technology, which will change the way that local people choose to carry out their daily business, including their dealings with the Council.

14. These major pressures, in combination, will radically alter the way our staff work over the next few years. We will need to quickly explore new (cheaper and better) ways of doing things, as well as working more closely with local partners, such as the Police and Health Service to take out waste and duplication in the way that public services are provided in Shropshire.
15. In dialogue with local people, elected Members will need to decide which of the services we provide are most valued in protecting and enhancing our quality of life, as well as those which could be scaled back without real detriment. The Cabinet and the Council's senior managers are already at work on this, and proposals will come forward shortly as part of a new Budget setting process for 2011 onwards. This will start in the next few weeks and will make decisions on future resourcing requirements earlier than in previous years, as part of a continuous process which will identify savings as we go, rather than waiting until next spring.
16. This thinking on our use of limited resources will be driven by a revised Corporate Plan, which will be brought forward for Council approval as soon as possible. The Cabinet and the senior management team are already working on putting together an ambitious, three year Transformation Programme, which will form the core of the new Corporate Plan. This will demonstrate how, by changing the way we do things, we can make a more effective contribution to the activities of the wider Shropshire Partnership, and to the development of the sub-regional economy for this part of the West Midlands.
17. An initial report that outlines the main elements of the Transformation Programme will come forward for Members' consideration shortly. Each of the political groups represented on the Council has already received a preliminary briefing on this from the Chief Executive, and our staff and the trade unions are now being brought into this dialogue, which will need to be extended shortly to include our partners and, of course, local people.
18. This approach should enable us to agree more detailed plans by the Summer, ready for implementation in the Autumn. This is designed to help us get ahead of the likely funding cuts of a new Government, following the forthcoming General Election. On this basis, there is no doubt in my mind that the next 12 months will be an even busier period, and that the Members will need to work together closely if we are to continue to make good progress. I remain optimistic that our sound track record to date will ensure that the new Council is well placed to face these challenges ahead, and to continue to demonstrate that it makes a real difference in the lives of local people.