



<u>Committee and Date</u>	<u>Item</u>
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Portfolio Holder for Flourishing Shropshire Communities

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1. Summary

This new portfolio brings together a range of functions which are collectively revolutionising the community leadership role of Shropshire Council, helping build strong, resilient communities. It includes the support portfolios of Rural Affairs (Cllr Cecilia Motley) and Town and Parish Council engagement (Cllr Martin Bennett).

REPORT

Community Leadership

A major piece of work with elected members in the South East of the County has explored various aspects of the future role for Shropshire Councillors. The main issues covered have been:

- understanding and building community capacity to identify and meet future development needs
- working at different geographical scales – including focusing in at a neighbourhood level
- effective community leadership, recognising the complexity of each Shropshire community
- using this fresh local insight in other roles such as scrutiny and the executive

The programme has also reviewed how Shropshire Council can best support these roles for individual councillors, and what sort of development programme for community leadership is needed moving forward.

A learning event is planned for October, both to share more widely the experience of individual councillors, but also to inform a future work programme. Key early learning points are as follows:

Community capacity: The project found widely varying levels of capacity within communities to respond to the challenges they face. In some, very active local organisations are able to take an immediate need, with the councillor role being to network and support as required. In others, there's a clear role for the Shropshire Councillor to develop and orchestrate community resources, whether through conventional means, through social media, or alternative approaches such as local community radio.

The project has begun to identify a set of skills, abilities and resources necessary for communities to thrive including effective social networks – of friends, neighbours, workmates and others, of community associations – the organisations run by and for local people that make things happen, and of the looser interactions that people have with others when they are out and about in the local area. Using this insight, the project is developing a template to analyse the 'health' of a community and to identify what role the Shropshire Councillor, supported by officers, can best play to respond.

Geographical patch: The project explored supporting councillors to work across a wide range of different scales – from Neenton (120 people) to Claverley, covering half the division.

Most members are familiar with particular parts of their division and with familiar individuals and groups. The project found value in encouraging a wider assessment of their patch – identifying needs, strengths and weaknesses, supported by the Area Director and Community Action Officer, using information from the Intelligence and Research and Customer Insight teams to help provide evidence.

Community leadership

Supporting Councillors to adapt to this new role needs a clear understanding of development needs and the often softer inter-personal skills required to give effective community leadership. Whilst most members have absorbed a range of skills necessary to do the 'old' role, key areas identified for further development include;

- brokering connections at the council, and in neighbouring parishes to bring in specific expertise, e.g. planning, housing, external funding sources
- supporting and encouraging local people who are on the Parish Council or Parish Plan group to take on task for the benefit of the local community
- Helping local community leaders to design a good process for completing tasks – e.g who to involve and how, and how to design good meetings that are fit for purpose
- Bringing together different interests and views within the community at a meeting, ensuring the less dominant, forthright individual voices are heard effectively
- Personal skills of networking, relationship building, listening and questioning

Conclusions

All this learning will be an essential basis for refining the role played by Area Directors, Community Action Officers and others who interact with and support the part played by Shropshire Councillors.

Capacity Building with the Voluntary and Community Sector

VCS Joint Task Group

The Government's Open Public Service White Paper anticipates a radically increased role for voluntary sector organisations in the delivery of public services. The Localism Bill sets out specific new Community Rights to Challenge and Buy services which will also give VCS organisations new opportunities.

Shropshire Council and Shropshire Voluntary Sector Assembly anticipated these opportunities, establishing a Joint Task Group, chaired initially by the Deputy Leader and now by me to focus on designing new approaches to commissioning, performance management and preparing for the new community rights. Each sub-group brings together key council and third sector expertise to co-design approaches which reflect this new national context.

Key priorities for the groups are:

Commissioning:

- Co-develop a commissioning framework which includes how to use commissioning to build capacity in the sector

Performance:

- Co-develop new performance framework and guidance ensuring the council and VCS organisations are clear about what's expected, the basis for payments and a shift to an outcomes based approach

Community Rights to Buy and Challenge:

- Integration of these new rights as much as possible into our Neighbourhood Planning and Asset management approaches

Again anticipating the reform of public services, Cabinet agreed in June 2011 to allocate £100,000 to support development of capacity in the local VCS. This is specifically being targeted on three key initiatives; a contracting vehicle, support for forums of interest and enhancing the relationship with the private sector, particularly recognising the impact social enterprise can have on prosperity.

Reports on outcomes from this investment are being made by the Chair of the Assembly to the Joint Task Group.

Establishing a contracting vehicle

The VCS in Shropshire is very well developed with high levels of activity and capacity. A recent national survey, promoted by the New Local Government Network, showed Shropshire has the greatest potential of any upper tier/unitary council area to make the big society happen, largely because of levels of volunteering and social activism in the county.

However, for locally based VCS organisations to fully benefit from new models of public service delivery and contracting, a new vehicle needs to be established, enabling small and medium sized VCS organisations to bid, handling the complex legal and technical challenges they would otherwise face alone.

To take advantage of national funding opportunities, a Community Interest Company has already been established with an interim management group. The CIC will be developed to be representative of the Assembly and external expertise drawn upon to ensure the sector can take full advantage of the new context in which we will work.

Support for VCSA Forums of Interest

The Assembly already operate a range of specific forums of interest, improving networking across the sector within themes such as health and well being, community transport and the growing importance of social enterprises. Recognising the increasing reach and influence of the sector in context of public service reform, a new support post is being recruited to.

Extended partnerships

The Assembly recognised the importance of improving its relationship with private sector interests, particularly in the context of exploring the potential for businesses and large corporate organisations willing to invest through corporate social responsibility. This could identify resources that private sector partners may offer the sector, including opportunities for a collaborative approach to tendering and increasing sustainability.

Working with Elected Members

A successful workshop and briefing for Shropshire Councillors took place on 21 July covering the work of the Assembly and relationships between Shropshire Council and VCS in the context of public service reform. As a consequence Councillors have been asked to consider how they could work more closely with the VCS, potentially improving links with the forums of interest and helping respond to current challenges and explore suggestions for improved joint working and communication.

Rural Affairs

National Rural Affairs

Shropshire Council is helping shape national rural policy through the Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEP) round tables organised by Defra and through the Rural Services Network (RSN) bringing together SPARSE Rural, the Local Government Group rural special interest group and other key organisations. This has included input to the anticipated rural affairs white paper around key issues of broadband, uplands communities, competitiveness of the farming industry, skills and rural tourism.

In the last year the Council has contributed to RSN calls for evidence on Big Society and Localism issues, transport services and fairer funding. We have also lobbied for recognition of upland community issues through the Commission for Rural Communities. We will be working with the Commission on two forthcoming national projects – one on training and employment and young people, and one on social isolation in rural communities and how this affects older people.

In the next year the council will continue to raise Shropshire's profile through the Defra rural economy growth review, by hosting the Defra LEP round-table in November and showcasing our work with Market Towns at the Action for Market Towns conference in Ludlow in October.

Sub-regional Rural Affairs

Shropshire is helping coordinate work across the Marches LEP on rural affairs. This includes capacity building of town and parish councils, and using the Shropshire Place Plans approach as the model for sub-regional support for community-led decision making about infrastructure. We will continue to hold regular portfolio-holder meetings with Herefordshire and Telford & Wrekin Councils to act as the rural conscience of the Marches LEP.

Similar opportunities to share our approach to rural community engagement have been identified with Cheshire West and Chester Council, Powys Rural Housing Enablers, Sport Wales and West Midlands authorities looking at community-led planning in an urban context. We have plans for cross-border toolkit events including an event to pick up issues for Burford and Tenbury Wells in partnership with Worcestershire and Malvern Hills Councils.

Local Rural Affairs

The rural toolkit approach has been successfully adapted and implemented in Shropshire with 34 events so far covering a number of rural parishes and all 18 market towns and key settlements involved in the Market Towns Revitalisation Programme. These have helped identify key issues in communities, given Shropshire Councillors an extra way of working with parish and town councils and given a range of local people the chance to help set local priorities.

We'll continue this work building up and refreshing our understanding of life in rural communities across Shropshire adding to our evidence base and enabling us to ensure that our policies take account of the needs of our rural communities.

Town and Parish Councils

Charter / ways of working

Following the successful Parish and Town Council conference held in July, Shropshire Council has agreed with the Association of Local Councils (ALC) and Society of Local Council Clerks (SSLCC) to develop a new approach to our relationship, replacing the existing Charter with a focus on building strong and effective working relationships between equals, rather than being overly prescriptive or detailed about what we do. This recognises the key role of the Clerk and the potential to develop a pivotal working relationship between the Shropshire Councillor, Clerk and Community Action Team Officer.

Challenges identified include the variable size and capacity of parishes, with 1/3rd having electorates of less than 200, with the opportunity to encourage federation and stronger joint working between local parishes. The objectives are:

- to simplify existing protocols to ensure that the evolving Charter is both meaningful and accessible to all,
- challenge assumptions and bust myths about what the Town and Parish Council stands for in different communities

- clarify roles, responsibilities and expectations of Members, Clerks, Shropshire Council Officers and the public
- engage key stakeholders and customers during the process and beyond to ensure that the Charter remains fit for purpose
- design, pilot and implement a Charter for how Town and Parish Councils will work in partnership with Shropshire Council to increase customer satisfaction and community engagement

It's expected that the new charter will be more of a memorandum of understanding, with a menu of options to facilitate joint working around themes such as 'problem solving' and 'setting priorities with communities'. Areas for consideration by Shropshire Council include clearer lines of contact and communication, and how to support ALC and individual councils adapt to the major changes and opportunities created by national reforms.

Early actions include agreement to work with ALC and the Society of Local Council Clerks on what a new 'Charter' will look like, alongside development of meetings with parish councils around the county, hosted by local members with Area Director support to help organisations prepare for the future together.

Sustainability and Carbon Management with Shropshire Communities

Climate Change Grant Fund

A £20,000 fund is being used to enable communities in Shropshire to tackle climate change through adaptation and mitigation projects. With match funding from elsewhere, over £200,000 has been invested in tackling climate change, although this is a conservative figure as the real volunteer match is often not included. Projects include community-based hydro-electric power generation, replacing street lights with energy efficient LEDs, and better insulation for community buildings.

Environment Delivery Group – Shropshire Low Carbon Communities Network

The Shropshire Low Carbon Community Network is helping local groups reduce carbon emissions through recycling, reducing waste and helping people understand how to minimise their environmental impact.

GSX – Green Shropshire XChange

This new group helps coordinate across the various Shropshire networks linking groups with interests in waste, energy and sustainability.

Its initial focus will be on:

- raising the profile of environmental issues across Shropshire
- improving communication on environmental issues between local communities and strategic bodies i.e. to develop a coherent voice representing environmental interests in Shropshire
- improving support for communities, voluntary organisations and social enterprises wanting to develop environmental projects
- influencing actions at a strategic level and contribute to strategic initiatives

The steering group is currently looking to create a website that will be able to share information and communications between groups in Shropshire and plans to hold a launch event in February 2012.

Fairtrade

Shropshire successfully achieved renewal of its status as a Fairtrade county, originally gained in 2007. Bridgnorth, Ludlow, Oswestry, Whitchurch and Church Stretton are all Fairtrade Towns in Shropshire and Shrewsbury is also celebrating being the most recent town to gain the status in August 2011.

Community Guide to Sustainability

The guide provides an overview of the measures and actions that can be taken, tips and case studies are provided as well as links for further information and who should be approached for support.

This guide will help communities work towards:

- living within environmental limits, protecting limited natural resources and limiting climate change (environmental sustainability)
- stimulating strong, healthy communities and a just society (social sustainability)
- building a strong, stable economy (economic sustainability)

Sustainable Energy in Historic Buildings

Shrewsbury was chosen as the focus for work on making historic buildings more sustainable part-funded by Intelligent Energy Europe (IEE) and coordinated by Marches Energy Agency.

This included work to help homeowners improve the efficiency of their home, particularly reducing carbon emissions. Advice for historic building owners covers the legislative constraints on the buildings, who is best to approach for help and guidance, what interventions are likely to be most suitable and why should you try and make your building more energy efficient. (*Hard copies available from the Sustainability Team*)

Shropshire Sustainable Schools Award

This award celebrates what Shropshire schools are doing to promote Sustainable Development – This year's winners were:

- 1st Prize £1000 – Much Wenlock Primary School
- 2nd Prize £500 – Newtown Primary School (Wem)
- 3rd Prize £250 – Bishops Castle Community College

7 Highly Commended schools also received a small financial reward. These schools are: St George's Primary School Clun, St John's Baptist Primary - Ruyton XI Towns, St John's (Bridgnorth), Wilfred Owen School, Sundorne Infant School, The Marches School and Technology College, The Priory School.

Sustainability Matters

A newsletter highlighting the work of the Sustainability Team is now produced monthly, all Members receive a hard copy of this newsletter, as do the CAO's, the Low Carbon Community Groups, Area Directors and other senior staff.

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

No background papers

Cabinet Member (Portfolio Holder)
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Cllr Gwilym Butler

Cllr Cecilia Motley

Cllr Martin Bennett

Local Member

All

Appendices

None
