



Date: Monday, 9 February 2026

Time: 10.00 am

Venue: The Council Chamber, The Guildhall, Frankwell Quay, Shrewsbury, SY3 8HQ

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## **TRANSFORMATION AND IMPROVEMENT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

### **TO FOLLOW REPORT (S)**

#### **10 Partnership Working Task & Finish Group (Pages 1 - 20)**

To receive an update further to Phase Two of the Partnership Working Task and Finish Group investigations.

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## **Report of the Partnership Working Task and Finish Group**

**Responsible Overview and  
Scrutiny Officer:**

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**Task and Finish Group Chair:**

Councillor Dawn Husemann

### **1. Synopsis**

The is the second report of the Partnership Working Task and Finish Group whose members have agreed to report their findings at regular intervals to the Transformation and Improvement Overview and Scrutiny Committee as their work progresses. The last report of the Task and Finish Group was shared in November 2025, and this report covers the work undertaken from that date until now, as part of Phase Two of their investigation.

### **2. Executive Summary**

2.1 The Partnership Working Task and Finish Group was established in September 2025 with the aim of exploring opportunities to deliver local outcomes and services differently, identifying opportunities for enhancing partnership opportunities across the County. The group's aim is to achieve improved outcomes for the people and communities of Shropshire through more efficient and effective collaboration, including initiatives at a local level through greater engagement with town and parish councils.

2.2 This second phase of Partnership Working Task and Finish Group work was intended to explore the ways in which Town and Parish Councils might work together to improve local decision making and outcomes in light of the proposed devolution of Streetscene services. This report focuses on this second phase of work prior to the group handing this devolution work over and focusing on the Partnership Plan.

2.3 At Transformation and Improvement Overview and Scrutiny Committee on the 19<sup>th</sup> January 2026 it was agreed that due to the totally different nature of the devolution of services and the Partnership Plan these two areas will be separated and dealt with by two separate Task and Finish Groups in future.

2.4 As part of understanding the challenges and opportunities faced by Town and Parish Councils within Shropshire the Partnership Working Task and Finish group undertook two separate workshops with Town and Parish chairs and clerks in Bridgnorth and in Ludlow, and this report details the findings from these sessions.

2.5 A further workshop with a rural cluster of parishes North of the County is expected to take place later in the Spring.

## Report

### 3. Financial Implications

3.1 The Partnership Working Task and Finish Group recognise that each community has unique challenges and understand that what works well for a rural parish may not be suitable in a large market town. They aim to review ways in which financial and non-financial benefits might be achieved through the adoption of a partnership approach.

3.2 Shropshire Councils' future approach may well be shaped by the work of the Task and Finish Group and therefore regular and timely updates to Cabinet need to be timed to align with informing future budget setting and the setting of Town and Parish precepts.

### 4. Climate Change Appraisal

4.1. During this phase of work the Partnership Working Task and Finish Group have considered how the different needs of communities, geographic areas, and partners should be built into any framework and arrangements for effective partnership working. They have worked with town and parishes to map community relations, ie; where people go to access services, may realise the potential for clustering of parishes to build neighbourhood resource and strong relationships which could be positive in reducing fuel consumption and carbon offsetting.

### 5. Background

- 5.1 The Partnership Working Task and Finish Group have already presented a number of recommendations to both Cabinet and Transformation and Improvement Overview and Scrutiny Committee in November 2025. An update as to their progress would be welcomed by the Task and Finish Members.
- 5.2 The most recent report attached of the Partnership Working Task and Finish Group outlines their research activities to enhance collaboration between Shropshire Council and local partners, especially Town and Parish Councils, to improve community outcomes and service delivery across Shropshire. It summarises enquiries, workshops, and findings aimed at informing effective partnership models tailored to suit diverse local needs.
- 5.2 Appendix One details the discoveries and feedback from workshops held in Bridgnorth and Ludlow with Town and Parish Council clerks and chairs, who undertook a number of exercises including local service mapping, and an exploration of potential partnership models including identification of the opportunities and challenges of each.
- 5.3 The workshop attendees were all very engaged and the outcomes of these sessions were very informative. Some of the feedback received included concern over a lack of funding, inconsistent service data, increased workload for clerks, and communication issues with Shropshire Council who they perceived as distant and hard to reach. Concerns were also raised about any imposition of unnecessary bureaucracy potentially undermining existing informal arrangements and local goodwill.
- 5.5 The Task and Finish Group recognised over the course of the workshops that the Town and Parish Councils perception of Shropshire Council would be an influential factor in the success of any partnership arrangement. Town and Parish Councils who attended the workshops expressed an erosion of trust in Shropshire Council, that would need to be restored through meaningful communication and transparent engagement.

## 6. Conclusions

- 6.1 Town and Parish Councils required clear assurance that there were benefits to pursuing a Partnership Working model, as well as a strengthening of trust and an assurance of efficiency in order to avoid potential repetition of previously unsuccessful models. Towns and Parishes sought empowerment and control over their local resources and services to best meet their community needs.
- 6.2 The Task and Finish Group recognised that a collaborative data audit between Shropshire Council and Town and Parish Councils was essential to clarifying service responsibilities, as well as providing transparency through clear two way open and honest communication. The active involvement of Town and Parish Councils in designing partnership arrangements together with Shropshire Council officers might help in alleviating their concerns.

6.3 The full report, listing the activities and findings of the group, and their recommendations in detail is attached at Appendix One

## 7. **Recommendations**

7.1 Members of Transformation and Improvement Overview and Scrutiny Committee are asked to consider and review the report of the Partnerships Task and Finish group, attached at Appendix One, and to endorse the recommendations of the Task and Finish Group set out below

**Recommendation 1** – A collaborative approach to a data audit between town and parish councils and Shropshire Council is essential to understanding expectations of one another. This needs to include clarity over what the statutory minimum is, a joint mapping of services and a clear understanding of service provision.

**Recommendation 2** – Ensure that work undertaken with town and parish councils is transparent and honest, with the aim of reaching a mutually beneficial arrangement that doesn't risk erosion of any previous good will arrangements by imposing too much bureaucracy and oversight.

**Recommendation 3** – Allow Town and Parish Councils to be involved in the joint development of any proposed Partnership arrangements, working together to provide clear benefits for local communities, alleviating some of the town and parish concerns highlighted in this report.

**Recommendation 4** – Provide regular communication with town and parish councils and look to improve ways in which they can communicate more easily with Shropshire Council officers and service areas.

**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:**

Report of the Partnership Working Task and Finish Group - Appendix One - 09.02.2026



**Shropshire  
Council**

## **Transformation and Improvement Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

### **Report of the Partnership Working Task and Finish Group**

**9<sup>th</sup> Feb 2026**

## **Acknowledgments**

The Partnership Working Task and Finish Group, chaired by Councillor Dawn Husemann, includes Councillors from a wide range of locations across Shropshire. This composition aims to reflect the varied needs and challenges faced by town and parish councils across the county.

The group has carried out research, sought expert advice, held workshops and examined case studies to identify effective partnership practices. The information as detailed in this report, is based upon these findings and feedback collated from workshops held with Town and Parish Councils.

The Task and Finish Group would like to thank those contributors whose valuable input has supported this ongoing inquiry. As the group's work continues, this report is one in a series intended to provide timely updates to the Transformation and Improvement Committee and to Cabinet as progress is being made.

## **Members of the Task and Finish Group**

Councillor Dawn Husemann (Chair)  
Councillor Edward Potter (Vice Chair)  
Councillor Rachel Connolly  
Councillor Carl Rowley  
Councillor Vivienne Parry  
Councillor Gregg Ebbs  
Councillor Alan Moseley

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## **1. Context**

The members of the Transformation and Improvement Overview and Scrutiny Committee acknowledge how crucial our partner organisations are. In particular, Town and Parish Councils and voluntary sector groups, in recognising and addressing the needs of Shropshire's communities.

## **2. Scope of the work**

The Partnership Working Task and Finish Group was established in September 2025 with the aim of identifying opportunities for enhancing partnership opportunities across the County. The group's aim is to achieve improved outcomes for the people and communities of Shropshire through more efficient and effective collaboration, including initiatives at the local level. The group agreed to report back to Transformation and Improvement Overview and Scrutiny Committee, and to Cabinet on a regular basis throughout the progression of its work.

The Committee acknowledges that every community has its own unique needs, recognising that approaches effective in a rural parish might not suit a large market town. Therefore, prior to commencing their work on the partnership plan the group agreed to assist Cabinet by first looking at the proposed devolution of Streetscene services to Town & Parish Councils. Pilot schemes were already being worked on to progress this devolution totally separately from this work.

Cabinet asked that the Partnership Working Task and Finish Group examine the opportunities in relation to the devolution of Streetscene services to non-pilot areas and feedback any ideas and issues identified. The aim being to assist Cabinet/decision makers in the proposed roll out of the devolution process to other areas in 2027. The group also agreed to conduct a traditional piece of Overview and Scrutiny work by evaluating the success or otherwise of the pilot schemes 6 months after they were implemented. It has now been agreed that due to the totally different nature of the devolution of services and the Partnership Plan these two areas will be separated and dealt with by separate Task and Finish Groups in future.

The Partnership Working Task and Finish Group first updated both Transformation and Improvement Overview and Scrutiny Committee, and Cabinet, in the Autumn of 2025 and all recommendations were accepted. By providing these regular updates the Committee will be able to task the group with new or refined work related to the groups remit as it emerges and make recommendations to Cabinet.

The second phase of Partnership Working Task and Finish Group work was to examine potential different ways in which Town and Parish Councils might work together to improve local decision making and outcomes in light of the proposed devolution of Streetscene services. This report focuses on this second phase of work prior to the group handing this devolution work over and focusing on the Partnership Plan.

### **3. Objectives**

Opportunities to deliver outcomes and services locally differently

- To understand fully what can be achieved, what could work well and where, and any barriers that might prevent success.
- Identify suitable services that could be put forward to inform the development of working models/proof of concept, to be piloted in the short term.
- To explore opportunities and possibilities to expand local involvement in the delivery of services and shared outcomes for residents and communities. and align and increase resource opportunities to achieve this e.g. through the involvement of the third sector and through different grant funding streams

Options for developing a Local Partnership in Shropshire

- To identify and recommend opportunities to improve engagement opportunities for partners with Shropshire Council develop effective local partnership arrangements including, either by Town and Parish Councils, VCSE organisations, other strategic partners, local providers, individually, together and / or in collaboration with Shropshire Council.
- To consider options for how a new style of partnership might work in practice and develop a policy around this for Shropshire, utilising best practice and what works in other places to do this (England/UK/internationally).
- To review ways in which financial and non-financial benefits might be achieved through the adoption of a partnership approach.
- To develop understanding of and recommending how levels of demand and need are identified and forecast by different partner organisations. How these can be aligned and applied consistently to inform the identification of shared outcomes, partnership decision making and improved progress and impact management.
- To consider how the different needs of communities, geographic areas, and partners should be built into any framework and arrangements for effective partnership working. Understand and map community relations, where people go to access services and potential for clustering of parishes to build resource and strong relationships.
- To identify options to establish and develop the relationships between local partnerships, and between local partnerships and more strategic partnerships e.g. those that are countywide.
- To help shape a new and long-term policy for Shropshire Council to develop their local partnership working, starting with Town and Parish Councils and the VCSE sector.

#### 4. What the Task and Finish Group have done?

The Partnership Working Task and Finish Group last reported to Transformation and Improvement Overview and Scrutiny Committee in November 2025 -

[Report of the Partnership Working Task and Finish Group](#)  PDF 241 KB

[APPENDIX ONE - Report of the Partnership Working Task and Finish Group - T&I](#)  
17.11.2025, item 8.  PDF 401 KB

The November report detailed the work undertaken by the Task and Finish Group in exploring what services Town and Parish Councils and external partners might choose to have delegated to them. It also highlighted a number of concerns and requirements identified by the participants that would need to be addressed if service devolution was to be successful. Recognising that it is important that local plans are developed with, and not imposed upon, Town and Parish Councils.

In the November 2025 report the Task and Finish Group reinforced their aim to improve services and deliver savings by identifying what can be realistically achieved, where new models could work, and which barriers needed to be addressed. Whilst engagement of Town and Parish Councils with the proposed devolution of services is voluntary, any withdrawal of services by Shropshire Council due to financial necessity, will require others to fill the gap.

The financial emergency facing Shropshire Council highlighted the need to devolve and delegate services where possible, with a Memorandum of Understanding being trialled in the selected areas of Shrewsbury, Oswestry, and Shifnal, as a proof of concept.

As part of the November 2025 findings of the Partnership Working Task and Finish Group, they recommended that a comprehensive services audit was needed to clarify which services are statutory and which are at risk. The members of the Task and Finish Group also emphasised the need for good communications, clear information-sharing, an understanding of economies of scale, and a single point of contact for Town and Parish Council Clerks to support this transition.

Throughout their work, the group consistently agreed that their ultimate aim was to improve services and outcomes for residents whilst ensuring financial sustainability. Three core questions guided their approach:

- what can be done,
- what will work and where
- what obstacles must be addressed

As part of the key findings within the November 2025 report the Task and Finish Group proposed undertaking the following next steps as Phase Two of their work - A review of the concept of clustering arrangements, and an examination of its approaches, such as hub and spoke networks, collaborative parish groups, blended delivery approaches and community work teams. Aiming towards providing the administration with a range of options which might work for Shropshire along with the complexities, risks and opportunities of each.

In order to carry out this phase of work the Task and Finish Group planned to speak with stakeholders, namely Town and Parish Council clerks and chairs across the County and examine the feasibility of these different approaches with them.

On the 16<sup>th</sup> December the Partnership Working Task and Finish Group arranged a workshop in Bridgnorth for the Town and Parish Councils of Bridgnorth and adjacent areas. A second workshop took place on the 27<sup>th</sup> January in Ludlow for the Town and Parish Councils of Ludlow and surrounding areas.

During the introductions at the start of each of the workshop sessions the Task and Finish Group chair was clear in explaining that the purpose of the session was to hear the views of the Town and Parish Council clerks and chairs, and not to impose either the Task and Finish Group or Shropshire Council's views upon them in any way. It was clearly explained that the Task and Finish Group are a research group and are not the decision makers but confirmed that they would gather the information shared and report that back to the decision makers.

To avoid an impression of pre-determination or for the attendees to feel pressured or overwhelmed just a small number of members of the Task and Finish Group attended to facilitate each session together with the Overview and Scrutiny Officer.

Each workshop was undertaken in the same way, with the same agenda, worksheets and approach, for consistency and effective comparison.

## **Session One**

The first session undertaken at both workshops (Bridgnorth and Ludlow) was an exercise in mapping services, understanding where both local need and local provision are located within these areas. Together with consideration of how services are accessed, what travel methods are used and what time requirements and distances are involved in getting to them.

Some of the services mapped included education, medical, shopping, leisure, early years support, and age support services. This exercise confirmed that for those parishes on the Bridgnorth border much of this provision was out of County, either in Wolverhampton, Dudley or Telford. This was also the case in the Ludlow area, going out of County to Hereford, Kidderminster or Worcester. Ludlow added that were "*recognised as being the town furthest from any hospital provision (excepting the cottage hospital)*"

The Bridgnorth group confirmed that there were complications to many services being based out of the County, the lack of bus services made access often very difficult and inconsistent, with some students reportedly undertaking 2.5 hour round trips to colleges. They added that there was - "*No link between planning and education provision, 600 plus new houses and this is not taken into account into long term national plan – low birth rate = over provision of primary places collapsing of classes at key stages, a dearth of teachers and lack of transport into schools*"

Both workshop groups explained that many of their rural residents have created their own networks of family, friends or neighbours, who they rely upon for travel assistance. Attendees in Ludlow also said that living in a rural community many people accept that

there will not be public transport and are happy to rely on their cars but that good highway provision was essential, adding that for a number of residents – though not all - a well maintained road network was more valuable than bus services, because they are so reliant on their cars to get anywhere. Some of the comments related to transport were as follows

*“We feel in South Shropshire that we pay for little services at greater and greater cost and people rely on car for most transport requirements”*

*“armac issues are not up to standard”*

*“NOT just Shrewsbury that floods! Drains cleaned – RARE, Ditches upkeep – NEVER!”*

The Bridgnorth Town and Parish workshop group agreed that town and rural needs were very different. Many rural areas lack bus routes which means that for a lot of resident's cars are the only, the most convenient and the most appropriate method of transport. Conversely issues for the town centre are more related to the impact of too many cars and limited and expensive parking.

## **Session Two**

During Session Two at each workshop the Task and Finish Group chair circulated the Shropshire Council Streetscene data for each of the respective areas. The values associated with each element of work and their total represent the full cost for Shropshire to deliver the service.

In both Bridgnorth and in Ludlow, this information caused concern amongst the workshop attendees who flagged a number of inconsistencies and inaccuracies.

Although in the Ludlow workshop one group acknowledged that having sight of this information, despite its inaccuracies, was a step towards providing honesty and transparency, which attendees felt is currently very lacking.

The groups had many questions about the data received and ultimately wanted to know how to challenge the figures presented. Town and Parish chairs and clerks were keen to find out where the data had stemmed from, how the figures had been arrived at and how it was assessed, monitored, controlled amongst other questions.

*“SC needs to supply Parish/Town Councils with lists so we can compile accurate list of services as starting point”*

Both workshop groups were determined that if partnership working was going to be a success a collaborative approach to a data audit would be vital. Proposing that Shropshire Council work together with Town and Parish chairs and clerks to map current services and ensure the accuracy of data. This services audit would result in the most up to date picture of services being delivered countywide and by whom.

The Bridgnorth and Ludlow attendees explained that they can't easily contact Shropshire Council officers and the lack of easy and effective two way communication was keenly felt. There was some positive feedback regarding Fix my Street for logging issues from the

Ludlow team but concerns from the Bridgnorth team that things are logged but nothing seems to happen. The Ludlow participants expressed frustration that the Customer Service Centre phone lines close as early as 3pm.

In Ludlow one of workshop groups proposed that the money, 'pot', allocated to them could be given to them to divide up and spend as they wished as a community. They would prefer this approach.

All groups needed clarity around what was meant by the statutory minimum in order to make more informed decisions on those matters which affect their areas.

For the remainder of Session Two the workshop groups each looked into the options for partnership and collaborative working, with particular focus upon hub and spoke networks, collaborative parish groups, blended delivery, community work teams and voluntary community work groups. They discussed the pros and cons of these different arrangements and explored what the expectations of Shropshire Council, Town Councils and Parish Councils might be in terms of engagement, costs, legal, and support services.

The Bridgnorth workshop group explored how hub and spoke models could work if the groups contained within were similar, like for like, and more easily able to work together and share commonalities. However, there was some concern for who might be the hub, and who the spoke, and whether the hub would have the necessary support and resources to manage this role.

#### *"How will models be funded? where is £ spent?"*

Both Bridgnorth and Ludlow groups flagged the lack of finance, insurance, safeguarding, expertise and oversight to manage the various models proposed. This could become a burden upon the hub around management, responsibility and accountability. Clarity would be needed to understand who is liable for what, who is covered for what, who sets key performance indicators, and how success would be measured.

Feedback as to various models included –

	<b>Pros</b>	<b>Cons</b>	<b>Comments</b>
<b>Hub/Spoke Networks</b>	<p>Pros</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Working together</li><li>- Local teams</li><li>- Local knowledge</li><li>- More choice</li><li>- Faster working</li></ul>	<p>Financial / Officer capacity</p> <p>Costs to residents for this</p> <p>Liability/insurance</p> <p>Facilities</p> <p>HR/Training</p> <p>Costs to PCs</p> <p>Poor communication</p> <p>Financial for the hub</p> <p>Burden on the hub</p>	<p><i>"Town Council not set up to deal with Hub/Spoke Model – not resources"</i></p> <p><i>"good for some services – social services"</i></p> <p><i>"Priorities</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Trust – lack of</li><li>- Lack of follow up</li><li>- Lack of resources"</li></ul>

	<p>Financial for Shropshire Council</p> <p>Expertise / equipment shared with spokes</p>	Control in the hub	
<b>Collaborative Parish Groups</b>	<p>e.g. Particular projects</p> <p>e.g. Purchasing equipment</p> <p>e.g. tractors/mowers</p> <p>Standardised jobs</p> <p>e.g. Play area inspection</p> <p>Good local knowledge</p> <p>More “buy-in”</p> <p>Greater involvement and ownership between towns/parishes</p> <p>Sharing costs</p> <p>Easier to justify precept increase</p> <p>Engagement</p> <p>Financial to towns and parishes</p>	<p>Costs precept</p> <p>Changes in views / elections</p> <p>Volunteers – not consistent, need appreciating, unreliable, training and insurance.</p> <p><u>Communication</u></p> <p>Difficulty getting accessing services/depts</p> <p>Phone holds</p> <p>Email bounce backs</p> <p>Out of office</p> <p>Holidays/sick leave</p>	<p><i>“Could work if similar parishes geographically close, not town councils”</i></p> <p><i>“done on an ad hoc basis already”</i></p> <p><i>“You need to ensure the committee is strong!”</i></p>
<b>Blended Delivery</b>	<p>Council already have the expertise</p> <p>Flexibility</p>	<p>Small rural parishes get forgotten</p> <p>Unwillingness to increase the precept</p>	<p><i>“What is blended? Lack of clarity?”</i></p> <p><i>“Shared services to meet needs: T&amp;PC Enhanced services already in existence</i></p>

		No further benefit over collaborative working	<i>Informed. Specify Contract Attractive to suppliers Flexible response to T&amp;PC needs”</i>
<b>Community Work teams</b>		How would it be organised?	<i>“Use contractors to do ad hoc work (do this instead)” “too bureaucratic”</i>
<b>Voluntary Community Work Groups</b>	Good for community wellbeing  Unmeasurable benefits for the Community	Lack of funding Lack of volunteers Skills? Insurance Safety and Training Safeguarding Lack of expertise Lack of management Risk? Organisation Transitory	<i>(is this parish council???) – already exist eg, litter, hedge cutting, grass cutting, we don’t want a structure on this. Keep it as it is. We don’t want bureaucracy imposed – insurance, risk assessments, H&amp;S” “how can you expect volunteers to take this on?”</i>

*“Communication needs to be improved for any model to work as a starting point”*

*“Risk, Health and Safety – a big issue for all options”*

*“need to know which services are discretionary?/statutory? Eg libraries, WCs”*

*“how will success be measured/reported?”*

One of the workshop groups in Ludlow said that they needed better access to services to address key issues in their areas such as road cleaning, culverts, ditch maintenance. Proposing that Shropshire Council could develop a set of services that parish councils could purchase, with clear pricing, free days, provision of access to equipment which the Parish Council could operate with local resources, who they would manage. In that way Shropshire Council would act as a service provider to the Parish and Town Councils, providing a clear set of services and costs that town and parish councils could buy in according to need and availability, local Councils could work together to improve efficiency.

In the Bridgnorth workshop, the clerks and chairs described how many rural parishes already engage local farmers to do hedge cutting and verge clearance out of good will. They expressed concern that this good will arrangement will erode if Shropshire Council imposes more bureaucracy and oversight.

*“In rural parishes farmers do most of the work through goodwill, we will lose that goodwill if turned into contracts/paid”*

Bridgnorth Town and Parish clerks and chairs favoured the informal and flexible approach that they utilise now which supports local employment and engages voluntary groups to undertake jobs such as hedge cutting and litter picking.

The attendees from Bridgnorth Town and Parish Councils all seemed very positive about the existing clerk’s network, which they felt already worked very well as a form of collaboration and communication amongst towns and parishes - *“use clerks network to find contractors. Informal and flexible! Good. Supports local employment”*

In Ludlow they said that the weekly newsletter from SALC was very helpful and suggested that Shropshire Council could feed news into that to aid with sharing information and ideas.

### **Session Three**

In Session Three the workshop groups each discussed the capacities and limitations of Town and Parish Councils in relation to what they are willing and able to do themselves, what they wish to do but cannot, and what they would prefer not to do. With additional focus upon the types of support that might be required to empower them, such as insurance, legal advice, IT and HR support.

*“We don’t have capacity to do more – need capacity of clerks, councillors etc etc”*

*“Town and Parish Councils are already delivering too many services”*

Amongst the Town and Parish Council workshop attendees who were at the Bridgnorth session, there was a shared belief that Shropshire Council processes are expensive, inflexible and bureaucratic. This was seen as the antithesis of Town and Parish Council processes whose use of local knowledge and local expertise was thought to be more efficient, faster, more flexible and cheaper.

The Bridgnorth workshop group felt that the informal and flexible approach undertaken by Town and Parish Councils at present, would suffer if formal arrangements were put in place, and local relationships would break down if limitations and bureaucracy were imposed.

At Bridgnorth and Ludlow attendees also expressed a lack of trust, and transparency with Shropshire Council.

In Ludlow they commented as follows –

*“We want to collate and represent the needs and best interests, as diverse as they are across South Shropshire, and be listened to and respected by a Unitary Authority that provides the funds and expertise and does its job.”*

*“We will not be the repository for or held accountable for, all the things Shropshire Council has failed to deliver”*

### **Session 4 – Community Boards**

The fourth workshop session focused on Community Boards, which act as local advisory groups connecting residents with local government. Typically made up of volunteers, these boards play a key part in addressing neighbourhood matters and influencing decisions. By representing community interests, Community Boards give residents a voice in local governance and opportunities to participate in decision-making processes.

Many of those workshop attendees in both Bridgnorth and Ludlow viewed the Parish Council as fulfilling the same function as a Community Board, seeing no added value in introducing another layer of bureaucracy. They felt that Community Boards would simply duplicate existing roles and add unnecessary bureaucracy. They were also concerned that there would be a lack of volunteers in sparse rural communities. Comments included:

*“Increasing levels of bureaucracy – PC and CB!! Who answerable to? Whose authority? Who is going to volunteer? Already struggling to get Councillors”*

*“it would be an extra, unelected level of bureaucracy”*

*“we don’t need another layer of government”*

*“the whole point of a parish council is to shape neighbourhood decisions and also ensure community interests are considered”*

Both groups strongly put the view that Parish councils are community boards, and they felt disrespected to have this suggestion put forward by Shropshire Council because ‘that’s what we do’. It reinforced their views that Shropshire Council doesn’t understand or respect the work of Town and Parish Councils.

Feedback from both the Bridgnorth and the Ludlow sessions was around how valued the role of elected Members were at Parish Council meetings in providing necessary two-way communication between local government and towns and parishes, and agreed that good, elected Member communication was key. It was recognised that not all areas have the same level of engagement, but all felt that where this happened it worked well and was a crucial interaction.

The Bridgnorth Town Council workshop attendees cited their vision for the future as follows –

*“To be considered as an important town within Shropshire where services and facilities are effective and support our communities needs. Where environmental maintenance is the best, it can be, footpaths are maintained and visitors are welcomed. To not be reliant on another organisations priorities but a fair share for all.”*

## 5. Key Findings

In total the Task and Finish group have heard from some 25 Town and Parish Councils to date. Throughout both of the workshop sessions it became evident that Town and Parish clerks and chairs feel very underestimated and undervalued. They explained how little recognition they get for the amount of work they do and their level of expertise. Those in Bridgnorth and in Ludlow suggested that Town and Parish Councils would like more involvement in decision making and in discussions around what affects their areas.

The workshop attendees in the Ludlow session felt that Shropshire Council often made crucial decisions without consultation and what they called “*superficial, inadequate engagement*”. Adding that Shropshire Council seem to be reluctant to accept that parish councils know their areas best, know what they need, and what they don’t need.

The key concerns of both Bridgnorth and Ludlow workshop attendees were -

- Lack of open communication and transparency with Shropshire Council – adding that it is difficult to know who the right person is to contact for key issues, and how to contact them.
- Concern that strategic decisions are based upon out of date and inaccurate information – both Ludlow and Bridgnorth attendees believed that a joint services audit would be necessary to establish an accurate baseline position.
- Lack of recognition that local knowledge is key and is valuable - town and parishes know what works and what doesn’t, and the differences between town and parish need.

The various challenges to successful devolution of Streetscene services cited by Bridgnorth and Ludlow groups were:

- lack of funding,
- lack of accurate information,
- lack of honesty from Shropshire Council in relation to ongoing funding and the demands on their precepts,
- a large increase in the clerk’s role,
- a diminishing relationship with Shropshire Council officers who were perceived to be remote, lacking in local knowledge or local engagement.

This highlighted the scale of the challenge that Shropshire Council faces if it wants to bring more town and parish councils on board with this work.

The Bridgnorth workshop group added that Shropshire Council don’t understand town/parish areas enough and needed greater community engagement/understanding. Feedback from the Ludlow workshop was that Shropshire Council were too focussed upon the national agenda and Shrewsbury and not enough at local level.

During the Bridgnorth and Ludlow workshops the clerks present explained that the discussion around Community Boards during the workshop had led to feelings of being undermined and unappreciated. There was a perceived lack of recognition of the fact that they are doing this work already in their roles.

Bridgnorth Town and Parish representatives explained that the clerk’s role had changed greatly in recent years and had grown to a vastly different role than in the past. They felt that clerks training and succession planning was key to providing the ongoing support necessary to Town and Parish Councils. The Ludlow workshop group commented that parish councillors are volunteers who have to deal with frequent challenge and criticism from the public. This is making it harder to find those willing to volunteer. Both groups highlighted the fact that they are volunteers, and the increasing expectations of the Council are making their roles harder.

Similarly, the clerks felt that their relationship with Shropshire Council officers had changed over recent years, and they now find that many officers are very difficult to contact. Ludlow attendees also complained about the inaccessibility of Council officers. Those at the Bridgnorth workshop added that they felt Shropshire Council was not service oriented or community led. The group having agreed that the devolution proposals were “*a structural solution to a cultural problem.*”

Despite this, some of the Town and Parish clerks and chairs engaged with were open to exploring opportunities for new ways of working but only if:

- there were clear local benefits to doing so,
- that it would be a move to a better way of working from **their** perspective for their areas.
- It would have to be a genuine two way partnership
- good engagement from SC would be essential, together with easy, honest and open communication.

It became evident that trust between Shropshire Council and the Town and Parish Councils has been badly eroded. This lack of trust will have to be rebuilt and there was a lack in confidence that this devolution approach would be a cheaper, quicker or more efficient approach due to past experiences of similar tried and tested models.

*“all models have been tried before and failed because each parish is unique”*

*“we have no confidence it would work in future due to past experiences”*

Bridgnorth workshop attendees added clear communication would be required to help provide the necessary confidence and trust. In Ludlow the group asked Shropshire Council to focus on providing a “*realistic response to everyday issues that affect us and our area*” they felt “*too far away from the ‘beating heart’ of Shropshire and easy to forget.*”

The Partnership Working Task and Finish Group are planning a third workshop session with a rural parish cluster North of the County in early February. This will conclude Phase Two of their work and end the groups involvement with the devolution of Streetscene services.

Following this the Group will refocus its efforts onto the long term piece of work focusing on the Partnership Plan.

### **Phase Three Next Steps**

As part of Phase Three the Task and Finish Group aim to review existing partnership relationships within Shropshire Council but will expand to include the emergency services, the NHS, the voluntary and community sector and any other partners. The Groups objective is to establish a comprehensive understanding of the present situation, close any gaps in understanding and compare this with the Council’s proposals for a partnership approach. This comparison will help to identify opportunities, challenges, and potential risks.

A lot of partnership working is already underway within Shropshire Council. The first stage of work for the refocused Partnership Working Task and Finish group will be to identify and

map all these existing partnership arrangements throughout Shropshire Council as a whole. As well as mapping existing links with external partners. This will provide a comprehensive strategic overview and a baseline 'where we are now position'. This approach will enable the group to identify gaps and where there are no or only loose connections both within Shropshire Council and between Shropshire Council and its partners.

There are already some good partnership working arrangements in Shropshire Council, particularly within health and social care. A clear understanding of these is vital for the identification of best practise models and ideas. It will also enable the group to capture the learning that has already been built up relating to the difficulties, complexities and needs of true partnership arrangements. This will help to inform recommendations and guidance for other areas to enable them to develop or improve their partnership relations.

## 6. Conclusions and Recommendations

The following recommendations are those proposed following Phase Two of this piece of work and should be taken in conjunction with those already presented to Transformation and Improvement Overview and Scrutiny in November 2025, at the end of Phase One of work. Both sets of recommendations are deemed by the Task and Finish Group members as essential to the success of a Partnership Working approach.

**Recommendation 1** – A collaborative approach to a data audit between town and parish councils and Shropshire Council is essential to understanding expectations of one another. This needs to include clarity over what the statutory minimum is, a joint mapping of services and a clear understanding of service provision.

**Recommendation 2** – Ensure that work undertaken with town and parish councils is transparent and honest, with the aim of reaching a mutually beneficial arrangement that doesn't risk erosion of any previous good will arrangements by imposing too much bureaucracy and oversight.

**Recommendation 3** – Allow Town and Parish Councils to be involved in the joint development of any proposed Partnership arrangements, working together to provide clear benefits for local communities, alleviating some of the town and parish concerns highlighted in this report.

**Recommendation 4** – Provide regular communication with town and parish councils and look to improve ways in which they can communicate more easily with Shropshire Council officers and service areas.