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Public

PORTFOLIO HOLDER ANNUAL REPORT FOR RURAL SERVICES AND COMMUNITIES

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1. Transfer of assets and services to town and parish councils

In early 2016, in response to challenging financial forecasts, Shropshire Council started to work with the county's town and parish councils to explore the potential for a devolution of local services and assets from Shropshire Council to local councils. The services and assets in scope include libraries, leisure centres, museums and amenity areas. Good progress is being made on agreeing these transfers and we are using the additional 12 month period that has been added to the timeline for transfers to be made, to support the existing activity and also to further develop – through engagement and consultation – how we will deliver these services in partnership with communities and partner organisations.

Members, town and parish councils and stakeholders are working together to both deliver and shape the council's ambition to transfer the management or ownership of community based services and assets.

Regular Town and Parish Council Forum meetings are being held, chaired by the Portfolio Holder. This provides an opportunity for issues of shared importance, particularly the programme of transferring the management responsibility for the delivery of local, community based services from the principal authority to local councils, to be discussed and developed.

2. Shropshire Association of Local Councils (SALC)

Shropshire Council continues to support SALC with a small annual grant and hosting their office within Shirehall. There has been a close working relationship between the council and SALC over the last year as we have developed together the future role of town and parish councils in the delivery and management of local services and assets. Representatives of Shropshire Council have regularly attended SALC Executive meetings and the Local Area Committees to speak on a range of relevant issues. There are opportunities for the council and SALC to co-create a training programme for local councils in the coming year – covering the areas that will evolve as the councils take on more responsibility for service delivery and asset management.

3. Voluntary and Community Sector

Work with Shropshire's Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) Assembly over the last 12 months has highlighted significant changes within the voluntary sector and local research has provided additional evidence of those changes. Key issues include:

- Changes in the profile of Shropshire's volunteer workforce.
- The impact of national policy and increases in demand for voluntary sector services and support.
- The impact of economic changes on the voluntary sector workforce including increased employment costs, the loss of grants, increased competition for public service contracts and the rapid increase in VCS service closures.
- Changes in the needs of people using VCS services (for example increased risks as a result of benefit changes, debt, increases in scams, financial abuse, social isolation etc.).

Many of these issues have been explored through the work of the VCSA Board and the Change and Compact Group (a group set up to allow commissioners and voluntary sector representatives the opportunity to work together on new policy).

Key areas of work the VCSA Board has been involved in include:

- Ensuring the voluntary sector is engaged in work to deliver the Social Inclusion element of the Marches LEP's European Structural and Investment Fund (ESIF) Strategy.
- Working closely with public health to support VCS engagement in preventative initiatives such as the pilot of Social Prescribing and the Healthy Conversation event designed to provide up to date information for all organisations delivering support, information and advice.
- Enabling VCS input into the Sustainability Transformation Plan and its different partnership groups and documents such as the STP Neighbourhoods Group.
- Leading a sub group to support the careful handling of public awareness concerning the pressures local authorities are under and the impact that would have on the delivery of VCS led preventative services.
- Work to maintain relationships with the Police and Crime Commissioner's Office in order to deliver shared outcomes such as victims, tackling the financial abuse among older people, tackling scams and increasing safety etc.

There has been an increase in demand for voluntary sector representation over recent months. VCS representatives attend over 40 different meetings and partnership groups. Areas of joint working that have seen an increase recently include mental health and the Sustainability Transformation Plan.

The VCSA has identified its priorities over the coming year to include:

- Infrastructure and sustainability (recognising the support needs of small groups, and volunteers and supporting social action).
- Impact (including working more closely with University Centre Shrewsbury to assess organisational needs, access research and implement improved measurement).
- Strengthening the voice of the voluntary sector and working in new ways to maintain a strong Assembly.

4. Change and Compact Group

The Group has been focusing on:

- Ensuring the Compact and good practice in partnership working continues to be implemented at a time of significant change and limited resources.
- Working to share information and resources across sectors including the Council's Commissioning Strategy and supporting documents including decommissioning guidance.
- Sharing information across sectors in the development of needs assessments, market assessments and Market Position Statements.
- Highlighting the need for infrastructure to support social action and participating in the Social Action learning programme led by the Cabinet Office.
- Undertaking research into volunteering through a VCS survey and evidence base.

5. Rural Services

Rural service challenges include fairer funding for rural areas; inadequate digital and physical infrastructure, lack of affordable housing, fuel poverty, risks of social exclusion, and an ageing demography. For example, Shropshire has a disproportionately older population, with resulting challenges for commissioners and providers of services including social care and community mental health care.

For Shropshire, a number of key channels have been utilised in the last year through which to seek to not only alert Government to the precise nature and dimensions of the challenges faced by Shropshire and other rural county authorities, but also provide hard evidence and cogent argument to inform and aid equitable and inclusive decision making across Whitehall. This has also helped to raise the authority's profile at national level.

Key areas include:

- Responses to a number of parliamentary select committee inquiries with regard to the digital economy; digital skills; the Local Plans Expert Group recommendations, "Countries of Culture" inquiry into regional arts funding and regional impact of local authority settlements on the cultural sector; and rural tourism;
- Responses to calls for evidence from CLG and Defra with regard to Local Plans, and to rural planning and farm diversifications, linked to the Government's measures for economic growth outlined in the Rural Productivity Plan;
- Rural demographic and financial data to aid input to Greg Clark MP's visit to Shropshire;
- Bespoke sessions with the county's MPs to reinforce the need for assured and comprehensive broadband and mobile phone coverage throughout the county and in particular the final 10% of hard to reach areas.
- Policy input to Ofcom work on developing a Universal Service Obligation (USO) for broadband;
- Local policy work on BT payphone retention, which is helping to identify where issues remain with mobile phone coverage, as well as where rural communities have issues or concerns such as over road safety, alongside opportunities to work together. An example of this is the work done by officers from across the council with parish councils on adoption of local K6 red kiosks and subsequent installation of defibrillators, to provide a resource for visitors to the county as well as for the rural community itself.

5.1 Local Government Association

The Portfolio Holder has been a Shropshire Council representative on the Local Government Association for a number of years and is a past member of the LGA People & Places Board. She regularly attends LGA meetings in London and the Local Government Conference.

5.2 County Councils Network

Together with the Leader and Chief Executive, the Portfolio Holder represents Shropshire Council on the County Councils' Network, attending regular meetings in London and the CCN Conference, which took place in early November in Guildford. This year's Conference demonstrated cross-party concern about government funding levels, the impact of full retention of business rates, the rising cost of adult social care provision and imminent publication of NHS Sustainable Transformation Plans and their likely effects on local health service provision; together with the overall uncertainty of the effect of Brexit on county economies.

5.3 Rural Services Network

The Rural Services Network (RSN) is a Special Interest Group of the Local Government Association representing the interests of rural service providers and the communities that they serve. Its membership comprises currently some 154 Local Authorities and over 100 other public service providers. The Portfolio Holder has represented Shropshire Council on RSN since 2009 and has chaired the organisation since 2013.

Since its foundation over twenty years ago, RSN's workload, influence and membership has grown exponentially. With the demise of the Commission for Rural Communities and the LGA Rural Commission, RSN is now the only remaining organisation which represents the views and concerns of rural England to government, and works to disseminate information to government on the effects of national policy on rural areas. Its local authority membership includes Unitary, County and District Authorities. RSN has also built up a Rural Services Partnership grouping which is made up of public service bodies, town and parish councils and businesses with rural interests. It runs an annual Rural Health Conference and collaborates with the Rural Housing Alliance on an annual Rural Housing Conference; both of these are increasingly well attended. RSN has close links with regional Universities and holds a series of four seminars annually, covering topics of particular concern to rural communities such as fuel poverty and public transport. It has an informative website, which addresses a wide range of rural issues, topics and news, with around 4,000 subscribers.

In 2015 RSN organised a Rural Conference to discuss issues of rural concern. This was repeated in 2016 and was so well received that it has been decided to confirm it as an annual fixture.

RSN has close links with the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Rural Affairs, for which it provides the secretariat and a great deal of research and information. This, together with its offshoot the Rural Fair Shares Group, has worked extremely hard to influence government on the issue of the disparity in successive funding settlements between rural and urban areas and the need to close the funding gap. They have instituted parliamentary debates, raised questions in the House and generally lobbied government Ministers in this cause. Their very active Chair, Graham Stuart MP, has had to stand down due to promotion to a Government post; his place has now been taken by James Heapey, MP for Wells.

RSN is working closely with the County Councils Network and District Councils Network to establish shared principles on issues of mutual concern. All recognise the strength of aligned responses to consultations; to this end all three organisations recently responded to the government for reforming local government finance and moving to a system based on 100% retained business rates.

The future programme for RSN will be focussed on working closely with the Rural Fair Shares Group, All Party Parliamentary Group and in particular other organisations with rural interests, to establish a common negotiating position of influence in the post-Brexit climate. RSN will continue to put pressure on Government in respect of retaining Transition Relief before the next local government financial settlement announcement at the end of the year; and the need for a fair formula for retention and top-up of business rates.

5.4 Arts Council

The Portfolio Holder was appointed to the Arts Council West Midlands Regional Board in 2012. Following reorganisation of the organisation and reduction from nine regions to five area councils, she was re-appointed as a Member of the Arts Council Area Board covering both West and East Midlands. She is a rural local government representative on the Board. In that capacity she has been invited to contribute to a number of Arts Council England advisory groups:

The Rural Stakeholders' Group, which was set up to consider how arts funding could be used more effectively to stimulate arts and cultural activities in rural areas and explore the barriers to participation in the arts in rural areas with poor connections and access.

The External Advisory Group, which consists of senior arts practitioners, theatre, museum, library and arts venue directors, and acts as a sounding board for the Arts Council in preparing submissions to Government for retaining arts funding at least at current levels.

The Museums Review Group, which was asked to consider appropriate representations for the Arts Council to put forward as evidence to the Department of Culture, Media and Sport White Paper on the future viability of both national and regional museums.

Membership of the Midlands Board and participation in the Advisory Groups has offered a unique opportunity to work with senior Arts Council officers and to make the case for funding and support for rural arts and culture. It was very good to see the interest shown in Shropshire's arts offer by the recent visit to Shrewsbury Museum of the Arts Council Chief Executive, Darren Henley, and Peter Phillips, Chair of the Arts Council Midlands Board, as well as senior officers, who met with Shropshire's Leader, Chief Executive, Director of Place and Enterprise and representatives of Shropshire arts organisations.

Future work for Arts Council Midlands includes consideration of applications for the new round of National Portfolio Organisations (NPO) funding. Shropshire has four arts organisations with NPO status at present; doubtless they will be re-applying to maintain their funding.

The Portfolio Holder holds regular liaison meetings with the Shropshire National Farmers' Union (NFU) and the West Midlands/Shropshire Country Landowners and Business Association (CLA). These meetings are constructive forums for exchanging views, and are attended by Shropshire Council officers who advise and update on Shropshire Council policies particularly with regard to planning, housing, broadband rollout and any other areas of interest or concern. Both organisations have said they find these meetings helpful and increase their understanding of how Shropshire Council works as well as the constraints under which it has to operate.

5.5 European Funding Programmes

The Portfolio Holder represents Shropshire Council on the Marches Local Enterprise Partnership European Structural Investment Fund, which is overseen by representatives of DCLG; and the Shropshire Hills LEADER Local Action Group, chaired by Cllr. Tim Barker. Both these programmes suffered some hiatus in the lead up to, and the aftermath of, the BREXIT vote; however, both are now back on stream and awarding grants.

Similarly, the Portfolio Holder sits on the European Rural Development Programme national Programme Monitoring Committee, which also underwent a hiatus but is now back on track.

There is some urgency in all these programmes to allocate funding as expeditiously as possible, although the Government has undertaken to underwrite funding allocations until 2019.

6. Local Joint Committees (LJCs)

The Local Joint Committees have continued to meet over the last year through a combination of business and public meetings. The public meetings have been an opportunity for the council and its strategic partners to engage with residents on key issues and for feedback on these to be received. The business meetings are used to plan public meetings and are also a good opportunity for representatives of all the councils within the LJC area to discuss common issues and hear collectively about key local developments. A number of LJCs have continued with the locality commissioning of youth activities within their areas – playing a role in assessing local need, designing commissioning intentions and monitoring the delivered activity. This will continue into 2017.

7. Big Conversation

Work on the Big Conversation has continued since the programme was launched in late 2015. Phase one saw the delivery of a survey, events, focus groups and discussions within a range of different forums. Over 2,270 residents took part in the Big Conversation survey. The survey asked people which services they valued most and least, and the services they believe might be delivered in other ways; e.g. by volunteers or local communities. A further 177 people were involved in more detailed conversations at events, meetings and workshops.

The second phase of the Big Conversation focused on using all the feedback obtained. It included:

- Additional detailed analysis to better understand the feedback gathered.
- The development of a free engagement toolkit.
- The production of a communications toolkit to support Shropshire Council in its work to keep people up to date with the financial challenges being faced.
- Incorporation of the findings into the development of the draft Corporate Plan.
- The development of a strategic action plan to implement the findings

The strategic action plan highlights all the work taking place to respond to the feedback received. Whilst projects are delivered and changes implemented, the Big Conversation project group has been developing the resources needed to update people on what has happened in the last 12 months and to plan methods of identifying any gaps or new ideas.

Phase three of the Big Conversation will include development of the website, a leaflet, a new survey and focus groups. Each will summarise what we learnt, highlight what is happening as a result of that learning, and explore what could happen next. The aim of phase three of the Big Conversation is to keep lines of communication open and encourage feedback, particularly recognising that there are people who either:

- a) have not had as much opportunity to participate in the Big Conversation to date; and/or
- b) are more likely to be impacted by changes to the way public services are delivered or by the loss of some services (e.g. those who may be at greater risk of being digitally or economically excluded).

We will give everyone another opportunity to get involved through a range of engagement opportunities. The objectives of the work due to take place over the coming months include:

- To communicate what the Council has done as a result of the feedback it received including how those findings have been used to inform the Council's Financial Strategy and draft Corporate Plan.
- To obtain feedback on identified priorities and the direction set out in the Corporate Plan (including the three high level outcomes; Healthy People, Resilient Communities and Prosperous Economy).
- To obtain project partners to assist in the delivery of engagement. Project partners will be commissioned because they have the community networks necessary to engage with those groups who were under-represented in Phase 1 (including children and young people, those who are digitally excluded and those whose disabilities may have prevented them from taking part in the conversations to date).
- To better understand the likely impact of changes and how service change can be made in a way that supports greater independence and community resilience.

8. Equalities and Social inclusion

8.1 Corporate Equality Objectives Action Plans are required to be published by local authorities at a minimum of four yearly intervals. Our Cabinet endorsed the 2016/2020 Action Plan at its meeting on 13th July 2016. The Shropshire Council Equality Objectives Action Plan is a key strand of the corporate and partnership approach of Shropshire Council towards continuing compliance with the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED).

8.2 The Deputy Portfolio Holder, Cllr Gwilym Butler has been appointed Member Champion for Equalities and is leading on the promotion of the Equality Objectives Action Plan with local partners, including town and parish councils and the VCS.

8.3 The **progress that we are making** here in Shropshire on equality, diversity and social inclusion includes actions across the following three areas:

- *publish equality and diversity information more visibly;*
Example: updated material on the Council website including evidence about service user and

workforce diversity, guidance for service areas assessing equality impact and links to information for communities, such as support for hate crime support and those wishing to support Syrian refugee family resettlement.

- *collect and analyse equality and diversity data more proactively;*
Example: increased use of Equality and Social Inclusion Impact Assessments by service areas, to ensure that equality data is being collected on an ongoing basis and considered when service changes are planned, and that there is ongoing engagement with people in Protected Characteristic groupings and people at risk of social exclusion.
- *work with partner organisations on equality-related issues.*
Example: working with primary schools to commemorate Holocaust Memorial Day through the annual planting of cherry trees and the continued involvement of inter faith forums, after a first cherry tree was planted in 2015.

9. Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB)

The context of continued structural change in local government and the broader working environment has led the Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Partnership and the respective local authorities, Shropshire Council and Telford & Wrekin Council, to recommend that the future interests of the AONB are best served by the creation of a new independent AONB body.

A detailed Business Case in support of the creation of a Conservation Board, a model enabled by the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, was considered and approved by both Councils and the Partnership in the Autumn 2016. The creation of a Conservation Board is achieved through a Statutory Instrument laid before both Houses of Parliament. A formal request was made to Defra in November, who lead the process and make the final decision.

It is considered that a modern, lean application of a Conservation Board will provide the strongest organisation possible for the long term future of the AONB. The new management structure will provide opportunities to tap into the capacity and skills of Board members, to work alongside the new Shropshire Hills AONB Trust charity, for enhanced commercial activity, to hold property and other assets, and above all the prospect of long term financial sustainability.

As a long-standing member of the AONB Partnership and Management Boards, the Portfolio Holder has been closely involved with the negotiations and planning for the new Conservation Board, and has taken on the role of Vice-Chair of the Transitional Conservation Board.

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

Name and Portfolio of Executive Member responsible for this area of responsibility:
Cllr Cecilia Motley, Portfolio Holder for Rural Services and Communities

Local Members:
All members

Appendices:
None