



Committee and Date

Council
30th March 2023

Item

Public



Communities Overview Committee Annual Report 2021/22

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Cabinet Member (Portfolio Holder):	All		

1. Synopsis

Communities Overview Committee looked at a range of key topics in 2021/22 which are summarised in this paper.

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1 The Shropshire Plan includes ‘Healthy Organisation’ as a priority outcome and the Strategic Objective that “We will ensure councillors are supported to advocate for their constituents but to also be ambassadors for the council”. This report shares the annual statement for 2021/22 for the Communities Overview Committee.
- 2.3 The annual statements for each overview and scrutiny committee for 2022/23 will be reported to Council during 2023/24

3. Recommendations

- 3.1. Members are asked to consider and comment on the 2021/22 annual statement for Communities Overview Committee.

REPORT

4. Risk Assessment and Opportunities Appraisal

- 4.1. Effective Overview and Scrutiny is a feature of the Council's governance arrangements, particularly where the Council is operating executive arrangements. There are a range of factors that could result in risks to Council of not doing O&S effectively.
- Failure to challenge and hold decision makers to account.
 - Failure to link O&S work to the delivery of the council's priorities and risk management – failure to demonstrate added value
 - Failure to carry out thorough and appropriate research to make evidence-based recommendations.
 - Failure to engage partners and providers.
 - Failure to ensure that structures and models of operation are fit for purpose and match ambition and available resources.
 - Failure to ensure that O&S can operate as the voice of communities.
 - Failure to draw on member knowledge and experience to inform policy development.
- 4.2. To mitigate, tolerate or eradicate these risks, enablers for effective scrutiny include:
- Operating in an apolitical manner.
 - Clarity of vision and purpose
 - Overview and Scrutiny support availability, capability and capacity
 - Effective engagement and commitment by Members and officers at all levels, including Cabinet, Opposition Leaders, Scrutiny Chairs and Senior Officers who play a central role in setting the tone and direction
 - Robust Work programming and prioritisation of topics with clear objectives and expected impacts
 - Access to and availability of robust data and intelligence
 - Good relationship with partners and providers
- 4.3. Overview and Scrutiny Committees have remits that cover the breadth of the work of the Council, as well as looking externally including Health Services and provision through Health Overview and Scrutiny requirements.
- 4.4. Topics for Overview and Scrutiny Committee work programmes are identified based on a number of different considerations including an understanding of risks to the Council, employees, people who use services, to service themselves, and to communities. These may be identified through reviewing performance information and comparing with others, changes to national and local policies, budget information, feedback from communities and

customers/service users, feedback from partners/providers, and reports from regulators.

- 4.5. During overview and scrutiny work evidence will be gathered that builds on this understanding to inform the development of conclusions and evidence-based recommendations.
- 4.6. The use of external peer challenge such as that offered by the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny provides objective review and feedback about opportunities to develop the effectiveness and impact of overview and scrutiny.

5. Financial Implications

- 5.1. There are no direct financial implications associated with the annual statements of the Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committees set out in this report.
- 5.2. Effective overview and scrutiny produces evidence-based recommendations. These can be informed by learning from best practice and an understanding of "what works" at other similar local authorities, as well as developing a robust picture of what the situation locally based on data, intelligence and insights. Where adopted recommendations can help with the efficiency and effectiveness of services that can be delivered differently, as well as informing the development of current and new policies.

6. Climate Change Appraisal

- 6.1. All reports to Overview and Scrutiny committees, as with all council committees, include appraisals of the impact of the report content on climate change.
- 6.2. Overview and Scrutiny Committee work programmes directly link to the Shropshire Plan priorities, including Healthy Environment which is built around climate change and carbon reduction, and the natural and historic environment.
- 6.3. Climate change and carbon reduction related issues are directly identified in the remit and therefore focus of the Place Overview Committee i.e.
 - delivery of the agreed lower carbon footprint and emissions targets, including air quality, by the Council and its partners;
 - actions to protect, enhance and value Shropshire's our natural resources and respect the historic environment;
 - arrangements to safeguard and promote a clean and green environment;
 - the delivery of work to reduce landfill and waste;
 - management and development of the physical and digital infrastructure

7. Background

- 7.1. Overview and Scrutiny Committees report to Council annually as part of the organisation's governance arrangements. This includes the work that they have completed in the previous 12 months and the impact they have had through their evidence-based recommendations.
- 7.2. This report sets out the annual statement for 2021/22 for Communities Overview Committee.

8. Annual Scrutiny Statement

8.1 Communities Overview Committee

- **Burial Capacity**

The committee received two updates on work to ensure sufficient cemetery capacity in Shropshire. It agreed that this was an ongoing issue that needed to be kept under review and asked that regular updates be provided to the committee in future.

- **Public Rights of Way**

Committee members expressed concern at the reduction in accessibility of public rights of way caused by the pandemic and the inability of volunteer groups to operate and maintain the paths. The committee also noted that the service was hampered in its ability to do more work to maintain paths by an inability to keep and use income it had generated. It called on the council to explore how the service could retain this money for this purpose in future.

In a further meeting the committee also raised concern at the staff shortages in the service, as well as ongoing requirements to bridge repairs to keep rights of way open. It sought assurance that the council would recruit to fill these posts, and that funding would be made available to effect repairs to address compromised safety.

- **Rural transport**

The committee heard how the council was seeking new ways to deliver public transport in rural areas. It aimed to move from limited scheduled services to a demand-responsive service that would serve more destinations more frequently and could link better to scheduled rail services. The committee supported the proposals and asked that any changes to services and plans be brought to the committee in due course.

- **Libraries Strategy**

The libraries service provided the committee with initial thoughts that it proposed to develop into a formal strategy in due course. The committee members recommended that any future strategy recognised the pivotal role libraries played in communities, particularly in rural communities. They also

recommended that the strategy made full use of commercial opportunities to ensure the long-term sustainability of facilities.

- **Community and Rural Strategy**

The committee received a draft of the strategy. Members suggested that the strategy needed to be brought to grass roots level and recognise the huge resources available in rural parishes and towns. It advised that ongoing development of the strategy should be undertaken with parishes as they had a good understanding of their own needs. It recommended that low level financial input may be needed in order to enable them to provide support in their own locality.

- **Armed Forces Covenant**

The committee endorsed the covenant and agreed that it would recommend that ex-service staff should receive greater priority for consideration in the housing allocation policy. It agreed to make this recommendation when it considered a revised Housing Allocations Policy later in the year.

- **Domestic Abuse**

Following the publication of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, the committee was keen to learn how the council intended to put its new legal duties into place. It asked that a draft strategy for the council was produced and published for agreement in due course, and recommended that the council seek White Ribbon Campaign accreditation.

- **Flooding**

The committee asked for an update on previous recommendations and other learning resulting from flooding throughout Shropshire in late 2019 and early 2020. It was assured that much of the learning from that flooding had been put into place, in particular a new Severe Weather Plan and Flood Action plan. It noted that considerable volunteer effort that had been deployed to mitigate the impact of flooding and recommended that Shropshire Council create a reserve of volunteers, from inside and outside of the council, who could be deployed to respond to other incidents or emergencies.

- **Strategic Housing Review**

The committee scrutinised a review of the housing revenue account management function. It agreed with the review that STAR Housing be retained and not merged with the council's Cornovii Developments.

- **Blue Badge Scheme**

Committee members raised concerns that efforts to digitalise council functions had made it considerably more difficult to apply for a Blue Badge for some people, particularly older residents. The committee recommended that the service work with AgeUK locally to identify ways to support applicants who were unable to use digital services.

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

Communities Overview Committee agendas, papers and minutes for May 2021 to March 2022.

Local Member:

All

Appendices

None
