

**Committee and Date**

Council  
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Item

Public



## Report of the Portfolio Holder Culture & Digital

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**Cabinet Member** (Portfolio Holder):

Rob Gittins (until 30/04/23)  
Robert Macey (from 01/05/23)

### 1. Synopsis

The Portfolio Holder for Culture & Digital has responsibility for many functions delivered by the Resources and Place Directorates. This report provides an update on key work undertaken since July 2022.

### 2. Executive Summary

2.1. The Culture & Digital Support Portfolio covers functions delivered by the Resources and Place Directorate, as listed below. This report provides an update to Council, setting out the crucial work undertaken since the last Portfolio Holder report presented to Council on 7<sup>th</sup> July 2022 as the Annual Report of the Portfolio Holder for Digital, Data & Insight and Built Housing. During this period this Portfolio has passed from Councillor Rob Gittins to Councillor Rob Macey, and now joins together the functions of Culture and Digital Support for the first time. By operating under the ethos of a Single Organisation, all staff covered by the Culture & Digital Portfolio can align behind the Council's key priorities.

2.2 Some of the key work undertaken within the Culture & Digital Support Portfolio and details of the aims and objectives for the future are provided in the pages below.

2.3 Service areas included within the Portfolio:

- IT and technology
- Data and Business Intelligence
- Digital First
- Infrastructure: Connecting Shropshire, Broadband, 5G
- Smart Shropshire: Digital Strategy, Digital County
- Information Governance, Performance management, Customer Services
- Culture, Leisure and Tourism services

### 3. IT and Technology

Within IT and Technology, work has been focused in two areas – supporting enhanced levels of cyber-security (to ensure that the council is defended from increasing levels of cyber attacks) and developing existing and new IT tools to facilitate the accessibility and efficiency of the Council and its many systems and services. Further details are set out below.

#### **Key achievements since July 2022:**

- An important part of our work is to keep the Council working, since July 2022 we have dealt with 24,594 incidents and 42,353 service requests.
- A further 10 schools have been moved onto our managed service offering.
- We have successfully applied for a grant with the Local Digital Cyber Fund and have been allocated a grant of £100,000 to deliver our Cyber Treatment Plan and reduce the risk created by legacy operating systems.
- Soft launch of new council website <https://next.shropshire.gov.uk/>. The next version of our website builds on a user-first approach and our research on best practice examples across local and central government. Council Tax and Joint Training are the first services to be rebuilt and are currently running alongside their 'current' versions as beta versions to gather user feedback.
- Phishing exercise run in Feb to investigate how staff respond to phishing emails.
- New backup system procured and implemented.
- We have implemented the first StarLink (satellite broadband) connection at a site that has been experiencing connection issues for several years, they now have a more robust and significantly quicker internet connection.
- A managed Security Operations Centre (SOC) has been implemented providing increased cyber security resilience on a 24/7 basis, and is working well. This was implemented on a trial basis and a more permanent solution will be considered this year.

### 4. Data & Business Intelligence

#### **4.1. Performance Management**

- Performance management reports have been submitted to the Overview Scrutiny committee on a quarterly basis with the measurements set against key performance indicators. The online Inphase portal has also been utilised to communicate the KPI's against The Shropshire Plan.

- With the launch of the Shropshire Plan in 2022 the performance management framework has also been relaunched with a stronger focus on the becoming a performance managed council with clear KPI's linked to the Shropshire vision and The Shropshire Plan with the golden thread through service delivery plans and personal development plans. The performance management framework also supports setting targets to enable direction of travel to be measured with actions and decisions to take corrective action if performance is going off course.

#### 4.2 **Data and Business Intelligence**

- The team has been restructured bringing together the data and insight team and the infrastructure and architecture team creating a performance and research and a data and reporting team within Improvement.
- Significant progress has been throughout the year developing and delivering dashboards across a variety of service areas.
- There has been a noticeable change in the appetite and understanding of the importance for data and business intelligence across the authority.
- Work has continued with the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services (ADASS) delivering not only a regional data hub for West Midlands ADASS but a national version which has been well received.
- Access to data sources and sharing of data has also been achieved for the core services.

## 5. Digital First

### **Background**

- Technology is continually changing the way people go about their daily lives how they interact, learn, play, and work, offering new and exciting opportunities for the way Shropshire Council connects and interacts with citizens and staff.
- This technical progress is predicted to continue for years to come, and it allows Shropshire Council to help ensure that both local residents and visitors to the county enjoy the benefits of the digital age, while working to ensure that those in 'digital poverty' are not left behind.
- Digital technology helps to remove some of the challenges of covering a large geographical area, remotely connecting residents to services in a more cost-effective and efficient manner. Accessing services digitally also reduces both time and travel costs and the associated impact on the environment, placing us on an even footing with urban authorities in terms of service delivery. The challenge with digital services is differing levels of digital infrastructure and digital skills, not understanding or appreciating the benefits of digital technology, not being able to afford devices or connections and trusting online services.
- In order to address these digital exclusions, there is a bid to expand the Digital Skills Programme, supporting a further 3,000 digitally excluded Shropshire residents aged 55 or over to interact with the Council digitally. Our Shropshire Local customer service points offer a place for our citizens to talk to friendly council staff

face to face and get support with a range of services, if citizens don't have a computer at home, they can use our public access computers.

## 6. Digital Infrastructure: Connecting Shropshire

### Summary of key headlines/achievements:

- Completion of final superfast broadband (30 megabits per second) contract (third of 3). Contract 3 delivered connectivity to 12,500 premises;
- European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development contract now complete, having delivered gigabit-capable connectivity to over 800 premises;
- ERDF Marches Business Broadband Grant Scheme is now complete, having delivered improved connectivity to over 75 businesses;
- £2.5m capital funding allocated for reinvestment to top-up the national Gigabit Broadband Voucher Scheme;
- Project Gigabit Lot 25 launched with first procurement outcome announced in May for North Shropshire (12,000 premises);
- Market engagement process ongoing to procure mobile phone coverage information across Shropshire Council area.

#### 6.1. Superfast Broadband Contract

- The second and final BT Openreach contract closed in 2020.
- Contract 3 was awarded to Airband Community Internet Ltd. The build phase of the contract was completed at the end of March 2023.
- By the end of the contract, Airband had provided over 12,500 contracted premises with access to a superfast broadband connection (of which about 1,900 premises have access to a 'fibre to the premises' broadband connection). Additional premises in the vicinity of contracted premises have also benefitted from Airband's own commercial deployment.
- Contract 3 brings an end to the superfast programme managed by Shropshire Council. Since 2013, over 70,000 premises have directly benefitted from the three superfast broadband contracts that Shropshire Council has managed.
- When added to commercial deployment, the Council contracts have increased superfast broadband coverage in the Shropshire Council area from 24% in 2014, to 98.5% in 2023 (Source: [Thinkbroadband](#)).
- Connecting Shropshire are currently overseeing the contractual closure process for Contract 3, which is expected to result in contract savings. When the contract is formally closed down later this year, this money will be available for reinvestment in additional broadband coverage or to contribute to the Council's 2023/24 savings targets.

#### 6.2. European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) Marches & Gloucestershire Viable Clusters Broadband Project

- Shropshire Council secured funds in 2017 from DEFRA through the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD).

- Around 800 Shropshire Council premises have been given access to a 'fibre to the premises' broadband connection from the project in some of our most challenging rural areas around Ellesmere and Oswestry.
- This contract was managed directly by Herefordshire Council who were the accountable body.

### 6.3. **ERDF Marches Business Broadband Grant Scheme**

In 2017 Shropshire Council secured funds from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) to support a project which was managed by Herefordshire Council. This project completed in March 2023, with 75 ERDF-eligible Shropshire Council businesses directly benefitting.

### 6.4. **Project Gigabit – Lot 25**

- Project Gigabit is a £5 billion government infrastructure project to enable and deliver fast, reliable digital connectivity for the UK. The prime objective of the programme is to deliver gigabit broadband to those areas of the country that are commercially unviable for broadband infrastructure suppliers to build to without public funding. Across the UK, 75% (ThinkBroadband, May 2023) of premises can now access gigabit-capable broadband, and the government's target is at least 85% gigabit-capable coverage by March 2026. In Shropshire only 37% of premises currently have a gigabit-capable coverage.
- Shropshire Council's role in this next phase of the national broadband programme has now changed. Whilst Shropshire Council remains a key stakeholder in the new Project Gigabit delivery model, it has no direct influence on the deployment strategy, management, or delivery of the new programme. Building Digital UK (BDUK) will be solely responsible for procurements, contracts and supplier management. BDUK is an executive agency, sponsored by the UK government's Department for Science, Innovation & Technology).
- In July 2022 BDUK issued an Invitation To Tender for two procurement Lots (25.01 and 25.02) in the Shropshire Council area:

#### Lot 25.01 Mid West Shropshire

- 7,359 premises (all in the Shropshire Council area)
- Subsidy available £10,805,000

#### Lot 25.02 North Shropshire

- 12,277 premises (10,752 in the Shropshire Council area)
  - Subsidy available £24,042,000
- In May, BDUK awarded the contract for Lot 25.02 to Freedom Fibre who will provide around 12,000 premises with gigabit-capable broadband across North Shropshire and surrounding areas. Under this contract, the first premises are expected to gain access to the new gigabit-capable broadband network in 2024.
  - Work is progressing on the contract concerning mid West Shropshire (25.01), and the approach for the rest of the county is still to be confirmed by BDUK.

- More information about Project Gigabit can be found here:  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/project-gigabit-delivery-plan-winter-update-2022-to-2023/project-gigabit-winter-update-2022-to-2023>

### 6.5. **Gigabit Broadband Voucher Scheme and Shropshire Council top-up**

- To provide additional support to premises without access to good broadband, Shropshire Council has made up to £2.5m funding available to ‘top-up’ the Gigabit Broadband Voucher Scheme in partnership with DSIT (Department for Science, Innovation & Technology). This funding has come from earlier contract savings and contract clawback mechanisms.
- The national Gigabit Vouchers are worth up to £4,500 per eligible premise. The Council has topped up the value of vouchers to £7,000 for any premises that cannot get superfast broadband.
- This strategic investment supports those premises not included in current/planned gigabit-capable broadband network deployment and particularly those in our most rural areas that do not have superfast broadband.
- Using the last BDUK reporting data from January 2023, 1,043 vouchers have been issued with a total value of £3,285,904 (of which £1,503,880 is from Shropshire capital top-up funding).
- To date 449 premises have been connected with vouchers paid out to suppliers. There are around twenty community schemes currently in the remaining pipeline.
- Projects with at least twenty paid vouchers include the following rural areas:
  - Boraston
  - Buildwas
  - Plealey
  - Stiperstones
  - Wistanswick

### 6.6. **Mobile Phone Coverage**

- Mobile phone services continue to play an ever more important role in people’s lives, from on-the-go calls and internet access to wireless connectivity for smart meters. Smartphones have become commonplace since the late 2000s, with 92% of UK mobile users now owning a smartphone that enables internet web browsing (Uswitch Statistics - 2023).
- Indoor 4G mobile phone coverage from all four providers in Shropshire is currently 64% v 84% nationally (Ofcom Connected Nations 2022) with Shropshire currently ranked 57th out of 96 areas in the UK (Signalchecker.co.uk).
- The Mobile Network Operator (MNO) ecosystem remains a wholly commercial marketplace dominated by four national providers, EE, O2, Three and Vodafone. Like broadband it has been the rural areas of Shropshire that have been the most challenging for these providers to address commercially. In 2020, the government and the MNOs agreed to invest over £1 billion in the Shared Rural Network (SRN) programme. The objective is to eliminate the majority of UK 4G ‘not’ spots and ‘partial not-spots’ areas by 2026.
- New SRN mast applications have started to come forward as part of this programme, with more expected over the next few years. It will be important that

the need for digital connectivity is carefully considered against the ongoing challenges of visible impacts when considering planning approvals.

- To understand the full extent of mobile phone coverage, Shropshire Council is working with neighbouring Local Authorities (Staffordshire CC & Worcestershire CC) to look at ways of jointly procuring detailed mobile phone network coverage data. Accurate data will enable the Council to work with the key stakeholders to address mobile phone coverage failures, at the same time as helping our residents and businesses to understand which MNO provides the best coverage for their needs.

## 7. Information Governance & Customer Services

### 7.1. Information Governance

- Information Governance plays a vital role in advising the Senior Information Risk Owner (SIRO), Executive Management Team and senior management in the establishment and maintenance of the Information Governance Framework and compliance with legislation including the efficiency and effectiveness of these arrangements. It is about the way an organisation's information is 'processed' or handled. On one hand it promotes openness and transparency – through legislation such as the Freedom of Information Act (FOI), Environmental Information Regulations and the Publication Scheme. On the other hand, it ensures personal, sensitive and confidential information is handled legally, securely and effectively in line with the requirements of the Data Protection Act 2018.
- The Information Governance team at Shropshire Council provides advice and guidance across the Council. The aim is to ensure that the council's information assets are used to their fullest potential in meeting corporate objectives while complying with relevant legislation.
- Information Governance also plays a vital role in the establishment and maintenance of the Information Governance Framework and compliance with legislation including the efficiency and effectiveness of these arrangements.

### 7.2. Customer Service

#### **Background:**

Customer Services is made up of several different teams that between them handle customer contact for a wide range of Council services.

The Customer Service Centre (CSC) itself consists of the First Point of Contact Team who triage the front end of Adult Social Work contact, and both adult and child concerns calls.

The Generalist Team within CSC handle service requests and transactions for over 50 services and have access to a range of line of business computer systems through which to fulfil customer requests.

CSC have also been making outbound calls to Shropshire residents identified as potentially requiring more support, initially this was during the Covid 19 pandemic to help those shielding, alongside other specific groups, to access the support they

needed and later, to proactively arrange vaccination appointments. More recently, these calls have been made to residents we identify as potentially needing help to cope with cost of living pressures.

The CSC works seamlessly with the Out of Hours/CCTV team who, as a team that works fully 24 hours every day of the year, have a dual role, providing both the

Council's emergency out of hours contacts for Social Care, Highways and Homelessness, alongside real time monitoring of Shrewsbury's CCTV network.

Also within Customer Services is the Welfare Support Team who take calls for the Housing options Service (homelessness) as well as administering the Local Support Fund which helps people in crisis. Having this team in CSC allows us to collaborate over identifying and awarding help to people presenting in need, including those who are homeless and residents that CSC identify as needing support.

The Face to Face Team is presently still part of Customer Services. These advisors handle customer enquiries for literally any Council service and are currently providing the Shropshire Local Service via both fixed venues and a regular mobile service.

Also within Customer Services is the Digital Skills project which identifies people wanting support to be able to do things online and provides a free, structured, outcomes based learning programme, commissioned via community providers and our own Libraries Service, that upskills people to perform online tasks confidently and safely.

The outcomes from the initial pilot scheme that was aimed at people aged 65 or over were very successful, and, as feedback from learners clearly showed, changed many lives very positively.

The project has now been extended to run until 2026 and widened to include people of all ages who meet specific criteria.

### **Key achievements from July 2022:**

CSC Since October 2022, customer service advisers have made almost 13,000 outbound phone calls to check how residents are managing the cost of living and to make them aware of support that is available, from discounts and benefits to resources and support in the community.

- First Point of Contact continue to support Adult's and Children's social care. Handling over 13,000 calls and over 6000 e-mails for adult and over 5000 calls for Children's services- including Compass, Early Help and Family Information Services (Jan-May 2023).
- Since July 2022 our Welfare Support Team has awarded cash grants worth over £440,000 to over 3000 vulnerable Shropshire households struggling to manage financially, effectively spending all of their allocation of the Government's Household Support Fund
- Our Out of Hours/CCTV team have successfully handled emergency contacts for the Council's own services as well as providing the same under contract to Herefordshire Council's Adult Social Work Team to a highly satisfactory level. CCTV have also been instrumental in a number of



- Our Face to Face team has assisted over 13,000 residents to make service requests online, and at the same time conducted proactive conversations with them especially around cost of living pressures and digital upskilling.
- Our Digital Skills programme delivered bespoke upskilling to over 300 learners over the age of 65

## 8. Culture, Leisure and Tourism

This year the Culture, Leisure and Tourism department has showcased the immense value and impact of its services within local communities and in contributing to the strategic objectives outlined in the Shropshire Plan. The department's commitment to fostering a vibrant cultural scene, promoting leisure opportunities, and stimulating tourism development has delivered throughout the county, enhancing quality of life, supporting economic growth, and reinforcing the area's unique identity.

The first step is the departmental restructure currently being implemented. Whilst making savings, this has reorganised staffing to create three new teams focusing on commercial development, project development and external funding, and increasing compliance, whilst reducing duplication of back-office functions.

### 8.1. Culture, Leisure and Tourism Development

#### **Key achievements:**

- A new partnership called **Vibrant Shropshire Cultural Compact** has been developed, with the backing of DCMS and Arts Council England. The Cultural Compact forms part of a national network and will be the independent voice for culture in Shropshire, supporting the delivery of the Vibrant Shropshire Cultural Strategy and underpinning health and wellbeing, the local economy, and the environment from a cultural perspective.

The Cultural Compact Board has been recruited, chaired by Paul Johnson, Head of University Centre Shrewsbury, and with senior representation from business, health and wellbeing, education, and the cultural sectors.

- £14,800 external funding has been secured to support the development of the Cultural Compact
  - Recruitment for a new Cultural Compact Officer (funded by Arts Council England) will be complete by June 2023
  - An application for £130,000 has been made to the UKSPF to fund a grants scheme that will support grass roots cultural organisations
- The **Holiday Activities and Food Programme** has supported families with children in receipt of benefits-related free school meals across the county. The programme provides nutritious meals, increases understanding of nutrition and allows young people to join in a wealth of fun activities during school holidays.

	HAF Summer 2022	Winter 2022	Easter 2023
Number of programmes run across Shropshire	56 HAF Holiday Programmes	39 HAF Holiday Programmes	58 HAF Holiday Programmes
Number of children and young people taking part- HAF funded attendees	3509	953	1238

- A new **Armed Forces Community Outreach Project** - Sarah Kerr, Shropshire Council's veteran's hub co-ordinator, has been recognised with the High Sheriff's Award for her commitment to developing support for the Armed Forces community in Shropshire. An Administrator has joined the project to increase the level of one-to-one support for veterans, recruit more project volunteers and run more events. Veterans volunteer Sandy Beattie has been recognised by the Mayor of Shrewsbury for his work with Shropshire Council's Armed Forces Covenant Outreach project.
- Over 60 members of the Culture, Leisure and Tourism team have attended training course to increase their confidence and skills in working with members of the **Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) community**.
  - In partnership with Ignition, a programme of activities designed especially for young members of the SEND Community has been delivered at libraries, Shrewsbury Museum and Art Gallery, Theatre Severn and Severn Valley County Park.
- The lease for **Acton Scott Historic Working Farm** was surrendered back to the Acton Scott Estate in April 2023, following twelve months of community engagement and negotiations with the Acton Scott Estate. The Estate intend to set up a not-for-profit body to operate a historic farm attraction that will open spring 2024.
- A new partnership has been built with a large local company to develop a **corporate volunteering** scheme. 15 volunteers spent two days in Ellesmere restoring Tricia's Pavilion at The Mere and over 20 volunteers have been helping to deliver digital training in libraries for members of the community aged 65 and over.

## 8.2 Culture and Tourism

Culture, Leisure and Tourism (CLT) has a core objective to drive its commercial impact and financial resilience through income generation and monetisation of its services. This is against a backdrop of significant financial pressures for Shropshire Council and a potential funding deficit of £51m in 23/24.

Now more than ever, CLT will needs to actively drive through our commercial plans and make an increased contribution to help with the challenges that lie ahead for Shropshire

Council. The service is responsible for an outstanding portfolio of venues and services and has a strong talented team with the skills and experience to help make the difference.

This work will be coordinated through the Culture and Tourism team which is responsible for:

- Theatre Services (Theatre Severn and Old Market Hall)
- Museums and Archives Services
- Shropshire visitor economy support and development
- CLT venue and service income generation and commercial development
- Marketing of CLT venues and services

### 8.2.1 Income Generation

A small team will be led by the Culture and Tourism Manager to create a programme of commercial initiatives for CLT services and sites and to continue to support growth for Shropshire's tourism sector.

#### 8.2.2 Theatre Services (Theatre Severn and Old Market Hall cinema)

##### **Key achievements:**

- **Christmas 2022 Pantomime** (Beauty and the Beast) broke previous Box Office records.
- Theatre Severn and the Old Market Hall achieved **combined annual attendance** of 240,206 during 2022/23. This represents 90% of pre-pandemic level.
- 2,885 people attended open-air theatre events at Shrewsbury Castle in July/August 2022. 87% of tickets were sold across the season. Another season is planned for summer 2023.
- Annual bar sales increased by 21%, and kiosk sales by 50% in latest financial year.
- Theatre Severn hosted its first **Relaxed Performance** in December 2022, and first **Dementia-friendly performance** in May 2023. It also partnered with Ignition to deliver a series of **Sensory Drama** sessions in Spring 2022, with a second series due across the summer, for children/young people with complex/sensory needs and their families.

#### 8.2.3 Museums and Archive Service

##### **Key achievements:**

- The discovery of a rare Bronze Age Sun Pendant in Shropshire was the catalyst for a partnership between the British Museum (BM) and Shropshire Museums & Archives Service that is intended to help create the **nation's first BM Partnership Gallery exploring the Prehistoric past**. National Portfolio funding has enabled us to take the development of the partnership to the next phase. A tender for a £50k commission to reimagine Shrewsbury Museum & Art Gallery has been developed and will be procured in 2023.
- In 2021 Shropshire Museums were successful in achieving ACE Project funding for Phase 1 of a long-term partnership between a regional rural museum and an

internationally renowned institution, representing a demonstrable commitment from ACE to the aims of the partnership. In 2022 further investment was secured from ACE in the form of three-year, **National Portfolio Organisation** funding.

Shropshire Museums are delighted to join the ACE National portfolio which recognises the importance of Shrewsbury Museum & Art Gallery as a cultural hub.

- In 2022 Shropshire Museums & Archives were successful in an application for funding from the Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund; a fund supporting new, ambitious, creative collections engagement that has a social impact. A new, public access **Archaeology Lab** has been established at Shropshire Museums Resource Centre (Ludlow Library) and offers placements for socially prescribed volunteers.
- **Visitor numbers** to Shrewsbury Museum & Art Gallery continue to increase from 132,735 in 2021/22 to 159,628 in 2022/23 representing a 20% increase in visitor figures year on year and a **64% increase on pre pandemic figures** of 97,144 (2019/20). In the first quarter of 2023 Shrewsbury Museum visitor figures are up 26% comparing Jan-March 2023 (39,238) to Jan-March 2022 (31,232).
- As the Council transitions to a cashless organisation, two newly installed **contactless donation points** successfully offer a convenient way for visitors to contribute, ensuring a crucial source of income for the service's future endeavours.
- In March 2023 Shropshire Archives successfully renewed their status as an **Accredited Archive Service**. Achieving accredited status demonstrates that Shropshire Archives has met clearly defined national standards relating to management and resourcing; the care of its unique collections and what the service offers to its entire range of users. The Archives and Records Management services joined a local government consortium of archives services in 2022 to develop a Digital Archive Repository, enabling Shropshire Council to remain compliant in the storage and retrieval of digital archives.
- A Conservation Management Plan has been completed for **Shropshire Castle**, clarifying the heritage importance of the site, restoration needed and starting to consider possible future uses.

#### 8.2.4 Visitor Economy and Tourism

##### Key achievements:

##### **Destination Management Plan (DMP)**

The DMP is a blueprint for managing Shropshire's visitor economy. It lays down a tourism strategy for the next three years with aspirations that by 2026:

- Public, private and third sectors across Shropshire will be working together – **One Shropshire** - to deliver a **coherent, quality visitor and resident experience**
- GVA growth will be a minimum of 5% per annum achieved by adopting a sustainable model of tourism development **including longer stays, value over volume, attract and disperse model**
- Shropshire will be a destination that can leverage resources and is **worthy of consideration for any future tourism funding initiatives** because it is well organised and connected

The DMP has identified eight key priorities to deliver growth and sustainable development of Shropshire's visitor economy:

- Develop a strong evidence base to support future decision making
- Improve digital infrastructure for tourism businesses
- Increase the appeal of the county for visiting families

- Adjust the ratio between day and staying visitors from 90:10 to 80:20
- Become an exemplar destination for sustainable practices
- Adopt an attract and disperse approach to regional and national marketing
- Increase Shropshire's reputation for quality experiences through product development
- Grow Shropshire's reputation for high service standards and a warm visitor welcome by investing in people

### **Shropshire Destination Brand**

Post COVID, a project was started to create a destination brand for Shropshire as an aspirational place for people to visit, work and live, in order to drive tourism, support growth in the wider economy, create jobs, help recruit skilled workers and attract inward investment. This work will also support delivery of the:

- Shropshire Plan 2022-25
- Economic Growth Strategy 2022-27
- Vibrant Shropshire, Cultural Strategy for Shropshire 2021-2031
- Project Objective: To co-create and launch a compelling destination brand strategy and place narrative for Shropshire that will support immediate visitor economy recovery from COVID-19, facilitate longer term positioning of the county as a visitor destination and promote Shropshire as an aspirational place to live and work.
- Desired Outcome: A well-defined market positioning, customer proposition and brand identity are crucial to the future success of Shropshire as a tourism destination and a county capable of delivering economic growth and attracting inward investment and people skills.

To date, research and insight studies have been completed, brand positionings tested with consumers and a final brand strategy formulated. Creative development for the visual identity and narrative has begun and work will be complete summer 2023.

## **8.3 Culture and Communities**

### **8.3.1 Libraries**

#### **Key achievements:**

- Publishing the new [Library Strategy](#) for Shropshire.
- The Library Service was awarded £236,950 from Arts Council England as part of the Libraries Improvement Fund. This funding will enable the **Live Well With Your Library** project which will see the installation of 1-to-1 interview pods and flexible shelving units in 6 of the market town libraries.
- Shropshire Libraries worked in partnership with the **Human Library** Organisation to pilot a series of Human Library events in Stoke Heath Prison. This brings people together to investigate and challenge prejudices. They focused on the topics of health, sexuality, grief, and abuse, which were well received by the prisoners and led to further frank and open discussions to discuss prejudice.
- The Shropshire Council funded **Digital Skills Programme** was rolled out to 16 libraries across the county to support people aged 65 and over to become digitally active. Over 147 people have completed their one to one ten-week course to date. Over 40 volunteers were recruited to support this project and are working closely with Community Resource and Capgemini, to help with further recruitment of digital

volunteers. With 25% of people 65 and over not digitally active, this project provides much needed support to gain confidence and explore the benefits of being online.

- Shropshire Libraries had a very successful **Summer Reading Challenge** in 2022. Across the library authorities in the West Midlands Region, Shropshire had the highest proportion of boys take part and our percentage reach was joint highest in the region. We also worked with the Holiday Activities and Food programme (HAF) around Shropshire, enabling us to engage with more children than ever, particularly increasing engagement of children who do not normally take part. In 2022, we had a total of 3302 children take part in the Summer Reading Challenge, of whom over 500 were new members of Shropshire Libraries.
- 2022/23 saw significance increases in **library events and activities**, with a total of 3,767 events attended by 53,868 people. These are increases of over 140% compared to the previous year. Events programmes include Rhyme Times and Story Times for children, events with authors and poets, drop-in advice sessions led by community partners, creative activities such as knitting, crafting, lego building, and learning sessions on subjects such as creative writing, local and family history, and careers and business advice.
- Shropshire Libraries were amongst over 80 organisations and Shropshire Council buildings offering a **Warm Welcome to Shropshire** residents last autumn and winter, where people could go for free to socialise, meet friends and take part in activities while also keeping warm. People concerned about the rising cost of living, were also signposted to support with energy, food, money, mental health and more useful information and resources.

### 8.3.2 Shropshire's Great Outdoors- Country Parks, Heritage Sites and Rights of Way

#### Country Parks and Heritage Sites

##### **Key achievements:**

- An £80K Invest to Save Loan from Shropshire Council has enabled us to halt the decline of the play area at The Mere and install **new play equipment**.
- **Nesscliffe Hillfort archaeological dig** coordinated by Oxford and Southampton Universities revealed a monument of national significance and the project went viral around the world. Utilisation of latest virtual imagery technology is allowing virtual access to these digs for the first time enabling the public to delve into the archaeology as the project evolves.
- **25 countryside sites remain open and safe** for public use alongside improvements to biodiversity.
- Funding of £40k has been secured via **Section 106** over the next 20 years to protect wildlife on our more sensitive sites from the detrimental effects of excess visitors.
- **Shining Light on Stanmore Country Park** is a £70k grant funded by Severn Trent Community Fund. Delivery includes path improvements, renovating ponds and creating a family discovery trail
- Initial meetings held and working group set up to explore the potential for a landscape-scale conservation project along the **Middle Severn Valley**, working closely with the National Trust.
- **Successful schools and events programme** delivered at Severn Valley Country Park including delivery of Severn Valley Trail Run in September 2022.

- **Strengthening ties with town and parish councils** to help fund large-scale conservation and land management at country parks and heritage sites

## Rights of Way

### **Key achievements:**

- 1,032 Individual **maintenance improvements** on the Rights of Way network delivered in year 2022-23 (previous best 938 2018/19), including **135 stiles replaced with gates** on the rights of way network to improve accessibility for all.
- **Income generated through commercial activity**, was just short of £250k in year 2022-23 (up nearly £50k from 2021/22). This was reinvested in service delivery and equipment.
- Successfully secured the hosting of the system used to manage the rights of way network (CAMs), this will ensure **improved management of the network**.
- 2283 Searches completed, 50 private searches, 100 Planning Applications responded to, 11 Formal Applications added to register, and 6 new Landowner Statements deposited during 2022-2023.
- Legal Orders prioritised and ongoing. Team planning for the implications of the Rights of Way Reforms due to be enacted under the **Deregulation Act 2015**.
- **Income targets achieved** despite challenges of hybrid working.
- Mapping & Enforcement Team successfully recruited staff following business case, this together with investment in the Maintenance Team means the overall the team is more able to deal with issues reported on the rights of way network. This is already showing results.

### **8.3.3 Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) Partnership**

#### **Key achievements:**

- Farming in Protected Landscapes programme extended to a 4<sup>th</sup> year 2024-25, a further £1.5 million allocated to the Shropshire Hills. £1.12 million allocated for 2023-24 and £746,000 paid so far in grants to 61 farm-based projects over two years 2021-23.
- Young Rangers and Green Leaders programmes achieved 432 attendances at 47 events during 2022-23.
- £75k of funding secured from Natural England under Protected Site Strategy for peatland mapping in the upper Clun catchment.
- Completion of £52k of Defra-funded 'Access for All' capital works at the Bog Centre, Carding Mill Valley and Shropshire Hills Discovery Centre, and completion of an inclusion study into improving provision for under-served groups in the Shropshire Hills AONB.
- Climate Change Action Plan completed.
- Revised Shropshire Hills Shuttle Bus route launched 27<sup>th</sup> May.
- Continued successful support to farmer cluster groups including participation in Defra Environmental Land Management Tests & Trials.
- Ancient woodland restoration project under way.

#### 8.3.4 Southern Shropshire LEADER Programme

The Southern Shropshire LEADER Local Action Group secured £2.032 million through the LEADER Programme, part of the Rural Development Programme for England, funded by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development.

The Southern Shropshire LEADER Programme implemented the six national LEADER priorities:

- Increasing farm productivity in ways which enhance natural capital.
- Developing sustainable micro and small enterprises and farm diversification.
- Building rural tourism making the most of Shropshire's assets.
- Improving rural services to support business growth and development.
- Enhancing the natural, cultural and heritage attractions of the area.
- Increasing woodland and forest productivity in ways which enhance natural capital.

This programme has now been completed.

##### **Key Achievements:**

- The programme developed and supported 73 projects totalling £3,875,882 worth of project spend. The grant intervention of £1,739,610 was administered by the Local Action Group and the LEADER support team.
- The programme created 63 local jobs.

#### 8.4 CLT Infrastructure, Compliance and Contracts

The Infrastructure, Compliance and Contracts team has been set up through the restructure. This team will focus on making CLT a better internal customer for back-office services, resulting in better compliance, speedier responses and less time being spent by services on back-office tasks, better compliance, and improved contracts.

Contracts are involved in over £500k income to CLT and over £3.5m of payments per year. Many of these need renegotiating, reviewing and improving, with a view to realising savings or increasing income through profit share etc.

The team will work closely with the ICT Business Partner to address issues with current IT systems and help ensure effective booking systems and other customer facing interfaces, helping to drive income and efficiencies.

The team will help manage systems and procedures to ensure consistency across services and reduce duplication, helping to reduce the Council's overall risk. There are significant shortcomings identified that could impact public safety and result in compensation or court proceedings. The team will facilitate compliance issues, H&S and other procedural priorities.

Short-term priorities:

- Digital review
- Fire Safety Management Review
- Software updates
- Venue improvements, including glazing in of sections of OMH undercroft, Coleham Pumping Station and reconfiguring parts of Theatre Severn.



- Low carbon projects in leisure centres
- Contracts register
- H&S Management
- Leisure Management Options
- Development of new facilities; Whitchurch Swimming and Fitness Centre and Swimming in Shrewsbury
- Leisure Centre audits

#### 8.4.1 Sports and Leisure

##### **Key achievements:**

- Negotiated **contract extension with Shropshire Community Leisure Trust** to continue to manage 4 facilities on behalf of the Council until 2025; included £365k investment in updated fitness equipment and innovative installations (Box12).
- Obtained approval to proceed with major capital project to replace **Whitchurch Swimming Centre**.
- Continued work on the development of **Swimming in Shrewsbury**.
- The **Playing Pitch and Outdoor Sport Strategy** was reviewed and updated, continuing support for development/replacement of essential facilities; for example, a replacement all-weather turf pitch at Meole Brace School in 2022.
- Purchase and installation of **new Technogym fitness equipment** at SpArC, Bishop's Castle – funding raised by the local community through the SpArC Trust.
  
- Since last year, a host of improvements have been made at the **Shropshire Community Leisure Trust managed centres**, including a new BOX12 fitness studio at the Sports Village and upgrades to the gym equipment at both Oswestry and Market Drayton. The Sports Village has also seen a Soft Play centre added to its mix of attractions. A new Community Outreach post has been secured.
- The first **open day at SpArC** on 1<sup>st</sup> April was a successful community event.
- **Visits** to Church Stretton Leisure Centre in 2022/23 exceeded pre-pandemic visitor numbers (2018/19 – 41,674; 2022/23 – 47,140). Visits to SpArC increased by 40% in 2022/23 compared with 2021/22, representing a 97% recovery rate following the pandemic.

##### **Aims and objectives in the future**

- All services will continue to align closely with the overarching strategy set out within the adopted Shropshire Plan
- There will be a continued focus on maximising the potential benefits digital services offer to the council and users of our services
- We will continue looking at innovative ways to deliver services and projects and grasp those opportunities that can benefit our county

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

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**Local Member:** Robert Macey

**Appendices** None