Committee and Date	Item
Council 18th July 2024	
	Public

Healthy People

Healthy Economy

Healthy Environment

Healthy Organisation

Report of the Portfolio Holder Culture & Digital

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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 2023.

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 6th July 2023 as the Annual Report of the Portfolio Holder for Digital, Data & Insight and Built Housing. 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. Recommendations

To receive the report and raise any issues as appropriate on the performance and activities of the Culture and Digital Portfolio.

4. IT and Technology

In Automation and Technology, our focus has been on enhancing our cyber security, operational performance and customer interactions, as well as embracing new technologies and leading the way in applying artificial intelligence in the public sector.

Some Key achievements since July 2023:

- An important part of our work is to keep the Council working, since July 2023 we have dealt with 23,290 incidents and 45,827 service requests.

- A programme has been established to replace IT equipment across the organisation, ensuring staff will be working on modern devices with a standard set of supporting peripherals. The programme moves away from the ad-hoc equipment purchases of the past and instead builds this into a rolling programme to refresh all IT and desktop devices every 3 years. A healthy organisation needs to ensure staff have access to modern and fit for purpose IT equipment, the programme will ensure this happens and will improve the digital experience for staff moving forward.

- We have implemented Microsoft Autopilot, a cloud-based service that simplifies the deployment and management of new Windows devices. It allows us to pre-configure devices with the required settings, applications, and policies before they are delivered to users, no-longer needing ICT staff to have their hands on the device before it goes to the user. Microsoft Autopilot reduces the time and cost of device provisioning, improves security and compliance, and enhances the user experience.

- We have been working with the Local Digital Cyber Fund and have been using a grant of £100,000 to deliver our Cyber Treatment Plan and reduce the risk created by legacy operating systems.

- A new process was introduced to identify users who haven't completed their cyber training and automatically restrict access to our IT systems. This has resulted in cyber security training compliance increasing from 81% to 97%.

- Shropshire Council has been part of an early access programme for Microsoft Copilot since October 2023. M365 Copilot is currently being trialled in 30

different areas of the Council. Feedback from participants is overwhelmingly positive, with many expressing their eagerness to integrate Copilot into their service areas. Multiple staff members are reporting how it is supporting them to manage their workload, take on additional duties and is making the workplace more inclusive. We have recently spoken at a Microsoft event as an exemplar and leader in introducing AI into the public sector.

We are working in collaboration with PWC on the Digital Delivery Unit (DDU). The DDU is focusing on integrating Microsoft Dynamics into our customer platforms, enhancing digital self-service capabilities, and exploring automation in customer interactions. The DDU is also developing a voice bot that can handle common queries and requests from callers. A voice bot to answer queries about the elections has been implemented and is handling 30% of the calls without human intervention.

5. Data & Business Intelligence

5.1. **Performance Management**

- Performance management reports have been submitted to the Transformation and Improvement Overview Scrutiny committee on a quarterly basis with the measurements set against key performance indicators for the Shropshire Plan. The report is submitted as an exception report and a Power BI dashboard has been developed and published on the Shropshire Council web site with the detailed KPI's.

- The performance management framework continues to be a focus and embedding within service areas by expanding on more service specific KPI's. This will continue to strengthen Shropshire Council to become 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**

- Significant progress has been made throughout the year developing and delivering dashboards across a variety of service areas.
- The financial reporting and dashboards created should be particularly noted as a significant improvement
- 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 and East Midlands ADASS but a national version which has been well received. Launched in May 2024 was an International Recruitment dashboard supporting the Home Office and UK Immigration and Visas.
- Access to data sources and sharing of data has also been achieved for the core services.

- Complex data matching across multiple data sets has also been achieved with a particular focus on vulnerability.

6. 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.

- We are co-chairing the Digital Inclusion Network alongside AgeUK. The purpose of the digital inclusion network is to identify the causes, barriers, and consequences of digital exclusion in Shropshire, to share best practice, to propose and implement solutions that can reduce the digital divide and promote digital inclusion.

- Our headline priorities pursue and promote a 'digital county' in which as many transactions as possible are done through digitally enabled routes, while also accepting that some transactions and individuals will be better served in the traditional manner.

7. Digital Infrastructure: Connecting Shropshire

Summary of key headlines/achievements:

- Two Project Gigabit contracts in delivery and progressing well in North Shropshire and Mid-west Shropshire;

- 99% of premises in the Shropshire Council area now have access to a superfast broadband connection (30 megabits per second);
- 65% of premises in the Shropshire Council area now have access to a gigabit-capable broadband connection (1,000 megabits per second) a rapid increase from 37% last year;
- 640 premises have been connected to full-fibre broadband thanks to £1,243,254 of Shropshire top-up voucher funding;
- Over the past year indoor 4G mobile phone coverage from all four providers in the Shropshire Council area has risen from 64% to 67%;
- Shropshire Council is actively involved in a consortium that's been awarded £9.9m of funding to install and test improved mobile connectivity in Bath, Cardiff and Shrewsbury;
- A funding bid for £3.75m that was submitted by Shropshire Council for the River Severn Partnership Advanced Wireless Innovation Region was successful.

7.1. **Superfast Broadband Contracts**

- Connecting Shropshire is working with Building Digital UK (BDUK) to close down the Airband contract, which is expected to result in contract savings that will be available for reinvestment in improving digital connectivity and/or contributing to the Council's 2024/25 savings targets.

- When added to commercial deployment, the Council's three contracts have increased superfast broadband coverage in the Shropshire Council area from 24% in 2014, to 99% in 2024 (source: Thinkbroadband, June 2024).

7.2. **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 objective of the programme is to deliver gigabit-capable broadband to those areas of the country that are commercially unviable for broadband infrastructure suppliers to build to without public funding.
In the Shropshire Council area, 65% of premises currently have access to a gigabit-capable broadband connection, up from 37% a year ago (source: ThinkBroadband, June 2024).

Shropshire Council remains a key stakeholder in the delivery of Project Gigabit; Connecting Shropshire continues to support BDUK and its infrastructure suppliers to engage with communities and reduce barriers to project delivery.

In July 2022, BDUK issued an Invitation To Tender for two procurement Lots (25.01 and 25.02) with premises in the Shropshire Council area:

Lot 25.01 Mid-west Shropshire - contract awarded to Voneus in April 2024
- 6,089 premises (all in the Shropshire Council area).
- Subsidy available = £12m.
- First premises expected to be able to access the new network in autumn 2024.
- To contact Voneus, please email: broadband@voneus.com

Lot 25.02 North Shropshire - contract awarded to [Freedom Fibre](#) in April 2023
- 12,277 premises (10,752 in the Shropshire Council area).
- Subsidy available = £24m.
- First premises expected to be able to access the new network in autumn 2024.
- To contact Freedom Fibre, please email: Shropshire-councillors@freedomfibre.com

The current expectation is that eligible premises in south & east Shropshire will be included in a larger cross-regional procurement to be launched in summer 2024.

More information about Project Gigabit can be found here: https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/project-gigabit-quarterly-updates

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

- To provide additional support to premises without access to superfast broadband, Shropshire Council has made up to £2.5m funding available to 'top-up' the national [Gigabit Broadband Voucher Scheme](#).

- Gigabit Vouchers are currently worth up to £4,500 per eligible premise and the Council top-up is worth up to £2,500 for premises that cannot access a superfast broadband connection.

- This strategic investment supports those premises not included in current/planned gigabit-capable broadband network deployment and particularly those in rural areas that cannot access a superfast broadband connection.

- To date, 640 vouchers with an element of Shropshire top-up funding have been paid to broadband infrastructure suppliers with a total value of £2,525,995 (of which 49% or £1,243,254 is Shropshire top-up).

- Please note that most premises in Shropshire are currently paused for vouchers because of the ongoing contract delivery in the north & west, and the impending procurement in the south & east of the county.

- The exception to the voucher pause is Woore parish because it's served by the Pipegate telephone exchange, which BDUK included in the neighbouring Lot 19 (Staffordshire). Premises in the Pipegate exchange are part of an Openreach Fibre Community Partnership. Thanks to the support of Woore Parish Council, the voucher pledge target is 94%. Openreach currently expect to start building their full-fibre broadband network in the area during September 2024.

7.4. **Mobile Phone Coverage**

- Indoor 4G mobile phone coverage from all four providers in Shropshire is currently 67% vs 71% nationally (source: [Ofcom Connected Nations 2023](#), page 12).

- The Mobile Network Operator (MNO) ecosystem remains a wholly commercial marketplace dominated by four national providers, EE, O2, Three and Vodafone. As previously for good broadband coverage, it's 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 £1bn in the Shared Rural Network (SRN) programme. The objective is to eliminate the majority of UK 4G 'total not-spots' and 'partial not-spots' by 2026.
- Over the last year, several SRN-funded transmitters have gone live in Shropshire, including in Clun, Llanfair Waterdine and Whixall Parish Council areas.

- Shropshire Council is working closely with mobile phone infrastructure providers that target areas with poor mobile phone coverage. Their business case based on installing 25m lattice masts that can accommodate transmitter equipment from multiple MNOs. Initial investigations have considered sites in Ryton, Wall-under-Heywood, and Weston Rhyn Parish Council areas.

- The partner Councils involved in the River Severn Partnership Advanced Wireless Innovation Region programme, including Shropshire Council, are looking to commission some drive trials to better understand mobile phone coverage in the region.

7.5. **5G Mobile Network Pilot - Shrewsbury**

- Shropshire Council is actively involved in a consortium led by a telecommunications company called Telet, which was awarded £9.9m funding from DSIT's Open Network Ecosystem competition in September 2023.

- The ONE WORD project will provide Shrewsbury with a new 5G network utilising around small cells radios deployed in Shrewsbury. Phase 1 of the project covers The Quarry Park and is expected to be commissioned and tested in July 2024.

- The primary aim of this research project is to improve mobile connectivity for the general public and traders at high-demand events, such as festivals, events and street markets.

7.6. **River Severn Partnership Advance Wireless Innovation Region (RSPAWIR)**

- The River Severn Partnership Advanced Wireless Innovation Region is a £3.75m initiative, wholly funded by the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) and managed by Shropshire Council on behalf of the River Severn Partnership.
- The RSPAWIR involves a wide array of partners and stakeholders with an interest in accelerating and exploiting the use of technologies enabled by Advanced Wireless Connectivity. The core aim of the RSPAWIR is to create opportunities for economic growth and to generate efficiencies that have environmental and social as well as economic benefits.
- The RSPAWIR is focused on accelerating the adoption of advanced wireless enabled technologies across three sectors which have particularly strong roots in the River Severn catchment area:
    - Water Management

- Agri-Tech
- Public Sector

- The RSPAWIR develops Use Cases that exploit market-ready technology and invests in dissemination activities to nurture the Advanced Wireless Connectivity ecosystem and further the case for the mainstream adoption of Advanced Wireless Technologies both within the region and the UK more widely.

7.7. **Digital switchover**

- The UK's landline/fixed telecoms networks will undergo substantial change in the coming years as the companies that run them upgrade the underlying technology from analogue to digital.
- Fixed landline operators which include BT Openreach and Virgin Media O2 are replacing the analogue telephone service (the Public Switched Telephone Network or PSTN) with a digital replacement (Voice over Internet Protocol or VoIP).
- This 'digital switchover' is already happening and the timescale for BT Openreach to retire their PSTN, is in January 2027 with other landline telephone providers following a similar timescale.
- In Spring 2024, BT began migrating customers onto their Digital Voice service in the West Midlands region. BT have confirmed that they won't be pro-actively switching vulnerable customers (e.g. elderly, landline only, no mobile signal, telecare alarms) until Spring 2025.

- In December 2023, Communication Providers (CPs) signed up to a set of commitments to protect vulnerable customers, known as the [PSTN Charter](#).

- For landline-only and business customers with specialist connectivity requirements, including some alarms, lift and emergency lines, ATMs and payment terminals, BT/openreach is working on a Dedicated Landline Service that will keep customers connected while moving them off the analogue PSTN. New equipment will be installed in telephone exchanges that allows customers who don't have a broadband connection to use their landline in the same way as they do today.
- Trials of the Dedicated Landline Service have begun with a nationwide rollout for eligible customers expected in Autumn 2024.

- The main 'call to action' is for customers to contact their Communication Provider.

- Links to more information:
  - [Moving landline phones to digital technology: what you need to know - Ofcom](#)
  - [The Digital Switchover | Shropshire Council](#)
  - [The withdrawal of landlines and switch to digital calls - House of Commons Library (parliament.uk)](#)
  - [Digital switchover hub | Local Government Association](#)
  - [Are landlines being phased out? Changes to landline telephones | Age UK](#)

8. Information Governance & Customer Services

8.1. **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 (EIR) 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.
- The Information Governance Framework was formally approved in June 2023 which sets out the Council's approach to managing information / data in line with legislation and internal policy.
- An ICO enforcement notice was placed on the Council in April 2023 in relation to low FOI compliance rates. An action plan was formally agreed and published and the Council was found to have fully complied with the notice by November 2023.
- The Council recognises the need for continuous improvement. A full internal of review of the FOIA processes commenced in November 2023 and work continues with PwC to implement a new FOI case management system during 2024. This review will ensure that the compliance rates are sustained in the medium to long term. Where changes to the existing processes are required, appropriate mechanisms will be put in place to ensure continued legislative compliance.
- Automation is key to efficient information governance processes. A focus for 2024 is automation of information security and breach reporting as well as implementation of a new information asset register.

8.2. **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 in 2023/4

During the year the CSC has continued to push to encourage customers to do business with the council using digital methods wherever possible as these are usually cheaper, more convenient for many customers and available 24/7. Following public consultation, it also altered its opening hours, enabling staffing savings while realising capacity to make outbound contact with parts of the community where this is most needed as part of the council's preventative work. Examples of where this work are:

Beginning the use of voice automation to support more basic enquiries and offer a 24/7 service for people calling these to help further reduce call volumes from the 54,000 calls made to CSC generalist team (approximately a third of all calls to CSC) and have been working on using voice automation to assist with handling some other basic enquiries.

Reaching out to customers who have applied for concessionary travel bus passes and making sure they have received them, while also encouraging them, if eligible, to apply for Attendance Allowance. CSC has spoken to over 700 residents to make them aware of this national grant which can be worth up to £108.55 extra per person.

Collaborating with Maternity Services to register new parents for parent classes and provide them with useful information.

In September 2023, went live with Virtual Care Calls for the Council's Assistive Tech team. Advisors can make video calls, send reminders and set medication prompts for people who would previously had an in-person visit from a social care worker. To date, 76 residents are benefitting from this service which is convenient and more cost effective.

First Point of Contact continue to support Adult's and Children's social care. Handling over 13,000 calls and over 6800 e-mails for adults including Adult Social Care, Adult Safeguarding, Occupational therapy and Adult Social care Mental Health.
Over 5000 calls for Children's services- including Compass, Early Help and Family Information Services (Jan-May 2024).

Our Welfare Support Team awarded grants worth over £460,000 to around 1,000 vulnerable Shropshire households struggling to manage financially. Careful management of the funding allocation also allowed an underspend to be redirected to ensure that Free School Meals recipients continued to receive support during the February and Easter school holidays.

Our Out of Hours/CCTV team have successfully handled emergency contacts for the Council's own services as well as providing a similar commercial contract for Herefordshire Council's Adult Social Work Team.

The Shropshire Local team has helped more than 16,000 residents to make service requests online, conduct proactive conversations with them especially around cost-of-living pressures and digital upskilling.

In the 12 months to March 2024, the Shropshire Digital Skills Programme supported 581 people to improve their digital skills, either through an 8-week programme of one-to-one digital support, or through our network of Digital Drop-Ins. This number set to increase in the next 6 months while we are very grateful to 78 volunteers who support Shropshire's digitally excluded residents to become confident online. The programme is delivered via community, voluntary and library locations, as well as the Enable supported employment service. By March 2026, 2,250 people will have accessed this free Digital Skills Programme.

9. Culture, Leisure and Tourism

9.1. Culture, Leisure and Tourism Development

This year the Culture, Leisure and Tourism department has showcased the great 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, promoting health and wellbeing, enhancing quality of life, supporting economic growth, and reinforcing the area's unique identity.

A further departmental restructure has been undertaken to deliver savings and ensure the service is working as efficiently as possible. A continued focus upon generating additional income, drawing in grant funding, and maximising efficiencies is driving further financial savings to the council, whilst preserving valued services and venues as far as possible.

Key achievements:

Vibrant Shropshire Cultural Compact

Shropshire's Cultural Compact has been successfully running for 12 months. This cross-sector consortium has a strong and engaged board, including representatives from education, the Integrated Care System, business, sport and a range of cultural organisations. It continues to support the delivery of the Vibrant Shropshire Cultural Strategy by using culture to improve the health, wellbeing, economy, and the environment of Shropshire.

Notable achievements in the last 12 months include:
- The team secured £160,000 of funding from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) to:
  - award 29 organisations with grants of between £1,000 - £5000 for community cultural projects that support the health, wellbeing, skills development and local economy of Shropshire
  - fund the Cultural Compact Officer until March 25
  - deliver networking and training events
- 100 partners have been recruited
- a new website for Vibrant Shropshire, will be launched autumn 2024
- a consultant is supporting the team to establish the Compact as an independent body
- training and networking events have been run across the county covering:
  - working with volunteers
  - overcoming barriers to participation
  - being more environmentally sustainable
  - governance

Holiday Activities and Food Programme

The team continues to support 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.

The programme, which is funded by the Department of Education is currently scheduled to close at the end of 2024, pending an update in the Autumn. As families greatly appreciate the support offered by the programme, it is very much hoped that DOE will provide funding in 2025 and beyond.

	Summer 2023	Winter 2023	Easter 2024
Number of programmes run across Shropshire	64	38	47
Number of children and young people taking part- HAF funded attendees	2,298 Primary 547 Secondary	820 Primary 95 Secondary	948 Primary 136 Secondary

Armed Forces Community Outreach Project

The team continues to support members of the Armed Forces Community to assimilate into civilian life and overcome issues resulting from the service. The team secured external funding from UKSPF, RESET and Robert Jones and Agnes Hunt hospital to support its activities until March 2025. The team is now exploring different models to help secure its future. The success of the project was recognised at the national Veterans Awards and continues to play a vital role in supporting community members to maintain positive health and wellbeing.

The team has also run a number of events to support the community and raise awareness including The Armed Forces Match Day at Shrewsbury Football Ground, Reservists Day and Armed Forces Day in the Castle.

Visitor Economy

Funding was secured from UKSPF to deliver a Visitor Economy Project. Two newly appointed members of staff will deliver a range of training and networking events for the sector, develop a new accessibility toolkit, further develop the new Shropshire brand, including the development of a new image bank, update the Great Outdoors Website, audit and develop outdoor activity provision in the county, update the Destination Management Plan and support the development of a new Local Visitor Economy Partnership (LVEP) with Telford.

The LVEP aims to continue growing the volume and value of the visitor economy, encouraging more day and overnight visitors, and enhancing the quality of life for residents. The partnership is also working on securing funding and grants to demonstrate funding probity and support the sector's business and skills development needs.

Additional funding secured

- £170,000 of CIL funding was secured to refurbish the play area at Broseley's Birchmeadow Park.
- £65,000 of UKSPF funds was secured to increase access to the countryside at a number of our country parks with improvements to paths and signage
- £500,000 has been secured (pending final confirmation) to make improvements to the Rights Of Way Network and improve access at a number of country parks.
- £150,000 of Homes for Ukraine funding is being used to deliver cultural activities that help guests from Ukraine feel more at home in Shropshire and integrate with the indigenous population. This project will be delivered with Shropshire Supports Refugees.

9.2. Culture and Tourism

The Culture, Leisure and Tourism (CLT) team 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 £62m in 24/25.

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

Income Generation

A programme of commercial initiatives for CLT services and sites continues to support both revenue income for the Council and growth for Shropshire's tourism sector.

Theatre Services (Theatre Severn and Old Market Hall cinema)

Key achievements:

- **Christmas 2023 Pantomime** (Jack and Beanstalk) marked the second year in a row of breaking previous Box Office records.
- Theatre Severn and the Old Market Hall achieved **combined annual attendance** of 254,252 during 2023/24. This represents 95%* of pre-pandemic level.
- 2,568 people attended open-air theatre events at Shrewsbury Castle in July/August 2023. Another season is planned for summer 2024.
- Annual bar sales increased by 10.4%, and kiosk sales by 13.5% in latest financial year.

- Theatre Severn again successfully hosted a **relaxed performance** at the Pantomime. It's partnership with Ignition continues to deliver a series of **Sensory Drama** sessions for children/young people with complex/sensory needs and their families.

  *Figure is a combined total. The Theatre total now exceeds pre-pandemic levels.

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**. Arts Council England, National Portfolio funding has enabled us to take the development of the partnership to the next phase. After a tendering process, consultancy Barker Langham were commissioned to develop a new interpretative master plan for a 'Reimagined' Shrewsbury Museum & Art Gallery, which encompasses a new Deep History gallery, a revised spatial layout and a redisplayed permanent collection. This work includes a detailed situation analysis, conservation plan, masterplan narrative interpretative framework, spatial analysis, co-production workshops and audience data reports. This wide-ranging evaluation will equip us with the tools to create and impactful, co-curated vision or the future and seek external funding and partnerships to enable us to progress this vision.
- Over the last 12 months we have focused on establishing and extending Museums & Archives **volunteering programmes.** Our two new (externally funded) Engagement Officers have expanded the reach of our impactful SEND volunteering programme, '**Experiences for Everyone'**, supporting 25 placements to date in 2024 at our collections centre in Ludlow, our agricultural rationalisation project in the south of the county and at Shropshire Archives. Our evaluation framework is embedded in our daily practice and the ACE Impacts and Insights Toolkit and the annual volunteer survey give us meaningful data which we use to create an annual report. In 24/25 our Strategic Volunteering Lead will continue to advocate for volunteering opportunities and consistent policy application across Shropshire Council, developing a framework which meets the priorities set out in the Shropshire Plan. We work with resettlement officers, youth teams, SEND partners and family networks to extend our volunteering reach into underserved communities.
- **Shrewsbury Museum & Art Gallery celebrated ten years of opening in April 2024. Visitor numbers** to Shrewsbury Museum & Art Gallery continue to increase from 159,628 in 2022/23 to 181,867 2023/20244 representing a 14% increase in visitor figures year on year and **an 87% increase on pre pandemic figures** of 97,144 (2019/20). Ten powerful stories from ten people who champion the role of the museum as a vital community and economic resource were shared via social and print media.
- **New agreements with Find My Past and Ancestry.com** will widen the reach of Shropshire Archives collections and secure valuable annual revenue to support archives services. The plans include the further digitisation of parish records. Newspapers, Quarter sessions and KSLI records.

- A Conservation Management Plan has been completed for **Shrewsbury Castle**, clarifying the heritage importance of the site and level of restoration needed. Building on the CMP, Shropshire Council have now commissioned the **Audience Development Plan and Feasibility Study** to gather stakeholder views and recommend future options for Shrewsbury Castle. Shropshire Council has received £30,000 through the UKSPF to support this process. The deadline for completion of the work is February 2025 with TDR Heritage appointed as lead consultants. A programme board including representatives from: TDR Heritage, Fay Bailey (Culture & Heritage Development Manager), Tim Pritchard (Shrewsbury Programme Manager), Rob Woodbury (Senior Design Feasibility Manager) and Andy Wigley (Policy and Environment Service Manager) are overseeing this project.
- The work will include:
  - A comprehensive Audience Development Plan, to include engagement with local and county residents, regional, national and international visitors to Shrewsbury;
  - A shared, agreed Statement of Intent for the site, considering the results of the Audience Development Plan;
  - Analysis of potential options for the Castle site, considering civic and local council events, to include how the Castle site might contribute to the heritage and tourism landscape in Shrewsbury and Shropshire and the likely income generation from both commercial and heritage uses of the wider site;
  - A review of the current use of Shrewsbury Castle, in discussion with the Soldiers of Shropshire Museum, to assess their current performance, aspirations and opportunities.
  - An options report and feasibility study

9.3. **Culture and Communities**

Libraries

Key achievements:

- Installation of externally funded flexible shelving and 1-to-1 pods in multiple library locations. These enable greater flexibility in how library spaces can be used, are opening up opportunities for working with new partners and teams particularly in the delivery of Healthy People elements of the Shropshire Plan , along with opportunities for income generation through room hire.
- Securing £280,000 funding from Arts Council England to install library self-service kiosks across the library branch network, with new library customer service counters in the largest branches. This project builds on improvements already being delivered via flexible shelving and 1:1 pods by enabling new ways of working and to focus staff resources on those who are most in need. It will improve the customer experience by offering greater choice for how people interact with the service, and open up potential for closer working with other Shropshire Council teams and partners.
- Implementation of wi-fi printing functionality in library branches, enabling customers to print direct from their own devices. Although there is still a need to provide printing from the existing public PCs, changing user demand means that many people now wish to print direct from their smart phones, tablets or laptops. This new solution offers a straightforward process that requires no

registrations, logins or passwords. The service is generating improved income levels.

- The upward trend for Event attendance in Libraries has continued, with 2023/24 showing a 25% increase on the previous year. In total library events were attended by 67,300 people. Events programmes include Rhyme Times and Story Times for children, events with authors and poets, health & well-being 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.

- Completion of phase 1 of the Digital Support for over 65's project which has delivered a 10-week learning programme to over 300 older people who lacked digital confidence and were at risk of exclusion. The 1-to1 training has been delivered through a network of volunteers including staff from Cap Gemini via their corporate volunteering scheme. Phase 2 of the project is now in progress with a wider target audience which includes those under-65 who are in need of digital skills support.

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

Country Parks and Heritage Sites

Key achievements:

- UK Shared Prosperity Fund; The team are working on the first phase of a project to invest in the visitor welcome offer at four large countryside heritage sites, funded by the UK Shared Prosperity Fund. The total value of phase 1 is just under £130k. Works already completed include surfacing and drainage of a path at Eardington Local Nature Reserve and exciting works to create hay meadow and wetland habitat and a new nature trail at Lyth Hill, near Shrewsbury.

- Donington and Albrighton Local Nature Reserve; Shropshire Council is working in partnership with Donington and Boscobel parish council to create a valuable wetland habitat that will help to contribute to natural flood management objectives for the Humphreston Brook.

- Birchmeadow Park; an important project is underway in Broseley. Shropshire Council is working in collaboration with the Town Council and the local community to replace the popular play area at the park. Funding for this will come from the Community Infrastructure Levy.

- Nesscliffe Hillfort; the first phase of a woodland management plan saw felling of conifer trees that were damaging the internationally important archaeology of the site. The final archaeological dig will take place in Summer 2024. The team have been working on a number of ways to engage with visitors and the local community and let them know about the fascinating history of the Hill. This includes a comic that has been in development for distribution amongst the local schools.

- The Mere; Shropshire Council is strengthening ties with Ellesmere Town Council to ensure that the management of this prestigious country park in north Shropshire meets both local need and its role in the visitor economy. Part of this process will involve investment in the infrastructure using UK Shared Prosperity Funds.

Rights of Way

Key achievements:

- **1,486 Individual maintenance improvements** on the Rights of Way network delivered in year 2023-24 (A new record!), including **161 stiles replaced with gates** on the rights of way network to improve accessibility for all. This is as a result of having a suitable & fully staffed team for 12 months; and balancing core rights of way work with increased income generation.
- **Income generated through commercial activity**, was £272,464 in year 2023-24 (up £20k from 2022/23). This was reinvested in service delivery and equipment and covered insurance losses from a burglary this year.
- Outdoor Partnerships managed to **finish the year within budget**, through careful spending, efficiency and income generation, assisting Shropshire Council achieve record savings for 2023/24 and contribute towards the MTFS savings for 2024/25
- A lot of work was done on **potential funding bids** throughout CLT and soon we hope to announce some significant external funding for both Rights of Way and Parks and Sites improvements for 2024/25.
- **2,401** Searches undertaken,**25** Private **Searches, 203** Planning Applications responded to, **12** Formal Applications added to register, and **11** 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**.

Shropshire Hills National Landscape team (formerly- Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) Partnership)

Key achievements:

- Farming in Protected Landscapes programme - £1,153,645 was distributed in grants to 63 projects during 2023-24. In the programme to date 3 years - July 2021 to March 2024, 81 projects have been funded, covering 15,857ha of land; £1,787,446 has been awarded in grants, with £78,500 of match funding. Over this time 199 farmers have participated, including 125 farmers who the team have not engaged with before, 20 farmers who have not participated in agri-environment schemes before, and 1 new farm cluster and 4 existing farm clusters have been supported.
- Ancient Woodlands restoration project - the Project Officer has advised 25 woodland owners, secured £12,000 of funding from Severn Trent Water and completed restoration works across four sites.
- New Engagement Ranger post - activities have included continuation of Young Rangers programme, development of projects for Defra's Access for All capital funding, and new outreach work with selected groups who are underserved in visiting the Shropshire Hills
- Clun Headwaters survey - eco-hydrology consultants have provided an in-depth report across the 450ha study area on groundwater, soil types and the extent to which previous land use influences hydrology, as well as site-specific reports for each of the participating landowners. A further larger area is now being surveyed with Natural England funding. Recommendations may be taken forward by landowners seeking to enhance the ecosystem services their land provides and

- receive payments for such services, either through private green finance or through Environmental Land Management (ELM) schemes.
- Further support has been provided to the Upper Onny Farmers Group through the Stepping Stones project, including discussions with partners about the potential for a collaborative Landscape Recovery Scheme (LRS) bid, looking also at the headwaters of the Teme and Clun catchments.
  - The new Sustainable Tourism Strategy for 2024-2029 was published. The Shuttle bus service for 2024 was launched and the annual leaflet swap and Tourism Expo event held in March including publication of a successful new visitor map.

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.

CLT Infrastructure, Compliance and Contracts

The Infrastructure, Compliance and Contracts team focuses 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, and improved contracts. Its activities this year have included:

- Working closely with colleagues in property and development to provide a consistent and co-ordinated approach to asset management across the CLT services. Reviewing existing arrangements to identify and address areas of weakness.
- Co-ordinating the commissioning of work through the property services group, such as the development of designs to reconfigure the space beneath the Old Market Hall.

- Reviewing the statutory compliance and preventative maintenance arrangements at each CLT site to ensure regulatory compliance and to protect the built assets.
- Auditing the guidance provided to site managers, and developing a framework of information, documentation and training requirements which can be rolled out across CLT properties.
- Working with the carbon reduction team to identify and implement practical steps to reduce the carbon footprints of CLT sites. Assisted with the preparation of a Low Carbon Skills Fund application which, if successful will allow us to develop heat decarbonisation plans at 20 sites to be used as a basis for future external funding applications.
- Providing guidance and developing a framework to support staff at sites where they are experiencing frequent incidents of antisocial behaviour.
- Liaising with ICT colleagues to highlight issues specific to CLT services which are proving difficult to progress through the standard ICT support channels.
- Reviewing the management of Heritage Sites, clarifying the roles and responsibilities of specialist teams across the authority to ensure those responsibilities are understood. Identify and liaising with external stakeholders. Collating and reviewing the asset data for each site in preparation for the development of management plans.
- Building a register of contracts, leases and agreements across CLT to allow speedy access to information and build an understanding of longer-term funding commitments and covenants.
- Working with the Health & Safety team to coordinate and raise the profile of Health & Safety issues across the services, as well as routinely dealing with specific incidents this has included the introduction of a quarterly CLT health and safety newsletter to assist with cascading information throughout the section.

Sports and Leisure

Key achievements:

Quarry Swimming Centre
- The main Quarry Pool reopened following the necessity to design and install a bespoke air-handling unit for the pool hall. Associated changing rooms were refurbished and the operator has completed an agreement for Shropshire Festivals to enhance and manage the catering offer on site. (opened 22nd June).

Shrewsbury Sports Village
- A consultation for the Shrewsbury Sports Village completed to gather community input on its development.
- Repairs were completed to the cycle track which has regained British Cycling accreditation for competitions and elite training. The Cycling Development officer, jointly funded by Shropshire Community Leisure Trust and the Council though the Innovation Fund, continues to attract new user groups to the track and increase participation.

SpArC – Bishops Castle
- The operation of the centre was transferred to SCLT/Serco, integrating it into the main leisure contract for improved efficiency, savings and enhanced customer service. This progresses the long-term plan to streamline and enhance consistency across our centres.

Whitchurch Swimming and Leisure Centre

- The development of the new centre is progressing at pace and is on schedule to open in Spring 2025. Extensive discussions with Shropshire Community Leisure Trust who will operate the facility as part of the wider management contract.

Meole Brace Golf Course

- The contract to operate the golf course was transferred to Will Shakespeare, the course's golf professional.
- Enhanced security provisions installed after travellers accessed the site, causing the course to close for a week. Currently being undertaken at Shrewsbury Sports Village too.

Swimming Pool Support Fund

- Funding was secured from Sport England for improvements at South Shropshire Leisure Centre (Ludlow) to reduce carbon emissions and operating costs. Solar panels have been installed and work is underway to fit energy efficient pumps. Funding was also received to support the installation of solar PV at Wem Swimming & Lifestyle Centre.

Low Carbon Skills Funding

- An application has been submitted for funding to produce a heat decarbonisation plan for SpArC and Church Stretton Leisure Centre.

Community Partnership

- Work continues with community partners to support local centres. Stretton Pool Action group purchased pool inflatables which have enabled the site team to provide fun sessions during school holidays and offer birthday parties. Pool steps will shortly be purchased to improve access for all.
- Trustees at SpArC are fund raising for major improvements to the swimming pool tank and have recently funded a lifeguard course taking place at the centre.
- A **Leisure needs assessment** was conducted to gather data that supports the strategic direction of leisure services.
- **Substitution funding** from public health for leisure services offered an opportunity to explore alternative funding methods for leisure services in partnership with other organisations.

Leisure Management Contracts audit.

- Working with the audit team, significant progress has been made to address longstanding audit concerns,

Summary of work planned 2024/25

- Opening Whitchurch Swimming Pool in Spring 2025
- The delivery of saving identified in the midterm financial strategy - options being considered include transferring management of joint-use leisure facilities to external operators in partnership with relevant schools/academies. Potential for transferring the ownership of South Shropshire Leisure
- Centre to the current operator is also under consideration.
- Conducting an Asset Review to identify capital investment needs and build outline business cases for any viable development.
- Preparation work for the procurement of the main Leisure Services Contract.
- Preparing a funding bid to replace the oil-fired boilers at SpArC with carbon neutral equipment.

- Consideration being given to potential padel tennis facility being developed at Shrewsbury Sports Village and the relocation of some University of Shrewsbury functions to the centre.

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)

Local Member: All

Appendices None