



Transformation and Improvement Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Report of the Partnership Working Task and Finish Group

November 2025

Acknowledgments

The Members of the Partnership Working Task and Finish Group, chaired by Councillor Dawn Husemann, were chosen with careful consideration to ensure that the group was made up of a range of both town and rural Councillors with a geographic spread across the County. Reflective of the diverse needs and challenges of town and parish councils across Shropshire.

The Task and Finish Group have conducted research, consulted experts, and reviewed case studies to understand effective partnership working. This evidence as well as Town and Parish Council survey results have informed the group's conclusions and those recommendations which are presented in this report.

The Task and Finish Group are grateful to those contributors who have provided the information essential to this ongoing investigation and would like to thank them for their time in meeting with them. The work of the Task and Finish Group is continuing, and this report is one of several expected throughout the life cycle of the work, which is aimed at providing timely updates to Transformation and Improvement Committee, and to Cabinet, as their work progresses.

Members of the Task and Finish Group

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

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1. Context

The Transformation and Improvement Overview and Scrutiny Committee members recognise the importance of our partner organisations, in particular Town and Parish Councils and Voluntary Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector groups and organisations, in identifying and helping to meet the needs of Shropshire communities and understanding the demand upon services.

2. Scope of the work

The Committee have identified that a Task and Finish Group should consider ways in which partnership working could be developed to deliver outcomes for Shropshire people and communities more efficiently and effectively, including at the local level. The Task and Finish Group have explored what has worked well elsewhere, and within Shropshire to understand the scale of this work and develop a proof of concept model that might be able to be rolled out over time. It anticipated that this partnership working will initially involve partners ranging from Town and Parish Councils to Faith Groups, and the VCSE sector. It has the scope to expand to partnerships that look more widely across the systems that the Council works in with other public sector partners such as the NHS, Police, Probation, Social Enterprise Models and the Fire and Rescue Service, to name a few.

Given the scale and nature of the topic and its relationship to the delivery of outcomes by using resources in the most effective way, there is a realistic option that this could be a standing Task and Finish Group of the Committee. It will report back on its findings and recommendations to the Transformation and Improvement OSC at specific points in the work and will also share key updates with the Town and Parishes Internal board. This would enable the committee to task the group with new or refined work related to the groups remit as it emerges and make recommendations to Cabinet/decision makers.

The Task and Finish Group will take account of partnership options and look to identify best practice and opportunities to enable more area-based locality partnerships to be developed for different geographies and communities in Shropshire. This will include considering options to empower local partners, in particular Town and Parish Councils, to make decisions that they feel will have the greatest impact upon their communities, drawing in benchmarking with other local authorities and horizon scanning of upcoming and developing legislation.

The Committee recognises that each community has unique demands, and they understand that what works well for a rural parish may not be suitable in a large market town. The Councils' future approach in Shropshire will be shaped by the work of the Task and Finish Group and the Committee and be reflective and supportive of these differences.

3. Objectives

Opportunities to deliver outcomes and services locally differently

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

Options for developing a Local Partnership in Shropshire

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

4. What the Task and Finish Group have done?

The Partnership Working Task and Finish Group was formed early September 2025 and have held four meetings to date to understand the scale and scope of the project and speak to relevant witnesses to better understand any challenges or opportunities presented. Further evidence gathering, desk based research and review has taken place in between meetings to consider the key information, learn from other local authorities and close any gaps in understanding.

The Task and Finish Group Members cover a variety of areas including Ludlow and Bridgnorth plus rural parishes in both north and south of the county and they have undertaken informal discussions with their parish councils.

In addition, a survey was sent to all Town and Parish Councils in June 2025 which remained open until September 2025. The results of the Town and Parish Survey are depicted as an infographic at the end of this report as Appendix I. Further to its completion the Partnership Working Task and Finish Group have reviewed the results and feedback received and used this information to consider where there are areas of improvement, quick wins and longer-term projects, and how these can be implemented and supported by Shropshire Council.

At their first meeting as a group on the 16th September 2025 the group worked hard to clarify the focus of their investigations and determine where they could have the most impact. Mindful of the quantity and breadth of all 153 towns and parishes this could become a large and widespread topic for a Task and Finish Group and therefore Task and Finish Group Members were keen to pinpoint areas in which they could most effectively contribute, pooling their local knowledge and experience to further explore the capacity and appetite of towns and parishes to work in partnership with Shropshire Council. This led to a revised terms of reference which better reflected their mutual understanding of how this work would take shape.

They agreed that headline feedback would be made to Cabinet on the 15th October to confirm the overarching principles, and the feasibility of partnership working, envisaging 18 months to 2 years until fully operational. This would be the first of several touchpoint reports to Cabinet and to Transformation and Improvement Overview and Scrutiny as this work progresses so that both committees are sighted throughout the course of this work. This is particularly important and timely in line with when budgets precepts are due to be set.

The group discussed how this work is not limited to town and parish council engagement, but that there were opportunities to scale this out in time to include fire services, voluntary sector organisations, police, and others.

All the group could see the value in retaining the Shropshire pound and commissioning local providers to provide local services ie cutting hedgerows, stressing that no town or parish council should be compelled to join if they don't wish to. This is not something that should be imposed but it might open up possibilities to those who are keen and able to do more themselves.

There are almost 2,000 town and parish councils within Shropshire many of whom may require training and support to take on additional responsibility and may have the desire to want to do so, with the appropriate enablers.

The Task and Finish Group heard how this work links to the national Neighbourhood Governance Review and the Local Government Outcomes Framework and were mindful of ensuring alignment as their work progresses. These frameworks still need to be reviewed in detail and the links clarified.

At this 16th September meeting the group were keen to hear about the experiences of their own Members and the engagement that they had already had within their local towns and parishes. In doing so they quickly understood the differentiations of scale and challenges faced amongst just the small cross section represented at the Task and Finish Group. They were eager to hear from a range of other areas and shortlisted a number of towns and parishes that they would like to engage with in future meetings, from a geographical spread across the County.

During the course of their conversations at the next Task and Finish Group meeting on the 22nd September, the group sought a clear definition of what services were statutory and non-statutory. In order for town and parish councils to understand what is required of them, the group felt that this information was essential to the success of the Partnership Plan and needed to be clarified. A services audit carried out by Town and Parish Council's and separately by Shropshire council to identify the current position and be clear about who currently does what would also be essential in negotiations with town and parishes, in order to be clear of the level of commitment expected.

The Deputy Leader of Shropshire Council confirmed at this meeting that due to the financial emergency at Shropshire Council services would continue to be cut year on year without intervention, although they are not near the statutory minimum at present this could be a very real likelihood in future. Therefore, consideration of what could be devolved and what could be delegated is essential. A Memorandum of Understanding is going ahead as proof of concept testing in those areas who are ready and willing to get underway. This will test out what works and where there are challenges to delivering services in this new way.

At the moment the proof of concept areas include Shrewsbury, Oswestry and Shifnal, but the Deputy Leader explained that small scale parish cluster schemes are also a consideration, as well as external partners involvement, such as the ICB, post offices or the police as examples. A member also added the option to engage with Corporate Social Responsibility schemes as part of this.

The group recognised that developing an understanding of where residents travel to access services would be useful, mapping community relations particularly in those areas that may choose to form a cluster.

The group discussed how improved dispersion of CIL might help enable towns and parishes and felt that some of the work of the Partnership Working Task and Finish Group would be likely to align with the work of the CIL Task and Finish Group which is expected to launch mid-October.

All agreed that the motivation for the Task and Finish Groups work was improving residents' lives, improving services and saving money, for the benefits of communities and the voluntary sector. In order to realise its success, three key questions needed to be understood -

What can be done?

What will work and where – what would a model look like?

What are the blockers to enabling this, and how can they be unblocked?

The Task and Finish Group were also keen to explore the policy development aspect of this work.

The Task and Finish Group next met on the 29th September 2025 and were joined by the Town Clerk for Shrewsbury Town Council and the Mayor of Church Stretton.

The Mayor of Church Stretton described how they have a population of just under 5,000 people with a catchment of 200 square miles, they have 8 staff, 200 acres of parkland to manage and around 80% of the enquiries they receive as a Town Council relate to services managed by Shropshire Council. The Task and Finish Group heard how residents are not clear on who provides the services they receive, many residents access services from outside of their parish and there is reliance upon public transport, buses, to make this movement possible. The Mayor of Church Stretton explained that resident engagement regarding the impact of the financial emergency was already underway.

Members of the Task and Finish Group confirmed that this is a case of asking Town and Parish Councils what they would like to take on, and not an imposition of services, however due to the financial emergency at Shropshire Council any vacuum created by withdrawal of services would need to be filled. The Mayor of Church Stretton asked that a services audit is provided in order to help Town and Parish Councils understand what services are provided by Shropshire Council, which ones are statutory, which ones are not and what are the minimum statutory service levels in each service area. This insight would help Town and Parish Councils understand what is at risk.

The Task and Finish Group heard from the Clerk of Shrewsbury Town Council about the Stepping Up team who are already making a difference by maintaining and enhancing Shrewsbury's public spaces. The Town Clerk added that Shrewsbury are in a position to take on a number of services and are enthusiastic about doing so, but central recharges need to be understood, HR, Payroll, Insurance for example.

It was felt that the memorandum of understanding puts the fundamental principles of partnership working together, and the pilot schemes can provide modelling as to how this can work well, if scaled out wider. Good communications, clear messaging, and collaboration are also essential to its success, both with towns and parishes but also with residents.

The Chair of the Task and Finish Group asked the witnesses what they needed from Shropshire Council to help make this happen. In response the Mayor of Church Stretton explained that an understanding of the economies of scale is key, as well as determining what role Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) funding might play and sharing the information necessary to ensuring towns and parishes are fully aware of what services are at risk. The Shrewsbury Town Council Clerk added that a single point of contact to break

down barriers and open doors was essential, as was the need for precepts to be set for the whole of an electoral term.

On the 10th October the Task and Finish Group met with Highways and Streetscene Officers to discuss the devolution of Streetscene services, which is already being prepared for pilot in Shrewsbury, Oswestry and Shifnal.

The Service Director Infrastructure reported that Shrewsbury, Oswestry, and Shifnal Town Councils have indicated interest in assuming Streetscene responsibilities. Each council may have different requirements and expectations, and the timeline for progress will align with the setting of precepts. Work is currently underway with Shrewsbury Town Council to provide their own Streetscene services beginning 1 April 2026, with further engagement planned with other Town and Parish Councils as appropriate.

The group heard how this was not prescriptive but would take into account the available resources, budget, environment to inform the type of service required which may include sweeping, litter picking, waste bins for example. Mindful that some towns and parishes already do undertake some of these activities, the group heard that Streetscene officers will be working through delivery options, not only for maintaining but enhancing services, above the existing standard perhaps through rewilding or planting of flowers.

The Task and Finish Group members felt that there should be clarity of different economies of scale that would make aspects of a service viable and that it would be beneficial for the Council to establish a way to collect and measure benefits of working in this way.

The Service Director Infrastructure and the Streetscene Manager are preparing a report detailing data regarding the proposed transfer of services, including TUPE considerations and financial modelling. This report aims to provide information on available options, opportunities, and associated risks.

At this point it was becoming clear that several key themes were emerging. Task and Finish Group members agreed that recommendations to Cabinet should include Communications – which had been an ongoing theme at every meeting so far. They felt that good communications with Town and Parish Councils were essential to avoid mixed messages, build trust and ensure open and transparent conversations. The Task and Finish Group recommended that this begins with the sharing of the survey results.

Task and Finish Group Members also recognised the breadth of Partnership Working opportunities therefore it was agreed that better outcomes will come from having a more detailed focus on specific project areas and from these build the overall picture and coherent, overarching principles to guide the Partnership Plan.

The financial emergency has meant that the Council fast tracked launching the already scoped transfer of Streetscene services in the planned pilot areas of Shrewsbury, Oswestry and Shifnal in advance of the Task and Finish groups research and findings. However, the early findings reported verbally to Cabinet in October should still be used to guide activities in these pilot areas. As is the nature of pilots these are moving fast to test concepts and identify learnings. The Task and Finish Group will review the progress of

these pilots during year 2026-27 to take the learning into account for the wider partnership plan.

Further recommendations would include awareness of the levels of support or training required for Town and Parish Councils and providing Towns and Parishes with sufficient information around statutory and non-statutory service to make informed decisions.

5. Key Findings

The Chair of the Partnership Working Task and Finish Group delivered a verbal report to Cabinet on 15th October 2025, presenting the initial findings of the group.

At this meeting she described the work that the group had undertaken to date including the meetings with The Mayor Church Stretton Town Council, The Town Clerk at Shrewsbury Town Council, The Service Director Infrastructure and the Streetscene Manager at Shropshire Council. As well as the research and review of a number of case studies of successful partnership working arrangements including reports from:

- Rotherham
- Oxfordshire
- Devon
- Malvern Hills
- Northamptonshire
- Buckinghamshire
- Plus the LGA report “Local service delivery and place shaping: A framework to support parish and town councils”

The Chair described to Cabinet how this research has led to the identification of three key strategic areas that the Task and Finish Group feel are critical to the success of a Partnership Working arrangement, these are as follows:

- Communication
- Support and training
- The sharing of essential information

The detailed recommendations proposed in relation to each of these strategic areas are contained within section 6 of this report.

Alongside these three key areas and the implementation of the associated recommendations the Task and Finish Group also felt that the following considerations were of importance:

1. In order to enable the transfer of services as soon as 2026/27 appropriate discussions between Town and Parish Council Chairs and Clerks and Shropshire Council/Streetscene officers must start immediately. The Task and Finish Group raised concern that failure to enter into discussions now could mean that Town and Parish Council will be unable to set their budgets to take account of any service transfers. This will inhibit or maybe even prevent any service transfers in the coming financial year.

2. The Service Director Infrastructure and the Streetscene Manager at Shropshire Council have assured the Task and Finish Group that they have the granular level, detailed information relating to Streetscene services and costs ready and available now. This data is a critical element to the success of the partnership. The agreement of the funding levels and payment regime would enable negotiations to commence immediately.
3. The considerable reliance on volunteers could inhibit the success of the programme. Careful consideration must be given to the impacts on and expectations of those volunteer Town & Parish Councillors. If solutions are not genuinely developed in conjunction with Town & Parish Councillors, there is a significant risk of failure.
4. Partnership Working has the potential to provide community and financial benefits. However, without robust foundations there is the possibility of not only failing to realise the financial and/or the community benefits, but they could also further damage already fragile relationships between Shropshire Council and its Town and Parish Councils and residents. If the transfer of Streetscene services goes well this could build trust and aid future developments. If it goes badly, it could undermine the whole Partnership plan.

The Task and Finish Group propose the following next steps under phase two of their work. They would like to look at the concept of clustering arrangements and how this might work in Shropshire along with the complexities and barriers to this type of structure. The group aim to examine different possible approaches. These will include but are not necessarily limited to:

- Hub and spoke networks
- Collaborative parish networks
- Blended delivery approaches
- Community gangs

Members of the Task and Finish Group would start with desk research looking at:

- Place plan geographies
- Local joint strategic needs assessment
- Local joint committees
- Emerging guidance from Government

These would help the Task and Finish Group in identifying any knowledge gaps and guide the group towards identifying the most relevant witnesses to call.

The Task and Finish Group would like to speak with stakeholders in different geographies and examine the feasibility of different approaches with them. The involvement of Shropshire Association of Local Councils (SALC) in this area will be considered. The focus will be on practical application on the ground including:

- Skills
- Willingness
- Capacity

The aim of this phase will be to provide the administration with different options which might work for Shropshire along with the risks and opportunities of each. Mindful of the time and resources available to the Task and Finish Group, these findings will be presented to

Transformation and Improvement Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet at appropriate intervals.

The Task and Finish Group propose that Phase Three of their work, over the longer term, might include looking at existing stakeholder relationships including emergency services, the NHS and others and to clarify the current position by stakeholder group and locality. The aim will be to identify a clear “where we are now position” that can be mapped alongside the Councils’ “where they want to be” position and conduct a gap analysis to highlight issues, possibilities and risks.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

In addition to the approval of those proposed future plans of the Task and Finish Group as set out in the key findings at section 5 above, Members make the following recommendations to Committee –

Recommendation1 –

The Task and Finish Group recommend that communication going forward must be:

- Consistent in its messaging, previously confusion has occurred about the message itself and terminology being used, this needs to be clarified and clearly explained.
- Sufficient to ensure that all stakeholders feel adequately informed about
 - what’s happening
 - The implications to them
 - The consequences of these changes to them and their residents
- It must be open, honest and two way.
- Multiple communication channels need to be used including but not limited to
 - face to face meetings,
 - group sessions,
 - newsletters,
 - press releases.

It is recommended that this begins with providing all participants with the results of the survey that they completed. Task and Finish Group members have learned that not being given the results has caused frustration amongst Town and Parish Councils.

Recommendation 2 –

Suitable support and training for Town and Parish Councils is essential, any breakdown in this area will mean that people simply won’t have the skills, capability or willingness to make the Partnership Working a success.

- It is recommended that there is provision of a single point of contact at an administrative level to support the Town and Parish Clerks. This will enable

a swift, straightforward method for them to communicate and liaise with Shropshire Council. The Task and Finish Group believe that a named person with a direct phone number and email is essential.

- Shropshire Council should liaise with the Shropshire Association of Local Councils (SALC) to assist in the provision of ongoing support and training to Clerks as this process moves forward.
- All clerks should be involved during the planning, development, pilot and implementation phases. It is going to be vital that local plans are developed with, and not imposed upon, our Town and Parish Councils. This is very important as clerks will be doing much of the work.

Recommendation 3 –

Regarding the sharing of essential information

Members of the Partnership Working Task and Finish Group urge that before people can or will be willing to engage with Shropshire Council about the transfer of services it is critical that they are given full information about

- The services to be transferred
- What the minimum statutory service provision for each item of service to be transferred is
- What the current cost of these services to Shropshire Council is
- How much money Town and Parish Councils will be given to carry out these services locally and what the ongoing financial arrangements are going to be.
- Exactly what will be expected of them and what help they will be given.

A further but important recommendation in this section is to minimise bureaucracy and rules. Making it as quick and easy as possible for Town and Parish Councils to engage with the partnership, taking on new tasks and then managing the process themselves.

Recommendation 4 –

The Task and Finish Group members recommend that they carry out a Scrutiny review of Phase one – the transfer of Streetscene to all pilot areas including but not limited to Shrewsbury, Shifnal and Oswestry.

This should take place 6 months after the transfer of services to gather the learning from these areas.

Members also recommend providing scrutiny of the “foundations development phase” relating to the success or otherwise of the communication, support and training and information provision building blocks

Town and Parish Council Engagement: Summary Results 2025

In June 2025 Shropshire Council launched a call for information from town, parish council and parish meetings designed to foster improved partnership working. The aim was to gather:

- Views on how the partnership should work and how to achieve an equal say in making our communities and services the best they can be.
- Experiences engaging with Shropshire Council and thoughts on how to improve.
- Which services town and parish councils believe could be better delivered locally either by Town and Parish Councils, using local providers, or in partnership with Shropshire Council.

The work was led by the Transformation and Improvement Overview and Scrutiny Committee with the aim of reporting to Cabinet and Full Council before the end of 2025.

Engagement

- A total of **132 individuals** responded (126 survey responses and 6 written responses).
- **93 town councils, parish councils or parish meetings** out of 165 contacts in Shropshire Council's area.
- The responses were geographically diverse.
- Half of the respondents were from clerks (50.8%), with 34.9% from councilors and others from chairpersons and groups.
- **55% indicated they will engage further** to discuss options.

Experiences

- When asked about overall experience of Shropshire Council in the last 12 months **only 9.5% rated their experience positively**, 46% rated it poor or very poor and 44.5% were neutral or gave no opinion.
- 74 of the 126 survey respondents (58.7%) believe **working to solve local highway issues** has been poor or very poor. Fix My Street was referenced within descriptions of challenges.
- A top concern includes **communication and lack of engagement** (access to officers, poor responses and lack of action).

Future working

- Survey participants identified **priority areas** where Shropshire Council could improve, with **highways and traffic/road safety, communication and engagement, street scene/environmental maintenance** topping and **Planning** seen as priorities.
- Suggestions for improvement include **single points of contact, directories of officers, improved engagement and communication, supporting rural areas, grants for community led activity and environmental maintenance** and many more ideas.

Service Delivery

- Despite 17% believing all services should remain Shropshire Council's responsibility, others feel in a position to consider delivery within these areas: **environmental maintenance, street scene (signage, cleaning, litter), minor road repairs, public spaces and grounds maintenance.**
- Other suggestions for local action include greater influence within planning decisions, youth support, tourism promotion, lighting, road safety, and car parks.

Support and partnership

- Partnership delivery suggestions are similar to the list above but include **traffic calming and road safety, highways projects, public assets (e.g. libraries, museums, leisure), drainage and flood response.** Some also mention rights of way maintenance and youth services.
- Support needs for service delivery or partnership working include **funding, discussions, legal and insurance advice, clear budgets and costings, officer support and work in clusters.**