

Shropshire Council Report
Prepared for Pontesbury Annual Parish meeting from Cllr Roger Evans

Pontesbury Parish area is represented by 2 Shropshire Councillors—Myself, Roger Evans, and Councillor Nick Hignett. I have drafted the report this year, and any errors or omissions are mine.

As was said last year the major focus of Shropshire Council has again been on financial stability. The new government that was elected last July have made a number of changes to how it funds local government. A number of previous government grants to Rural Authorities like Shropshire have been reduced whilst others, like the Telford & Wrekin Authority for example, are due to receive a higher percentage increase. This, together with the continued increasing cost of, providing the social care that many residents of all ages need and the ever-reducing amount that is held in reserves are causing more and more financial problems.

FINANCE AND RESOURCES—The most recent reports for the current year show that the Council again failed to make all the savings needed and overspent the agreed revenue budget by around £35m. Reserves are again expected to be used to cover this overspend and so achieve the required budget position. This will mean they are now expected fall to the extremely dangerous low level of just over £3m. The council has incurred other expenditure, and it has now received permission from the government to borrow an extra £26.9m. This will enable the council to pay the transformation, PwC consultants and staff redundancy costs.

Charges for emptying green bins were eventually introduced last Autumn. It has now been announced that after March 31st only in exceptional circumstances will new requests to have green bins emptied be agreed. This moratorium will last until October 2025. Parking charges, after some delays, were increased a few days ago and it is stated in council papers further increases will be made later this year. It has now been declared that the former Council HQ at the Shirehall is now no longer in use and all services have been transferred elsewhere. The Guildhall situated in Frankwell is now the temporary Council HQ.

The council, at its recent meeting agreed that the increase in council tax for next year will be 4.99%, the maximum permitted. The savings target for this next financial year is expected to be around £52m. It has also been stated that asset sales will be used to pay off the £26.9m loan. Details concerning when and what these asset sales are, have not been published, nor the amount of interest that it is expected will have been incurred.

All of the financial information mentioned so far have covered the revenue budget, which is that part of the budget which covers the day-to-day running expenses of the council. The other part of a council's budget is the capital one. This covers one off spending and is mainly concerned with various projects. The largest of these is of course the projected North West Relief Road or NWRR.

This NWRR project was originally expected to cost just over £80m with the council projected to contribute around £27m. The balance coming from other sources, including £54m from the government. After many delays it was revealed 10 days ago in the much-delayed draft full business case that the cost is now expected to be around £215m with £39m so far spent in preparation work. No grants or external funding to meet the increase of £135m have yet been obtained. This, due to the date it was published means it cannot now be discussed at any council meeting until June. Any application to Government for extra money to assist in meeting this increased cost cannot be made until after this June Council meeting.

There are other projects included in the capital budget. These include the proposed new Swimming Pool at the Sports Village in Sundorne and the so-called Smithfield/regeneration project. The first part of the latter project is now in progress and includes both the demolition of the Riverside Shopping Centre and the delivery of a new landmark Public Park in

Shrewsbury Town Centre. No funding is yet allocated to deliver any other part of the Smithfield/riverside project.

CLIMATE CHANGE, ENVIRONMENT AND TRANSPORT— The diminished Climate Team continues to attract Government capital and revenue grants.

Low Carbon Community buildings - the design of new buildings such as the new swimming pool at Whitchurch is an example.

Electric Vehicle Chargers - Shropshire Council have recently won new grants to further improve the largest EV- charging infrastructure programmes in the Midlands and will soon own and operate even more chargers.

WASTE—Green bin charges, as already mentioned was introduced last autumn. Further savings, again with little details are shown as being expected to be made later this year.

PLANNING---The production of the replacement, updated Local Plan has so far taken over 5 years. A draft was eventually produced and agreed by the council's cabinet. The Government appointed Planning Inspectors who have been charged with examining the proposals have now indicated they feel it does not meet a number of criteria. Further that the council does not have the capacity to make the needed alterations within any acceptable time limit. The latest position is that the plan is to be withdrawn, and work started to produce a replacement one that will cover the period 2025–2045. This will need to be produced within the next 2 years. In the meantime it has now been admitted by Shropshire Council that due to the large increase in the number houses that are needed to meet the new government set targets it can no longer meet the 5-year housing target. This in turn means that some present planning policies are no longer valid, and developers may well come forward with planning applications that would not previously have been granted.

Finally it is being suggested that government will soon introduce legislation that officers will solely determine more planning applications. Councillors will only be asked their views on strategic applications. Also, after an application is agreed in principle then any further decisions will again only involve officers.

CHILDREN AND EDUCATION---Requests for help with travel passes for the 16 - 18-year pupils attending education establishments are still awaited.

More foster carers are desperately needed, and anyone interested are asked to urgently contact the council.

A few schools now have 20mph zones in place and more are being planned.

Just announced is that for September 91.1% of secondary school students were offered their first preference.

HOUSING AND ASSETS---Shropshire Council has two owned housing companies, STaR and Cornovii, both are performing well, with over 200 homes under construction across the county. These are delivering high quality affordable, low energy, local needs homes together with some specialist accommodation.

Homelessness continues to be an area of high pressure for the Council, however, using the ex-university accommodation in Shrewsbury has much improved the situation.

STaR Housing Association has had its borrowing envelope increased by £52m. SC in partnership with STaR is committed to delivering over 500 homes of various descriptions by summer 2026.

HIGHWAYS---At present numerous comments about “Fix My Street” have been made.

These are being investigated. Locally many complaints have also been made about potholes and flooding. An invitation has been issued to council officers covering these to attend the Annual meeting.

DEVOLUTION –The Government recently announced that it was their intention to make a number of changes involving Local Government. They intend, to use their words, to put in place a more efficient system and introduce Unitary Authorities throughout England. Each Unitary Authority will cover an electorate of at least half a million electors. Also included in this reorganisation, Government has stated they wish to create Strategic Authorities throughout England each having a Mayor and an electorate of at least 1.5m.

A number of Local Authorities were asked if they would agree to postpone their elections, which were due to be held in May. At present 10 Counties have agreed this proposal and to postpone them until May 2026 so allowing time for this change to take place and new Unitary Authorities to be created. It is expected more will follow in the next few years. Where this leaves Shropshire with an electorate of around 260,000 is not yet known. It is understood that Staffordshire are considering the Unitary proposal.

Locally there are a number of issues being pursued.

These include identifying a number of narrow roads in the parish as Quiet Lanes and introducing both a 30-mph limit in Cruckton/Cruckmeole and a ban on HGV vehicles using this as a through route. Also there are an increasing number of roads subject to flooding problems.

FINALLY----- On behalf of myself and Councillor Nick Hignett, we would like to thank all of the Parish Councillors and Officers for working alongside us to represent our residents.

March 9th, 2025.