

January 2025 Report

Healthy People Healthy Environment Healthy Economy Healthy Organisation

We wish you all a Happy New Year.

We felt that instead of reviewing what has been happening in Local Government over the last month, and looking forward to various issues that are currently in the immediate pipeline - we would make an attempt to look forward as to what may be affecting Local Government over the next 12 months – or possibly longer, as the new Labour Government sets out its stall.

January Can be a Tough Month:

First though we are aware of how hard January can be on everyone's mental health. So it seems appropriate to re state the assistance that is available for anyone contemplating suicide. Samaritans can be reached by phone on 116 123. If you are under the age of 35, or worried about someone who is, the Papyrus help line is 08000884141 or text 07660 039967. As Parish and Town Council's do have FB pages please spread this message.

Political Realignments:

While the political 'goings on' at Shirehall may seem irrelevant to non-political Town and Parish Councils there may always be a roll down effect. Notwithstanding by-election changes the Shirehall administration remained Conservative. However, 2 north Shropshire Conservative Members transferred their political party allegiance to a group calling itself Shropshire First – and now sit as Independents. This means that if all Members turn up at the final Full Council meeting in Feb25, voting (eg on the 2025/26 Budget) will be split 50:50 with the Conservative Chair having to use his casting vote. The possibility of a vote of no confidence in the Leader (Lezley Picton) is real; requiring a change of Administration until the May25 elections. This has also meant a change in the political make up of various Committees – though Simon has remained on both the Audit and Pension Committee, while Gwilym continues to sit on Cabinet as Portfolio for Finance, Corporate Resources and Finance and substitute for the Southern Planning Committee.

Planning Committees

Local Planning Committees may well have their influence reduced. There is a consultation ongoing regarding the future of Local Planning Committees. In effect this consultation's proposals will lead to the vast majority of applications being dealt with by Officers; and if a site is agreed within a Local Plan it will get built out. So the possibility of local Members' 'calling in' a Planning Application to request that the elected Members that sit on Planning Committees have a say, will be much reduced.

NPPF Final Document

The new NPPF document has been released. Shropshire's annual housing figure (currently 1073) will rise to 1994. The long awaited Local Plan (still not approved) proposed the number would be 1450 (ie high growth) - so this 1994 represents a significant increase. You may recall

talk of a regional committee/board determining the Local Plan; but this may well have been shelved. Once the Local Plan has been approved we will be in a position to at least understand where these new (extra) houses are likely to be built.

English Devolution White Paper

The English Devolution White Paper has been released. In short the White Paper seeks to abolish two tier authorities and create only Unitaries – such as Shropshire. However, all Unitaries need to cover a population of more than 500,000. This will inevitably mean that Shropshire will have to merge with another Local Authority - but there are no timescales for this. Once these changes have been made (or alongside these changes) Unitary Councils will be asked (or mandated) to come together in a combined authority under a Mayor. The Mayor will also be the Police and Crime Commissioner and the Fire Chief, there is also a suggestion that the Mayor should be the chair of the Integrated Care Board.

We are not aware of any move to empower the Town and Parish Councils ie to enhance government at the ultra-local level.

All of these changes are unlikely to affect the Shropshire Council (which include Town and Parishes) elections due in 2025.

Local Government Finance Settlement

The settlement will be confirmed in Feb25. Although the Officers at Shirehall are still working on what the detail means it does appear that the funding that will be received will be a similar amount to last year. The bad news is that Shropshire has definitely lost the Rural Services Grant (£9m) and the Social Care monies are under investigation. However, what is currently unclear is how the new 'deprivation monies', which we hope will cover these losses, will be allocated.

So what does this means in terms of Council provided public services? We think that the comments from Grant Thornton (our external auditors) remain true – that the Council is at a financial precipice, but not currently facing 'catastrophe'.

Cllrs Gwilym Butler and Simon Harris

Cleobury Mortimer Division