

CHURCH STRETTON TOWN COUNCIL – ANNUAL REPORT

Introduction

The Church Stretton Town Council is pleased to present its report to residents for the year ended 24th May 2022.

Church Stretton residents will know about the many challenges which faced the new Council following the elections in May 2021, and part of this report must be to share with residents the significant progress which has been made in addressing the areas which we felt needed most attention. But this report will not dwell on the past, and will instead provide an update on the state of the Council's finances, internal controls and procedures before moving on to detail the wider progress which has been made. It will finally set out the high level plans for the future.

Council Membership

The Town Council has thirteen councillors shared across four wards, and over the year all positions were occupied. Twelve Councillors were elected on 6th May 2021, and the final vacancy was filled by co-option on 29th June 2021. One Councillor, Cllr Lyn Antill resigned on 26th April 2022, being the last full Council meeting of the year. Lyn has been a Councillor for eight years. We are all grateful for her service on the Council and send her every good wish for her retirement.

A list of all Councillors, the wards they represent, and a record of attendance is given in Appendix A

Finances

The Council is particularly grateful to the Locum Town Clerk and Responsible Finance Officer, Gillian Bailey, who since July 2021 has worked to resolve the problems with the Council's financial controls and processes. As a result of her hard work the Council receives regular and effective management information, and on 26th April 2022 received the following draft financial information for the year ended 31st March 2022:

	31st March 2021	31st March 2022	Change
	£	£	£
Balances b/fwd	443,350	422,695	(20,655)
Precept	408,202	404,969	3,233
Other receipts	39,646	89,979	50,333
Staff costs	208,113	189,968	(18,145)
Loan interest	7,842	7,842	0
Other payments	252,548	215,030	(37,516)

Balances c/fwd	422,695	504,803	82108
Total value of cash	442,159	543,139	100,980

The draft figures show the Council to be in an improved position financially. The table shows the position at the end of 2021, the end of 2022 and the net changes over the year. The bold text below reflects items in the table. In particular:

- The preliminary surplus for the year ended 31st March 2022 before transfers to Ear Marked Reserves (EMR) was £82,108 – being the difference between the opening balance (**balances b/fwd**) of **£422,695** and the carried forward or closing balance (**c/fwd**) of **£504,803**. This was as the result of increased income (**other receipts** in the table) and **lower costs and payments**.
- This surplus will allow the Council to allocate some of these funds to Ear Marked Reserves, and in particular to street lighting replacement (£12,000), the extension of the town cemetery (£20,000) and tree works (£25,000), all work which is urgently needed. These items were planned in the budget and the expenditure managed to create the year end surplus.
- After boosting these funds the total EMRs will increase to £373, 832 and general reserves will be £130,971. The slight increase in general reserves will also allow the Town Council to meet its newly adopted reserves policy which requires a minimum of four months net relevant expenditure (NRE). For 2022/23 NRE is budgeted at £123,197.
- Together, the Ear Marked Reserves and General Reserves total **£504,803**.

The renewal of street lighting is one of the best ways for the Town Council to contribute to carbon reduction, whilst the existing cemetery is almost full and needs extending. These will be two of the important capital works planned during the year.

Fixing the Past, Living in the Present, Planning for the Future

In June the Council approved a strategy called *Fixing the Past, Living in the Present and Planning for the Future*. Over the past twelve months Councillors and staff have been engaged in resolving the issues identified in previous audits. This included ensuring all of the Council's policies and procedures, standing orders, schemes of delegation, personnel policies, data protection, IT security, bank reconciliations and risk assessments are fit for purpose. Although there is some work left to do, the majority of the remedial actions have now been completed with over 200 documents having been created and approved by Council in order to meet its regulatory obligations.

In particular, two year's financial records have been recreated, the VAT issues settled, regular financial information is now provided and the 2022/23 budget developed to reflect capital and spending needs. Key financial figures, budgets and performance data have also been shared in a spirit of openness with the public via *Stretton Focus*. As many residents

have remarked, 'Community Matters tells it as it is', and the Council is grateful to *Stretton Focus* for its support in sharing the message with residents. We will continue to do so.

Establishing a sound financial foundation has allowed the Council to more effectively address day to day matters and to plan more for the future because it understands what funds and reserves it has available. It would be impractical to list everything which has been completed in this report, and so a sample of the key activities linked to the main committees and sub-groups is given below. Full details of all of the Council's activities, and the associated agendas and papers are provided on the Town Council website, and talking about the website is a good place to start.

And one short word for the Town's Councillors: unlike the Unitary or Parliamentary Members, all of the Town's Councillors are unpaid volunteers. Details of attendances are given in Appendix A.

Town Council website and logo: *Communications working group*

In the modern world the ability to access information instantly is considered the norm, and the Town Council, recognising this reality, resolved to introduce a new website with up to date navigation tools. Following a tender exercise, 'Aubergine' were selected to build the new site and configure the content management system. This work has progressed well and the new website is currently being built and will go live this summer with a fresh look and easy to use format. The new website will be accompanied by the adoption of a new Town Council logo which you will start to see on our digital and print media from this summer.

In addition to its project work on the website, the Communications working group takes the lead on informing residents about what is going on, using print media, social media (Facebook in particular) and Community Messenger.

Emergency Plan leaflets to all homes: *Emergency Planning Group*

Comprised of several local organisations and charities in the parish, the Emergency Planning Group has been developing new plans to help the town deal with incidents which may occur, and what is considered to be the final draft was circulated in May 2022. Informed by Storm Barra in December 2021, in addition to the traditional contingency plans which would help residents in the event of a major fire or flood, the plan looks to introduce a 'street warden' programme across the towns and villages. The plan is that in the event services are disrupted, the telephones stop working or bad weather prevents movement, wardens will check on their street or neighbourhood and summon assistance if required.

To help residents prepare for any type of emergency leaflets produced by the Group will be delivered over the summer to every home. The leaflets show pictorially what steps householders should take now to prepare. A range of useful contact numbers is also included.

Christmas lights and party: *Public Realm Committee*

Despite the severe weather and power cuts disrupting the switch on of the Christmas lights, Santa managed to reschedule his visit to the Grotto a week later, and children managed to meet Santa and receive a small gift. After Christmas a grant was secured to fund the purchase of new lights for Sandford Avenue which will be on display from this year.

Jubilee celebrations: *Public Realm Committee*

The Town is looking forward to enjoying four days of celebration across the parish. Fifty-four flags representing countries across the Queen's Commonwealth will be flown and stay up for the 10k run on 11th June and until after the conclusion of the Arts Festival. Street parties, nature walks, firework displays, family fun day and dog show, fancy dress, and a flower festival mean that there will be something taking place right across the Jubilee weekend. A huge thank you to the many volunteers who have made this happen. And a particular mention for the formal declaration of the Rectory Wood and Field becoming a Local Nature Reserve, making Church Stretton the only town in the county to have two nature reserves.

Housing Needs Survey and Local Plan: *Strategy Committee*

The Housing Needs Survey (HNS) has been developed and delivered to all households during the first week in May, and the information which it secures will enable the Town to input effectively to the Examination in Public of the Shropshire Local Plan.

The Strategy Committee has been actively following and commenting to Shropshire Council on the Shropshire Local Plan and has engaged with both the planners and the inspectors. At stake are applications to build in excess of 1,000 new homes around the town.

Meanwhile, the HNS will inform the Town's housing and development plans and will allow the real need within the parish to be established.

S137 Grants: *Finance Committee*

In addition to its role of overseeing the Council's finances, the Finance Committee also manages the Council's s137 grants process. Working with a fund of £10,000 established in the 2022-23 budget, the Committee allocates £2,500 each quarter to local organisations to help meet insurance bills, support the work of local associations or to buy new bits of kit for youth groups. The second tranche will be allocated in July.

Flooding in Essex Road: *Strategy Committee*

Local residents report that there have been problems with flooding for 36 years. And although the Town Council have no responsibility for highways or sewers, during the year lay members of the Strategy Committee have supported work to negotiate with Shropshire Council, Severn Trent Water and the Environment Agency to develop a solution. And although progress has been frustrating – these problems cost big money to fix – progress has been made with projects to model the water flows, internal inspections of the sewers, and some clearance work on the outfalls all coming together to identify the causes of the

problems. A report produced by the Committee will be used to get the concerned parties to take ownership of their respective responsibilities.

Tools for the job: *Public Realm Committee*

The development of the 2022-23 Budget was structured to allow for the purchase of both a new Ransomes triple mower and a Polaris all terrain utility vehicle as a replacement for the Council's flatbed Transit which had failed its MOT and had been condemned. Both of these vehicles are essential for maintaining the 200 acres of land owned by the Council. We are very grateful to the volunteer working parties who continue to support the Council's outdoor team.

Oakbank Motel: *Strategy Committee*

Significant concern within the community led the Council to take up the issues arising from the housing of people with complex needs in the Oakbank Motel. The absence of any support for those housed there deprived them of the help they needed to improve their lives and actions of a minority caused serious issues for nearby residents.

After a series of meetings with the owners, Shropshire Council, the Police and others the Town Council successfully made the case that it was not safe or appropriate to use Oakbank in this way. The property is currently empty.

Outstanding Community Award: *Council and residents*

Congratulations to all for winning the inaugural Shropshire Community Foundation Awards where Church Stretton was awarded joint first prize. The award recognised how our community had really come together and adapted how it worked to support people through the pandemic, and also the generosity and volunteering spirit which exists right across the parish.

Recruiting a new team: *Personnel Committee*

On the day the new Council was elected the Council only had two permanent members of staff. The Personnel Committee has worked unseen to stabilise the workforce and recruit a permanent team whilst introducing robust employment practices. It has been one of the most intensive and demanding tasks of any Committee.

Children's play equipment: *Public Realm and residents*

The Council discovered that much of the play equipment needed replacing, and has set about making improvements. The first major new installation has been in All Stretton where there was no functioning equipment after the old rides had been condemned and removed. Built through a partnership between residents (the All Stretton Village Society) who fundraised £10,000, the Council who allocated £20,000 and the Lottery who gave a grant for £8,500, the new play space will be named in honour of the Jubilee at its official opening later this year.

Youth Club: *Council in partnership*

Working in partnership with Mayfair and the Shropshire Youth Association, a grant of £5,000 from the Council enabled the opening of a weekly youth club in the town which is planning to expand its intake during 2022-23.

Drugs Action Group: *Strategy Committee*

Following on from several of the initiatives reported above, the Council resolved to facilitate the establishment of an independent Drugs Action Group in the town. With objectives to provide factual information, deliver and support preventative activities, and to monitor and respond to local trends and incidents, the Group is in the process of developing its formal constitution, appointing its committee and considering an application for charitable status.

Planning applications: *Planning Committee*

Over the past year the Planning Committee have reviewed 155 planning applications from within the parish, including 80 in respect of trees and 48 which needed to be reviewed by either the full Council or Planning Committee. Of these, 24 were supported, 7 were neutral and the Committee objected to 9. The remaining 8 are yet to be determined. When compared to the final decisions of Shropshire Council only one case resulted in a determination by Shropshire which was different to our recommendations.

Currently three appeals are pending and one has been refused.

The very great majority of planning applications are visited so as to fully understand the proposals and the sites are photographed both as a record of the visit and also to use during the subsequent Committee discussion.

In addition to the regular planning applications the Planning Committee responds to consultations and also presents a case where necessary to Planning Inspectors setting out the Town Council's views where there has been an appeal.

Parking restrictions: *Parking working group*

After the difficulties experienced with Shropshire Council's consultation the Town Council, in April 2022, established a formal working party of the Council to create a partnership with several local organisations including Shropshire Council and the National Trust. Resident representatives are being recruited to join the group.

Planning for the future: *the Council's outline plans for 2022-23*

The most important strategic issue facing the town remains the satisfactory adoption of the Shropshire Local Plan, and much of the strategy work completed this year is to support the Council at the Examination in Public of the Local Plan.

With a stronger financial position the Council will continue to invest in services, and will finalise the recruitment of staff to bring the team up to full strength.

This year will also be the first full year (May to May) for which the improvements in financial control and procedures will be operational for the whole of the year, and this will be reflected in the audit reports and annual returns to be completed in June 2023. (The return to be completed in June 2022 includes the period April and May 2021, and as such will show deficiencies).

The Council will continue to progress the various reactive projects taken up on behalf of residents like flooding and Oakbank, together with new issues as they emerge.

The Council will also leverage its investment in the Outdoor team to further improve the upkeep of the parks, the nature reserves and also of the town's cemeteries and further improvements to play equipment will continue as budgets permit. A wider project, to extend the existing cemetery, will also be commenced alongside a programme to upgrade street lighting, a key opportunity for advancing climate change improvements at a town level, whilst more work will be undertaken to strengthen the Council's health and safety and data protection.

The new Town Council website will be formally launched together with the new logo and branding, and new content will be written to compliment material transferred. The Town Council is also exploring the use of a geographical information system which will help us capture and provide information on the assets we maintain.

Summary

The first year of the new Council has been heavily focused on Fixing the past, with which great progress has been made. The Council is grateful to all of the volunteers, staff and Councillors for their work in making this happen. Alongside the myriad of procedures and standing orders approved during the year the Council has been stabilising and strengthening the staff team and acquiring the tools needed to maintain the town's 200 acres of public realm. The town has also stabilised its finances and now has timely and effective management information which supports efficient use of resources.

Alongside this remedial work the Council has been engaged in planning, consultation and other work to inform the Shropshire Local Plan. The Council has additionally picked up a number of previously outstanding issues faced by the town, and it will continue to work on these and any new issues which emerge.

It has been a tough year, but your Councillors feel that much has been achieved, and we all look forward to reporting further progress next year.

APPENDIX A

Ward	Councillor name	Date elected/coopted (C)	Date resigned	Expenses claimed £	Attendance (full council)
North Ward	Nicola Carter	6 th May 21		0	10/13
	Sheila Davies	6 th May 21		0	12/13
	John Luck	6 th May 21		0	13/13
	Bob Welch	6 th May 21		0	12/13
South Ward	Lyn Antill	6 th May 21	26 th April 22	0	12/13
	Ryan Foulkes	6 th May 21		0	11/13
	Daniel Hartshorne	6 th May 21		0	8/13
	Graham Lewis	29 th June 21 (C)		0	Note 1
	Mark Morris	6 th May 21		0	11/13
All Stretton	Andy Munro	6 th May 21		0	13/13
	Helen Stowell	6 th May 21		0	12/13
Little Stretton	Colin Carson	6 th May 21		0	10/13
	Julie Lawton	6 th May 21		0	13/13

Note 1: Cllr Lewis has been isolating whilst undergoing hospital treatment, and has been joining Committee meetings and completing other work remotely. Government regulations do not allow Zoom for council meetings.