



**Church
Stretton**
Town Council

CHURCH STRETTON TOWN COUNCIL STRATEGY COMMITTEE DISCUSSION DOCUMENT COUNCIL PRIORITIES 2022-2025

INTRODUCTION

The Church Stretton Town Council (CSTC) has an annual budget of around £1/2 million, of which around half is spent on staff. The relatively high staff budget reflects the extensive property and land interests for which the CSTC is responsible, including two Local Nature Reserves and over 200 acres of publicly accessible parks and play areas.

After a year of successfully addressing historic issues, the CSTC is now facing a range of both internal and external challenges. At a meeting of the Chairs of the Council's committees held on 18th July an assessment of the challenges faced was created using a PESTLE analysis – Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Legal and Environmental, and conclusions drawn about the implications of the threats to the CSTC. The identified threats were then introduced to a prioritisation exercise.

The purpose of this paper is to share the PESTLE findings, and to identify the emerging priorities for discussion.

PESTLE ANALYSIS

Political

Elections to the Town Council are scheduled in May 2025, as are unitary elections to Shropshire Council. A general election must be held by 2024 (strictly, by January 2025). There are a number of boundary reviews taking place which will affect the town, in particular the constituency boundary changes which will extend the Ludlow Constituency north to Dorrington (but curiously it doesn't include Leebotwood). Shropshire Council is also conducting a review of the viability and cost effectiveness of there being nearly 150 town and parish councils, which is likely to result in consolidation.

Additionally, the well publicised financial difficulties impacting Shropshire Council may need to be resolved by changes to its make-up. Michael Gove had suggested that a bail out would need a merger with Telford and Wrekin, but the views of a new Minister are not known.

The implications identified include:

- Preparedness for other local parishes to be added to CSTC. Whilst this is not sought the CSTC should accept this as a possibility
- The likelihood that such an outcome would bring more expense than income
- Limited say in deciding changes with the risk of party political influence
- A desire to see Church Stretton and Craven Arms established as separate unitary council wards
- The likelihood of lots of loose ends which will need to be tidied
- A high demand for comms

Economic

The wider UK economy will directly influence the CSTC, and equally significant will be the need for Shropshire Council to make savings to balance its budget. In particular, Shropshire have committed the remainder of its reserves to balance its budget leaving further savings of £10m to find this year and a projected further £40m next year. On top of this SC have shared that inflation will exacerbate their financial position.

Inflation will adversely impact CSTC – energy costs, contractor rates and staff wages.

Additionally, residents will be finding the cost of living difficult, and will be looking for help and guidance, if not direct support from local services like the foodbank.

The probability is that SC will look to cut services, yet the area where this is possible is limited because of the need for SC to prioritise statutory services. This will leave the library, the swimming pool, the leisure centre and some discretionary contracts, eg to Mayfair, particularly vulnerable. Public transport may also be impacted

In short, the CSTC needs to focus on how it will attempt to fill the vacuum created by the withdrawal of services by Shropshire Council.

The following conclusions may therefore be drawn:

- CSTC needs to assemble data and build a case for a fairer distribution of resources which appear to be concentrated on urban communities to the detriment of Church Stretton, and then present this case.
- The impact of cost of living increases will drive an increased need for information, and the CSTC needs to explore ways by which this may be done, eg Citizens Advice
- Cost of living increases will, together with wider demographics and changes to work patterns, restrict and reduce the availability of volunteers. This has already been witnessed.
- Alternative funding strategies and ownership models need to be explored, particularly for the library, pool and leisure centre. The implications for the precept need to be understood.
- Opportunities for consolidation of premises and assets must be explored, which should include CSTC

Social

The Church Stretton demographics are changing and are likely to continue to do so. The average age of the town's residents is increasing, as is the age of retirement. This is increasing the demand for care and medical services whilst reducing the availability of volunteers to help provide them at exactly the same time that the state is scaling back provision in the hope that volunteers will fill the gap. There is already evidence of volunteer fatigue, and consideration has to be given as to how to better support, retain and recruit volunteers.

There are also several behavioural changes, many driven or accelerated by covid, which impact the town. Leisure patterns are changing, with a move from hotels to camping/glamping and bed and breakfast, and the cost of living increases will just exacerbate this move. Further, the covid lockdown helped attract many visitors who were more interested in partying in preference to enjoying the countryside. This is against a background of increasing awareness and support for the environment.

Increased working from home and the issues above are also affecting feelings of isolation whilst the slowly but certainly increasing population will impact infrastructure and access to services.

Conclusions include:

- Conversations about infrastructure planning
- Development of understanding around the needs of the town's retail offering
- Continued support for the Drugs Action Group and for the PSPO
- Identifying support for volunteers and improving recruitment
- Close liaison with Tourism to promote CS in the best places and support provision of accommodation whilst not adversely impacting the environment and residents eg wild camping

Technology

Technology is changing the lives of residents and it is important that as the way we live alters people who have not, or can not, adopt new technology are not left behind and become isolated, eg banking. Ironically, technology offers novel opportunities for addressing isolation as demonstrated during the pandemic.

Conversely, for the majority who are becoming increasingly reliant on new technology, we need to ensure that there is adequate capacity – mobile networks, broadband, gas, car charging, electricity robustness , (particularly 11kv supply) and reliability, legacy fuel and banking

Legal

The primary legal document impacting Church Stretton will be the Shropshire Local Plan, and the Town Council is already working to influence its outcomes. Once adopted it should

relieve pressure on the Town Council to defend speculative planning applications outside of the development boundary.

The Town Council will also need to maintain an overview on any other outcomes arising from the adopted local plan. It will also be necessary to look at any new legislation emanating from the new government. The notion that certain planning controls may be relaxed to boost the economy is just one example.

Boundary changes are identified under Political

Environment

A comparison between the Town Council's current performance and the NALC guidelines shows the CSTC to be performing much better than might be imagined, helped enormously by the significant nature reserves, woodlands and parks for which the council is responsible. However, work needs to be done to complete and record this work, and to shape it for presentation to the wider public. It should form an important plank of the future Neighbourhood Plan but care should be taken to ensure it does not dominate as evidenced by the CLP.

Particular matters to review beyond development of the Council's own climate policy should include looking at the AONB and Shropshire Council's DP24 policy covering the AONB.

The implications of climate change should also be reflected in the emergent Emergency Plan

Current projects and workload

In addition to the many future needs identified above, the discussion around workload identified a number of strategic priorities alongside a wide range of other issues which need to be resourced and addressed. The strategic issues (in no order of priority) were identified as:

- Extension of the town cemetery, and potential master plan to co-ordinate the allotments, existing cemetery, new cemetery, Cudwell Meadow, the mental health through horticulture project, and the wider land holding with a view to building something which reflects joined up thinking which is greater than the sum of the parts
- SHI – maintenance plan, remedial work, health and safety, funding and optimal use strategy
- Neighbourhood Plan which will include all of the strategic issues identified in this section plus a new design for the town, public toilets, housing, protection of countryside, development to meet housing need and service provision.
- Town parks – the steps required beyond day to day maintenance to renovate the play equipment, open up activities like crazy golf, improve access to toilets and meet expectations identified by the current park survey
- 60 High Street – maintenance plan, remedial work, health and safety, funding, document storage and disposal, and optimal use strategy

The identification of suitable systems of governance eg task and finish group, formal sub-committee needs to take place and formal project documentation developed for each of the projects actioned.

To support the planning and budgeting a high level plan extending five years plus should be developed which covers the whole council and as well as the major milestones of the key projects above, should also record major asset life/maintenance cycles and the key annual governance events eg budget, accounts, AGM.

Other significant projects include:

- Christmas lights and celebrations
- Family fun day
- Completion of Emergency Plan and practice exercise
- Tourism and tourism research project
- Provision of information, eg housing advice, Citizen's Advice Bureau
- Development of urban/rural resource campaign

Summary and conclusion

The general consensus is that the council has satisfactorily addressed the historic 'Fixing the past' backlog and has now moved forward into the 'Living in the present' and Planning for the future' phases. This is not to say that everything is perfect, rather to say that the work, for example, to improve the parks and address building maintenance now forms part of the day to day activity. As such, in very simple terms, it is possible to divide all of the work detailed above into the "Present/operational" and "Future/strategic" and that a crude distinction can be that the Present could be categorised as "Officer led" with the strategic projects as "Councillor led".

This is a necessarily simplistic model, but one which needs to be developed if the required progress is to be achieved. We cannot afford to do just one thing or the other: we must work on both side by side. Both are equally important. In other words, whilst major projects like the Neighbourhood Plan are progressed all of the important matters and organic improvements need to be maintained.

To expect everything to be delivered by the staff team is both unreasonable and unrealistic, which is why the major projects need to be both led, but also resourced by Councillors and the growing team of lay members in whom significant knowledge and capacity resides. It is submitted that this is the only way by which the council can progress.

If this distinction is accepted (and it is something which needs to be discussed and accepted by full council) it describes the path forward. A series of plans need to be developed which should be pulled together by the overall five year plan rehearsed above, which includes the major day to day activities (the battle rhythm) as well as the major projects. Ideally, this needs to be completed by mid October in order to inform the budget.

