

## **News from Stratford District Council**

This month, **District Councillor Trevor Russel** says the jury is out on controversial plans to 'join' Shipston with Stratford, and reports on confusion over the future of SDC's Area Office.

### **The 'merger': how it can work**

The plan to 'merge' Shipston (and surrounding villages) with Stratford under a new joint area committee of the county and district councils has provoked a strong reaction in the town. I share the concerns, indeed opposed the proposal at SDC's Executive.

But with both councils now approving the plan, it will go ahead – with the new committee probably starting work in January.

I welcome a joint SDC-WCC committee: the two authorities do need to work together.

It will mean a bigger pot of money to support local organisations – and district councillors, for the first time, will have a voice and vote on matters like roads and pavements, previously the exclusive preserve of county members.

I also hope both councils will agree to devolve even more powers and budgets to the new area committees. Both need to decentralise more and take more decisions locally.

Nonetheless, there remain two major concerns and uncertainties about the new set-up.

One, the new committee will be remote, covering a huge area with 40,000 residents.

Two, the biggest concern, councillors from Stratford town will outnumber councillors from Shipston, Compton, Brailes and Tredington three to two. Will they use their majority to give preference to Stratford when allocating grants or taking other decisions?

That doesn't have to happen. And it won't happen if the Stratford councillors listen, get to understand the challenges and issues we face in the Stour Valley, realise we need more, not less support from SDC and WCC, and work for not against our interests.

In opposing the new arrangements, I advocated six area committees, one covering Shipston and its hinterland. That would have meant decisions being taken locally by councillors who are close to and understand the local issues.

However, the decision to join us with Stratford has been taken. We must and can make the new arrangement work. Time will tell whether it will.

### **Area office: what on earth is going on?**

Residents expect councillors to get their facts right when they report back on matters of local interest or importance – and usually we do. But if two councillors give different information on the same item, what and who do they believe?

Unintentionally, county councillor Chris Saint and I gave confusing reports to the town council at the October meeting.

In his report, Chris said WCC and SDC had agreed to open one-stop shops in Stratford, Southam and Alcester – but not in Shipston because, he said, SDC was unwilling to support one here. He quoted one of his Cabinet colleagues as saying that WCC was willing to discuss the idea.

In my report, I confirmed the agreement on the three new one-stop shops, but said that SDC officers had told our Executive it was WCC who were unwilling to support one in Shipston. I emphasised that SDC had *not* ruled it out – indeed, Les Topham, the Leader of the council, felt we should go back to the county and say we were prepared to discuss the possibilities.

I don't blame town councillors, and members of the public present, for wondering which one of us was right.

In truth, both of us were right – insofar as we reported the information we were given by officers at WCC and SDC respectively. But the information was clearly contradictory, and unhelpful to both Chris and me, and more importantly to residents.

Where do we go from here? How do we untangle the crossed wires – clear up the confusion?

SDC's Executive is due to get a report on future options for Shipston area office. Closure will certainly be one of them – with it replaced by a mobile bus and 24-hour kiosk offering e-access to services.

**But** the comments by leading members of both councils have changed things dramatically.

Two-three weeks ago, it was almost certainly a question of when the lights would be switched off for the last time in the Telegraph Street office. Now, the door has been opened on at least the possibility of a new joint office in Shipston.

The next step is for the two councils to hold discussions at the political level to explore if we can reach an agreement in principle. Watch this space.

### **We can have confidence in our young people**

With other councillors, district and county, I took part recently in political 'speed dating' with a group of youngsters – including from Shipston – and it was an extremely challenging experience.

Each young person had four minutes with each councillor to quiz us on any topic they wanted to ask.

The youngsters, aged 11 to 17, threw rapid fire questions – and expected quick, snappy answers – on everything from affordable housing, smoking, drugs, underage drinking, transport, and activities for them to global warming and preventing war.

Both councillors and youngsters said afterwards how much they appreciated the event. And certainly we were impressed by their thoughtful and thought-provoking questions.

I'm convinced we've no need to worry about the future. It's in good hands – theirs.

