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Dear Secretary of State

Role of Parish Council

I write further to your open letter to Parish & Town Councils.

Within the Shropshire Council boundary we have 167 Parish Councils which range in size from some of the smallest hamlets covering a handful of residents to the Town Council covering the county town of Shrewsbury covering a population of over 70,000. Parish Councils play a large part in local government, being the glue that cements communities together, being the retainers of much local knowledge and being eyes and ears for my Council which is spread across 1000 square miles.

This current crisis has really emphasised to me the role that Parish Councils are playing in supporting some of our most vulnerable residents, not just through helping them with their shopping or getting prescriptions or walking their dog, but also sign posting them to help that either the voluntary & community sector can provide or that we with social care responsibilities can provide.

To me I see that Parish Councils are the ones that add the jam and cream in the cake that we at principal councils bake; they are the ones that add quality of life by making their communities nicer places to live, work and visit.

This crisis has brought financial pressures on many of our parish councils, particularly our Town Councils who play a great role in ensuring the vitality of our market towns. The services they provide are too lengthy to list but they do include:

- Operating valuable town centres services like car parks, toilets and visitor centres
- Running vibrant markets
- Maintaining parks & open spaces
- Providing bereavement services through cemeteries and church yards
- Maintaining sports facilities to encourage us all to have healthier lifestyles



- Running community facilities that are true hubs for their communities bringing stakeholders together to provide a one-stop facility
- Providing youth services and in some places very specialist youth activity to guard against the impact of county lines in our county
- Providing services to the elderly like meals on wheels

In the majority of cases, Parish Councils can weather the storm of this crisis, but for some their loss of income and increased expenditure is crippling. Many of our larger Town Councils have been innovative, finding alternative sources of funding and growing commercial activity so that the expenses of running their councils just doesn't fall on the Council tax payers; using income from Markets, Events, Concessions, Room Hire, Sports Pitch Hire to supplement the cost of running free community facilities like parks and open space. I fear that it will be a long time before our Town Councils will see a return of these income streams to pre-coronavirus levels because I cannot realistically see these kind of activities returning for quite some time. And yet there is an expectation from the public, and from you, that parks and cemeteries must continue to be open and maintained.

I note from your letter that you have referred Parish Councils to their principal authorities for funding following your commitment of £1.6bn to local government. Shropshire Council's share of that £1.6bn didn't even cover our losses so however much I would like to help them, I have to look at the greater good of the county as a whole and protect statutory functions.

I feel quite helpless as some of the packages offered to the business sector, like the grants to the retail, hospitality & leisure sector and business rates exemption would fit very well for many of our Parish & Town Councils who have considerable losses of income in those areas and continue to have business rate liability on carparks that have no patronage, markets that at best are seeing 75% loss of footfall or are closed; and sporting facilities that are closed.

I would encourage you to consider extending those areas to Parish & Town Councils and we can manage their applications in the same way we are doing for the business community.

I also believe there are potential packages you could put together with their national association, the National Association of Local Councils, maybe in conjunction with the Local Government Association by creating a Hardship Fund that those Parish Councils, at risk of not meeting their liabilities, could tap into. Some Parish Councils will inevitably face cash flow issues over the next couple of years. Creating an easier mechanism for short-term financing might help some weather the storm.

Turning to recovery, we are all so busy focussing on the here and now, but my grave concern is around what impact this crisis has on our society in general, in terms of



personal debt, family makeup, the ability of people to cope, their confidence in returning to normality, whatever normality will be.

As Leader of Shropshire Council, I see my role is showing great leadership across the county ensuring Shropshire remains a great place to live, work and invest and my staff are making great strides, but I need those larger Town & Parish Councils to help me bring back that confidence in people to return to trading locally, shopping locally, living our lives locally. Many of those Town Councils are in a great position to show local leadership and help with that regeneration, working with newly established Business Improvement Districts in our larger towns, driving one single collective vision. I would encourage you to consider some kind of Recovery Fund that can be accessed by all tiers of local government to put the beating heart back into our communities.

I am sure my sentiments are echoed around the country by other leaders of Unitary, County & District Councils who enjoy good relations with their network of Parish Councils and I would urge you to support them as you have others.

Kind regards.

Peter Nutting
Leader Shropshire Council