



LUDLOW UNDER CONTINUING PRESSURE: HOPE IN TROUBLED TIMES?

A follow-up to the 2012 report *Ludlow under Pressure*

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Introduction

Life has moved on since the publication of *Ludlow under Pressure* in 2012. This updated report reflects changes which have taken place over the past two years locally, and the efforts local churches have made to address emerging needs, within the national and global context. Rising levels of social need remain, urgent as ever, and the resources to meet them continue to be cut back – drastically so. In many areas of its life Shropshire is approaching a crisis point.

Globally the situation has become more alarming, with increasing turmoil in the Middle East, and horrors perpetrated by extremist groups in the name of Islam. The impact of these conflicts extends far beyond that region, causing fear and instability. The threat to the future well-being of humankind by climate change is now generally accepted; and the Ebola virus might develop into an unprecedented pandemic. There are no simple solutions, and good reason for alarm.

Though the suffering and poverty in many parts of the world are beyond our powers to relieve, except through our charitable giving and prayer, we can play our part in confronting hardship nearer home. Much of that derives from the economic policies and the inequality we also see operating on a global scale. In this report we describe some Ludlow initiatives which are responding to local need.

There can be no short-term fix. Financial cutbacks take their toll: charities may struggle to survive because funding has been cut; and new volunteers to replace ageing ones are often lacking. We have to look for ways to manage our economy and society with an emphasis on sustainability and justice rather than crude 'growth'.

The Church must engage in that political debate and ensure that social policies express compassion and equity. Its role is to ask fundamental, even unwelcome, questions about priorities, values, and the use of power – and to offer a message of hope.

Ludlow under Pressure: the 2012 report two years on

In November 2012 a group drawn from Churches Together Around Ludlow (CTAL) presented the report *Ludlow under Pressure*, setting out the impact of the economic recession. It was subtitled 'A report on urgent social needs'. It looked at the likely effect of cuts to public services and benefits, highlighting especially

- the needs of older people at risk
- the needs of people in the 16-24 age group, especially those who are experiencing low employment opportunities and limited housing options
- limited community transport facilities, especially for those who are seeking work and health care
- a serious shortage of social and affordable housing.

The situation is getting critical

Two years on, there is good reason for concern. The 2012 report recognised that the effects of the recession precipitated in 2008 were unlikely to be short-term (p. 24). The country cannot depend upon continuing growth to fund ever-improving benefits and standards of living. Higher levels of unemployment, longer life expectancy, and heavy demands on the NHS and other welfare provisions are forcing a review of the way in which services are provided.

In such a situation, the needs of the most vulnerable can be overlooked. Limited resources have to be allocated as fairly as possible. Communities need to develop new ways of giving support and to rely on more local resources with a renewed emphasis on voluntary effort and reliance on non-statutory bodies. Welfare-state provision is unlikely to expand. At the same time we have to ask: how far can a civilised society allow the Welfare State to contract – and at what social cost?

Galvanising the whole community

If this new report is to make a contribution to the needs which it highlights there has to be both the staffing and money essential to manage programmes of action. In recent years there has been no publicly-funded

co-ordination of the voluntary sector. This would require a broadly-based community body. Many voluntary organisations are doing admirable work, but they often work in isolation and without outside support. We hope this report will make it more likely that this will happen.

The situation is more critical than in 2012.

We are all in this together.

The four key concerns: an update

We remain concerned about older and younger people at risk, and about local provision of transport, and social and affordable housing. Some good local initiatives have been taken, as we show in the sections which follow. But nowhere near enough has yet been done. Many older people are at increasing risk to health, and even life, because of reconfigurations of the NHS. Severe financial cutbacks, additional to those already made, including further cuts to the county's youth services, will be implemented in April 2015. This is a time of far-reaching and probably painful change in Ludlow and in Shropshire.

Older people at risk

Ludlow under Pressure commented extensively on the needs of the older age group and the support provision available. It drew attention to the fact that Shropshire has a higher proportion of over-65s than the national average, and of the 63,400 people 29,464 were assessed as having long-term medical needs. In the Ludlow area there is likely to be a doubling of those over 85 by 2020.

Age UK

Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin Age UK remains the lead agency in caring for the needs of older people. It is a highly-respected and valued organisation but heavily reliant on volunteers and charitable giving. In 2012 the county reduced its grant by 20% but in recent times there has been a 25% increase in demand for advice and information. There were cuts to staffing, and in Ludlow there is now just one part-time officer to concentrate on Hospital to Home support. With the closure of Stone House, the Helena Lane replacement office on the town fringe does not make for ease of access.

Age UK has its Council grant for advice and information guaranteed for the next two years, but with further cuts to the Council budget pending, other areas of its operation may be hit and there is certainly no prospect of extending its personal services from public funding. Any growth in the foreseeable future must come from charitable giving. Age UK manages 40 day centres in the county, but the nearest to Ludlow is at Craven Arms.

Helena Lane

There has been hope that the under-used Helena Lane purpose-built centre owned by the Council might be made available. Although not ideally located, it is well-equipped and could be the resource which is sorely needed in Ludlow (see below on the new initiative Hands Together Ludlow). In a tough economic climate there is no immediate prospect of setting up anything like the excellent Mayfair Centre at Church Stretton. That should be a longer-term aim.

Dementia

There is a particular need for support to those people and their families affected by dementia. With an ageing population it is becoming a major issue. There is a growing awareness of the problem, but few resources to match. Dementia Action Alliance has recently been established in the county, but again this is a voluntary initiative which has to scratch around for funding.

Other needs

Although there are a number of befriending schemes in the area, loneliness is a serious problem. Many older people, particularly those out of town and living alone, have very limited social contact. Churches are sometimes in a position to provide a network of support but their contact is usually limited to their own members. A more co-ordinated system is needed but that, again, would require volunteers and financial resources. The ending of Meals on Wheels was a sad loss.

Residential care

The maximum cost for residential care paid by the Council remains at £350 a week. This allows for only basic standards of care in the less well-equipped homes. Residents or their families are increasingly expected to top up the fees paid by the Council. Originally such additional payments were for 'luxuries', but gradually they are expected to pay for standard items. People with private means have to meet the full cost of care down to £23,000 of their capital. There is some prospect of this being raised to £100,000 in the Care Act but some parts of the care package may be set

against this figure.

Residents may be in a position to pay when they enter a home with higher fees, but once their funds are exhausted they may be required to move to lower-standard accommodation elsewhere in the county, away from familiar surroundings and from staff with whom they feel comfortable. So overall in home care and residential provision there is a two-tier service developing, dependent on the ability to pay. Care homes in the Ludlow area are generally of a high standard but people with limited means may find themselves moved, at a time when they are very frail, to less congenial accommodation.

Funerals

A final concern is the spiralling cost of funerals. The average cost in 1992 was £950. By 2017 it is expected to be about £4,400. Many old people are worried that there will be insufficient funds to ensure that they will have a decent funeral. The pauper's funeral may be set to return. Age UK itself administers a scheme by which people can pay in advance, but those of limited resources may not feel able to set money aside, or may not know of the scheme.

Present benefits and future concerns

State pensions increasing in line with inflation afford older people some financial protection, though fuel poverty is a real issue in the winter months. Concessions are available on public transport and in some leisure facilities; and the 'bedroom tax' does not apply to those of pensionable age; some more-privileged older people benefit from the time of good employment pensions and escalating property prices. That again points up a divide within the community.

Sources of advice

If people have concerns about accessing or paying for care, Age UK have a wide range of very useful booklets and factsheets which can help, and there are professional staff and volunteers available to give advice. They can be contacted on 01743 233123.

Older people represent an increasing percentage of the population in this area.

Vital services are being cut and the voluntary sector cannot meet the shortfall.

The authorities must lay plans and make budget provision for emerging demands. No evidence of this happening.

People at risk in the 16-24 age group

The far-reaching changes in the youth services are further causes for concern. Resources seem to be diminishing, and people working in this sector are under enormous pressure. Though the young people themselves are resourceful and often resilient, their emotional welfare under current pressures is worrying. Mental-health issues and depression are increasing, there is a serious shortage of counselling services, and no permanently-employed child psychiatrist in Shropshire. Any referral, for any age group, involves a long wait.

Many young people are vulnerable, for a number of reasons. They may lack adequate parental support. If they are unable to continue living at home, housing alternatives are not easily found at affordable prices. The economic situation has not affected young people as badly as first anticipated, but it is too early to tell what the long-term effects will be. For some, however, jobs are still hard to come by, and getting to interviews may be difficult or impossible if they do not have their own transport.

Overworked youth leaders

Those involved in running youth organisations often feel isolated and unsupported. More help would be warmly welcomed from the Town Council, the churches, the police, as well as the wider community, and, of course, parents themselves. Too little is known of the good work already being done, and overworked youth workers can hardly spare the time to talk about their work.

Shropshire Council cuts

The Shropshire Council youth budget for next year (2014-15) is being reduced. It is hoped to save £150,000 by ending all direct-funded work from April 2014. The Council's declared policy is to concentrate on young people's 'needs' rather than 'wants'. But this rather neat distinction may turn out to be a false economy.

About 100 youth workers will lose their jobs. Sixteen front-line staff in this sector are leaving the county. Although the Council has expressed the hope that some of its youth workers will be re-employed by privately-commissioned providers, this is far from certain. Shropshire will be deprived of professional expertise and experience it can ill afford to lose. On a personal level, relationships of trust and support painstakingly built up with youngsters across the county will end. They will not be easily replaced.

It is doubtful whether the Council has realistically faced the likely social cost of these cuts. In a recent meeting, a County Councillor and a Council official, when asked this question, seemed to think the questioner was referring only to money.

Private funding

Funding for youth work from charitable sources is also becoming more difficult to obtain. There is more demand, but a smaller pot available. Helping young people in a rural area which is perceived to be affluent is not a priority; other charities, and projects such as local hospices, are regarded as more important. So Ludlow Youth Forum, led by Richard Morley, struggles to survive, yet Ludlow can ill afford to lose his invaluable work engaging with teenagers out on the streets in and around the town on Friday and Saturday nights.

Ludlow Youth Centre

The youth services have been sharing the Centre with other organisations such as the CAB, which had to move out of Stone House when that was sold

by the Council. It is possible that the Youth Centre may also be closed as part of the Council's drive to reduce costs. That may prove difficult, if the Centre was purpose-built with EU funds. Investigations are proceeding, and we await developments.

There are, however, two local youth initiatives which deserve mention here.

Young Shropshire in Work

Many young people need to develop life skills so that they can become more independent; those with few or no qualifications compete in a difficult job market against better-qualified candidates, and unemployment is not easily avoided. Young Shropshire in Work is a registered charitable trust, set up by John Aitken with the support of the Shropshire Housing Group, which aims to help young people improve their chances of getting into work. Other agencies and organisations address these issues with government support and funding, yet there continues to be a mismatch between employment and candidates.

Many candidates are not 'work-ready'. Voluntary work does not come easily to young people brought up in an environment of benefit dependence. However, when given opportunities they often perform well and, with encouragement, begin to understand the importance of being able to demonstrate achievements, however modest. It also starts to break a vicious circle: without opportunity, the experience isn't gained; without the experience, it's difficult to secure the opportunity.

Young Shropshire in Work focusses on three key areas:

- providing mentoring for young people. Two groups of mentors have been trained and further mentors are being sought.
- engaging with employers about possibilities for work experience, placements, training or apprenticeships
- funding. Young people may need appropriate clothing and equipment and, in some cases, help with transport, in order to begin work.

Ludlow Foyer

Ludlow Foyer, situated in the heart of Ludlow, is a project providing accommodation and hands-on support for up to two years for homeless and

vulnerable young people aged 16-25. Training and skills workshops are provided to help them to cope with living in their own accommodation and to find work.

The Foyer is open to all young people (not just those that live there) to get this support, and to make use of the facilities and training on offer. There is now a brand-new computer and IT suite for all members of the public to use on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and staff are on hand to provide one-to-one support with accessing the internet, benefit claims, job searches etc. There is a café area and kitchen for events and for training, with public-access WiFi.

Most of the young people who come to live in the Foyer have a huge range of emotional and support needs, and have often been street homeless, or 'sofa-surfing' before they arrive.

The funding for the support that is provided comes from Shropshire Council's Supporting People funding, while training funding is always an ongoing search. Currently the Foyer has funding for one year from the national Foyer Federation to run a whole programme of training and activities aimed at increasing healthy lifestyles.

The Foyer is indebted to support from Ludlow Town Council, the Young People in Work initiative, and the Rural Community Council, and for help from volunteers. The decrease in funding for youth services and voluntary organisations has had a noticeable impact on the network of support available for young people seeking work and specialist support.

Another local youth initiative is Young at Art; see the next section of this report.

Valuable local initiatives in youth work continue.

Far-reaching cutbacks in funding raise grave questions about future provision.

Pressures on vulnerable younger people continue.

Transport

Here the local authority was already working to implement some of *Ludlow under Pressure's* recommendations. However, since the last Council election, the situation has deteriorated, as resources have been reduced or diverted elsewhere. In a rural area like ours there is inevitably a great reliance on the car. Yet purchasing, maintaining (including insurance costs) and replacing a car is a daunting task for low-wage earners and many younger people.

Bus services

The town bus service has experienced a number of changes. The buses are now all easy-access, but the frequency has been reduced, routes have changed, and some areas are still without any service.

An effective Park-and-Ride service is yet to be established, making it difficult for both residents and visitors to the town.

The new Castle Connect service between Ludlow, Knighton, Clun and Bishop's Castle has run on summer weekends in 2013 and 2014, but its future is not guaranteed.

Other Shropshire Link rural services have been reduced. At the time of writing (September 2014) the 492 service between Hereford, Leominster and Ludlow will soon be stopping short of the Shropshire border, affecting especially the elderly and isolated, the young and unemployed living outside Ludlow. The through 492 service from Hereford, re-numbered the 490, will now run only twice a day.

Walking and cycling in Ludlow

Plans to improve pedestrian and cycle routes appear to have been shelved due to lack of resources. A number of areas remain inaccessible or difficult for those using mobility aids or mobility scooters, or pushing buggies. This also applies to the train station.

Community transport

More positively, Ludlow Under Pressure and CTAL were involved in the setting up in 2013 of the Ludlow Traveller Community Transport Scheme under the umbrella of Shrewsbury Dial-a-Ride, which helps to fill some of the gaps in rural bus services. CTAL has been advertising for drivers for this and the Volunteer Driver (Community Car) scheme, and has supported the very successful local Co-Wheels Car Club. Needed: more volunteers for the Ludlow Traveller and Community Car schemes and also more individuals and organisations to join both these and the Car Club to ensure they remain viable.

New community initiatives are helping.

Gaps in provision need to be addressed urgently.

As always, older people and the less well-off suffer most.

Housing

Still a depressing scene

The *Ludlow under Pressure* report in 2012 outlined a depressing housing situation both nationally and locally. It recognised that only a greater allocation of public funding would enable an improvement in the quantity and type of social housing stock, and recommended a sustained, informed campaign for greater housing justice. Sadly there has been little progress to report. Central government has supported incentives for new-build medium-cost private housing, but not for low-cost social housing. It has in fact cut subsidies on truly affordable housing development, and relaxed previous incentives for private developers to include an adequate element of such housing in any new schemes.

'Healthy demand'?

Local estate agents suggest that there is a 'healthy demand' for housing,

about half of it from people moving up from the south-east. The other half are people seeking to move into Ludlow from surrounding rural areas, or to move into larger local accommodation as family growth requires it. Some Ludlow residents, however, who have bought 3-4-bedroom houses, are now anxious about the likelihood of increased mortgage interest costs and the danger of negative equity.

Some small-scale private construction is infilling vacant urban plots. Larger-scale projects (such as one at Foldgate Lane) and the recent Bromfield Meadow scheme (rejected by Shropshire Council) include distinctly minimal provision for affordable housing.

South Shropshire Housing Association

The key player in the Ludlow area remains the South Shropshire Housing Association, which owns and manages the bulk of social housing in the area. It has, however, been able to secure £25m of public resources for new-build homes across Shropshire. It has also been concentrating on support for tenants in coping with the impact of the Under-Occupancy rules (commonly known as the 'bedroom tax') and in preparing for the major increase in administrative work that introduction of Universal Credit may bring. It has continued with its new-build programme in various sites across the county, including Church Stretton, Onibury and Neenton, and with an improvement programme to ensure the quality of its existing housing stock is kept to a decent standard. In the longer term it has plans to extend the amount of supported accommodation that it provides at the Ludlow Foyer, and to undertake major redevelopments, where the stock is no longer desirable.

Wrekin Housing Trust

A new player in Ludlow, the Wrekin Housing Trust, which has formed a partnership with the well-established South Shropshire Furniture Scheme, has bought the old Ludlow Tax Office site. Construction of eight 2-bedroom houses and four 1-bedroom flats has begun. This is being financed through a combination of selling surplus housing stock in Telford and securing commercial bank credit. All will be let as affordable-rent properties at 80% of their open market rental value.

Information

The best source of up-to-date information on social housing in the Ludlow area is the website of South Shropshire Housing Association, shropshirehousing.org.uk. There one can find information about their excellent work with sheltered housing for the elderly, with Sustain, the Foyer, and domestic violence initiatives, and in supporting existing tenants to cope with the current welfare reforms. The website also links to the Homepoint system to register a request for housing, or to use the Find a Home, or the Housing Options wizard.

In preparing this report, the Ludlow Under Pressure group has received help from South Shropshire Housing Association staff with details not just of bricks and mortar but also of issues affecting people struggling to manage in their homes at a time when the government continues to move the goalposts in unclear and often alarming ways.

Government housing policies still favour owner-occupiers.

Nationally and locally, there remains a dire shortage of social and affordable housing.

South Shropshire Housing Association continues to do good work.

New and continuing initiatives

In this section we summarise first the work of four new initiatives which have grown out of the 2012 report *Ludlow under Pressure*, second, a continuing initiative, and, finally, two local examples of organisations struggling to cope against enormous financial odds.

Hands Together Ludlow

A Ludlow under Pressure initiative called Hands Together Ludlow (HTL) was launched on 4 June 2014. Its aim is to bring together volunteers from across and outside the churches to work alongside others, including professionals, on new and existing projects. Part of its purpose is to avoid duplication of effort with the support of one administration system, so that social agencies working in partnership with HTL, including Compassionate Communities, Age UK, Home-Start, the Furniture Scheme, Family Solutions, Dementia Café, the No-Interest Loan Scheme, and the Food Parcel Scheme, can co-operate more effectively.

To support the project in its early stages, a commercial ready-made-meal production line based in Ludlow is planned for 2015. At the same time, a new Meals on Wheels service and provision for daily Luncheon Clubs at different locations or 'hubs' in Ludlow are being developed. Expanding the project to outlying areas of South Shropshire is planned in the longer term. As the commercial cooking requirement grows, it is hoped to provide employment opportunities for the graduates of Grow Cook Learn, based in Craven Arms.

Volunteers are asked to attend one of the mentoring courses provided by the safeguarding-training consultant of Severn Hospice, and DBS checks on volunteers are carried out if they work in vulnerable situations.

One of HTL's early initiatives is to provide nutritious meals for people on limited budgets and offer them guidance in preparing meals. Those volunteers with cooking and catering skills have produced appropriate recipes (and have also obtained food hygiene certificates). Suitable locations are being sought in Ludlow where luncheon clubs and catering courses can be held, including possible links with churches.

More volunteers will be needed as HTL grows and expands. Help with

gardening, housework, IT problems, and transport is also envisaged, as well as visiting and befriending people who are socially isolated.

Fuel Poverty Scheme

In late 2012 a Fuel Poverty Fund was established. It began in a low-key way, with limited publicity at first, so that appropriate levels and methods of support could be sorted out without raising unrealistic public expectations. In the first year over £500 was donated by individuals and distributed confidentially to some 30 people in need of help, identified by social workers and housing officers. This is over and above support available from public sources. (Many social-security schemes are under great pressure due to changes in criteria, rules, and staffing).

In late 2013 the Fuel Poverty Fund received a grant from CTAL together with many generous donations from people across and beyond the churches, a substantial donation from the Ludlow Rotary Club, and Gift Aid on many of the individual donations.

Since November 2013 (and during an exceptionally mild winter season) £930 has been granted to 17 families and individuals. There is a healthy balance of over £5,500 in the fund to provide continuing help. For the winter of 2014-15 it is proposed to make grants of up to £50.

No-Interest Loan Scheme

During the spring of 2014 an outpost of the Tenbury No-Interest Loan Scheme (NILS) was established in Ludlow. The scheme has been running successfully in Tenbury Wells for a number of years. Jane Newton, its founder, based it on experience she had whilst working in Australia. An anonymous and very generous benefactor provided a sum of money which made the project feasible. People without the means to raise a loan for essential household goods such as a washing machine are able to borrow the required sum of money over a period up to two years, paying back only the capital. The borrower is required to demonstrate that she has sufficient disposable income to meet the weekly payments.

Ludlow's NILS is based at the Foyer, where Shropshire Housing Association have provided office accommodation. Volunteers, mainly from St Laurence's Church, ensure that the office to which applicants come is open on two

mornings a week. The main administration for the scheme is carried out in the Tenbury Wells office.

Young at Art

Young at Art is a CTAL-sponsored annual exhibition of paintings and works of art produced by local young people, including children. The aim has been to provide a platform for young people to display their skills and to make contact with older people who take an interest in their work. There have been two exhibitions, in September 2013 and October 2014, held in St Laurence's Church. Both exhibitions attracted work of real quality and attracted high praise in the comments made by a wide range of visitors to the church.

The work exhibited in 2014 came from many quarters: from Ludlow Infants and Junior Schools, Onny School, Ludlow Education Centre, Ludlow Foyer for young homeless people, and Ludlow College. Voluntary organisations submitting artwork included Craven Arms and Ludlow Youth Centres, Splodged (an art group for young adults with learning disabilities), and Shropshire Youth Forum. It deserves to become an annual feature of the Ludlow scene.

The four initiatives outlined here began largely thanks to one or two individuals working with, or linked with Ludlow Under Pressure. It shows what can be done, and we hope more will follow in the difficult years ahead. But that will not obviate the need to ask the questions which this report is raising about local and national priorities.

We turn next to another crucially important local initiative which pre-dates Ludlow Under Pressure.

Ludlow Food Bank

The scheme with the longest track record and highest level of public support so far has been the Food Bank, with its volunteers from across all the churches and the wider community. At present its resources are keeping pace with the demands upon it. It continues to be busy in 2014, with the number of parcels similar to 2013. From 1 January to 31 August 2014, 169 food parcels were given out, 80 of these to single people, and 89 to families or couples. The largest family that needed a food parcel had six

children. Overall, food has been provided for 143 children. The largest demographic group the Food Bank has helped is families (44%), followed by single men (28%).

The most common reason for needing a food parcel has been problems or delays with benefits (36%). Other reasons include being a victim of theft, fraud, domestic violence, or house fire, as well as poor health, bereavement, accidents, or being made redundant. Professionals refer food parcel recipients to the Food Bank, confirming that they are in genuine need. 48% of referrals have come from housing associations, and 22% have come from health visitors and the CAB. The other 30% have come from a variety of agencies.

The service continues, thanks to volunteer help, and contributions from the churches and others in and around Ludlow.

Home-Start

Home-Start is a voluntary organisation, committed to promoting the welfare of families with one child or more under five years of age. Volunteers offer regular support, friendship and practical help to families under stress in their homes, helping to prevent family crisis and breakdown.

Since the publication of *Ludlow under Pressure* in November 2012, the viability of Home-Start's work in South Shropshire has come under increasing threat, principally through the withdrawal of local authority funding to support the core work of supporting families through volunteering. Two other Home-Start schemes, operating in Shrewsbury and North Shropshire, have faced similar difficulties. After working together in partnership for some months, the three schemes merged in April 2014 to form Home-Start Shropshire.

The new organisation has been successful in securing funding to provide professional support for vulnerable children, but this has not helped to sustain the core work of the volunteers. A much-reduced level of funding has been maintained through grants and donations, and through local fund-raising activities, but this has fallen far short of the level needed to fill the gap left by the loss of financial support from Shropshire Council and the local health authority. As a direct consequence of this, Home-Start has been forced to reduce the number of families that it is able to support to about

one third the level reported for 2012. The need remains high and appears to be growing as local families face increasing financial hardship. This is evidenced in the number of referrals that Home-Start continues to receive.

Looking to the future, Home-Start has significantly reduced its overhead costs through re-structuring and rationalisation of administrative operations across the county. It awaits the outcome of a substantial lottery bid which, if successful, will secure a funding stream to support its volunteer work for three years from January 2015. Other sources of funding are being sought which would enable it to rebuild and extend the scheme over the next few years, but for the time being it has had to withdraw its work in the south of the county back to the immediate Ludlow area.

The service has been restructured to maintain a service, but the impact on the number of families it can support is going to be significant. Between April 2013 and April 2014 Home-Start had a total of 142 referrals, an increase of 33% on the previous year. 124 of the 142 referrals involved issues of mental ill-health. In 112 of the referrals there was a need for financial support and help with budgeting. In all, during this period, Home-Start supported 80 families, compared with 120 families in the previous year.

For the year beginning April 2014, Home-Start anticipates helping 50 families, a calculation based on predicted funding levels.

The family group which met on Fridays in Ludlow closed in July due to lack of funding; this was a group which Home-Start had run for almost 25 years.

Other organisations

The difficulties Home-Start Shropshire is facing are the experience of other voluntary organisations around the country. The similar government-funded national Sure-Start programme has been a valued support to young families. Maintaining both Home-Start and Sure-Start would seem to be a good investment in the future well-being of the community. Economies here, as elsewhere, are looking like false economies.

Local Health Services

There are major changes proposed for the provision of health care in Shropshire. These changes are likely to have a negative impact on the service for patients living in Ludlow and South Shropshire. Future Fit is the programme which lays out these proposed changes. Although the planning is well-advanced, implementation will not take place until after the general election.

Proposals for future provision of emergency health services in Shropshire include the loss of one Accident and Emergency Department.

Shropshire health services, that is every service apart from General Practice, are commissioned by the Care Commissioning Group (CCG) whose membership is mainly General Practitioners. The management of all local community health services, including the Shropshire community hospitals, is the responsibility of the Shropshire NHS Community Trust. The two major hospitals in Shropshire come under the management of the Shrewsbury and Telford Hospital NHS Trust. This Trust is struggling to deal with a predicted serious overspend and is facing recruitment difficulties for specialist staff to continue to provide its Accident and Emergency service on the two sites.

The CCG's Future Fit programme identifies the proposed changes to the provision of health care in the county. The proposal is that there will be just one Emergency Centre (a beefed-up version of Accident and Emergency) in the county; decisions about location of services already taken give an indication that this Emergency Centre will most likely be at Telford. In addition to this one Emergency Centre there will be a number of Urgent Care Centres (UCCs) which will provide a walk-in service with an improved range of services compared to those which are now provided by Minor Injuries Units. The CCG is unable to say at this stage of planning just how many of these UCCs there will be; the numbers quoted unofficially have been between three and six. It will be vital to have an UCC in Ludlow to provide a service to the town and to South Shropshire. If the Emergency Centre is to be located in Telford, South Shropshire patients will face a

longer ambulance journey with the inevitable delay in treatment for a number of serious conditions. Detailed information at nhsfuturefit.co.uk

The aim of the Care Bill will be to provide care in the community rather than in hospital, with the responsibility shared between the Health Service and the Local Authority.

Central to the government's Care Bill is the removal of funds from the Health Service to provide funding for care to be provided jointly by the Health Service and Local Authority, the emphasis being on care in the community, using the skills of General Practitioners, community nurses, and care assistants. The use of private health providers will be a significant part of the changes. This aspect of the Care Bill is designed to relieve pressure on Accident and Emergency Departments (which will become Emergency Centres) and acute hospital beds. In the case of hospital beds the thinking is that patients who have received surgical treatment, or other treatment needing highly-skilled medical and nursing input, will be moved from Shrewsbury Hospital and Telford Hospital to less-expensive hospital provision when they are 'safe' to move, as opposed to being well enough to move; it is likely that this provision will be found in the existing community hospitals or in beds in private nursing homes.

The third proposed change is the extending of services in the North Staffs Hospital at Stoke-on-Trent to provide treatment for very serious conditions, such as major heart attacks, for a wide geographical area which includes Shropshire.

Local Authority services

Shropshire Council

An impending crisis

Shropshire services, if not already, will very soon be at crisis point. This is a period of drastic change in local government, raising serious questions about its purpose and about how the needs of local communities are to be met. The need for major economies is the biggest driving force. Central government requires Shropshire Council to make savings of £80m by 2017. Most of these savings have yet to be made. April 2015, when further drastic cuts are made, may well be the moment of truth.

What will be left?

Council-owned property throughout the County, including Shirehall itself, is being sold off. In Ludlow, Stone House, where the Council's offices used to be located, has been sold, and the offices accommodated in Ludlow Library. Limited space there means that there is no privacy for people wishing to discuss their problems with council officers. The CAB, which used to be in Stone House, now occupies rooms in the Youth Centre's premises, but there are worries that the Youth Centre, too, may soon be sold. (See 'People at risk in the 16-24 age group'. The drastic financial cutbacks mean that the county's infrastructure is deteriorating.

Disappearing funds

Other funding streams are drying up, and other grants have come to an end – for example, the Local Joint Committee has lost its funding. Grants to charities are also being phased out, as all Council services are reduced or outsourced. To make matters worse, funds which are not the direct responsibility of Shropshire Council have also gone: for example, the funding for central government's Market Towns Initiative.

The charities themselves are required to adapt to a way of working imposed by the Council which consumes hours in administration, rather than in front-line work. But not to do so could mean the complete loss of their funding.

Given these financial cuts, it is not surprising that the Council has reduced its staff numbers by more than 1,500, with the loss of much professional expertise.

Outsourcing

In order to achieve the savings of £80m required by central government and to take forward their declared policy of divesting themselves of all public services, with the possible exception of child protection, the Council has set up a business company, ip&e. A consultant has been engaged for two years on a salary of £95,000 per annum to enable the company to get off the ground. Council-owned property throughout the county, including Shirehall itself, is being sold off. The aim is that Shropshire Council will become a commissioner of services rather than a provider of services.

Information on Shropshire Council can be found on their website with particular reference to ip&e, the newly-established commercial enterprise.

Accountability?

Arrangements for the accountability and management of this commercial enterprise are far from clear, but it seems that elected members are closely involved. This could lead to a blurring of roles. There is already a lack of clarity, as members of the council assume more executive control of services.

With these changes already implemented or in the pipeline, the face of local government has been altered beyond recognition.

Homeless people

At the time of writing, as winter approaches, there are 5 or 6 homeless people in Ludlow. This is a large number for a small town, and it is likely to increase unless Universal Credit (the flagship of the government's welfare reform) is introduced carefully and compassionately. But is the Council's policy going to be adequate?

The Council website on homelessness refers to 'significant improvement in the provision of homelessness services'. It notes that 'continuing work'

includes 'investigation about rough sleeping' and aims 'to further reduce the use of temporary accommodation'.

We recognise that the County wants to make savings; but at what human cost? A new test of eligibility for help is emerging: if a person's homelessness is their own fault, they do not qualify for help. But how is 'fault' determined? And is this test right anyway? We could apply this question in other areas: are hospitals to refuse treatment to heavy smokers suffering from lung cancer? This is a dangerous road.

Disability Living Allowance

The Council's Information Governance Team state that Shropshire Council includes the Disability Living Allowance as income in their assessment of the income of applicants for Discretionary Housing Payments. This seems very harsh – other county authorities do not include it. It clearly increases the hardship and stress of people who are already struggling and vulnerable. Scroungers are far fewer in number than some of the popular press would have us believe.

Local Support and Prevention Fund

Overall, of the £467,992 available in this Fund, which replaced the old Discretionary Social Fund in 2013, only £73,750 has been given out, of which the Ludlow food parcels project received £200 (paying for two out of the 126 parcels so far given out). The accompanying statement seems to imply that people in such dire straits are likely to have only themselves to blame.

Summary

We have tried to be fair to Shropshire Council in this section, but it would be irresponsible not to express our deep concern about what is happening in our county. The face of local government has been changed beyond recognition. The Council, which had an honourable record of civic pride with a commitment to the vulnerable members of society, has chosen to become a business enterprise. The way in which those private businesses operate will, inevitably, have the greatest impact on elderly frail people, people with disabilities, children and young people in difficulty, and families who are struggling on low income.

There are political questions to be asked – and they are not party-political ones. What constitutes a civilised, humane society? Are taxes, including the Council Tax, the contribution we make towards such a society? What is a locally-elected council to do when the well-being of the county seems incompatible with centrally-directed policies?

The Council are making very drastic financial cuts.

Future services will be locally commissioned, with funding uncertain.

Far-reaching decisions are being made by a few Cabinet members.

Ludlow Town Council

Town and County

The demise of the District Council places a greater responsibility on the Town Council to care for the needs of the local community and represent those to the county authority. The relationship between the two bodies is not an easy one. County Councillors have the right to attend Town Council meetings and there is some overlap of membership, but the Town Council experiences some difficulty in negotiating with the more powerful and more professionally-resourced body. Arrangements have now been made for regular meetings between Councillors of the Town and the County, together with the Clerk, to ensure better communication on matters of shared concern.

Our hope is that some of the issues raised in *Ludlow under Pressure* and this update will be conveyed to the County Council by the Town Council.

'Ludlow future'

'Ludlow future' is the ongoing plan until 2015. This ambitious document covers many of our concerns. But resources are very limited and it is not

clear that all the aspirations are being fulfilled. One aim of the plan is to reduce inequality, and to seek to co-ordinate the roles of the public and voluntary sectors. Ludlow might benefit from a co-ordinating body like South Shropshire Voluntary Action, but the Town Council has a limited budget. However, it is seeking to involve local neighbourhoods and in that process it will be important to hear the voice of the less-privileged parts of the community.

Wider concerns and pressures

Ludlow under Pressure focussed on our local community but recognised the effect of developments and policies in a wider world. In this section we point to some worrying trends and developments in the wider world which we cannot ignore.

Loss of trust

Over recent years there has been a growing lack of confidence, and even trust, in the established political parties and in our financial and commercial organisations. (The emergence of UKIP is a symptom of the distrust). In such a climate, the ideals of public service and of doing a job well are in danger of being eroded. More compassionate policies are under threat, as wealth creation becomes the driving force for both companies and individuals. Efficiency, of course, matters. But an emphasis on measurable targets and outcomes can lead to the neglect of less-tangible values and qualities which our country urgently needs. The high level of participation in the Scottish independence referendum suggests that serious political debate can be rekindled. But there is much work to be done if current distrust, apathy and cynicism are to be overcome.

A questionable ideology

Competition can result in more losers than winners. The faith that market forces and commercial incentives will ensure better public services has not been an unqualified success. Although some services have improved, the interests of shareholders can mean that those sectors which show less profit can be neglected. Many of our privatised utilities – rail, electricity, gas, water, telephones, and waste collection – are now in the hands of foreign investors, in some cases, ironically, state-owned. (The French-government-owned EDF controls much of our power infrastructure).

In this situation, we have little control over charges and costs, and no benefit from their profits. The subsidies paid to rail operators are considerably in excess of those expended before privatisation. Shifting the burden of taxation to the consumer all too readily results in the less well-off paying the same as the more affluent.

Any ideology or development which increases the burdens of the poor is a matter for moral, and Christian, concern, as the Christian scriptures amply illustrate.

Global threats and inequality

Terrorism, mass migration, or the epidemic of Ebola may all seriously disrupt our way of life. So, too, might a growing inequality. Deep concerns about this have been raised by Pope Francis, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and many other church leaders. President Obama and even the Governor of the Bank of England have spoken of its threat to stability. The head of the IMF warns of a 'staggering' rise in inequality worldwide.

In our own society there is growing evidence of increasing inequality. There is little evidence that wealth created by the very rich trickles down to benefit all, and it can be tempting for the well-off to try to justify their wealth by judging people beneath them as less deserving. The slogan of 'strivers' and 'scroungers' draws a crude and unreal distinction. Great inequality makes for an unstable and fractured society.

Climate change

The seriousness of this threat merits separate mention. Climate change remains, literally, a burning issue. The summit in New York in September 2014 sought to lay the groundwork for a global agreement on carbon-cutting emissions at the Paris Conference in 2015. The less-developed countries and their citizens suffer most from the extreme weather conditions partly caused by the fossil-fuel consumption of industrialised nations. This growing crisis has to be high on the agenda of us all.

Disenchantment with politics is widespread.

Market forces, terrorism, and climate change are amongst the many challenges we face.

Why are the churches involved?

A bias to the poor

The *Ludlow Under Pressure* work sprang from a concern to make a Christian response to the concept of The Big Society, and particularly its emphasis on localism and volunteering. Its mission includes continuing Christ's work by attending to the needs of the deprived and marginalised. So it is bound to express a bias to the poor. Its prophetic role requires Christians both to speak truth to power and to testify to enduring truths and values. (Many of its martyrs have done just that). The Church must also be wary of compromising its beliefs by bowing to expediency or aligning itself too comfortably with the established order.

A Church alongside

The churches have a notable history of pioneering enterprises in social work and education. But they hold no monopoly of care, and ideally should seek to support and play their part in the work of welfare agencies and other bodies serving the community. They might continue to initiate and develop small -scale projects, but do not have the expertise or the capacity to match the contribution of statutory bodies or large charitable organisations. As it is, their members are often well represented amongst those who offer their services to local voluntary agencies.

A Church for the community

The change in the nation's economic circumstances has prompted churches to review their work and their role in the communities in which they are set. It also means – or should mean – that the churches themselves will work more closely with each other, all of them looking beyond the needs of their own congregations. In Ludlow, for example, St Laurence's Church is engaged in re-configuring the building to make it more available to the whole town, whilst Ludlow Baptist Church plays a large role in the food-parcel scheme, and, together with the South Shropshire Furniture Fund, administers the Fuel Poverty Scheme. Similar things may be said of the other Christian communities in Ludlow.

A community of hope

Lastly, the church stands for hope – a faith that, in a turbulent, unpredictable world there is the source of strength to sustain us and see us through. So the Church seeks to be a channel of God's grace, offering love and compassion, and, at the same time, inviting people to share a vision of life and the world which embraces more than material wellbeing.

The Church's mission means being alongside the poor.

The Church is called to be involved, not semi-detached.

The Church stands for hope.

Some outstanding questions

Part of the Church's task is to ask sometimes awkward questions of people in positions of authority. That is what this short section is about.

Will volunteering be enough?

Are charities going to survive?

Are we avoiding the problems which legislation cannot solve?

Is our country poor?

Can we go on like this?

Will volunteering be enough?

The cutbacks in public services are being made on the assumption that volunteers will pick up the slack. But this is unrealistic. For example, many people in full-time work have to work longer hours, and local volunteers are often retired and less able to take on physically-demanding tasks. In any case, volunteers cannot supply the professional expertise which the public sector is in grave danger of losing.

Are charities going to survive?

Charities, like volunteers, have been expected to pick up the shortfall caused by cuts in public funding to statutory services. Yet their funding has been drastically cut, and if they are dependent on state or council funding, they have to be careful not to offend those on whom they rely for financial support.

Are we avoiding the problems which legislation cannot solve?

It is tempting to imagine that all our problems are economic and financial. But they are not. How, for example, can we encourage a healthy democracy

at both local and national level and challenge prevalent apathy and cynicism? Or how can we foster trust, such as trusting teachers simply to get on with the jobs which most of them want to do well anyway?

Is our country poor?

Put like this, the answer has to be: no. But behind this question there are others. Politicians and the media alike promote a very negative impression of taxes. They are an imposition and a burden on 'hard-working' people, and should be kept as low as possible. But taxes are an important way of acknowledging that there is such a thing as 'society'. They are what we contribute towards making society civilised and humane, especially for those who struggle to get by –very often, through no fault of their own. If all political parties continue to think that putting up taxes is electorally disastrous, we are heading, as a country, for serious trouble.

The challenge

Don't look the other way

There is good reason to be fearful for the future. It is tempting to take comfort in our own little world and get on with our lives as best we can. That can also be our response to hardship nearer home. In this report we have tried to set local pressures in the context of a wider world because what happens there largely determines the economic and social policies which shape our lives. So much seems beyond our reach, and, set against the scale of suffering elsewhere, our local concerns may seem insignificant.

What we can do

This report points to ways in which we can do what we can, where we are, to relieve hardship by helping to develop projects, but also campaigning for policies which would make for a more equal and fairer society. We cannot rely on continuing economic growth to ensure our wellbeing. Whichever party or parties are in power after the next election, there will be continuing austerity involving some combination of cuts to services and higher taxation. As a community we may have to adjust to very different way of ordering our lives.

The challenge to the churches

Churches have a part to play in that. In the Christian faith lies hope that humankind can, with God's help, work through hardship and apparent disaster to establish a more compassionate and caring society. This report tells of some modest achievements over the past two years. Yet this is only a beginning. If churches in Ludlow are to help shape our future as a community it cannot be left to the small group who have tried to encourage some programme of action and who take responsibility for this report. The vision and the energy required to make more than a modest contribution have to be widely shared.

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