

## Question from Members of the Public

### Community and Environment Committee – 28<sup>th</sup> July 2022

#### **Question from Andrew Dagleish - Present at the meeting**

*Congleton is currently undergoing one of its largest housing developments, at least since the 70s. Thousands of new residents are coming to live in Congleton and are contributing financially to the town's coffers. There is much focus on new housing and new roads, but this seems to be at the expense of existing facilities. The town centre is just one area that requires investment with many empty shops, semi-derelict buildings and poor road conditions.*

*Some years back, plans were drawn up to redevelop the town centre. Since that time, high streets up and down the country have seen large chains & banks closing branches due to changes in shopping habits along with a general move to online trading. The idea of adding new town centre retail stock would appear to go against the grain. More work needs to be done to help small independent shop owners and encourage current empty building owners to either improve property appearance, apply for change of use or sell up.*

*Who is directly responsible for investment in the town centre and does this responsibility rest with the Town Council or Cheshire East? Congleton is currently looking like the poor relation when compared with other Cheshire East towns. Sandbach in particular, since Cheshire East Council moved there has seen much investment.*

*When are we in Congleton going to see some of the money raised from local Council tax receipts spend on the town's appearance?*

#### **Response:**

Andrew I would like to thank you for your question and for the obvious care that you have for Congleton. You have raised a number of points, so I'll look to take them in the order that you raised them.

Within the Cheshire East Council (CEC) Local Plan, Congleton has been allocated circa 4150 new houses by 2030. We believe this equates to around 10,000 people. The extra taxes for these houses will go to CEC and the parish in which the house is built, so the Town Council will not get extra funds to spend in Congleton as we and the public thought would happen.

It is true that a great deal has changed since the Town Centre Plans were written in 2010, Cheshire East Council is currently working on Town Centre Vitality Plans for the nine key service centres towns -including Congleton. Cheshire East Council will be briefing Cheshire East Ward Councillors about these plans next week and will share the plans with the Town Council after that.

It is not as simple as one group, organisation or individual who is responsible for investment into the Town Centre. The Town Council, as the most local tier of government, has the greatest interest in the town and promotes and lobbies on the town's behalf. We liaise with the shops, create and support events that attract footfall, do our best to keep the town clean, tidy and attractive. We are currently running a second-floor improvement grant to help landlords and shop owners. The Town Council has limited budgets and no powers to force businesses to make change.

Cheshire East Council collects the business rates, has a small regeneration team and when funding becomes available on a regional or national level can apply on behalf of the towns, usually CEC is limited to applying for one town in its patch.

The Government's Levelling up and Regeneration Bill, which should be going through parliament this year, will give powers to local authorities such as Cheshire East Council to force owners of long-term empty properties to rent them out.

Nationally the British Retail Consortium estimates that in the first quarter of 2022 vacancy rates stood at 14.1%. In Congleton we have 219 ground floor units in the Town Centre of which 190 are occupied – giving Congleton a Vacancy rate of 13.3%. Some good news that is that in recent months a number of new businesses have opened in Congleton, and we have local businesses and developers who have purchased and are working on plans for the former Scarborough site, a local company has acquired the B&M site and there has been significant investment in the Lion and Swan Hotel

As a Town Council we will continue to support local businesses, encourage people into the town and work with partners in Cheshire East, the Cheshire East Chamber of Commerce, and the Local Economic Partnership to get the best deals that we can for Congleton.