

Report of Councillor Elissa Swinglehurst September 2018

Llangarron Ward

First of all, you may have noticed that there was a silence over August; principally this was due to the fact that there was very little to report as council and parish council activity tends to be quiet as people take annual leave. I didn't take a holiday but did use the time to catch up on all those domestic chores that I had neglected. The end of August was a 'tombola' birthday for me and I was taken to see Evita at Cardiff as a treat (thanks Vall!)- you may notice a theme inspired by this excellent production.

'And the money keeps rolling in'

I am currently Cabinet Member for Children and Families, I attend multiple committees with partner organisations, scrutiny committee, training, cabinet meetings and briefings, planning briefings, parish council meetings and so on. The details of my allowance and expenses for the year are available on the council website but I think it is important to be really up front about these things so here it is.....My basic allowance (in common with all councillors) is £7419.94, I also receive a special allowance for being a Cabinet Member of £1679.85 and expenses (travel to and from Hereford) of £993.16 (which is about 40p per mile and gives you some idea of the number of times I go to Hereford for meetings!). The total therefore is £10,092.95 before tax. I'm off to the Cayman Islands now.

You Must Love Me

As Cabinet Member for Children and Families I have a responsibility for all Herefordshire children but, in common with all members and officers of the Council, I am a 'corporate parent' for the children in care. These young people have often had very difficult family circumstances and, frankly, their stories are heart breaking. As a Council we are committed to doing our very best for these kids, to give them stable, permanent and loving homes and the best chance to realise their potential. We recently had a visit from the Department of Education National Advisor on Care Leavers and I was really encouraged by his feedback. He recognised the passionate and committed attitude of all the staff and reported the positive nature of comments made by the care leavers themselves but there is always more to do and improvements to make. In describing his own approach to care leavers' support he recalled talking to local businesses in Trafford and saying that if the Council are the Corporate Parents then the local businesses (and in my view wider society) are the Uncles and Aunts. The point is that these young people are not nobody's children, they are everybody's children and we all have a role to play, something to offer, even if it is only to think of them from time to time. If you are a local business and might be able to offer work, apprenticeship opportunities, experience days please get in touch. If you have suggestions about cultural, sport and leisure activities that might be offered please get in touch.

Another Suitcase in Another Hall

I attended a two day Local Government Association Lead Member conference at the swishy Warwick University Campus. It was an agenda as packed as the M42 and by the end of the second day I thought my brain was going to explode. Other Lead members in attendance shared their experiences and, on the whole, I felt that Herefordshire had a great deal to be proud of. The pressures on Children's services are well known and we are not in an alternate universe but, unlike some authorities, we are managing to deliver a balanced budget whilst still providing statutory services.

I have also attended an update on the Nutrient Management Plan in a joint briefing with Powys County Councillors in Clyro. The NMP is the plan that the council has developed to reduce the levels of Phosphate in the Lugg and Wye catchments to comply with the EU Habitats Directive on water quality. There are two main contributors to excessive Phosphate in the river systems – one is housing development and the other is diffuse agricultural pollution from poor farming practice. The division of responsibility between these two contributors is roughly 50/50. The representative from Welsh Water outlined a £50m investment (part of the Amp 7 investment period) in upgrading sewage works within the catchment (eleven of which will benefit from a Phosphate stripper to remove Phosphate from the water prior to discharge – this is in addition to the treatment plants that have already benefitted from the AMP5 and 6 investment).

Dane Broomfield from the Environment Agency gave an overview of the situation which included a 'combination' graph where the phosphate levels are shown, using extrapolated data, under various scenarios. The graph showed the 'red line' which is the EU Habitats Directive target with the current known river conditions in the Wye showing as just below the line, the planned housing development and population growth was factored in (at this point the column exceeded the red line) and then the Welsh Water investment in infrastructure is factored in and the column drops to below its current position. Interestingly the section of the column representing agricultural diffuse pollution remains broadly consistent throughout – this is due to the difficulty in gathering 'hard data' about diffuse pollution so the 'worst case' of only minimal improvement was used.

There has been an enormous effort to disseminate improved farming practice, this has focussed on the Lugg catchment because it is already in exceedance but the lessons are the same wherever you are – for the most part they are pretty obvious and should be a part of normal, sensible farming practice. Maize presents a particular risk if the crop is not under-planted since it leaves bare soil in the months when rainfall is likely to be highest. The colossal loss of soil from sloping fields where no mitigation has been attempted is a predictable outcome; I say 'predictable' because, using satellite mapping and overlays it is absolutely possible to predict where there will be soil erosion. I can only hope that good farming practice becomes the norm in all areas of the country – perhaps once it is tied into subsidy we may see significant progress – the Wye Usk Foundation are always able to give advice and support to any landowners who want to be part of the solution and not part of the problem.

www.wyecatchment.org.uk/farm-herefordshire 7 videos (one featuring a local farming success story) which show farmers in the county demonstrating catchment sensitive practices.

For those of you who are interested in the work of the NMB and the condition of the rivers I recommend the Nutrient Management Board Dashboard

<https://environment.maps.arcgis.com/apps/Cascade/index.html?appid=1dc5b2adc99e48b095950055f2785d7a>

which shows the annual averages since the start of monitoring. It is a bit early to have confidence in the developing trend (which is marginally in the right direction) and there are numerous sudden 'spikes' to alarming levels in both catchments. It is not the spikes that cause the problem it is the background levels of Phosphate that settle in the river and cause a nutrient rich environment where algal blooms risk depleting the oxygen in the water to the detriment of the bio diversity, aquatic and fish life within the system. The council website has a link to the dashboard and for further information about the challenge I would direct you to the Wye Usk Foundation and Farm Herefordshire.

Interestingly – when Heineken polluted the Yazor brook they paid £167,000 to the Wye Usk foundation to help in various projects to improve and protect the river – several farmers have been found to have caused soil based pollution incidents and as a result they have contributed a total of nothing to improve and protect the river, the RPA did not even hold back any subsidy from them although they did write them a letter. Is it me or is that a bit uneven???

Oh What a Circus

Tory Party Conference. I've never been to one of these before but this year is too intriguing to miss. Since most of the conference is in October I will hold over the detailed report until later....oooh a cliffhanger.

A New Argentina

A New National Planning Policy Framework actually (this is getting tricky to tie in to Evita). The Government has issued a revised NPPF which will impact on planning decision making and the planned review of the Core Strategy. There are no obvious headlines but if you are interested in planning policy or involved in Neighbourhood development plans you may find it useful. Whilst the main document is laudably brief it must be seen in the round with the copious footnotes and supplementary documents that make it more unwieldy. The housing delivery numbers and data will become more crucial in decision making, particularly at planning enquiries; in due course this will mean that each application will not simply sit in isolation but be seen in a wider context of housing delivery.

The housing delivery target or assessed need will be a combination of household growth and affordability.

One thing that I find frustrating is the lack of courage over sanctions if a developer fails to deliver on a planning permission for a strategic site. Until there are some tools in the cupboard for the local authority to compel 'build out' we will continue to give planning permission only to see the site advertised for development at an inflated price and no houses built as a result. No houses being built has an impact on our ability to deliver the required housing supply as some of the sites may well be perceived as not being 'deliverable'..... One potential wrinkle is that the Local Authority is now being asked to 'clearly evidence' a developers' intention to deliver within 5 years (NPPF 67 footnote 32, Glossary: deliverable). At first I thought 'how on earth is that supposed to work', then I wondered what would happen if it simply became a condition that the applicant has to demonstrate 'deliverability' – we would, at the least, manage to convert every planning permission into a deliverable site and then we would have a hope of achieving the 5 year housing land supply (currently we are at 4.55 years)...just a thought.

NDPs will be judged against the 'archived' NPPF until January 2019.

Roads and potholes

Sections of the A466 have been resurfaced recently and there has been some top dressing on U roads, the high velocity patcher has also been in the area. Whilst the High Velocity Patcher may not be as permanent as a road resurfacing programme it is value for money – a HVP pothole fill costs about £15 against about £70 for 'cut and fill'. Budget pressures have meant that the roads are now in 'managed decline' – Herefordshire has low council tax receipts (due to low density of population) but we have more miles of road per head of population than anywhere else. The scrutiny committee

is currently asking for feedback from parish councils to inform the council about the methods, efficiency, suitability of the Balfour Beatty contract so if you have a view please let your parish council know so that they can include it in their response.

The Council has also just launched a new app to report potholes. It can be downloaded from the council website.

And the Money keeps rolling out..

The Hereford Times reports a 1.4m 'overspend' - the full article accurately reports that the 'overspend' is on Adults with learning disability and children coming into care. In my view we should be careful about the language around this area of Council spend – if the parameters of need have remained the same since the budget was adopted then an 'overspend' would be accurate but, in the areas of looked after children and adults with learning disability the need has not remained the same; for example, extrapolating from historic levels and trends we had budgeted for 9 residential placements but we have had to pay for 17. It is true to say that Herefordshire has an above average number of children in care and there is work underway to safely reduce the number but in the meantime new children are coming in. We are not alone and it is important to look at the national picture – the Local Government Association is predicting a gap in funding of Children's Services of £2 billion by 2020 and a gap in the current year of £800m across the country. The reasons are complex and, to my mind, not fully understood, all I know is that we are putting a great deal of effort and resources into fighting the fire with very little capacity left over to look for the matches.

Glancing at the Public Services Executive Online website I found the following headlines:

'Surrey County Council issued warning as council faced near 100m deficit'

'Cash strapped Somerset council might still fail to set 'sustainable budget' despite massive cuts.'

'Left with no choice', Somerset Council confirms 130 jobs and major services are at risk.

Northamptonshire is facing a 70m budget deficit, Moray has a 19m deficit – our own neighbours, Worcestershire, has a budget gap of 18m in the year and predict a gap of 35m next year if action is not taken; their reserves have reduced over the last 5 years from around 130m to 50m.

In Herefordshire over the same period, despite rising levels of need in both Adult and Children's Social Care and a low council tax base, we have consistently delivered a balanced budget, made the tough decisions early and even managed to increase our reserve to meet any gaps in 2020.

Recently Herefordshire Council had a balance sheet review from Link Asset Services who commented, "...this is probably the best positioned authority's accounts I've seen in terms of year on year performance for some while.

I fully appreciate that there are on-going austerity issues but the balance sheet is very robust indeed." - Richard Bason BA (Hons) FCPFA

As always if you have any questions or if I can help with anything please contact me.

Best wishes

Cllr. Elissa Swinglehurst

