

Report of Cllr. Elissa Swinglehurst December 2018

Llangarron Ward

I hope everyone had a peaceful and joyful festive period. Christmas is such a magical time for children and families but I am always mindful of those who are alone, who do not have a family and who rely on friends and neighbours to welcome them in and share Christmas with them. I would like to pay tribute to those good friends and neighbours who look out for people who are alone at this time, who reach out in a spirit of goodwill and generosity to add to their yuletide family.

December is usually a month where things start to wind down but that has not been the case for me. You may have read about the court judgements against Herefordshire Council Children's Services that were reported in the local press. There has been a strong impression created by the reporting of these cases that the Council are trying to cover them up and have held 'secret meetings'.

I do realise that the press are looking for an angle – some intriguing headline to pique the interest of the readers but, unfortunately, it is often only the headline that gets a glance. The facts are not nearly as much fun as a 'secret meeting' – so, for those who are interested in what is going on behind the headlines...

There are two court cases where the Judge has criticised Herefordshire Council Children's Services.

It is in the nature of such court findings that extreme care must be taken to avoid anything that might publicly identify any individuals involved. In addition to this there are precise criticisms of individuals who are no longer members of the staff at Herefordshire Council and therefore employment law constrains what information can enter the public domain.

The outcome of the court proceedings was anticipated during the process and the cross party performance challenge panel and chair and vice chair of the Children and Families Scrutiny committee were briefed on multiple occasions. Group leaders, chair and vice chair of scrutiny were kept fully informed and it was open to them to communicate to the rest of the membership if they wished to but, unsurprisingly, they waited until the court findings were published.

It is not possible to share the court findings prior to the date that they are published – they were published on the 7<sup>th</sup> December and the full text of the judgement was e mailed to all members on that day. So far, so not very secret.

A series of member briefings were arranged as performance challenge sessions. Performance challenge sessions are not public meetings but the scrutiny committee have called the matter in for their committee to examine in depth and their meetings are public. The outcry from some opposition members, picked up by the media, that they have had to call an extraordinary council meeting to discuss this is, to my mind, a bit of theatre. Nothing has been held back – the scrutiny committee will be able to examine the cases in detail and with the seriousness that they deserve and this is, to my mind, the appropriate public forum.

## **Cabinet**

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The cabinet meeting for December was a very full agenda and while we were going through it I realised that it almost perfectly represented the various ways in which the council are guided by and are living up to their corporate priorities.

On the agenda was the rebuilding of Peterchurch Primary school – I am very happy that we are progressing this project to the feasibility stage with the intention of going to build as soon as practicable. (giving our children the best start in life)

The council has taken the decision to purchase accommodation to meet strategic priorities. This decision was 'in principle' and establishes the direction of travel. There will be subsequent decisions to purchase particular property. The phrase 'strategic priorities' does not convey the 'on the ground reality' of the people who will benefit from this decision – the most vulnerable groups, care leavers and those with complex needs. We are delivering on another key priority.....

There was a decision to progress the redevelopment of 'station approach' in Hereford (where Rockfield DIY used to be) to provide purpose built student accommodation to support Hereford College of Art – going from strength to strength as it is – and the nascent University as it establishes.

Another key priority is to grow the economy and at this meeting of cabinet a decision was taken to invest in supporting the delivery of the cyber security centre in Rotherwas. A joint project with the University of Wolverhampton the centre should lead to about 190 new jobs in a high skilled and growing area of the economy. Unfortunately all the Hereford Times could think to write about this was based on a comment by the local ward member about a lack of security in Rotherwas – conflating, or confounding cyber security – high tech, online – with the theft of bicycles. I'm not saying that the theft of bicycles and areas of graffiti aren't important but they are nothing to do with the cutting edge of on-line safety.

The final piece of the agenda was a 'snapshot' of budget and performance across all the areas of the council. As you might expect this produced a number of high points and areas which need to improve. Worth a look if you want to see the scope of activity that the council undertakes in an average quarter.

### **And finally...**

I have had the pleasure of presenting award certificates to the group of young people who had taken second place a national award for their excellent mental health podcast. Well done to them for their honest and thoughtful comments and for a really brilliant podcast – hopefully they will do some more.

I will have a bit more to report next month as I am presenting two applications at planning committee on the 24<sup>th</sup> January (one in Llangrove and one in Glewstone).

Meantime I wish you all a Happy New Year.