

Report of Ward Councillor Elissa Swinglehurst January 2018

Happy New Year to everyone.

Things were slow to get going – hence the delayed report but now we are back at full steam and I have pleasure in informing you of the following activities of yours truly.

As a member of the planning committee I had an all day meeting to determine a number of complex and delicately balanced applications. I also had my first meeting as a member of the regulatory committee to determine a licence variation. But this is all in the nature of ‘business as usual’ so I thought I’d give some attention to the cabinet and full council meeting for this period which I also attended.

THE FULL COUNCIL MEETING

The full council meeting was held on the 26th January where the decision to set the council tax was finally made.

The basic choice was to raise the base by 2.99% (the maximum allowed under current government rules) or remain at the 1.9% allowed before the government changed the position. The other sum that is in the mix is the balance of the 6% Adult Social Care Levy that the council is empowered to add to the council tax. Last year the council decided to use 2% of this sum in addition to the 1.9% rise to the base rate.

So, potentially, the rise could be as much as 5.99% (2.99% plus 3%) with the balance of the Adult Social Care levy falling into 2019/20.

Now, being Conservative, my heart does not sing at the prospect of tax hikes and I am concerned that there are many people in the county who are on low wages and for whom any rise in council tax is going to be a struggle. However, set against that, is the need to meet the challenge of ever increasing demands being made on public services whilst the Regional Support Grant dwindles into nothingness by 2020. It was therefore with a degree of reluctance but resignation that I voted in favour of a 4.9% increase in Council Tax for the 2018/19 period (made up of 2.9% increase to base and 2% Adult Social Care levy). The advantage of taking the extra 1% on base is that it can be used within the Adult wellbeing directorate if needed but can also be used for other public services. I have suggested that some of the money, if possible, be allocated to rural roads; it may not be possible but I always feel it is worth keeping the state of the rural roads on the radar.

In an interview with the Hereford Times the leader, Cllr. Tony Johnson, tried to create some context. There are about 3500 adults in the county who are recipients of care, ‘it is roughly three percent of the total population. Those 3% take 52% of our total budget - £75m is what we currently spend per year on care’. The council collects 98m a year from council tax ‘if we spend 75m a year just on care, 76% of everything we collect in council tax just goes on care....we are trying to get the reality out to people and understanding of where the money goes....’ I would make the comment that public consultation after public consultation on proposed budgets have the top items of desired spend as roads, drainage, libraries but never children and the vulnerable in our community. I suspect that many people are unaware of the role and responsibility of the local authority in looking after those who need care.

The leader of It’s Our County replied to the proposal by making an eloquent speech that covered a range of topics including Brexit, austerity and the funding of the NHS. Unfortunately none of these areas fall within the purview of a local authority. Other opposition parties were split between

wanting a higher spend on public services (which realistically translates into higher tax) and those wanting lower taxation (which translates into poorer public services and a risk to the most vulnerable). Just as I was beginning to think that there was not going to be much of a consensus Cllr James (Lib Dem) brought a level of common sense and experience to the debate neatly framing the argument: to increase the council tax will cause hardship but not to increase council tax will also cause hardship.

In the end the 4.9% increase was approved with 41 votes for, 4 abstention and 1 against.

Cabinet Meeting 18 January

A number of issues were raised by objectors to the by-pass as it proceeds towards the route selection for the next 'link' up to the A49 north of Hereford. During the public question and answer session the cabinet member, Cllr. Phillip Price, addressed a number of concerns including: the potential impact on the Hereford Community Farm, the loss of landscape (and specific trees) depicted by Brian Hatton in his early 20thc paintings, the relative merits of a park and ride scheme without a by-pass, the potential costs, the impact on air quality and so on. The level of public engagement with the by-pass is a good thing but it would be nice, if only for variety, to have the occasional voice raised in support of the economic, educational and housing growth that it will facilitate. Not surprisingly the most engaged members of the public are those who live close to the route.

Another interesting question raised by a member of the public queried the potential impact on Herefordshire Council due to the financial risk to Balfour Beatty as a consequence of the failure of Carillion. The cabinet member, Cllr. Bramer, replied that there was no likely consequence as the contracts affected (i.e. where Carillion and BBLP are engaged in a joint enterprise) are nothing to do with Herefordshire Council. The supply chain risk arrangements are also protected from impact and the share price of BBLP suggests that the markets are not concerned about potential impact.

What a Load of Rubbish

I went on a visit to the Hartlebury Energy from Waste plant. The Council is a joint investor in this enterprise along with Worcestershire Council. I remember at the time it was being proposed there was a massive amount of negative press for the council and a great deal of opposition to the plan. I visited the plant in the company of one of our Green councillors who was still against it. I was curious as to why a Green councillor would be against a way of removing tons of waste from landfill and generating electricity from it. She said it was because of the emissions – so I asked about the emissions and was told that they are about equivalent over the year of the London firework display – in other words there is no discernible difference to the background levels. She also said that there were other better technologies available but, we were told, they would either not be suitable for a mixed waste stream (like Anaerobic Digesters) or they had proved to be unreliable and, in one case, the company had gone bust.

I am no expert but I was impressed by our quiet monolith that munches 200,000 tons of waste and generates enough electricity to power a city the size of Hereford. Even the ash is used as a building aggregate – so no waste at all. A friend who was staying with me from Hampshire told me that her county have to ship their waste to Malmo in Sweden to use their incinerator – she regretted that her county council hadn't invested in their own plant.

And finally....You may have read about a homeless SAS veteran....

I cannot, for legal reasons, go into the details of this case but I have posted the council's response to the media frenzy on my councillor facebook page. It is all that I can do apparently – frustrating.