

REPORT of Councillor Elissa Swinglehurst JUNE 2019

Curiouser and curiouser said Alice....

The new administration has just had their first Cabinet meeting and I attended in my capacity as Chair of Adult Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee. We are at a slightly odd stage where the business still going through the council is entirely the work of the previous administration but has to be signed off by the new administration. There is huge scope here for political mischief making, for being iconoclastic with other peoples' work, for scoring points at the expense of those who are not in a position to answer back....huge scope but, and I stand full square behind this comment, it is entirely to the credit of the new administration that they have not done so but have, sensibly in my view, allowed for the work already done to progress. Indeed, more than that, they were generous in their acknowledgment of the work of the now ex-cabinet members particularly Cllr Lester, Cllr Shaw and even myself. The reason I got mentioned was that one of the things going through to final approval was the Children and Young Peoples Plan 2019-2023; this had been delayed due to ongoing consultation and then purdah. I had not imagined that by the time it came up for adoption I would be sitting on the sidelines watching someone else introduce it to cabinet for approval but Cllr Norman did a very good job and the plan has now been approved.

The other item on the agenda was the approval of the budget outturn – bearing in mind that this is a net budget of around 150m (gross over 300m) the budget came in only a tiny bit adrift – a £600,000 more or less underspend (yay) which will be added to reserves. To be only 600,000 adrift in the context of a large and complex budget structure is like landing a jumbo jet on a postage stamp. Brilliant work.

I have also chaired my first Adult Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee and we cut our teeth on a pretty gnarly topic of proposed changes to the CCG – the proposal being to 'merge' the four regional CCGs (three Worcs and one Herefordshire) into one body. Obviously there was a degree of concern about whether this would impact the funding, service delivery and 'voice' of Herefordshire as part of a larger organisation. We asked loads of questions and got full and detailed responses that went a long way to reassuring us that the voice of Herefordshire will continue to be heard.

LOCAL INFORMATION

A49 planned works. I have asked the new cabinet member to lend his support so we can take full advantage of the planned works to the A49 to do other works at the same time. Cllr. Harrington has responded positively and I hope that we will see substantial improvement to the footways and verges along this section of road.

I have also begun a conversation with Cllr. Harrington to see if it would be possible to put a crossing point on Wilton Road to make it safer to go from Bridstow to the garage.

PLANNING

I am very pleased that the Welsh Newton and Llanrothal Neighbourhood Development Plan has now passed examination and will be voted on in a referendum in August/September. If it is supported then the parish will have a fully adopted NDP to direct development in the local area.

If you would like to keep up to date with planning matters (or any other news come to that) you can subscribe to the RSS feed on the Herefordshire Council website.

NEWS – Did you know that the word NEWS is in fact an acronym for Noteable Events Weather and Sport?

You may have noticed that there is now a petition online via Change.org to save the Hereford Bypass – as of today there are over 400 signatories,(update now 745) there is also a facebook post by Your Herefordshire which has had over 600 comments – the vast majority are supporting the bypass. You might think that this would rate a mention in the Hereford Times....after all it is a government investment of around 180m in the county that is hanging in the balance. The front page this week is a story of ‘disgruntled’ residents who had not realised that a newly surface dressed road might have soft tar which apparently ‘covered’ them and their dogs.....words seriously fail me.

Anyway, the letters page does carry a long and informative letter from someone in Leominster which summarises the bypass issue very well so the paper hasn’t ignored the story completely. It did manage some column inches on the tree preservation order for trees on the Kings Acre Road (which would be affected by the bypass) but no space for the 600 plus voices raised in support of the road.....is it any wonder that the silent majority feel unrepresented and ignored?

Another fun thing this week is the final outcome of the misconduct saga. The Hereford Times’ fearless democracy reporter has been chasing uphill and down dale, he has channelled Woodward and Bernstein, dug deep, met with deep throats in eerie car parks (I made that bit up) – he has actually put in a freedom of information request and the council has been told to comply. I had been told that the reason we did not make the information public in the first place was that most of the upheld complaints were against parish/town councillors and we took the view that it was enough that these people give up their time and effort for no reward without also publically humiliating them when they have made a mistake, especially when they are no longer in office. This was not accepted because the dark suspicion was that the only possible reason a Conservative administration would seek to keep this sort of information out of the public domain is because it contains something that would be embarrassing for the Conservatives. Well, the story is now told, the names are out in the open and has merited a narrow column in the internal pages. I can’t help wondering what the front page story might have been if the FOI revealed that a Conservative councillor had been caught with their hand in the biscuit barrel. As it is the story has confirmed that of the 9 upheld complaints 6 were against Ledbury Town Councillors and three against County Councillors – they are Cllr. Jim Knipe (Independent – and according to his LinkedIn page still a councillor but in reality he lost his seat in 2015), Cllr. Glenda Powell (Independent, stood for re election in 2019, and has been found guilty on (unrelated) criminal charges, <https://www.herefordtimes.com/news/16952416.former-councillor-pleads-guilty-to-two-criminal-charges/>

and Cllr. Mark Hubbard (It’s Our County). I note in this context that the Hereford Times (strangely in my view) reported only the surnames of the councillors concerned (Knipe, Hubbard, Powell) – which is unfortunate because there were two Cllr. Powells on the council at this time. The second Cllr. Powell was the Conservative Cllr. Graham Powell whose record is exemplary as a hardworking and dedicated councillor. It seems a shame that, due to this oversight, his name may be erroneously linked to the misconduct saga by those who are just totally convinced that there has to be a Conservative in there somewhere. IF we assume that this created ambiguity is unintentional, it is very, very sloppy reporting.

No complaints were upheld against Conservative County Councillors – although that point is not made as the Hereford Times does not attribute political party to the names (hoping that people will draw their own conclusions??). The story is also picked up in the editorial where the Conservatives

get criticised for allowing people to go on thinking that they are hiding their misconduct when all along they were not – the gist being that the Conservative administration is to blame for people thinking the worst of them because they chose not to publicly hang out opposition councillors who had fallen foul of the misconduct system. What is that saying about not letting the truth get in the way of a ‘good story’? The truth is that the Conservatives actually ran the council well – not perfect in every way but overall they managed the budget despite fiscal pressures, improved service delivery, had a coherent plan for economic growth and a great set of plans for the future.

If you would like to see the bypass come to pass then please sign the change.org petition <https://www.change.org/p/herefordshire-council-save-the-hereford-bypass> there is also a dedicated facebook page saveourbypass and the ongoing conversation on Your Herefordshire facebook page. If no one speaks up then the conclusion will be that it was the bypass, not Brexit, that halved the Conservative councillor numbers and gifted the council to a coalition of Greens (no bypass or road of any sort) IOC (no bypass) and Independents (some of whom are members of Green Party or Extinction Rebellion and whose leader – the leader of the council – lives very close to the proposed route of the road).

I have spoken to a number of local business people and they are very worried about the impact of not building the road. The hundreds of posts on line are from ordinary working people who are desperate for the bypass – if you only look at the letters page of the Hereford Times you would think the numbers are evenly balanced, they are not. When the question was first asked over 80% of respondents wanted a bypass – what is it about people in charge that they feel that the general population should be ignored when their view clashes with the ideology of elected representatives. At least the Greens and IOC stood honestly on manifestos against the bypass (and now have 7 councillors out of 53 each on the council) but who knows what their ‘Independent’ candidate was standing for or against? Let alone those ‘Independents’ who are members of Extinction Rebellion or the Green Party.....did the electorate really know who they were voting for???

Perhaps, dare one suggest it, we ought to have a referendum? Mind you, if we just dither about long enough the money will evaporate and the whole thing will be academic for another 40 years - kicking the can down the road until there is no road is not a worthy policy; the new administration need to be clear on what their intentions are so that the people of Herefordshire have a chance to have their say.

Happy Days.

Elissa