

Report of Cllr Elissa Swinglehurst February 2019

R.I.P Cllr Jenny Hyde

Cllr. Jenny Hyde, who represented Llangarron Ward for many years, passed away on 11th February. She was a devoted and tireless champion for the children who come into care, a kind and compassionate person and an inspiration to me. She will be missed.

Meeting with Bill Wiggin MP

I was really pleased to have the opportunity to meet with Bill Wiggin MP at Barrs Court School in Hereford. We had a detailed discussion with the excellent school head about the challenges of providing such a successful SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) service. We also had the chance to tour the school and meet with pupils and teachers. I have to say that I totally take my hat off to them – the atmosphere is happy, calm, creative and comforting. There is clearly a culture of caring and real commitment to encouraging every pupil to fulfil their potential. Wonderful.

The Big Item this Month was the Budget setting.

For the first time in 17 years an alternative budget had been put forward by the opposition It's Our County with the support of the Green Party. Although she was modest about her role I suspect most of the heavy lifting was done by Cllr Harvey who also presented the alternative budget to the scrutiny committees.

It was good to have an alternative budget to discuss – all too often the opposition complain about the administration's budget but they don't offer an alternative and end up abstaining in the vote. On this occasion at least there was something to vote for and against and the opposition had put in the time and effort to offer an alternative.

It's a bit of a misnomer to say that this was a truly alternative budget – there was no alternative offered for the proposed increase in council tax, 98% of the net budget 150m spend was not challenged and the 'bottom line' of the various directorates was not changed. The focus of the alternative budget was 2m primarily drawn from the rural sparsity fund to support the delivery of services in rural areas.

It's funny really that the council meeting which was to agree the budget and set the council tax level for next year was principally about 2m spend – 2m, in the context of the overall spend is a grace note – very little attention was given therefore to the increase in Council tax. There is a temptation to congratulate ourselves as Councillors for keeping the budget balanced despite having to find savings of 90m from the annual spend but it is the efforts of the residents of Herefordshire, digging deep year after year, that have allowed us to continue to support vulnerable adults and children and provide statutory services. So, to all those Council Tax payers – Thank you.

In the end the Conservative budget comfortably carried the day – not, it must be noted, because the administration had a majority in the room (we didn't) but because the ideas were more cogent, better informed and offered better value for money for the tax payer. The opposition budget was more or less spending 2m on 'considering', 'researching', 'investigating', 'modelling' and running pilot schemes where there was no substantive budget to follow through on any of the schemes. For instance there was the proposal to spend money investigating a tram scheme for Hereford but, of

course, trams require cables and tracks and would be expensive to introduce (apparently there is a new sort of tram that doesn't need tracks....isn't that a bus?) and of limited benefit to the rural areas of Herefordshire; by contrast the Conservatives thought it would be better to spend on supporting the community transport schemes around the county.

One further thing that I will comment on before I leave the budget setting meeting was the level of personal abuse directed at the Conservative administration and especially the Cabinet of which I am a member. The opposition mocked us, saying we were looking tired and run out – I would remind the reader that this was a budget meeting which began with a silence in memory of our dear friend and colleague who died only 4 days before. Her loss was a shock to everyone but especially for Cabinet colleagues who worked alongside her and many of whom were also personal friends. Plus which, I would suggest that if I looked tired it was because I was tired having stayed up late for a few nights getting my head around the agenda and preparing for the meeting. Either way I am inclined to the view that personal attack is the last refuge of those who have run out of sensible argument – we are tired, we look old, we are arrogant....sticks and stones. It is a puerile level of debate.

It's not easy being Green.

The meeting was also a focus for a number of people, members of the public and Green Councillors in the main to express their concern about climate change.

I am getting a bit hacked off with the assumption that because I am not a 'Green' I therefore want to destroy the environment and don't understand anything about it. I find it patronising and offensive. The council, under the Conservatives, have worked hard to reduce our carbon footprint and will continue to do so – quietly and effectively. Maybe we ought to shout about it a bit more...maybe people who criticise should look into what we are actually doing and have already done before they assume we do nothing. However – despite the exhortations of those who 'really care' about climate change (unlike the rest of us who apparently don't give a stuff) Herefordshire Council cannot devote our budget to a range of unspecified activities to meet 'the global climate crisis'; mainly because we have to meet our statutory duties, stuff like looking after vulnerable adults, looked after children, roads, drainage, waste collection, environmental health, enforcement, planning....all that stuff. Reality check – it is an either/or.....so what services would the Greens see cut in the revenue budget so they can do some unspecified but very virtuous thing to halt global climate change. Tell you what I think – as a Conservative – it isn't up to Herefordshire Council to stop climate change, to stop the unsustainable consumption of the world's resources, to stop turtles being strangled by plastic in the Pacific Gyre, it's not up to Herefordshire Council to stop deforestation or to protect the Orang-utan, or the Polar Bear.....it up to you, and me. We should ask ourselves about our own consumption, our carbon footprint...and...crucially...the carbon footprint of our children, and their children, and their children, and their children because THAT is the size of our carbon footprint.

Taking over the Council

This was a day when the councillors, who are all corporate parents, had the opportunity to mentor groups of 'care experienced' young people. 5 councillors took part, including 3 cabinet members – the leader would have been there but he had his own parenting event (congratulations on a beautiful baby girl).

The day was brilliant – funny, inspiring, challenging and thought provoking. We designed a regeneration project – our team came up with a multi-use, integrated social enterprise project with a pet friendly vegan café, business start-up space, social enterprise retail space and care leavers

accommodation all designed around a glass courtyard with kinetic sculpture centrepiece. Awesome, and I got to practice my dance moves.

And finally.....

Taking on the challenge from the parish summit meetings being held by the leader there is a group of parish councils who are meeting to exchange best practice, share experiences and explore the idea that there is strength in numbers. The first meeting was very animated with all sorts of great ideas coming forward – I attended primarily as a parish councillor but was also happy to be there as a county councillor. There were representatives from Walford, Whitchurch and Ganarew, Welsh Newton and Llanrothal, Llangarron and Marstow. Hopefully this is the start of an excellent new initiative – if any other parish councillors would like to get involved please let me know. The topics ranged from planning and potholes to community care and good neighbour schemes.

That's all for now and potentially for a while as I will have to quieten down over purdah as we approach the local elections in May. Meantime, if I can be of any help with anything, as always...

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