

# January 2020 Ward Councillor report

Elissa Swinglehurst, Llangarron Ward.

## **Planning**

December's planning committee determined the Lower Herberts Hill application in Llangarron. I represented local views and the committee approved the application after some debate and in agreement with the officer recommendation.

January's planning committee determined two applications on Welsh Newton Common. I represented local views and the committee unanimously refused both applications against the officer recommendation. In both cases the refusal was proposed by Cllr. Fagan on grounds which included policies contained in the recently adopted NDP for the parish.

## **Adults and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee**

The general election and rules around purdah had an impact in December and pushed an important piece of scrutiny of the temporary closure of the Ross Minor Injuries Unit into the following month. The meeting in January was well attended by local members who spoke passionately and forcefully in support of the MIU and the wider community hospital role. The CCG (Clinical Commissioning Group) reassured the committee that there would be no further temporary closures and that the views of stakeholders would be taken into account as a long term solution is worked out. The reason that the MIUs (Leominster and Ross on Wye) have winter closures is to draw the nursing staff resource into the county A&E where they are needed to manage peak demand. The scrutiny committee have requested to be informed as the CCG develop a redesign of this service.

The committee also had a second look at the proposed budget and new corporate plan. There were no significant changes to the Adults budget from the November meeting and so very little additional comment from the scrutiny committee. There are a number of capital proposals that are lacking sufficient detail to make serious comments at this stage and so the committee asked for this detail as and when it comes forward. Some ideas are still at a conceptual stage – like the proposed investment of up to 100m in public housing stock which was supported in the public consultation. I do have some reservations about a consultation where the public are asked if they would like cake and biscuits and sandwiches whereas in fact the choice is cake or biscuits or sandwiches or tiny portions of all three.

## **Flooding**

I visited two properties that had been affected by flooding in the area. Houses that had not flooded in living memory but which had been inundated with water and tons of silt. I wonder if we have had the wettest three months on record – substantially wetter than, say 2012, 2013 – or perhaps there is some other factor in play...some change to the landscape perhaps? Some alteration to the way in which the water behaves? What I do know is that in Welsh Newton we have a farm that has gone from fairly low impact, rotational and traditional farming to 100% maize cultivation. It is about 100 acres of sloping valley side, the farmer has made no attempt to direct drill a companion cover crop, to enhance/maintain drainage or to leave any form of headland or buffer strips. In October the A466 was flooded and all of the water and silt came from that one farm, I have posted a film of this on my Facebook page, 'A River Runs Through it'). Subsequently there has clearly been some sort of

activity as the water and silt is now more or less going down the Mally Brook (a lower Wye tributary). This will cause the water course to silt up and block over time and all the downstream landowners will have to pay to desilt (as part of their riparian responsibility under the Land Drainage Act) but at least the water isn't washing down the road. Of course the silt is also carrying the phosphate that the farmer has used to fertilise the land and this will now pollute the river contributing to the terrible algal blooms that are turning the lower Wye into a nasty, slimy, pea soup in the summer and destroying the river ecology.

I am pushing for the local authority to be far more proactive where drainage is concerned. In a meeting with Balfour Beatty this month the question of proactive Vs reactive drainage work came up – at the moment 'proactive' is not 'preventative' it is doing what you are going to have to do anyway, but doing it before you have to. It makes more sense to me if we put more effort behind proactive work and for it to actually be preventative. In drainage terms this does not mean just to dig out the road drain before it is completely blocked but to look and see where the water and silt are coming from. If the problem is being created because of non-compliance with existing legislation (land drainage act, water rules for farming, EA pollution legislation, NVZ etc) then the statutory body should deal with it under that legislation. Climate change is likely to lead to increased levels of precipitation (planning now requires a 40% margin in the 1 in 100 year flood event) so, surely, it makes sense to stop bailing out the boat with a tea cup and to start looking for, and fixing, the leak? In response to a question from me it appears that the local authority have not prosecuted anyone for drainage – this has got to change or I worry that I will be visiting more people who have to deal with the utterly miserable experience of having their home ruined.

### **Roads to Nowhere.**

A couple of other interesting things came out of the BBLP briefing.

There has been a massive spike in defects due to water on the road network (see above section). In January 2019 there were 200 cat 1 and the current level is 400 with the expectation that this will rise to 500. The need to deal with cat 1 potholes as a matter of priority is taking resources away from non-urgent works (cat 2) and from prevention works. BBLP are working weekends and putting the resources in to catch up with the backlog – they are also doing some temporary repairs to put something in the hole for the time being. It is very difficult to fill holes during cold, wet weather and the result is sub optimal.

The new velocity patcher – the 'velociraptor' (a legacy from the last administration) has been at work gritting – it has been designed as a multi-purpose vehicle that can grit in the winter and fill potholes in the dryer months. Hopefully this will go onto filling duties in March.

Current estimates are that it would cost 87m to fix all the defects in the county and get all the roads up to a good standard. It would then cost about 8m pa to maintain. So, if you were asked at a consultation if you wanted cake or biscuits = 100m on 1000 local authority owned houses or on a comprehensive fix to all the local roads with a reduced annual spend to maintain them.....would you support the public housing or the road network?

Historically Herefordshire Council and BBLP have done well to secure extra funding and to allocate additional spend on the road network – in 2014/15 this was 20m extra, in 2017 8m, in 2018 4.4m and due to the BBLP asset management we receive a 'bonus' of 1.9m over the basic government funding. The proposed budget will show the level of spending on roads for next year.

Incidentally – because the government funding formula is based on speed and volume of traffic there is a massive difference between urban and rural funding. This ignores the fact that our rural roads get a real hammering with large vehicles and water/mud so probably have a shorter life expectancy. Herefordshire also has more km of road per head of population than pretty much anywhere else so we are having to make a very little go a very long way.

Our road network, bridges and drainage are in a state of ‘managed decline’ – every year there is a shortfall in funding – for instance the maintenance backlog of bridges is somewhere around 16m, the annual maintenance is around 2.7m but there is only .7m in the budget, the roads should have around 8m annual funding but they get 1.6m, drainage has a backlog of 300 projects. When BBLP took over the contract there were 16,000 known gullies on the asset register – there are now 32,000....there is only so much to go round – at least 75p in every pound raised in council tax is spent on care.

If you want to report a fault please use the Herefordshire.gov website – this goes directly to the teams out in the locality.

Or you can phone 01432 261800

### **My Glamourous life.**

I spent a lovely day in the rain visiting a number of the smaller sewage treatment works in the Lugg catchment. You might have seen something about this in the local press. I am the chair of the Nutrient Management Board which is tasked with the delivery of the Nutrient Management Plan to deliver favourable conservation status (water quality) for the Lugg, Upper and Lower Wye. Last year the failing status of the Lugg and a case known as the ‘Dutch Nitrates case’ resulted in Natural England placing a moratorium on any development in that catchment (which is most of North Herefordshire). This is causing tremendous hardship for people and businesses trying to build homes and it is something that we need to address urgently. Although not precisely the remit of the board there is clearly a close synergy between the objectives of improving the water quality and giving Natural England the degree of certainty they need to allow further development. I have been working with Simon Evans from the Wye Usk Foundation on a plan to deliver a number of constructed integrated wetlands on the smaller sewage treatment plants. This plan has the added advantages of carbon sequestration, high levels of bio diversity and, where possible, a lovely public amenity space. It’s a good thing, a very good thing.

### **And finally – talking rubbish.**

I am on the task and finish group that is working on the waste contracts for the council. We have an opportunity to reimagine the waste pathways as we are in the fortunate position of the contracts ending in the near future and in the same time frame as the government’s new legislation. From a philosophical point of view we need to stop looking at waste and start looking at a potential resource – somebody’s old bread is someone else’s beer ingredient, rotting bio matter can be energy and so on – but we are currently at the stage where even patently reusable and good stuff is being put into the waste stream. I will illustrate with a story...

On (another) glamourous day out I was visiting the Ross on Wye household recycling facility in the company of a representative from a local charity. We opened the back of the charity donation bin and it was very full. At the front was a big, bright blue, plush dolphin with large eyes and eyelashes. It looked like new. It also sang. The charity didn’t want it because they are full up so it was returned

to the 'waste' stream to go to landfill or incineration. A couple of weeks later I read that West Mercia Women's Aid were desperate for good condition toys for children who have been forced to abandon their family home due to domestic violence.... Surely it ought not to be beyond the mind of man – or woman – to join these ends together. We should be far less casual about 'stuff'; as my Mother used to say 'waste not, want not, the saying's very true, practice economy in everything you do' – she also said 'make do and mend' and 'is the sun over the yard-arm?'

TTFN

Elissa