

Serving the parishes of Llangarron, Welsh Newton and Llanrothal, Bridstow, Sellack, Peterstow and Marstow.

I just thought I'd do another report for February to comment on the budget debate.

Setting the council budget is a long drawn out business. This year has been further complicated by the various pressures around the pandemic and the government money that has been provided to meet most, if not all, of those pressures. The story is not yet told and that adds a layer of uncertainty in an uncertain time.

It is usual for opposing parties to offer an amendment or two to the budget – it always happened when the Conservatives were the administration and it was a good way of debating something that is, for the most part, immutable. If you want to actually offer an alternative budget you can do so, but it requires weeks of officer time and will inevitably not succeed if the majority view holds. This is not, by and large, a sensible use of senior officer time. As a result, amendments will tend to focus on those extra bits of money that come in late and are not part of the body of the budget.

The budget amendments this year were from the Conservatives who wanted to reduce the council tax increase to 3.99% by holding over 1% of the Adult Social Care precept. The Adults and Communities directorate had a net budget requirement of 1.2m increase and the 3% precept would raise in the region of 2.1m so a 1% reduction was affordable (even with the lower council tax collection – historically 1% of council tax is equivalent to 1m but anticipated lower receipts has reduced this to 700k). The Lib Dems wanted to take this a step further and reduce the increase to 3% but proposed raiding the reserves to pay for it, since the reserves are for 'rainy days' or emergencies that didn't seem sustainable. Having said that, both the Lib Dems and Conservatives were voicing a concern about those people who are struggling but who are not on universal credit (and therefore in receipt of the 86% reduction, now 100% reduction). We felt there are plenty of people who are not in receipt of welfare but who, due to covid, have changed circumstances and who we should try to protect from the highest council tax increase possible. Both of the amendments were lost.

The Conservatives also proposed an amendment to take some of the New Homes Bonus (371,000) to fund parish councils to undertake flood resilience and alleviation works. The 250,000 drainage grant (the result of a previous Conservative amendment) has been very successful and it made sense to try to direct some more resources in this way. In my view, voiced in the meeting, parish councils are able to offer fantastic value for money, they know exactly where the money needs to be spent and they know the best way to serve their communities. It was also pointed out that this was a Hereford centric budget and the rural areas were getting neglected. The amendment was lost because the administration wants the money to pay for active travel measures in Hereford – according to one councillor -so that the causes of the flooding can be dealt with – ie. Climate change. I'm not sure that 371,000 will go very far in addressing GLOBAL climate change but it might have done some good in protecting individual properties and communities. Ah well. I will keep pressing for more funding to parish councils to undertake specific works to address flooding and drainage issues and I am hopeful that some money may be found for this. Incidentally the 250,000 drainage grant was going to be cut off by March 31<sup>st</sup> but I lobbied Cllr Harrington and he has got BBLP to extend the date – to 'roll it over', so that works can be completed.

The third amendment was to put 200,000 from the New Homes Bonus into the Household recycling sites to keep their hours of operation the same (the saving proposal was to cut the hours of operation). I don't understand why we can't just do more reuse – like at Llanfoist – it makes enough money to pay for itself and protect the hours of operation at a zero revenue cost to the council. Disappointed with this administration that they can't seem to get that simple thing done. We have seen an increase in fly tipping with the household recycling centres being either closed or using the booking system – fly tipping is not only unsightly, dangerous for wildlife and environmentally damaging it also costs the council over 1m a year.....which does suggest that reducing the opening hours of the sites to save 200,000 could be a false economy. That amendment was also lost.

I don't mind losing amendments – it is to be expected when you are in the minority (the Conservatives are the largest single party but not sufficiently numerous to outweigh the combined independent/ IOC/Green administration); what I do find a bit strange is that, throughout the debate, various members of the coalition kept questioning our right to propose an amendment and to wish to debate it. It became a trope of the meeting – just before I was to speak I was left literally dumbfounded, by a comment by the preceding speaker to the effect of 'why are you bothering to do this'? The argument was put that since the budget had been through scrutiny all points of view should already have been known (not so due to political proportionality on the scrutiny committees), amendments were seen as political posturing (but they are the only way of debating the budget and having an opportunity for minor changes) and so on, and so forth. Taking this to its logical extreme reminds me of the exchange between Sherlock Holmes and Professor Moriarty on their encountering each other in Baker Street,

"All that I have to say has already crossed your mind," said he.

"Then possibly my answer has crossed yours," I replied.

"You stand fast?"

"Absolutely."

"He clapped his hand into his pocket, and I raised the pistol from the table."

In other words – why bother? Since the outcome of the debate is not a tremendous mystery why bother having the meeting at all – in fact why not just let the majority administration get on with it and everyone else can put their feet up and have a cup of tea.

Which leads me on to another apparently dull subject – governance review.

You may or may not be aware that the council has a cabinet system – like Westminster ..a bit. In other words the decision making is done by the officers and cabinet for the most part and occasionally by the full council. It is a system that is inherently efficient but lacking in meaningful input from anyone not in the cabinet. There had been a desire on the part of members of the administration before they were elected to see this system replaced with a committee system – more inclusive, less efficient. It looks as if, after months of deep reflection and naval gazing, the cabinet system will remain – albeit wearing a hat. Personally I can see the benefits and disbenefits of both systems but I firmly believe that there should always someone to hold to account and this can be obscured in the committee system. It's not as if the committee would be likely to have the final say – that would always reside with the majority administration (and that is how democracy works) but it would provide more 'window dressing' of collaborative working. I would rather just

have a good debate – I don't think it is healthy for everyone to get in the tent or, as I like to say, it is the grit in the oyster that makes the pearl.

BBLP

We had a briefing in January from BBLP. They are delivering some of the additional investment despite the weather and covid but there is still a way to go.

The series of storms presented a challenge in keeping up with the cat one defects – for instance Storm Bella produced 59 cat one in 24 hours. This is always going to have a knock on effect in dealing with cat 2 and other items. If you see short term repair work going on it will be a temporary repair as it is impossible to do a good repair job when it is so wet!

The council has invested in a rotary ditcher – machine which zips along and clears road side ditches. I'm sure that will be useful but not sure who should use it since the roadside ditches are, on the whole, the responsibility of the adjacent land owner.

There was a good deal of conversation around flooding and the necessity for the major players to work together. As the new Chair of the Lugg Internal Drainage Board I agree and will be holding meetings with local authority and Environment Agency drainage folk to see how we can work together more effectively.

And finally...

Talking of working together...really happy that Llangarron Parish Council and Llanwarne Parish Council are going to collaborate to improve the Garron and Gamber. It might interest you to know that, in terms of water quality, the Garron was rated as good (overall, ecology and chemical) in 2013, in 2019 the Garron was rated as poor (overall poor, ecology poor and chemical FAIL); in 2015 the Gamber (source to confluence with the Garron) was rated good (overall, ecology and chemical), in 2019 it was rated moderate (overall moderate, ecology moderate, chemical FAIL). The reasons given for the deterioration of condition were 'poor nutrient management' (ie. Fertilizer), 'poor livestock management' and sedimentation (soil loss). For those who are interested, this information is from the Environment Agency catchment data website. The parish councils are hoping to work with riparian owners to reduce the flooding risk and to have a positive impact on the river habitat. They have my full support in this fantastic endeavor. If you own land adjacent to the Garron or the Gamber please contact one or other parish council and become part of this exciting project.

Elissa