

## Report

Lots of big things that aren't Covid related (for a change)

### Green things

After a year of long and detailed meetings the report of the task and finish group on the Climate and Ecological Emergency was delivered to the General Scrutiny Committee. I was asked to be part of this task and finish group, even though I do not serve on the GSC, to ensure a degree of political proportionality (the other members on the group were Cllr. William Wilding – chair, Independent, Cllr. Toni Fagan, Green, Cllr Louis Stark, Lib Dem, Cllr Jennie Hewitt, Independent). All the members of the t&f were passionate about the subject, at least two of them are active members of the climate change protest group 'extinction rebellion'.

I feel it is crucial that we identify pragmatic, workable, deliverable and measurable actions in response to the emergency. Obviously, as part of this committee, my 'job' was to identify appropriate responses to the council's declaration.

I am not massively impressed by those who endlessly circle a problem, admiring it from every angle, keening like a Tuareg widow whose voice is instantly swept away on the Sahara winds. I'm more interested in straightforward, actual, concrete actions that might be a bit challenging but which should be undertaken. This report contained three such actions from me but, to my surprise, they got watered down and lost without me even knowing about it. I only found out on the day the report was being presented. Happily, the General Scrutiny Committee were minded to ask me what the actions were and they were unanimously added to the recommendations to go forward to the cabinet for consideration.

One action was that the council should invoke something called an Article 4 direction to suspend permitted development rights in respect of motor sports. As things stand, off road motor sport can take place for up to 14 days a year (28 days including camping etc) with no planning permission or licence at all – which might not seem like a big deal but it is 14 days in which the environment will be comprehensively destroyed. It also doesn't take into account the scale of these events. There used to be a local track where one event was an international competition filmed by Sky Sports with hundreds of spectators and competitors. The traffic was so bad it took the police one and a half hours to drive the short road onto the venue (normally a few minutes). The air ambulance had to be called out on more than one occasion as the riders had accidents but no one could get up the road. There were multiple events there, ripping up the soil, causing incredible quantities of dust to rise like a miasma in the valley, bikes belting through the woodland, churning up the bluebells and destroying the delicate habitat. No need for a risk assessment, no need for traffic controlling measures, no need to damp the dust, no control whatsoever – none. I have asked the cabinet to consider this and whether it would be appropriate to require planning permission for some or all of these events in the light of the declaration of a climate and ecological emergency. It is important to be clear that this is not about stopping a couple of kids riding around, it is about bringing some degree of control to large, organised events.

I'm getting a fair amount of criticism for this on social media as the fans of off road motor sport get all revved up but their ire is misplaced. I am not a decision taker, merely someone pointing out that if you have declared an ecological and climate emergency, it makes sense to examine whether or not events that are destructive to the environment should be considered as requiring planning permission so that those effects can be mitigated in some way.....perhaps fans of off road

motorsport need to put their case to the cabinet and explain how this activity is consistent with the declaration of a climate and ecological emergency.

Other green stuff – the state of the rivers.

There was a breakthrough moment when Natural Resources Wales finally got around to checking the health of the rivers against the tighter 2016 targets and discovered that around most of their previously 'healthy' rivers were, in fact, failing for phosphate. It is important to understand that the health of the rivers has not suddenly got worse, the targets changed – targets are a bit of a movable feast and so water bodies that are clearly showing stress in the conservation indicators (ie. Actual 'on the ground/in the water' response to environmental stressors) might be passing until someone thinks that the targets might be wrong at which point they all fail.

We have an interesting development locally as a result of the NRW revised targets; the Lower Wye SAC (Walford to Bigsweir) is now failing for Phosphate. There has been a spike at Huntsham and again at Redbrook, possibly due to tributaries like the Garron and the 'frothy' Trothy, but this is the first time the statutory undertaker has issued a consistent fail. There are conversations happening in response to this as the EA and NE work to arrive at a consistent position and Herefordshire, Monmouthshire and Forest of Dean Councils do likewise. Given that the result of the ongoing failure of the R Lugg for phosphate was to impose a moratorium on all development in the catchment all I am going to say is 'watch this space' .....

Budget

The normal big ticket item at this time of year is the budget setting process. As chair of the Adults Scrutiny Committee I had sight of the proposals for savings in the Adults and Communities budget and the opportunity to question the director as to the overall and specific measures to provide services whilst making savings. The pressures on this directorate are over 4m – not to be wondered at with an aging demographic, rising cost pressures in the market and CV19 – but savings of over 3m had been identified so there is a residual gap of 1.2m. The 3% ASC levy on council tax raises around 3m so the gap can be met. The savings proposals were, as is typical for this directorate, well thought out and what one might genuinely term 'efficiencies' – for instance decommissioning under-utilised services/places. The adults directorate have really taken on the challenge in Herefordshire – for a number of years the director has steered away from an intervention heavy approach to what is called a 'strengths based approach' – the result has been higher levels of satisfaction from users, better clinical outcomes and reduced costs. It is such a magic combination and other councils are using the Herefordshire model to inform their own decision making.

It has been difficult to set a budget this year due to the number of moving parts and the uncertainties due to Covid. The Government have paid out 160m to the council to meet the costs of Covid but since the story is not yet told there is always a degree of gapping to account for. Overall though the council has had sufficient funding and resilience to continue to function and to support our communities.

The proposed Council Tax increase will be 4.99% (1.99% base and 3% adult social care precept). I will go into further detail as it comes up for full council debate.

### **Meanwhile.....are we on a road to nowhere?**

An emergency full council meeting was called for 2 Feb (hence the delay in sending this out) – the final decision on the Hereford Transport Plan (including the Western relief road/ bypass) and South Wye Transport Package (including the Southern Link road A49-A465).

It is the position of the Conservatives that Hereford needs a bypass in order to de-trunk the A49, provide road space for cycles and buses, take HGVs away from the medieval city walls, improve the air quality in the city, reduce the congestion, unlock the full potential of the enterprise zone and add to the infrastructure to service the strategic housing sites to the west of the city. On social media this is often presented as some sort of self-serving motivation – that we only want to build the road so we can build houses (like that's a bad thing). I can tell you that I, personally, couldn't care less. I don't live in Hereford, I don't need a house, I can always shop in Gloucester or Newport or on line. I have zero skin in the game. However, as a county councillor, trying to do the right thing for Hereford and for Herefordshire, I think that a bypass is long overdue, I think that Hereford is the sensible place to build houses because it is where there are jobs, education, services, hospital etc. and therefore it is more sustainable than country villages which have none of those things. The non-delivery of the strategic sites has coincided with over-delivery in the countryside and we must hope that the housing land supply improves or we will face a 'free for all' – housing delivery is not being helped by the moratorium on building in the north of the county (over 1000 houses held up) due to the pollution of the River Lugg predominantly from agricultural diffuse sources.

Anyway, houses are not built to line the pockets of Conservative councillors – that would be fake news – The council needs money to continue to deliver services to support vulnerable adults and children. Since the revenue funding grants have all but dried up, the council is far more reliant on local taxation (council tax). Either council tax has to rise or we have to build more houses....council tax cannot rise by more than 1.9% per annum because it is capped, even with the 3% social care uplift it is a struggle to make ends meet. The building of houses is not to benefit councillors but to support the economy and increase the council tax receipts to pay for adult social care and to meet the cost of the increasing number of children in care (to say nothing of the other things the council does like roads, drainage, waste, public realm, parks, libraries, responding to the CV19 pandemic and climate and ecological emergency. )

Houses will need to be built, with or without a bypass, at the moment 2600 are being considered on Grafton Lane – which is not a great road at the best of times.

It's all water under the bridge now as the council have voted to abandon the western route. Acknowledging that a second river crossing is still needed to give some resilience to the local road network there is a thought of creating a crossing to the east. Somehow a road and bridge to the east (not a bypass so unable to detrunk the A49), is considered a better option. In my view the Lugg meadow (the finest and largest Lammas meadow in the country, a site of special scientific interest) is just as valuable a natural environment as the arable fields to the west, the river is just as special – but somehow the environmental damage to the west is too awful to consider but it's perfectly ok to build roads and a bridge to the east. Even the Green party says so. But it will not de trunk the A49 so there is no way to create the additional road space for priority bus and cycle lanes along the A49 corridor. Also, according to Jesse Norman MP, the government is really unlikely to pay for a bridge and road to the east since the council have turned down the 200m that was 'lined up' for the western route. The eastern option was originally abandoned in the early 90s after it was ruled out on environmental grounds at public enquiry.

The saga of Hereford and the bypass is a Groundhog Day rotation of the same ideas coming up, going down, going round and round but never getting to a solution. The last administration got to within touching distance but then lost control of the council and the 200m that was 'lined up' at the treasury, has gone to some other road building project. The fact that Hereford will not have a bypass anytime soon doesn't mean that tarmac won't be laid somewhere, the 2 miles of road that would have been the Southern Link Road (linking the A465 to the A49) will be 2 miles of road

somewhere else so, environmentally, all we have done is sacrifice Hereford on the altar of climate change but has it made a difference? Will the building of a few miles of road around Hereford really move the dial on Global Climate change? Will the decision not to build the road move the dial on Global climate change? No, of course not. But it will have a very serious impact on the lives and livelihoods of the people who live there, especially in the areas of highest deprivation. So, yes, those leafy and lovely areas like Breinton, the graceful avenue of Kings Acre have been spared but the misery for the residents of Newton Farm and the A49 corridor continues.

The basic plan is now to reduce traffic in Hereford by getting people to walk and cycle more. Excellent. I'm all in favour of people walking and cycling. There is an idea that the Conservatives did nothing to promote walking and cycling – not so – in fact cycling in Hereford increased by 50% under the Conservative administration, it was the Conservative administration that brought in the Beryl Bike scheme, invested heavily in cycle infrastructure and spent at least 5m on encouraging active travel which resulted in all of 2.6% behaviour change; there was also over 27m allocated to active travel as part of the wider transport schemes.

So there is a strong track record to look at to make a realistic assessment of the likelihood of greater change (given that the first changes happen with the cohort most willing to make the change). Personally I think that there is very little chance of change on a sufficient scale – I do not think that people are going to leave their car and take the bus or walk – not unless there is a significant move to both incentivise active travel and discourage car use. These things are called 'demand management' – examples of demand management would be higher parking charges, congestion charging, work place parking charges etc. All measures that would impact retail and business in Hereford already struggling due to floods and CV19.

The point is that it's complicated – the debate could have been highly divisive as views are deeply held on all sides, but, on the whole, there was acknowledgment that we are all trying to get it right and it comes down to a judgement as to what that might look like. I will append my contribution to the debate for those of you who have nothing better to do.

One odd thing is that no one knows who voted for, against or abstained due to the electronic voting method in virtual meetings. Personally I think that is not acceptable and I will be trying to get the names released into the public domain. As councillors we all have to be willing to take a decision publicly and stand by that decision. I am not comfortable with a vote that is, in essence, a secret ballot – especially on such a crucial issue. For the avoidance of doubt I voted in favour of the amendment (to judge the two road schemes separately) and I voted against the substantive (to abandon both road schemes and decapitalise the 12m loss as a result, meaning that the loss is put into revenue and has to be realised by taking the money out of reserves).

I think that's long enough for now!