

Report of Cllr. Elissa Swinglehurst Llangarron Ward member September 2021

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

The song remains the same.

The ongoing preoccupations of the council and of yours truly remain broadly the same as last month. There is continuing concern over the delivery of children's services which has been increased by the sudden departure of the interim director, departure of other key staff members and changing portfolio holders. As I remarked in my last report there is a need for change and a need for continuity and I am not confident that the council has the balance right in children's services at the moment. There are no easy answers.

There are also no easy answers to the phosphate pollution in the Rivers Lugg and Wye. This month I chaired the Nutrient Management Board again and was pleased to welcome John Reed from Avara and Nigel Berry from Gamber Logistics to present to the board. It was refreshing to hear two major players in the poultry industry acknowledge that they are part of the problem and that they are both committed to becoming part of the solution. Their contribution to the meeting was encouraging and I pay tribute to both organisations for taking positive action to eliminate their contribution to the problem.

Interesting contributions were also made by other members, notably Fergus O' Brien from Dwr Cymru who gave a presentation showing that even if there were no sewage treatment works in the catchment the river would still be in a parlous state due to agricultural diffuse sources and legacy phosphate.

It is encouraging that the increasing understanding of the role of legacy phosphate is prompting companies like Avara and Gamber logistics to address the problem, I understand that other farmers who attended a meeting with the Leeds and Lancaster Uni RePhokus team were likewise determined to become the solution they need to be once they had the understanding of the scale of the issue.

During September I also attended a number of events at the Monmouth Climate Festival (I know it's not Herefordshire) and thought it would be great to do something similar on our side of the border. I met with the newly formed 'Friends of the Lower Wye' who will be campaigning to improve the water quality of the Wye by testing the main stem and tributaries and working with the environment agency, NRW and Cardiff University to get a better understanding of the precise origins of the phosphate. I also attended a somewhat less inspiring evening with politicians talking about the environment – it showed some areas of misunderstanding around the pollution of the river, the causes, the actions needed and the reasons for the so called planning moratorium.

Continuing Health Care

I chaired a meeting of the Adults Wellbeing Scrutiny committee which discussed the issue of Continuing Health Care or CHC. This is one of those areas where the local authority and the NHS rub up against each other. What is needed is collaborative working with the best interests of the patient front and centre but it is never that simple. For the age demographic Herefordshire shows anomalous levels of CHC – in other words, for reasons that are unclear, the local health authority do not feel that as many people meet the benchmark for nursing care as might be suggested by the national average

and these people, therefore, do not qualify for funding or they fall into the council funded social care provision. I am hopeful that the ongoing discussions around this will lead to closer working and better outcomes.

Full Council

This has been a full day meeting, various technical issues delayed the start so really looked like it was going to be a marathon. The heavy agenda included the Minerals and Waste Plan and I contributed to the debate both praising the development of this important policy document and raising concerns around the definition of 'failure' of the River Wye Special Area of Conservation, 'at least Nutrient Neutrality' and the reliability of the AHDB (Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board) advice for achievement of nutrient neutrality as well as the need to stand firm against hydrocarbon extraction in the AONB.

The item on the improvement journey of children's services led to a lengthy debate with a range of views. Concern was expressed over the openness and transparency of the administration, the balance of change/continuity, the impact on social worker morale/recruitment and the need for stability – particularly in the light of the sudden departure of the interim director of service.

An item on flood repair expenditure went through to authorise a revised budget for works that were required after Storm Dennis. Some works came in under, some over. To be fair the initial costings were made before the extent of the works were fully known and best guess was as good as it was ever going to be. Cllr Harrington was praised and thanked for his hard work as were Golden Valley contractors who did some of the work – the debate went on a bit longer than was strictly necessary as ward members all put in a bid for funding for drainage works in their own area.

I just thought it might be worth explaining why I did not support the motion to apply for bathing water status as a way of protecting the river and I append my speech for anyone who is interested.

"The Warfe at Ilkley was designated in 2000, it is one of the most polluted stretches of river in the country – primarily due to STW – on a sunny day up to 2000 people go to this stretch of the river to enjoy the cooling water and high levels of dangerous bacteria.

- Bathing water status would mean that more EA resource would have to go to testing the river. The two parameters that will be tested are E. coli and Intestinal Enterococci (enterocoxi) only. No testing for other parameters such as phosphate or ammonia will be mandatory, giving only a partial picture of river water quality.
- We have only just got more resource into the EA to support the implementation of Farming Rules for Water, do we really want them to have to now spend resource on testing for e coli when the problem, as far as the river is concerned, is phosphate.

Getting bathing water status does not confer improved water quality but it does mean that more people will go to the river to bathe along with Adam and Eve and pinch me. We are so used to seeing everything in relation to our wants and our needs – even today, here, now, trying to address the water quality crisis in the rivers Wye and Lugg we are seeking to do it so we can benefit, and we are not thinking about the river at all. We are anthropocentric in our thinking – let's take a moment and try to think like a fish.... a salmon.

The times of year when most people are likely to want to go to the river to enjoy the cooling waters are when it is hot, when the water temperature is high, when the flow is reduced. At these times the salmon, having swum for countless miles in their extraordinary migration, are draining the last of their energy to get back to the spawning gravels to reproduce and create the next generation of Salars. They have had to survive predators in the open ocean, trawlers, gillnets, disease, sea lice, micro plastics, anglers and poachers but, against the odds, they make it into the river. The high temperature, low flow and likely algal bloom all deplete oxygen levels and the salmon, in trying to survive the last few miles, will move into the heads of pools where the water is more oxygenated. This is their last final effort and what do we suppose the effect will be on this salmon if, at the point where it is struggling to survive, a family with kids and an inflatable unicorn all decide to go for a swim. The salmon will move off and its chances of survival will diminish.

Does the river really need us to swim in it? Does it need 2000 people to turn up with picnics and barbeques and inflatable unicorns? Does the river want us to get closer to it? Does the river crave more human contact? I would say that we have done enough to the river for now and we should probably just do the right thing for the right reason. Treat it with respect, it is not our playground.”