

Report of Cllr Elissa Swinglehurst Llangarron Ward Feb 2022

Happy to be serving the communities of Welsh Newton and Llanrothal, Llangarron, Marstow, Bridstow, Peterstow and Sellack.

As promised – here is a brief update on the last report due to the budget setting full council meeting that was held on the 11th February.

If you are interested in the detail of the budget it can be found on the council's website (all 434 pages of it)

[Agenda for Council on Friday 11 February 2022, 10.00 am - Herefordshire Council](#)

Or you can watch the debate on You Tube.

Although this is the single most important decision that the council makes in any year it is remarkable how little public engagement there is with the consultation process. It is a shame because, it is this meeting that determines how much money is spent on roads, drainage, libraries, climate change measures, adult social care, children's services, planning services and all the various things that the council does.

The cabinet member handled all questions and challenges with confidence and displayed a firm grasp of the principles and details of the proposed budget. The focus of the debate was on whether or not to increase the level of council tax by the maximum amount. On one side is the argument that the council needs the full increase to deliver needed services to the vulnerable, on the other side the additional pressures that this increase will bring to the average household. There are no easy answers but it is appropriate that the questions are asked.

There was a full debate at which the principle points were – the desire not to add to the inflationary and other pressures on our residents, the desire to spend money on climate action, the desire to take money from reserves (past tax) to offset current rises, the desire not to push costs down the line...

The first amendment was to use some money to keep car parking charges down – this passed almost unanimously (which is one of those instances of climate change rhetoric and action not aligning, with the honourable exception of Cllr Wilding who stayed true to his principles).

The second amendment was to rein back the increase in council tax to zero and to fund services through reserves, the new homes bonus and business rate grant. This was proposed by the Conservatives but not supported by the majority of the council.

The third amendment was to rein back the increase in council tax to 1% Adult Social Care funding and to fund the balance through reserves and the new homes bonus. This was proposed by the Conservatives but not supported by the majority of the council.

The fourth amendment was to allocate the New Homes Bonus (1.3m) to support market towns rather than to pay for as yet unspecified actions on climate change identified by the citizens assembly. The council does have other funds for both of those areas of spend so it is a matter of emphasis rather than absolute choice. According to the cabinet member, Cllr Ellie Chowns, the funding for climate change action is in 'everything we spend and everything we do' with about 11m on direct climate related spend.

The amendment was put by the Conservative group but failed to be supported by the majority of the council.

Sometimes, I have to say, the tone of the debate was less than civil and there was a good deal of politicking. My view is that it is the job of the opposition to offer alternatives in the almost certain knowledge that they will not carry the day against a ruling majority; this ought not diminish the right, indeed, imperative, to offer alternatives for debate. It just doesn't need to get personal, at least not in my view.

Other News.

I spent a day with Minister Rebecca Pow as she visited the county to hear about the problems of the Wye. This is the second time I have had the opportunity of meeting her and have to say she is very sharp and has a firm grasp of the issue. We had a farm tour in Fownhope looking at the arable farming in a riverside context and the ways in which the farmer has been able to use funding to plant buffer strips and leave some grass ley on the riverside flood plain. The meeting was also attended by lots of Environment Agency officers and senior staff as there has been a good deal of criticism of the EA for their inaction and reluctance to be an effective regulator. It is important to understand the restrictions and obstacles that they face in trying to be an effective regulator – partly resource, partly prioritisation, partly the efficacy of the legislation itself and partly a cultural desire to solve everything with advice and voluntary measures rather than court action.

Water Resources West

I attended an interesting meeting discussing the challenges of water security – it seems amazing (and I did say this) that we in the west should be discussing the dangers of drought when for many months of the year it does nothing but rain. Surely we need to capture, retain, use more of that water rather than letting it flood houses, wash out fields and rush out to the Bristol Channel. This is not entirely unconnected with the meeting above in as much as healthy soils have a far greater infiltration rate and so the farmer with healthy soil is not going to need to irrigate quite as early or as much as the farmer who has flushed their top soil away or failed to use soil improving rotations. Either way it looks as if we are going to see increasing control of abstraction and water usage in the future. I referred the meeting to the multiple winter storage lakes that are being built by farmers to offset the risk of reduced abstraction and was surprised that the rest of the meeting were not aware of the investment being made. I think there is a great opportunity around on-farm winter storage lakes to provide the farmer with multiple additional income streams and multiple biodiversity benefits.

Biodiversity Net Gain

I attended a really interesting meeting about the requirement for biodiversity net gain (BNG) that is now enshrined in law (The Environment Act). Basically it will mean that a developer will have to add 10% to the biodiversity value of the site after the development. This might also be achieved off site or, as a last resort, as a payment to purchase off site credits. The potential of this bit of legislation is absolutely huge and unlike 106 and other mechanisms there is no argument about viability – it is mandatory. Local authorities can also raise the bar to higher than 10% if they chose to – S. Cambs is aiming for 20% and I very much hope that we will be similarly ambitious. Anyway, there is a current consultation on the DEFRA site if anyone is interested.

IMPORTANT

Planning policy consultation

Can I take this opportunity to urge parish councils and residents to reply to the spatial options consultation...it is about where new housing needs to go in the county.... please respond. Just go to the council website and follow the links.