

Report of Cllr Elissa Swinglehurst happily serving the parishes of Welsh Newton and Llanrothal, Llangarron, Marstow, Peterstow, Bridstow and Sellack.

November 2022

The glamorous life of a local politician – I spent a fascinating few hours touring a sewage treatment works (Llanfoist, Abergavenny) to observe the various stages that ‘wastewater’ goes through before it is discharged into the river. Did you know that they have a gizmo there that can detect Covid 19 in the water? Amazing stuff. Apparently it is used to predict ‘hotspots’ and shows if there is an increase in rates in an area.

It is a total pain that people still flush ‘unflushable’ non-biodegradable things like wet wipes and female hygiene products. These materials clog up all the screens and have to be removed from the waste water. They also clog up the pipes and can cause storm overflows to discharge raw sewage into the river. Remember the three P rule (paper, poo and pee)!

Biddlestone Planning Appeal

Three days this month were taken up with the planning inspectorate hearing of the Biddlestone Polytunnel applications which were refused by Herefordshire Council. The process was relatively informal and it allowed local people to not only make statements but to contribute to the hearing as it went along. We also went on a site visit so the inspector was able to see and form a view on the potential landscape impact etc. The outcome may not be known for a little while as there is a lot to consider over the 7 applications.

Biodiversity Net gain

I attended a planning advisory service briefing on biodiversity net gain which is the government’s plan to reduce species depletion and habitat loss by requiring an increase of 10% as a minimum of the biodiversity of any development site. This will become mandatory from late 2023 and measures will be secured for at least 30 years. Some local authorities have already started doing it and some are going for a higher rate than 10%. This is one of the measures to deliver on the 25yr environment plan along with Local Nature Recovery Networks and changes to agricultural subsidy.

The council can do a great deal to prepare even if they don’t go ahead and implement biodiversity net gain ahead of the mandatory period. I have asked for the details of Herefordshire Council’s progress with BNG to be brought to the Environment and Sustainability Scrutiny Committee so we can be assured that the council is ready. If you are interested in BNG Cornwall council has implemented it early (March 2020), they declared an ecological emergency last year (Herefordshire Council that in 2019) and have already adopted a target for improvement and developed their Local Nature Recovery Strategy.

SACROG

I also attended the SACROG (Special Area of Conservation Rivers oversight group) – this is the Welsh Government group to look at actions to help all the SAC rivers that are struggling. I must say that the Welsh Government are grasping the issue and there is some good work coming forward. There is still a long way to go and there is the need for better regulation but at least the Welsh government are taking it seriously.

Scrutiny Committees.

The Environment and Sustainability scrutiny committee met to discuss the flood strategy. We were joined by the Fire and Rescue Service and also discussed emergency resilience in drought, fire and so on. I thought it was useful to try to clear some communications between the F&RS, the local resilience forum and the parish councils who might be called upon during an emergency. Still a work in progress but it doesn't hurt to consider what you would do if there was a flood or a fire – how would you be able to assist your residents and the emergency services.

Some of this is also about prevention. When we get a weather warning for snow and ice the gritters go out and grit the road as a preventative measure. When we get a weather warning for rainfall we don't do anything to make sure that the road grids are clear of debris....perhaps we need to raise awareness of the importance of keeping grids clear of leaves, particularly at this time of year.

I suggested that the flooding strategy needs to take account of the rural areas as much as it does the urban areas. There is a section on urban drainage and how that is designed to slow the water so it doesn't overcharge the system (and end up discharging in a combined sewer overflow) or cause flooding but there was very little thought about the other ways in which water flows can be increased in rural areas. Climate change is also playing an important part with increased rainfall intensity.

The council is working on nature based solutions as well as engineering ones but it would certainly help if everyone could make sure that the grid nearest them is clear and that they are not doing anything to make matters worse for anyone else.

Scrutiny Management Board met to review the council's recruitment and retention strategy. This is a critical area for the council. There are national issues with recruitment so it is really important to ensure that you retain the staff you have. If you lose permanent staff it is not always possible to recruit to the position and so the council uses more agency and interim staff to fill the posts. This is at a considerable cost to the council and it also means that there is a lack of continuity in service delivery areas. There are up sides as well – interim staff might only be on a short contract to do a specific piece of work, they can bring new ways of doing things with them and experience of working in other authorities.

Cabinet report on obesity – I reported to the cabinet on the Health Care and Wellbeing scrutiny committee findings regarding obesity in Herefordshire. It is important to try to prevent poor health and one of the ways we can do this is by eating well. Unfortunately in Herefordshire, as in the rest of the country, we have children who are obese as well as adults – the reasons can be complex although the basic truth is simple. If we can't reduce the levels of unhealthy weight we will be facing an ever increasing demand on the NHS due to diabetes as well as other weight related conditions.

Save the river meeting in Monmouth.

And finally, I went along to a meeting in Monmouth about the River Wye and what can be done to improve the water quality. The panel consisted of Dwr Cymru, John Reed (Avara), Ben Taylor Davies (ReGenBen farmer), another farmer (I didn't get his name), the Environment Agency, David Davies MP and Peter Fox MS. It was a very good event and the room was packed. Both the farmers were committed to sustainable farming methods and were well aware of the potential for their sector to be part of the problem as well as part of the solution. John Reed (Avara – poultry processing firm) explained his firm's desire to move to a circular economy and to remove the litter/manure to process it and stop the phosphate that is damaging the river getting out into the environment.

The Environment Agency explained that the majority of the phosphate that is damaging the river is coming from agricultural diffuse sources (70%) but most of the conversation seemed to be around the role of the water company.

Dwr Cymru outlined the massive investment (£60m) they are making into reducing CSO spills and stripping phosphate at their wastewater treatment plants but they also explained that the public have a role to play – be careful what you flush!