

Report of Cllr Elissa Swinglehurst Llangarron Ward February 2023

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

Full Council

[Council - Friday 10 February 2023 10.00 am - YouTube](#)

The big ticket item so far was the budget meeting – as usual it was very long and there were a multitude of speakers to the substantive item as well as amendments.

The 4.99% hike in council tax was not supported by the Conservative Group who were concerned about the impact this will have on those who are struggling to get by. The use of reserves was also an issue as it is not a sustainable source of funding.

There are considerable challenges around some very important areas of council work and none more challenging, or more important, than children's services. To give an idea of the level of investment that is being made into this service currently here are some numbers:

In 2018/19 the budget for children's services was £27,571,000, in 2021/22 it was £46,905,000 and it continues to rise to a new overspend estimate of £63,500,000.

The administration got the budget through and the council tax was set by majority.

The Council Tax bills will be sent out this month. A band D council tax for 2023/24 will increase to £1,786.61 – an increase of £86. Added to this is the Police precept (18.8 million is raised in Herefordshire towards West Mercia Constabulary) a band D charge of £264.50, an increase of £14.84 or 5.94%. Also, the Hereford & Worcester Fire service (6.7 million raised from Herefordshire) a band D charge £94.40 an increase of £5 or 5.59%. Finally the Parish precept is also added.

A Grand Day Out to look at a hole in the ground.

I had the great pleasure of going to look at the first Herefordshire Council Wetland which is just being created and, when finished, will remove around 200kgs of phosphate a year from the Lugg. The primary reason for this is to free up some housing by using the reduction to create nutrient neutrality. Housebuilders will be able to buy the 'credit' to offset any new homes at a cost of around £14,000 a kg/P. There will be a benefit to the river of 20% of the reduction – so 40kg/pa which is better than nothing but it doesn't really touch the sides of the 3000t/pa that is accumulating in the soils every year and the 225t (225,000kg) lost to the river from agriculture (numbers from RePhokus report Lancaster University).

The wetland will be fabulous when it is finished, a wildlife rich, bio diverse habitat and I really hope to revisit it in a couple of years when it is fully established. The next one will be at Titley and another will follow at Tarrington.

Litter Out.

I had a meeting with Balfour Beatty and complained (as I always do) about the litter on the A40 and A49. It is not possible for our wonderful community litter pickers to safely pick fast roads and there are places, particularly on the A40, where the verges are starting to resemble landfill. This is an

AONB! Truly, it is disgusting. I am always looking for opportunities to get the council teams out when there is a road closure and at the moment it is very aggravating to see that highways are re-stoning the verges but not picking up the litter as they go. Anyway, in an idle moment, I was fantasising about a big truck that could drive along and Hoover up all the litter – I shared this to BBLP and it turns out that there is such a thing and it was co-designed by BBLP!! I will keep pursuing this because the litter is ugly, it attracts more litter, it is depressing for local residents and dangerous to wildlife.

Childrens' Services.

The Secretary of State via Minister Claire Coutinho MP (Minister for Children, families and wellbeing) has retained her Commissioner Eleanor Brazil to continue to oversee Children's care services in Herefordshire. In the Statutory Declaration published on 1st March - the Minister instructs Herefordshire Council to work and cooperate with Ms Brazil and an appointed improvement adviser until further notice.

This is a good decision. Given the long history of poor performance and particular poor response to Ofsted reports since 2019, having external leadership, directly responsible to the Secretary of State, is the best way that this council's children's service can stabilise and sustain improvement. Giving vulnerable children, families and carers the proper standards of process and support. Maintaining improvement will be a challenge, particularly given the pressures on the children's sector across the country, and will have a financial cost. The current budget for these services for 2022/23 is 54.5 million pounds but is projected by the end of this month to have overspent and be 63.5 million. Most importantly however we have to secure better outcomes for these vulnerable children.

The commissioner Eleanor Brazil has shared her report and it does not make for easy reading – there are some very strong criticisms of the council. I will not attempt to summarise it as that would be to over simplify and possibly trivialise what is a serious and complex subject. Instead, here is a link that will take you to the full report, the minister's decision and the council's response.

[Herefordshire Council responds to Ministerial decision – Herefordshire Council](#)

Rights of Nature

I proposed a notice on motion to full council to ask the executive to consider a byelaw to give the Wye and Lugg within Herefordshire rights. This includes the right to be free from pollution.

Rights of nature is a growing movement, it is a way of recalibrating how we see the world and our role within it. There are rivers in New Zealand, Canada, America and other countries that have been granted rights or 'personhood' and I can see no reason why the UK shouldn't look at those examples. There has already been an attempt to recognise the byelaw for the River Frome, there is an effort to recognise the River Avon and the Ouse but so far no one has got it over the line. I am pleased to report that Herefordshire Council unanimously supported the proposal which goes to show that – although we are about to enter an election – there are some things that are more important than politics.