

## **Report from Cllr Elissa Swinglehurst**

**Representing Llangarron Ward, the parishes of Welsh Newton and Llanrothal, Llangrove, Peterstow, Bridstow, Marstow and Sellack.**

### **August/September 2023**

For a brief period in August I was elevated to the role of acting leader so I decided to mandate free ice cream for everyone and to cut council tax by 50%...oh no, hang on, that was a dream....although I was acting leader for a few weeks.

**'Waste Not...want not'** as my Mother used to say. I am a passionate advocate for reducing waste being sensible, if not frugal, with the world's resources. I grew up in a household where everything got used to destruction and then it was repurposed and used a bit more...I do not understand the world where people buy disposable t shirts, just don't get it – so with that in mind I am really determined to make sure Herefordshire Council does much better at increasing re-use at the Household Recycling sites. In order to inspire the team and show them what I would like to have happen we went to the Llanfoist reuse centre outside Abergavenny – it's a great place where items that would otherwise be destined for destruction are for sale for reuse. The team were impressed and we will be doing our utmost to deliver a service that is as good as that for the people of Herefordshire.

The waste contract is being procured at the moment – it is one of the largest single contracts that the council holds and it falls within my portfolio. The budget envelope is £8m for this service – It's a lot of money to be spending!

### **Planning**

The drafting of the new local plan is also something in my portfolio and I have been working with officers to ensure that it reflects the ambition we have to deliver housing in a way that is sustainable and sensible. A series of briefings have ensured that the entire cabinet are sighted on the policies that are emerging. We have listened to feedback from parish councils in developing the rural policies.

Individual applications for planning continue to come forward and for the most part they are uncontroversial. I will be taking a few to committee which reflects the level of local unrest and is the best way to make sure all sides are heard.

### **Winter is Coming**

Another bit of my cabinet portfolio is climate change and net zero. The council has funding to pay for retrofit of properties to make them warmer and cheaper to run [Home energy – Herefordshire Council](#). Lots of households will qualify – you might be one of them so, check it out!

## **Local Nature Recovery**

I am pleased to share that Herefordshire has been invited to be part of a government initiative where 48 local authorities are taking on the responsibility of coordinating a nationwide countryside restoration effort. The aim is to connect the many natural spaces with each other allowing species of plants to thrive and wildlife to move freely from one habitat to another on a joined-up 'nature highway'. We'll now be producing a [Local Nature Recovery Strategy](#) (LNRS) for Herefordshire, which will be developed in consultation with landowners, nature organisations and conservation groups in the county. We'll also be drawing on the expertise and resources of the Forestry Commission, Environment Agency and Natural England over the coming months, to shape our approach. As the Cabinet Member for the Environment this will come under my portfolio and I am really excited by the prospect of making real the ambitions contained within the government's Environment Act and Environment Improvement Plan as well as the targets agreed at COP15.

## **River Wye**

I have had a number of meetings with DEFRA and DLUHC over the past months to discuss the state of the river and the impact of nutrient neutrality on housebuilders/homeowners.

Herefordshire Council has put a great deal of effort into delivering mitigation for new housing in the form of wetlands. The first is now operational and is reducing the phosphate in the discharged water from a rural sewage treatment plant in Luston. I am looking forward to the official 'ribbon cutting' ceremony but more importantly it is good to know that as the water flows through the system so the planning applications that have been held up will also begin to flow again.

It is important to understand the scale and context of this in order to see what the government was trying to achieve with the Scott amendments to the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill (LURB) this week. The source apportionment data we have for the catchment shows that around 23% of the phosphate in the river is coming from housing (that is all existing housing) and 72% is coming from agriculture. All of the housing in Herefordshire is 86,845, the housing that is being held in the moratorium is around 1600 so as a percentage of a percentage, 86,845 being 23%, it is below 1%. To put it another way – the amount of phosphate credit required to mitigate the impact of these houses is 288kgs. Luston will offset 200kgs, so there is 88kgs to still mitigate (and for which the council has plans). The overall phosphate surplus in the catchment as calculated in the substance flow analysis by the University of Lancaster is 3,000,000 kgs (principally entering the catchment as animal feed), even when re calculated using co-efficients supplied by Avara (the poultry processing industry leader) this is still 1,750,000kgs which does somewhat demonstrate why stopping housebuilding is not going to fix the problem – it is just causing a lot of misery.

Anyway, the Lords have voted the amendments down so the housebuilders and homeowners of the Lugg catchment will continue to have to pay to mitigate or they will be unable to build. The council will continue to explore every opportunity to deliver mitigation to a reasonable scientific certainty so we do not keep on losing skilled workers, jobs and local economic benefit estimated at over 100m a year (400m to date) in a housing moratorium that does nothing to fix the river.

## **RAAC**

If you follow the national news you'll have heard a lot this week about RAAC – Reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete. The situation here is that none of the schools we're responsible for maintaining has been found through our initial assessments to be of immediate concern. 21 schools

don't have RAAC, and further survey work is now ongoing on the remaining 25 to confirm the absence of RAAC, or otherwise. We're unaware of any issues relating to the use of RAAC in any of our public buildings, and all future condition surveys will include a RAAC survey where appropriate.

### **Changes to customer service to increase efficiency and reduce cost.**

Wednesday saw the launch of a voice automation pilot which is being trailed in our customer service team.

Callers to the council's main switchboard about a planning application, to check their bin collection day or to book a time to visit a local recycling centre will now receive an automated response to help with their query.

The voice automation system is being piloted in this small number of areas during a three month trial period. This is to see how successful it is at helping customers get the information they need more quickly and at reducing the volume of calls to customer services so people don't need to wait so long to speak to an agent.

The new system, which is powered by the same software as Alexa, doesn't replace customer services staff, instead it acts as a first layer of filtering. The trial period will test three different customer journeys. The customer services team have been testing the software to make sure it works seamlessly for callers.

During the trial period callers will be asked to rate their satisfaction with the service. At the end of the pilot we will have information about what improvements callers have experienced to help inform any future decisions on the implementation of the system more widely.

### **Lengthsman**

**I would like to take this opportunity to thank our lengthsman and the team for the job they do on behalf of the parish councils and residents in Llangarron Ward. Without them there would be a large number of maintenance jobs that would be waiting to be done. Sometimes it is necessary for them to block the road while they carry out their work. They will always be as considerate as possible in doing this and I very much hope that local residents are understanding and considerate in return.**

**Kindness costs nothing.**