

Report from Cllr Elissa Swinglehurst June 2024

Happy to be representing Llangarron Ward and the parishes of Llangarron, Bridstow, Peterstow, Sellack, Marstow and Welsh Newton and Llanrothal.

May 2024

One year on from being re-elected I thought it might be useful to take a moment to look back over the last 12 months.

When the minority Conservative administration took charge of the council the budget deficit was 13.8m. The financial resilience reserve had gone from over 10m to 1m. The cumulative funding gap (MTFS) was over 15m. Children's Services had been judged to be inadequate and children, for the first time ever, judged not to be safe in the county. The much-needed Hereford bypass had been cancelled at a cost of over 20m and yet no progress had been made on delivering any alternative route (apart from a very expensive consultancy report which concluded that the best route to relieve congestion was to the West – i.e. the cancelled route). Critical projects had stalled or were going at a snail's pace despite a massive spend in project management and over 20m in government funding. The planned relocation of the library to the rear of Maylord Orchards shopping centre and the redesign of the museum in Hereford hadn't even managed to get to planning permission and the fine old Shire Hall was just being left to rot.

So – what has happened in 12 months?

There have been some very tough conversations about the budget, a series of 'star chambers' with each cabinet member challenged to find the right savings to protect frontline services but at the same time reduce the budget deficit.

We are now at a point where we can say with confidence that the 13m hole has been reduced to an 8m hole. It will be better when we don't have a hole at all and – barring the unforeseen – we are hoping to get to that place in next year's budget in place of a previously predicted 19m deficit.

What is particularly encouraging is that we are starting to see some meaningful improvement in children's services – it's early days and we are still being judged as inadequate but at least the signs are more encouraging than they have been for some time.

We are pushing ahead as fast as we can to resuscitate the bypass. We have set aside budget to make a start and we are aiming to break ground by the end of our tenure. There is a great deal to do!

The previous administration were planning on putting the new library into Maylord's Orchard shopping centre. We decided to relocate it to the Shire Hall. This will not only provide a purpose for this important building but it says something about the importance we place on learning – not something to hide away next to Poundland but something to put in one of the iconic buildings of the county. This is proceeding and whilst it will take a little longer the end result will be a great deal better and something we will be proud of for many, many years to come.

We all know that the roads are in a terrible state. This is partly due to the previous administration spending less money on potholes. We are spending 12m more this year – more than has been spent in any of the past 4 years. Although many areas require significantly more investment, it is a welcome step in the right direction. As always where you spot a repair completed by Balfour Beatty or a utility company that does not look to be of a sufficient standard please raise it with me and I will highlight it with the relevant team. Herefordshire Council does use its powers to force utility

companies and Balfour Beatty to return and redo work where it does not meet the standards required however, if these issues are not flagged to them then they are unable to take action.

The third instalment of our additional funding to Parish councils (Aside from the increased Lengthsman Grant - £250k and the Prow Scheme - £250k) is the Local Drainage Fund - £445k. Expressions of interest were due in last month and I am told approximately 90 Parish councils registered their interest. Details of how to apply and the projects that can be funded will be published soon but please do not be concerned if your expression of interest has not been acknowledged.

Countdown to Christmas

It looks as if the promised Gigabit broadband for Llangrove/Welsh Newton Common and Welsh Newton is going to happen! Well done to all of those residents to campaigned for this and encouraged others to sign up. According to Openreach they hope to have majority built by autumn and full completion by Christmas.

What's in Your Churchyard?

We had a lovely Sunday doing an inventory of the biodiversity in St Mary's Welsh Newton. There were an amazing number of plant species and some very special moths. A wonderful way to introduce the next generation to an appreciation of nature in all its abundance and diversity. Thanks to all who got it organised.

On a final note I would like to reassure residents and Councillors that although Government may grind to a halt throughout the election, Herefordshire Council is not subject to the same restrictions and will continue with business as usual. This includes the delivery of vital services, road investment and associated projects. I will provide a written update prior to the General Election but no matter who you chose to vote for, please do make sure you are registered and able to exercise your vote on 4th July. As always if you have any concerns locally please contact me.

Although I am pretty busy with things please do let me know when your parish council meetings are and send me an agenda so I can keep up with what is happening!

Elissa