

Report of Cllr Elissa Swinglehurst – Llangarron Ward

Sorry it's a bit late – to be honest I've been spending all my time lounging around in the sun like a lizard I wish! Actually it has been a busy month and I decided to hold on this report until the second Cabinet meeting at the end of the month where the options for the future delivery of the museum, archive and library services was discussed.

There was a group of protestors on the steps of the Shire Hall with banners expressing concern about plans to 'privatise' the library, museum and archive service and exhorting the council to protect those services. I feel somewhat upset that the public perception is that the council wants to do nothing more than close libraries and damage the cultural life of the county – the fact of the matter, and I tried to bring this out in debate, is that the council have worked with volunteer, community and parish councils to keep the libraries open. I looked on the internet to get a sense of context and decided to compare our Council's efforts with those of one of the London Boroughs close to where I used to live. Herefordshire has a total population of around 186,000 and delivers services (repairs roads, looks after the vulnerable, collects waste etc. etc.) around its 2,180 km²; The London Borough of Brent has a population of 324,000 (roughly twice as many people paying council tax) and delivers services around a modest 43.24 km². In 2011 Brent had 12 libraries and Herefordshire had 11 libraries, today Brent has 6 libraries and Herefordshire has 11 libraries. That does not happen by magic. In addition, during this period, Herefordshire council built the universally praised new archive centre in Rotherwas and the resource and learning centre in Friar Street (both well worth a visit), the Black and White House was improved as a visitor attraction, the Masters House library and museum in Ledbury was restored, Ross on Wye library was enhanced and investment was made (and is still being made) in improving Hereford Library. I kept on wondering what, exactly, the Council had done to justify the general perception that we want to destroy the museum, archive and library services for that, surely, is the implication of the exhortation of the protestors that the services need protecting.

The problem is that the council are obliged to balance the budget – we only have so much money coming in and we have rising pressures in children's and adult care. We are not unique in this, you will hear it on the news most nights, rising costs, rising needs and plummeting funding from central government. What we aim to do is to ensure the future of a service whilst also reducing the cost to the council.

The cabinet agreed a number of recommendations including additional investment of 230k for Hereford library and investment in the Black and White house – the following is from the official press release:

The recommendations also included starting a procurement process to see if there is a partner organisation who would run the services on behalf of the council including generating income and bringing in new people to use the centres. The councillors stressed this should only happen if there was a benefit and would not reduce quality of services, with a final decision only made when proposals have been fully evaluated.

Councillors at the meeting fully recognised the contribution of parish councils, volunteers and community groups in supporting the council with changes it has made including 6 out of 11 libraries now operating as community run libraries. There was also mention of the significant investment the council has made in these services in the last three years - something unusual amongst authorities facing financial challenges.

Cross Border Healthcare

At a parish council recently the issue of cross border healthcare came up – for those who are unaware of the background I will do a brief recap...

Subsequent to devolution the NHS is not a single entity anymore and there are a number of differences between the NHS in Wales and the NHS in England. For instance, in England, under the English NHS constitution there is patient choice over secondary care, in Wales there is not, in England you pay for prescriptions (unless benefitting from an exemption) in Wales you do not. As a result of this – about 7 or 8 years ago, those ‘English Patients’ who use a Welsh GP were obliged to use Welsh secondary care as well. This caused a bit of an uproar and Jesse Norman MP got involved. In the end it was agreed with the Welsh NHS that ‘English Patients’ could ask to be referred to the English hospitals for secondary care – initially this offer was for 5 hospitals only.

As time has gone by there are now a number of areas where the offer on either side of the border is divergent and this may lead to health inequality – in my view if you are English, live in England and pay your taxes to England you are covered by the English NHS constitution – but the problem is that there is no GP surgery on the English side of the border that will take on patients from some areas of the ward (Welsh Newton for one) because we are too distant. I have written to the CCG for clarification of the current position and will keep you informed. If you have any specific problems or questions please raise them with me and I will try to get an answer for you.

Everyone’s favourite subject....potholes

There has been some national press recently highlighting the problem of potholes all over the country – you will be interested to hear that Herefordshire isn’t anywhere near the worst offenders. That being said, the council are very well aware of the state of the roads and will be investing all that we can to improve the situation.

And finally –

If you have ever thought that you would like to be a county or town Councillor the Conservatives would like to hear from you. We are looking for committed and sincere people, in all areas of the county, who want to serve their communities, to step forward for election in May 2019.

As always, if you have any issues, questions or comments please feel free to get in touch.

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