

Ward Councillor's Report – February 2024

Flooding

I am continuing to provide assistance to individual residents / households who were affected by the floods on 9th May last year. Some have still not been able to return to their homes whilst others, although back in, are contending with the problems of redecoration and replacing cherished items where possible.

One resident told me that they had spent £11,000 on two flood-resistant doors to make the property more resilient in future. That's an exorbitant cost and one that few people would be able to afford. Most insurance companies would not fund these improvements, even though it could prevent claims in the future. DCC do operate a Property Flood Resilience grant of up to £5,000 – I am in the process of helping one homeowner to apply – but its qualification criteria are quite strict. Nevertheless, if you would like to find out if your property would qualify for DCC assistance then let me know. It's their new financial year in April and they might just have some money to disperse, briefly.

Strategic Planning Committee

The SPC continues to review proposed elements of the emerging new "Local Plan" in its committee sessions. As an aside it is important to note that these meetings are available to watch live or as a recording on East Devon District Council's YouTube channel. It's quite a useful way of keeping up to date with things and if you're only interested in one part of the meeting you can "fast forward" to that part on the recording. Members of the public are also able to attend and (provided they are registered in advance) can speak for up to 3 minutes to address the committee in the public speaking section at the beginning of the meeting.

The meeting on 13th February was particularly interesting as it sought to address the question of "green wedges" in the new plan. These are a bit like "green belt" land – spaces between towns and villages that the planners at East Devon seek to protect from development to try and preserve the character of villages and hamlets and stop them being subsumed into existing towns by urban sprawl. They don't have the same legal protection as "green belt", which is referred to within the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) which is the overarching guide to planning law, but they do offer at least some protection, especially when they are enshrined within a council's local plan or a village's neighbourhood plan. Therefore it was with an awful lot of surprise that the SPC were faced with a draft of the new proposed green wedges which sought to reduce them in area by c70%, removing a lot of protection and potentially opening up yet more farmland to the possibility of development (even over and above the draft "new town" to the West of Farringdon, covering >500 hectares, that I have previously written about).

I wrote publicly (on social media) to Cllr Jess Bailey (member of SPC) in full support of her opposition to the officers' proposals. To give Councillors their due those that spoke repeatedly decried this proposal and the upshot was that it was returned to the drawing board. The policies in the new plan do need to be defensible to inspection but in this case, pretty recent appeal inspections have actually upheld the rationale of protection of green wedges to refuse development in inappropriate places and to that end I hope we at least maintain the existing wedges in the new plan or even (as Cllr Mike Howe, Ind, suggested) extend them and convert some of them into full green belt. We win this battle but not yet the war...

The Knowle, Sidmouth – Planning Application

A quick recap first – these were the former offices of EDDC in Sidmouth (actually a former hotel) which EDDC vacated perhaps 6 or more years ago to relocate to their new offices in

Honiton (and old ones in Exmouth too – two sites, but don't start me on that one). The property was sold to a company called Pegasus Life who put in for planning permission to knock down the old site and build around 80 retirement units – flats etc of varying sizes. This was approved but unfortunately Pegasus Life then got into financial difficulty and had to drop their plans and subsequently sold the property to Macarthy and Stone, known nationally for their retirement and nursing home complexes. Last year the former offices burned down in a suspected arson attack. In February the new owners (I won't call them M&S) applied for planning permission for a new design – around 160 (much smaller) units within a much taller and unfortunately “bland looking” block. Although planning officers' recommendation was to approve the application the planning committee considered this and rejected the plans, principally as the “scale, massing and design” was seen to be out of keeping with Sidmouth and some of the units were deemed to be overbearing with their windows and balconies overlooking neighbours. Astonishingly, the design's blatant lack of sufficient parking and a heart – felt objection from one of the doctors from Sidmouth Beacon surgery stating how understaffed and stretched they were already were seemingly ignored from the rationale for rejection. I seldom bet but if I were to on this occasion I would wager that if this decision were to go to appeal EDDC would unfortunately lose. The reasons for refusal, which our own committee choose, are not strong enough. Watch this space.

Footpath 1

Many thanks to those that answered my call for volunteers to help with a working party to improve Footpath 1 (between the Tolle House and School Lane). Our first works are now planned for Sunday 18th February and we will probably have a follow up on Sunday 17th March too, in case anyone else wanted to step forward to help! Please do drop me a line if so. Encouragingly, following a meeting with DCC Footpaths Coordinator Emma Hellier, DCC Cllr Jess Bailey, Ted Swan and myself, DCC have agreed to undertake some works to install a safety barrier at the point just above Capper Close where there is a significant drop. They will also look to put together a bid for capital works to improve that particular section which runs for around 20 metres or so.

Peer Review Challenge

In early February EDDC was subject to a voluntary, planned “Peer Review”, facilitated by the Local Government Association. This is undertaken periodically by 5 standing councillors from other councils up and down the country and designed to be apolitical, i.e putting political differences aside. It starts with the review team looking at a myriad of reports, both external (such as audit) and internal, such as management reporting etc to get a feel for what the council does and how it's doing. Then the team come on site and undertake face to face interviews with the senior management team, other senior officers and senior members (councillors) of the council such as Cabinet members. They also “drill down” and speak with more junior staff and also had an open session where all councillors were invited to attend and speak.

This is undertaken over a relatively short 3-day period. During their time at the council they managed to speak to nearly 150 different people. My contribution? When asked what my observations were as relatively new councillor I said (perhaps unhelpfully for them) that there was too much introspection! We / EDDC do seem to spend an awful lot of time reviewing and generally looking inwards. Now is the time to get on with the recommendations / agreed actions. Reviews themselves don't deliver improvements, undertaking actions does. Actually they seemed to agree.

The upshot of their review was really very flattering to EDDC.

- “EDDC is a great place to work, with engaged staff and members”

- “A new Chief Executive is needed (position is currently vacant)... Capacity of the Executive Team is limited at the moment”
- “EDDC is now at a point where it needs to raise its profile externally... and be part of wider debates around Devon and regional place shaping”
- “EDDC’s reputation should be enhanced based on the great work we have observed”
- “Great commitment from officers at a senior level – unbelievably better”.

The review team of course came up with some practical areas of improvement;

1. Progress Chief Exec recruitment
2. Consider Cabinet Working arrangements – leave space for strategic workshops
3. Make “outwardly focussed” work and profile a priority
4. Invest in Member (Councillor) development and training and in political awareness for staff
5. Streamline and prioritise your actions
6. No more reviews for now! (I’ll claim that one!)
7. Consider using member and officer ambassadors to address reputation management and assist with “myth busting”.
8. Develop the programme of external engagement for example with Town and Parish Councils.
9. Greater visibility with housing tenants is underway but sense check what they would value
10. Provide direction for leisure and culture provision

Their report will be officially written up and published by 8th May, with an action plan following by 8th July and a (quick) review undertaken in December 24 too.

Jupp v Foord

On Thursday 15th February the village hosted a “Question Time” - style debate between Simon Jupp MP (Con) and Richard Foord MP (Lib Dem). Over 70 people attended in person with a further 70 or so watching online to a debate that covered such diverse subjects as water quality and the NHS through to how to engage with young people in politics and of course the inevitable potholes. It was chaired by Susan Tribble, Chair of the Parish Council and, judging by the comments that were made by some members of the audience as they left the 2 hour debate, was well received. Certainly in the 30+ years that I have been in the village I can’t recall a meeting like this. I hope there are plenty more of them in the future.

I did take issue with Mr Jupp blaming EDDC for the lack of social housing in the area and directing people to the “voids” that EDDC have – those council houses that have been vacated and are waiting to be re-let. Mr Jupp stated that there were 150 voids – in fact the figure is less than 100 and falling month by month, as I pointed out to him. But it pales into insignificance when compared with the fact that council tenants have a “right to buy” their council house, stemming from a policy Margaret Thatcher introduced back in the 1980’s. The real problem is that whilst tenants can buy their council house from the council at a discount to market value based on the length of time they have rented the property, the council can only keep 25% of even that discounted figure for use to purchase or build replacement properties. The balance is returned to central government coffers. So all local authorities who supply and maintain social housing are facing the same dilemma of ever dwindling stock of their housing to meet an ever-increasing demand. But apparently its EDDC’s fault!

South West Water

At Full Council on Wednesday 21st February a long and detailed motion was proposed by Cllr Todd Olive (full text available on the EDDC website) essentially expressing "no confidence" in South West Water. The reasons were numerous but basically recent sewerage failures, particularly in the Exmouth and Clyst St Mary areas, have been the straw that broke the camel's back. Years of underinvestment in the sewerage infrastructure are now coming to a head.

In our parish we are affected, whether we know it or not, by frequent overflow discharges upstream in the River Otter, particularly from Honiton. This affects the water quality of the river water and causes sickness in bathers, both human and animal such as dogs. There is currently no legal requirement for SWW to report discharges into rivers, only into the seaway, so they don't tell us when they do it.

SWW also seldom comment on housing planning applications and are accused of "running with the hare as well as the hounds" as they are financially incentivised to agree to new housing whilst not needing to confirm that the sewerage and reservoir capacities are adequate.

With all this in mind I was more than happy to be a named supporter of the motion and it was duly carried with just two (Conservative) councillors abstaining.

Chris Burhop