

Newton Poppleford & Harpford Parish Council Annual Parish Meeting 2024

District Councillor's Report

Flooding

Within 5 days of the new term of office for the District Council Newton Poppleford was hit by its worst flood event for 50 years. 55 properties were flooded in Newton Poppleford alone, with more in the farther reaches of the parish such as Venn Ottery, Hawkerland and Northmostown. A total of 105 properties were flooded in Newton Poppleford and adjacent parishes by the same storm event.

The day itself, 9th May, was an emergency situation, with police and fire crews undertaking search and rescue activities and later pumping out flooded properties.

In the days and indeed weeks afterwards the activities transformed to recovery. DCC, the supposed lead flood authority, were somewhat slow to take control of the situation and I was really pleased that within a few days EDDC appointed an Environmental Manager, Matt Blythe, to coordinate works and agencies, managing the situation incredibly well in my opinion.

The recovery operation involved identifying and assisting vulnerable households and clearing rubbish and mud from properties and streets. Nearly one year on many households are still recovering, with some properties still not yet habitable. The performance of insurance companies has been markedly different, with some reacting swiftly and efficiently whilst others have held protracted arguments with the householders & in some cases I have been geeing involved assisting residents in this regard.

The flooding has projected the parish towards the top of DCC's priority list for future works, with flood prevention projects planned or under investigation in the Otter Valley including Venn Ottery, Northmostown, Burrow and the commons. It's imperative that all local representatives continue to lobby to ensure these projects are delivered to mitigate or prevent future flood events.

I am particularly pleased to see the MUGA back up and running and with a working party managing it, following the damage from the floods last year.

EDDC Management

In September the long serving Chief Executive of EDDC, Mark Williams, retired from the post after 21 years – in fact I believe he was England's longest serving Council CEO. Since then a team of 3 senior managers has shared the CEO's responsibilities and steered the council. Recruitment for a new CEO is, I understand, at an advanced stage.

This is the latest step in the transformation of EDDC and recent external and internal audit reports, along with a Peer Review in January, have all commented on how relations between staff, managers and members is much better than previously. In fact the very recent Peer Review was particularly complimentary of the work that the council is undertaking and the progress it is making.

The Senior team have formulated strategic plans for EDDC for each of their areas, and indeed an overall council plan which was presented to full Council earlier in April and contains some 47 objectives and deadlines. Far too many, in my opinion, when these are overlaid with existing management actions from audit reports and peer reviews etc. The Housing Board alone monitors in excess of 100 "Key Performance Indicators", or KPIs. As I said, just too many.

Elsewhere in East Devon

Storm events have caused chaos and cost along the East Devon coastline throughout the winter, with the sea wall at Exmouth being badly exposed in places where previous administrations have permitted shoddy workmanship on the sea defences. Repairs will cost many millions of pounds and have already been disruptive to some of the seafront businesses such as “Mickey’s” restaurant.

Exmouth was not alone, with both Budleigh and Seaton being hit by a combination of spring tides and storms which damaged some people’s beach huts and flooded some sea front businesses and properties.

The incredibly wet winter, with >70% more rainfall than average, has also exacerbated problems on the roads, with thousands of residents complaining bitterly about the condition of roads and cars being damaged by hitting pot holes. DCC are the authority for highways so I have been directing complaints to them, but also helping some residents to register potholes on DCC’s website.

Since being re-elected in May last year I have joined the Audit and Governance Committee (elected Vice Chair), the Housing Review Board and have been working on a major project with the Council’s Streetscene team. All of these roles, plus visits and tours, have given me much more insight into the very varied work of the council, much of which I was blissfully unaware of.

Other

The parish bonfire night and firework event was marred by the extremely late arrival of the contractor, with fireworks, scheduled for around 19.15, not actually being fired until around 20.45. This was particularly galling when we consider that the crowd was one of the highest we have seen there. The PC needs to decide soon whether it wishes this event to proceed in 2024 and if so, do we continue with the same contractor.

The Neighbourhood Plan was given a bit of a new lease of life by Central Government who changed the rules to say that the NP will continue to carry significant weight for up to 4 years from the date it is “made”, up from the previous 2. It is very important that work is undertaken at this stage to refresh the plan to ensure that it will continue to have significant weight after July 2025 when it will be 4 years old.

I am pleased that the Parish Council continues to provide WC facilities to the parish and its visitors. I respect that not everyone on the Council shares my opinion on this matter. Sometimes it isn’t possible for all of us to agree on everything – what a terrible world that would be if it were the case! I understand that much more cost – effective quotes have been obtained for the refurbishment of the existing facility and hope that this can be undertaken soon.

I appreciated the Parish Council’s support for the Otter Trail Group who are looking to put in place a combined cycleway and footpath between Sidmouth and Feniton. It would be wonderful if residents and especially children could safely cycle these distances, particularly to school.

However this could all be a moot point if the footpaths around the Otter and the Red Bridge, the only safe pedestrian access across the River Otter in our parish at the moment, are allowed to fall into disrepair. This remains a grave concern and will be a point of focus for the coming year.

I would like to thank the PC for their support and commend their hard work over the past year.

Chris Burhop