

Flood

Following a fairly frenetic period in the immediate aftermath of the flood of 9th May the Recovery Coordination Group, consisting of all the affected and associated government agencies, has wound down to what is now a monthly meeting to review agreed actions. The next meeting is on Monday 24th by zoom & I hope to be able to attend that virtual meeting. We now await the draft report from DCC into the flood event which should look at causes, effects and mitigation actions that can be taken in the short, medium and long term. I continue to receive occasional enquiries and requests for further help from affected residents and I am coordinating this with the relevant agencies.

We all must remember that, with over 60 homes flooded internally in Newton Poppleford alone and approximately 85 in the parish as a whole, there are a great many people who are still dealing with the consequences of the flood. That includes a large proportion who have had to move out of their homes for what may be up to a year in some cases. If affected residents would like further assistance please don't hesitate to contact me.

I have been copied into correspondence between the Environment Agency and representatives of Burrow Lane which shows there continues to be significant unhappiness at the alleged lack of enforcement by the EA against the landowner. I will continue to liaise with this group whilst they correspond with the agencies.

In discussing flooding with one life-long resident it is apparent that, over the decades, natural flood defences have been either knowingly or accidentally destroyed by us - residents, developers, home / landowners. Ditches have been filled in, hedges removed and natural soakaways have been filled in leaving sheer run off from Mutters Moor for instance. All the while we continue to build on green space, tarmac our driveways and even install artificial grass in the name of progress. With climate change "exceptional" storm events will become more of the norm and it stands to reason that we need more, not less, flood defence.

Prompted by Cllr Tribble I did enquire whether there could be any financial assistance for the PC with their uninsured repair costs for fencing from either DCC or EDDC however to no avail so far. My contacts say they have one further option to try...

EDDC Report - Cllr John Humphries

On Tuesday 11th July EDDC convened an Extraordinary General Meeting of full council to review and debate a report that had been commissioned around 9 months ago into the case of former Councillor John Humphries. Humphries was an EDDC councillor until stepping down in 2019. At that point he was under investigation by Devon & Cornwall police for allegations of historic sex abuse. Nevertheless, despite him being informed of the investigation he was recommended for and accepted the title of Honorary Alderman in December 2019. In November 2020 Humphries appeared at Exeter Magistrates Court charged with 10 charges of sex offences. he was found guilty in August 2021 and sentenced to 21 years imprisonment.

The report, by independent investigators Verita, was commissioned to learn what had gone wrong at EDDC to allow someone who was being investigated for these terrible crimes to remain in a position of authority, with the potential to contact vulnerable people whilst in his role, even though no such complaints have arisen. It is clear that the safeguarding procedures which are meant to kick in and protect the public in these circumstances failed. It is therefore very important that the council learns the lessons of this matter. It would appear that the Council's Monitoring Officer (now departed for a new role) knew about the investigation in March 2016 but he seems to have decided not to invoke the Safeguarding Lead at the council. The council's enquiries will continue to establish definitively if anyone else knew about the matter but did nothing about it.

Council voted on 11th July to accept all the recommendations of the report, including the review of its processes of record keeping and how Honorary Aldermen / women are appointed. The full Verita report is available (search EDDC agenda, public document pack, 11/7/23) and, although disturbing, is well worth a read.

EDDC Full Council 19/7/2023

A full council chamber at Blackdown House, Honiton on Wednesday 19th met just a week after the EGM mentioned above. Aside from the usual acceptance of minutes of sub-committees there were two motions to debate. The first was a motion asking that the council commits to maintaining cash as a method of paying for car parking in East Devon until 2027. There was some disquiet at tying the council in for that length of time and others made the point that we should be making data-based decisions rather than emotional decisions, so a report was requested on this matter - ideally to see what the current cash receipts and trend are - for the Overview sub-committee to review before returning to full council.

The second motion was a long one, suggesting that the council undertake a variety of reviews, mainly external, to compare how we as a council are performing. Many of the suggested reviews are being offered to be funded by external organisations such as the Local Government Association and SW Employers, so the costs to the council and therefore taxpayers should be fairly minimal. There were a host of objections to the proposal from the Conservative group, with a particularly personal attack from Cllr Mike Goodman on Council Leader Paul Arnott which seemed inappropriate in the extreme. I am on the Audit and Governance committee and I noted that Grant Thornton (our external auditors) had recommended external reviews of some of the council's work in last year's audit report. The motion was passed by council despite en bloc opposition from the Conservatives.

Planning

There are a couple of contentious planning applications around at the moment. 23/0624/FUL Luscombes is going to EDDC's planning committee for consideration on Friday 28th July. Cllr Tribble on behalf of the PC (who opposed) and I will be attending along with a neighbour and a representation from Gill Cameron Webb. Plans go to committee primarily when the local ward member's (me!) view is at odds with planning officers. In this case planning officers are recommending approval, hence the meeting.

The second one is Bridge End House, Harford (23/1210/FUL), on which the PC and I have already submitted comments. This has to date received some 54 public comments, 27 in support and 27 opposing. Supporters appear to be increasingly critical of what they see as local opposition to the concept of residential care at the site. I think this is disingenuous. Opposition appears to be mainly focussed on the suitability of the site for residential care given its location on the A3052 and its history of flooding. We await officers' reports on this application.

Tour of the "West End"

On Thursday 6th July EDDC officers arranged a tour of the West End of the district for councillors (map attached!), especially useful for new (or relatively new) members. The tour began in Cranbrook which, over the past 12 years has seen nearly 3,000 new homes built. The town continues to grow and has 7 shops, a railway station, a pub, a primary school and a "through school", which combines both primary and secondary school.

The long-awaited town centre is now under construction and will feature a new Morrisons supermarket roughly the size of the Sainsburys in Ottery which is expected to be open in time for Christmas and a number of new shops. A new nursery school is also under construction. The town is expected to increase to around 8,000 homes and a population of 20,000. There are plans for a health and well-being hub, leisure centre (hopefully with a swimming pool), children's & youth centre and a library and town council offices.

From Cranbrook we headed on to Sky Park, a 100-acre business / industrial estate near Exeter Airport. Eventually it will become 1 million ft² of employment space. The estate is a joint venture between Devon County Council and St Modwen, a major industrial property developer. There is a mixture of freehold and leasehold property and it is served by a district heating centre next to the park. There is currently planning for a further 36 small industrial units and a 3-acre site for a new ambulance regional HQ. The newest resident is a brand new 200k ft² factory for Stovax Gazco which employs 300 people. This site amalgamated several Stovax sites across the country, including a former site in Sowton.

Then we headed on to the Future Skills Centre which was founded from the former Flybe crew training centre after the demise of Flybe back in March 2020. The key here was very prompt action by both DCC and the director of the training centre. Their prompt action allowed both the building and the staff to be retained after Flybe had gone into administration. The facility serves Exeter College with vocational training including electronics and metal work. There are also conference facilities which are used around 250 times a year. They have retained links with aviation, with Exeter Aerospace being nearby and have 6 apprentices starting in September from 170 applicants. They undertake police training here too, including virtual reality training of police drone pilots.

Finally, we visited Exeter Science Park. This is a private limited company but its shareholders are Devon County Council, Exeter City Council, Exeter University and East Devon District Council, which owns 23%. We had a presentation about the history of the park and its development and then a tour of its most recent building, a "net zero" office block which has

an EPC rating of A+. The park is currently at around 68% occupancy meaning there is a fair amount of spare space available to let at the moment & this is hampering the future plan to develop the site which is targeted for "maturity" by 2034. A new 142 bed "low carbon" hotel by Intercontinental is starting to be built at the site and it is hoped that this will attract more businesses to relocate there. The park also offers its own flexible broadband packages from its own 10Gb facility, cashflow management assistance and the ability to hot desk office space up to 5,500 ft².

Bench at bus stop

Some residents may have noticed a broken bench by the Westbound bus stop near King Alfred Way. EDDC Street Scene finally came to take it away in early July and I have asked them to ensure it is replaced.

Otter Trail

I was invited to join the "Otter Trail" group by Ottery District Councillor Peter Faithful. This group is aiming to create a multi-use path between Feniton and Sidmouth, via Harpford woods. It was born out of a DCC report into the feasibility of cycle projects over a decade ago so it's a "slow burner". The path would be suitable for walkers, cyclists, horse riders, runners and wheelchair users. The Otter Trail was incorporated into DCC's 15-year plan in 2015. The group will work to negotiate access agreements with relevant landowners and will attempt then to secure funding for the project which is expected to be implemented one stage at a time, hopefully with Sidmouth to Harpford being the first one, which could include ambitious plans for a bridge over the A3052.

East Devon HATOC

I have been appointed as one of three district councillors to ED Highways and Traffic Orders Committee. With Highways being the responsibility of DCC this is a committee lead by DCC but with three EDDC councillors appointed to it to help boost local representation. The first meeting took place on Monday 17th July and, once a "new" Chair was appointed (Cllr Stuart Hughes) was mainly focussed on approving around 50 schemes to introduce double yellow lines in trouble spots around East Devon. Most were approved but, and it might be encouraging to hear this, where there had been significant local objections following consultations, the proposals were either dropped or in a couple of cases postponed pending a site visit. One DCC Councillor commented at the end of the meeting that this is "a DCC meeting and I don't agree with all these EDDC councillors being invited." Tough. That sort of attitude just hardens my resolve to scrutinise the workings of this committee and at first glance, they seem to do a fair bit of talking but not much checking on follow ups. Evidence of this is the promise of a pedestrian crossing survey in Newton Poppleford at July's meeting *last year* & yet we still have not seen one...

Avocet Chicks

East Devon's Seaton wetlands, managed by EDDC, have seen the county's first ever Avocet chicks hatch. Black Hole Marsh, part of the Seaton Wetlands, was created in 2008 with

support from the Environment Agency. Although Avocets have been spotted at the wetlands for most of the past 15 years this is the first time that chicks have hatched. EDDC are delighted to see that multiple pairs of Oystercatchers are also regularly breeding at the wetlands. Visitors are welcome to visit and observe these rare birds, from a respectable distance, of course.

Pothole claim

Residents may recall that my wife suffered a puncture after hitting a pothole way back in January. Recognising that we were far from being alone at suffering car damage from potholes over the past winter I promised to keep readers apprised of the application for reimbursement from DCC. You may recall that the application process was onerous, requesting copies of the vehicle registration document, MOT, insurance, last service details and a copy of the last invoice for replacement tyres, as well as a photo of the punctured tyre, invoice for the new one, map of the location of the pothole and reference number for the report on DCC's website of the pothole. Phew!

Well, nearly 6 months later we have had a response accepting our claim but reducing it by 30% because of the age of the original tyre, to prevent "betterment", in other words to prevent us having something better than we had before the incident. No wonder people don't bother applying or give up.

The worst of the potholes in the village were repaired back in mid-May, just 5 days after Tiverton and Honiton MP Richard Foord was shown on ITV Westcountry at Joney's Cross, being interviewed about the appalling state of potholes in the County. Coincidence?

Chris Burhop
July 2023