

District Councillor's Report from Cllr. Chris Burhop

If they say that a week is a long time in politics, a month is like an eon. We've certainly had a bit of a roller coaster over the past month.

District Council Elections

I was extremely honoured to be elected on 4th May with a very healthy majority of nearly 500 votes (633 v 138), after a 44% turnout, which, whilst it may sound low, was amongst the highest in East Devon & my majority at 82% was, I believe, the highest. I will strive to do my best to represent the people of the ward of Newton Poppleford & Harpford. As the result was announced I expressed my thanks to the Conservative candidate, a young man called Josh Harrison. Josh has in turn expressed an interest in joining the Parish Council & whilst that is not up to me I wish him the best for his future endeavours.

Flooding on 9th May

My pledge to do my best was very quickly put to the test as the ward experienced an extreme storm and flash flooding on Tuesday 9th May. I myself was at work in Exeter at the time but although my journey back took over 1½ hours it was nothing in comparison to the devastation faced by so many residents so quickly on that day.

Estimates are that between 30 and 40 properties were flooded indoors across the ward with many more experiencing damage to garages, outbuildings and gardens including fencing. The Parish Council's new MUGA facility was badly damaged. My thoughts are with those whose properties were completely flooded, some of whom have been told it may be 6 or even 9 months before the property will be habitable and everything is put right.

The flood was incredibly localised, with EDDC estimating that between 70mm and 130 mm fell locally within a 2 hour window on that day. This overwhelmed the Back Brook with the run off from Aylesbeare common coinciding with the run off from farmers' fields, some of which had been recently ploughed. In the village Burrow Lane, Exeter Road, Meadow Drive, Lark Rise, Chestnut Way and Hazel Close were particularly badly affected. A number of other properties were also affected in isolated pockets throughout the parish too. Venn Ottery was also hit very badly with a number of properties in Barton Mews and the surrounding area flooded through. There were many reports of properties just avoiding flooding too, by the skin of their teeth. The storm seemed to go as far as Tipton St John and then peter out. Unusually this was not flooding from the River Otter rising as we had seen previously in 2008 and 2012.

Video I have seen on line shows the storm in full swing at 14.47. Within 30 minutes the Venn Ottery Road in Newton Poppleford was only passable with a 4WD and 30 minutes after that it was 2½ ft deep in places. The speed that the waters rose gave homeowners no chance to prepare or even react.

The reaction of the emergency services appeared to be first class, with six fire tenders plus boat rescue teams here in quick time in a search and rescue role. Firemen went door to door to look to support people with the most urgent need. At the same time neighbours and friends came out to support those who had been flooded and do what they could. The Parish Council distributed its stock of booms and sandbags but by then the flood water had both risen and receded as there was no imminent warning of flooding, just of the possibility of thunderstorms.

Over the next couple of days there has been a truly heart-warming response from so many residents, many of whom did whatever they could to help. DCC highways and footpath officers were on hand assessing the situation and coordinating the necessary highway clean ups and the EA were also around helping to clear parts of Back Brook that had become blocked with detritus. The Parish Council tried to coordinate help efforts on the Wednesday but in truth many residents took it upon themselves to offer their assistance. A local electrician offered free electrical testing for flooded properties to put residents' minds at rest. There are many stories of residents taking laundry and bringing it back clean and dried & offering meals, snacks and even accommodation to those affected. And many just got stuck in with shovelling the mud and sludge that was both inside and outside so many properties. As I write the neighbours' assistance is still continuing as many residents still wait to hear their fate regarding whether they can stay in their own properties.

I appealed to both EDDC and DCC for their assistance. Normally DCC take the lead with emergency events such as this one, however for whatever reason to date they have been reluctant to declare an emergency, so EDDC have agreed to lead it. On Friday 12th May EDDC sent in teams of trained officers to go door to door to establish any immediate needs. EDDC also started an operation to pick up some of the piles of mud and sludge which had been shifted from properties and gardens to the side of the road and have agreed to bring several large skips so that people at least have somewhere to deposit their damaged goods.

There is a multi-agency meeting planned for Monday 15th May – far too late if you ask me – and after the deadline for this article. I will try and keep residents informed as best I can in the meantime.

I know that many residents have theories about what contributed to the magnitude of the flooding event. 5 days into the disaster is not the time to begin a root and branch investigation but rest assured one will be undertaken and its findings will be published. EDDC officers have already promised this.

So, in summary, my heart goes out to those who have been affected by the flooding. I will continue to do what I can to help residents and I am determined that, if lessons should be learned, they will indeed be learned.

Highways

I'm not sure if the term ironic should be applied here, but just before the floods I had received several more complaints about the state of the roads in the ward, particularly the A3052 near the bridge over the River Otter. Well the floods have definitely not helped the situation. There's a lot of chatter on social media about who do we complain to. In truth all highways matters must be reported to Devon County Council. Even if I report it via their managers they tell me I must log it on their "report a problem" page: <https://www.devon.gov.uk/roadsandtransport/report-a-problem/>

This should be where you report blocked drains, damaged footpaths or anything similar too. I'm told it's progress...

The real irony I suppose came on polling day, 4th May, when SWW had unilaterally decided to come and work on the problem that caused the footpath to be temporarily closed at the junction of School Lane and Station Road. Hey presto, they put up traffic lights right outside the polling station, without a "Temporary Road Order" (citing, I guess, their emergency powers even though the footpath had been closed for weeks and it was therefore hardly an emergency). Meanwhile, at the Tolle House, DCC's contractors chose exactly the same day and time to put up temporary lights covering the mini roundabout as they decided to choose just then to fill in the myriad of potholes on the roundabout.

The result was traffic chaos and gridlock. Instead of standing quietly outside the polling station at 3pm on that Thursday I was directing traffic trying to get the gridlock shifted. This was also peak school collection time. I'm told by the school that some 36 children were not collected on time as a result of this chaos. I had resolved to make it my top priority after the election to go and bang heads together, and then along came the floods!

Richard Foord MP (LibDem, Honiton & Tiverton) chose Newton Poppleford as the place to discuss Devon's roads with ITV Westcountry on Friday 12th May! I directed him to several local hotspots, including the road before the R Otter Bridge...

The New District Council

Following the election on 4th May the Conservative party lost yet more seats and are down to 17, with the Lib Dems picking up a large number of seats and several previous independents switching to LibDem, I believe they finished with 18 seats and independents such as myself 19. Labour had 2 seats and there was 3 green councillors and one liberal.

Whilst there will be no overall majority for any one political party it is expected that the so - called Democratic Alliance will again make a political grouping which will have sufficient support to form a leadership for the council. I have joined this political grouping, as I did in November, following in the late Cllr Val Ranger's footsteps. I will not be aligned to a party and will not be "whipped" or "told" what to do or how to vote.



The tide mark on Berkley Cottage



A sea of mud, inside and out.



County Cllr Jess Bailey helping clean a bathroom



Lark Rise towards Chestnut Way



Mud after the flood, Burrow Lane



Flooded property at Parsons Close



Tennis Courts



Hazel Close South



Hazel Close East