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Press release from today 18th May 2020 East Devon District Council leader Cllr Ben Ingham and Independent Group Cabinet resign

East Devon District Council's leader Cllr Ben Ingham and his Cabinet of Independent Group councillors have resigned today with immediate effect.

A meeting will now be called of the Council to decide upon a new administration.

In resigning, Cllr Ingham made the following personal statement:

“Since being elected unanimously as Leader of East Devon District Council, with the support of the Independent Group I have done my very best to make our council as fit to serve our communities as possible. We created a superb four year council plan that our officers have committed to on such a scale that EDDC received the platinum award for Investors in People, something only a very select number of other councils in the country have achieved. That tells me we were on track.

“Strategically we have planned for the long term interests of East Devon and our communities. So I am sorry to see us forced to stop so soon. I believe the vast majority of people in East Devon will approve of what we have planned and what we have achieved on their behalf. I thank all of our officers for their support and exemplary conduct during this Covid 19 pandemic. They are a credit to all of us who live in East Devon.”

A statement from the Independent Group said:

“The May 2019 East Devon District Council Elections saw an end to forty-five years of Conservative majority leadership. Three broadly equal political groups meant that to form an administration was always going to be challenging, a task accepted by the Independent Group, under Leader Cllr Ben Ingham.

“One year later, the balance has changed. The Independent East Devon Alliance, Liberal Democrats, Green Party and Independent Progressive Group have come together to form the Democratic Alliance, capable of delivering an overall majority of Members in the Council and gaining the right to form the administration.

“It is therefore time for the leadership team of the Independent Group to step aside. Our whole Cabinet is dissolved with immediate effect. Whilst the unique circumstances of an active COVID-19 pandemic are hardly an ideal time for a leadership change, we will ensure this change takes place in a manner which minimises any risk to service provision, disruption to our Officer colleagues, local authority and private sector partners, East Devon residents and businesses, by taking a clear and decisive step without delay.

“Current Independent Group Cabinet Portfolio Holders, and Committee Chairs have all personally committed to ensure their successors in the new Democratic Alliance administration receive a full and comprehensive handover of responsibilities.

“The Independent Group would like to thank all who have supported us during the last year and commit to maintaining a full and active part in the future of East Devon District Council.”

Background Changes in the Council

There is a coalition of parties (EDA, Lib Dem, Greens, Independents and Progressive Independents) who have come together in a bid to form the new ruling group of councillors putting aside their political grouping to work for the good of East Devon, the group is called the Democratic Alliance. There are no political whips or dictating how anyone should vote. It was agreed that the members of this group have very much in common despite being members of different political parties. There has been disappointment over the past year that the ruling party of just 19 councillors were simply carrying on with the policies of the Tory party locally which was not really what residents voted for when they voted in so many councillors of differing political parties last May after 45 years of Tory rule at EDDC.

9 councillors recently left the ruling party, 8 just recently, leaving the absurd position of just 10 councillors out of 60 being the ‘leading group’. The current Chairman of EDDC gave CV-19 as a reason for not having an annual council meeting in May this year where a new leader, Deputy, Chairman and Vice-Chairman could be voted in and take a more pro-active approach to policy. One cannot help wondering if the financial ‘allowances’ for holding certain posts play a part in the decision for some people to hold on to certain posts. This decision has been challenged as Zoom meetings are now very much the ‘new normal’. Democracy and transparency must not be allowed to slip.

It was felt by some cllrs that EDDC were resistant to having Zoom meetings as it suited their agenda not to have them, leaving too many major decisions to be made behind closed doors. There has been a major pushback on this decision and meetings are now coming back onto the agenda, albeit in remote form. The public are still welcome to these meetings and indeed it may be more convenient for the public to tune in from home given care responsibilities etc.

Enforcement

While residents have been out and about they have noticed many more concerns about land and use of land than is usually the case. I have raised these with enforcement. This process usually takes some time but I am grateful for residents for raising these. Remember photographs are always useful if you see something that concerns you.

Examples

1. Land being used as a dump adjacent to the railway line close to where this meets the road to Tipton St John.
2. Land supposedly set aside for wildlife being used to practise car racing and shooting.

There have been many complaints about people lighting bonfires on hot sunny days. I am hoping that now the recycling centres are open again this complaint will diminish. Do contact me if this continues to be a problem.

Moor Lane – green lane.

Many residents have contacted me with fears about the closure of Moore Lane which runs alongside a new agricultural barn being built at Southerton and comes out at the bungalow 'Harlens' on the Venn Ottery Road. Ted Swan who maintains all our local footpaths is seeking to have this path given legal status. If you have used that path for more than 20 years please contact me or Ted as we need evidence from users who have used the path for that long as part of that process. The adjacent land owner has assured me he has no intention of closing this path and furthermore is looking to open another brand new footpath through woodland that residents might enjoy.

Barn Construction at Southerton

Some residents have complained about noise and disruption caused by the construction of an agricultural barn in Southerton and an increase in extremely large vehicles travelling at speed through the villages. I mentioned last month that Wales and West Utilities are using land at Southerton near to where the barn is being built to park their vehicles whilst working on the FAB project. W & W Utilities have the power to enter any land to assist with their work, and in turn compensate the landowner I have asked residents to send me photos so we can determine who owns the vehicles via their vehicle registration number. WWU will be on site for about 5 months.

Compliments

A number of residents have asked me to pass on their thanks to the staff at the Woods Farm recycling centre. The system there is working really well and staff are courteous and efficient. One resident suggested the system works so well it should be maintained.

Red bridge

The parish council contacted the footpaths officer Richard Spurway with concerns that the north bank is eroding so much that it may no longer be possible to cross. Richard confirmed that DCC have no intention of making repairs, that they are aware it may need to be closed and again talked of siting the bridge in a new location (one that is no more sustainable than the current one and which would involve a new footpath with permission from the farmer to cross his land. I very much doubt that permission would be given freely). I will write to Mr Spurway asking him how plans for this new bridge and footpath are progressing. I suspect they are not, DCC are exceedingly slow at protecting footpaths. I have made enquiries about an online petition and have been given a recommendation of a site to use.

Re-wilding

A benefit to the current situation for wildlife has been very clear already. One positive aspect is that verges are being left in a more natural state which benefits the wildlife apart of course for dangerous places like road junctions where the growth of vegetation restricts vision. However concerns have been raised that some areas have been strimmed over enthusiastically turning what were once lush verges into mad flats. This is being looked into.

Parish Council meetings

Newton Poppleford and Harpford Parish council meeting is tonight being held as a Webinar which the public can view.

EDDC funds

A meeting was held to look at a report on EDDC funds for the short and medium term. Obviously CV-19 has had an impact on these and there is concern that central government will not be helping out with the shortfall. Concerns were raised about the proposals put forward in that report which is

another reason for the council to be back to full meetings and democratic appointments for the leading roles.

Updates from portfolio member for the Environment 15.05.2020 - Geoff Jung

Current position on various projects. Despite the current Emergency and some staff re-deployed to carry out emergency work and others furloughed and some projects due to social distancing put on hold, most projects are continuing.

Resilience Projects. Following a consultation last year, which our dedicated Officers responded to, the EA amended the financial matrix to calculate the funding for flood schemes, which resulted in a more favourable financial contribution. Although highly complicated the more favourable funding has been used by our engineering team who have reassessed the Sidmouth and East Beach BMS which will protect houses in lower Sidmouth, plus give added protection to the crumbling cliffs on East Beach. The more favourable funding now means we are fully funded for the project which means we, as a district council, can move the project on to the detailed planning stage.

The Exmouth flood scheme, which is EA fully funded is progressing well with work continuing throughout the last few months but with changes due to social distance measures.

Street Scene. Most EDDC parks have now been re-opened. However, Public Toilets need to remain closed until we have carried out further work for 10 of them to open under the strict social distancing and cleaning practices which are required. We have tried to target each town, and more to our beach fronts but because of the extra work these will not open for a week.

Our gardens and parks and green spaces are being maintained to a minimum standard, with less planting due to lack of available plants, and unfortunately no volunteer groups to assist.

Beaches and Water use 1st May saw the re-introduction of the beach controls for dogs. The Prime Minister on Sunday relaxed the rules on open areas and therefore our beaches can be used as normal. However due to Lifeguard training restrictions we will not have the lifeguard cover we had planned for. It is hoped Exmouth Beach will have some cover for the school holiday period. The use of boats following last weekend's relaxation announcements led to some confusion. The Exe and Exmouth Beach are controlled by Exeter Harbour Authority and finally on Wednesday following clarification from ministers, all recreational boating is now permitted on the Exe and other locations throughout the South West will follow suit, but subject to social distancing measures and no overnight stays aboard. These various decisions, taken together will affect the safety of our coastal waters and beaches and probably affect our seaside towns with a greater influx of day trippers, with most facilities still closed.

Recycling and Waste. I would like to thank our officers and team at both at East Devon and our partners Suez, plus Strata for their brilliant work in sustaining a continuous service for our recycling and waste over the last 8 weeks. It's been a challenge with complying to H&S rules sickness and self-isolation plus keeping up with information and press and social media. On Monday 9th May we re-introduced our Green Bin recycling which helps many of our residents with green recycling, plus it provides some revenue to ourselves. The Devon County Council Recycling centres also reopened last Monday but on strict restrictions which will help our residents. There are reports of some delays and a few highway issues in the first few days, and the advice is if you can store waste safely do so and only use kerb side collections

Team Effort I am so pleased that despite the uncertainties and emergency measures our great team of officers, staff and partners have achieved an almost full programme of services for our residents

and contributed great support to the East Devon Hub and District wide emergency support. We have a long road ahead through the many months of further uncertainty until we can start our recovery plan.

Recovery Stage. We are expecting a difficult return to a “new normal” with a recession, financial pressures, employment losses and many companies closing which will require a careful and considered approach by this Council. This must include new environmental vigour, to face our other declared Emergency: “Climate Change”

Cllr Geoff Jung

Extract from the Housing officer on Home Safeguard and the homeless during CV-19

We have continued to maintain Home Safeguard, ensuring the 24/7 service continues to run throughout the pandemic- we have altered some of the shifts in order to meet service demand but overall staffing provision has not been an issue to date and demand has been manageable. We are continuing to apply the restricted access process whereby visitors are not allowed to enter the building, this includes staff not on shift so access is only given to staff coming on shifts and to one Manager.

Estate Management have seen an increase in calls with people complaining about neighbours/households nearby- mainly noise complaints which was expected due to the increased amount of time people have been spending at home. The Officers have been doing their best to intervene in these situations as best they can via telephone contact with residents.

Wellbeing Checks

We took the decision to introduce wellbeing checks to vulnerable people living in our general purpose properties, recognising that not all of our vulnerable residents reside in sheltered housing. We have recently extended this to all general purpose tenants and have been utilising Officers from across the service to do this. This has been really appreciated by residents, they have been delighted to hear from us and we have received many messages of thanks for undertaking these additional checks. We have a small number who due to having no other forms of support have requested a regular call-back so we have also committed to doing this.

Housing Needs and Allocations – homeless people.

Our Housing Needs team have dealt with some complex approaches where solutions have not been straight-forward.

We have re-deployed some Officers from Housing Allocations into Housing Needs in order to assist with the complexity of some of the issues being dealt with.

We are continuing to see high numbers of homeless approaches, currently averaging a homeless on the day approach each day, and seven approaches have been made via the out of hours service over the last week alone. We now have 50 new households currently accommodated in temporary accommodation, the vast majority in B&B, vast majority of those single applicants. The team remain focused on assessment, support and ‘move on’ where appropriate and to date 19 positive move on’s have been achieved for people in B&B since lockdown.

Ward Councillors Report to the Parish Council May 2020
Val Ranger, Newton Poppleford and Harpford.

The team are working hard to move people on with positive outcomes – although affordability and complex needs of customers is proving to be an issue. We have seen a very recent rise in domestic abuse related cases. Our team are continuing outreach sessions to follow up new reports of rough sleepers.

We have been able to undertake a few sign-ups during the period where the moves were deemed as essential, we have of course ensured social distancing measures are taken into consideration. You may be aware of the announcement this week in relation to house moves being able to now go ahead, we are assessing the guidance carefully and will look to work towards how we scale back up this area to ensure we are assisting people to move into our properties as soon as we can. During this period we have undertaken a review of the housing register and have removed 700 entries due to them being inactive or now no longer requiring accommodation, all households this relates to have been contacted so they are aware of the situation.

Devon Home Choice adverts have been on hold for some time, we are recommencing the advertising of properties from next week.

Val Ranger