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Neighbourhood Plan

Public Consultation – this is finally ready to go out for the first public consultation in its draft form on 1st November for 6 weeks. The consultation must be sent to approximately 40 statutory bodies including all the adjacent counties and parish councils. Summary paper copies will be placed in all the shops in Newton Poppleford, and the pub and churches, the village halls etc. It will be available electronically on the parish council website and both in summary and in full. There will be large print copies available. It can also be emailed out to resident’s associations and clubs etc. We will also be visiting groups and clubs to talk about the plan.

There will be two open events towards the end of the 6-week period; one in the pavilion and one in Newton Poppleford village hall. The idea is that residents’ questions can be answered, and comments can be noted down in person.

Once that consultation ends, all feedback is reviewed, and changes are made to the plan if thought appropriate. There is then another 6-week consultation. When it finally goes to the planning inspector, they make may suggestions which also have to be taken on board. When it is finally considered sound by the inspector the whole village referendum will be held. That again takes about 6 weeks for the notice in the run up to the election and the voting process. In order to be adopted most of those voting must support it.

Car Parking Charges

It has been a heated time of debate at the District Council. As the new administration settles in, some councillors are becoming impatient for more change. I was sympathetic in May to the view that change takes time, and it was important not to destabilise the council by too rapid change. However, with a change in administration, I think residents will expect to see change coming and as councillors we should also start to feel a change in attitude. The change I am looking for is not to blindly accept reports from Officers and approve them which is what frequently happened before. These reports were always voted through as the Whip was used to ensure that the ruling party voted them through. This is the reason that it is so important to be an Independent councillor, in my opinion.

At Cabinet on Wednesday 2nd October there was a heated debate about a proposed number of changes to parking regulations, not least a rise of 50% in town car parks (the council refer to them as the ‘busiest’ car parks), rising from £1.00 to £1.50 per hour. Plus extending the core payment times by an hour to 7.00 pm. Numerous concerns were put forward, about the impact on those on a tight budget, the lack of cheap public transport as an alternative, the fact this may drive shoppers to the larger out of town shops with free parking, that retail premises were already struggling and anything that impacts adversely should be avoided and not least the principle of a 50% rise in one hit.

I felt the longer core times would impact on families taking their children to afterschool events such as for swimming lessons, adding another £1 to what they already pay on top of parking and for the lessons. Furthermore, the idea of £1.50 per hour charges was supposed to encourage shoppers to park in other car parks outside the centre of the town, thus adversely impacting on those with more limited mobility or families with small children, buggies, heavy shopping etc. However, one of those car parks, the Manor Car park in Sidmouth is locked up at 7.00 pm despite it being a 24-hour car park, with 24-hour charges. The signage there is completely baffling. I asked if EDDC are charging for a 24-hour period, does that mean EDDC have 24-hour enforcement officers giving out tickets? Naturally the answer to that is clearly no, but the officer stated that enforcement officers work on a rota of extended hours. Whilst I imagine they might routinely start early and finish late; I doubt any are patrolling virtually empty car parks in the middle of the night. Though I cannot state emphatically that this is the case.

There was a proposal to start charging in car parks that are currently free. Some councillors agreed with this stating that those in paying car parks were subsidising the free car parks. Given how neglected these generally are, in need of new lines and some needing resurfacing, it is hard to see how they have been 'subsidized' to date. It is hard to see how EDDC have invested any money of note into the Newton Poppleford Car park, certainly since I have lived in the parish (1993) so that argument holds very little weight with me. Temple Street Car park lost some of its free parking spaces for 11 'residents permits'. Some businesses have stated that these permits are bought by second homeowners in many cases and often remain empty whilst potential shoppers struggle to find a parking space and local businesses feel this has impacted negatively on their footfall. Proposals to charge for the remaining free places at Temple Street have not gone down well.

I will certainly be opposing charges for Newton Poppleford car park for the following reasons:

- 60 staff work at the school. Many of these are low paid part time workers. Although a proportion may live locally and be able to walk to the school, many do not. Despite the school being brand new, there is no parking on site except for a couple of disabled parking bays.
- Many of the houses in School Lane have no parking on site, nor a garage. They will be forced to park on the local streets. These are already congested. There are double yellow lines in the area and more parked cars on the road will make it even more dangerous for children walking to school and trying to cross the road.
- Local businesses do not need this additional barrier to trade.
- If parking permits were introduced, how will these be sold? First come first served, a lottery?
- The car park has numerous rights of way across it, and private garages, not to mention those visiting the doctor's surgery. A resident has already contacted me to say they don't feel they should have to pay to visit the doctor and they are unable to walk from the western end of the village to the car park.
- The car park is often a gathering place for people who drive there and then take the bus or a coach ride further afield. To have to pay for parking all day would also push them onto free street parking.
- There may be an option for the Parish Council to take over the running of the car park, something they have debated for several years.

Data showed that in Ottery St Mary once parking charges rose, there was a drop in the number of cars paying to park there and so there was a proposal to:

“introduce our usual winter price offer (all day parking for just £2) here with immediate effect rather than waiting for 1 November. It is our experience that this offer does not impact negatively on our own revenue with customers seeing £2 all day as great value. The additional revenue from more £2 tickets being purchased outweighs any loss of revenue from higher value sales”.

This was supported.

It is bizarre that EDDC should concede the above and yet on the other hand propose to increase charges in other towns by a massive 50%.

The officer also recommended offering free coach parking in Seaton for a twelve-month trial period starting immediately to enable them to assess whether the offer results in increased coach visits to the town. This again was widely supported.

Prior to the Cabinet meeting, on 24th September, I asked the officer preparing the report for a copy of the spreadsheet showing the income for every car park, from which he had presumably compiled his report. This was not forthcoming until midday on 2nd October. The most worrying part of this is that it was clear that Cabinet, who were making the decision about parking charges, had not seen it either. So they were not making an informed decision in my opinion. I also noted that several car parks were missing from the spreadsheet. What was clear was that senior officers see car parking as an easy cash cow to partly plug the ever-increasing funding gap since the austerity policy started.

What the spreadsheet did show was that the Manor Pavilion car park had received over £18,000 in income since charges there were controversially introduced and the theatre was promised when charges were introduced that money would be ploughed back into it, for example to replace seating. This needs to be investigated to ensure that happens.

In summary over 24 councillors, virtually every councillor in the room, spoke out against the charges. Cabinet proposed and voted to support going to public consultation over the raising of car parking charges to £1.20 per hour in the key car parks, plus supported the reduced charge in Ottery St Mary and the one-year free coach parking trial in Seaton.

Scrutiny met the next evening 3rd October and once again concerns were raised not only about the proposals but how the business was conducted and it was agreed that a car parking TAFF (Task and Finish Forum) should be set up to properly investigate all car parks and parking charges and report back to Scrutiny.

Great Exeter Strategic Plan

I attended the Mayor of West Devon’s Annual Civic Ceremony on Sunday 6th October in my role as Vice Chairman of EDDC. One of the things that came to light was that other councils have already put forward the additional 5 names of the 5 councillors from each of the partners to join the GESP membership, with proportional representation from the political parties. It is hoped that with the new makeup of the committee, now having 10 members from each partner rather than 5, there will be more openness and transparency about the decision-making process. It was also clear that other Chairman already knew the proposed dates of GESP meetings, whereas I had been under the impression these were not yet decided. I was alarmed to hear a councillor again ask the Leader at both Strategic Planning and at Cabinet for reassurances that GESP will go ahead as agreed under the previous administration. I found the response that plans were to progress as planned, rather alarming.

Full Council

This will take place on 23rd October. Several Notices of Motion (NoM) were proposed. These were about:

Recycling – the motion put forward by an East Devon Alliance councillor asked that EDDC track and publish where all the waste they collect goes, in other words behave with full transparency and integrity, rather than saying it is all processed in the UK when they mean it is all sold to UK companies and that EDDC cannot control what they do with it. It also proposed that there was more emphasis on ‘re-use, refill, reduce’ rather than ‘recycle’ which does nothing to address the root cause of all the waste plastic and polluting by-products etc. The Chief Executive turned down this Notice of Motion. However, the proposer has since appealed this, and it has now been allowed and I believe it will now appear on the agenda.

National Park – You may remember that in the autumn of 2018, there was a consultation on National Parks and AONBs. I responded because I do not feel that EDDC give enough protection to the AONB and requested that East Devon and the Jurassic coast should be considered for NP status. The EDA also put in a response as did the Otter Valley Association. I have spoken out many times at EDDC about why there has not been a broader discussion on the benefits a NP could bring to the area, but the former administration always knocked back any such suggestions. I have frequently raised concerns about how the Greater Exeter Strategic Plan will encroach on our area, bringing congestion and more pressure on infrastructure and higher pollution.

The results of the Glover Review have now been released and it suggests that two leading candidates for becoming National Parks are the Cotswolds AONB and the Dorset and East Devon AONB. National Parks bring in a significant millions of pounds of funding for the local area and this is all about supporting local industry and providing local affordable housing for local people without adversely impacting on the area. An EDA councillor put forward a Notice of Motion which proposed that a working party of 12 councillors should work together to look at the opportunities and challenges a National Park might bring. This was turned down by the Chief Executive who felt it did not immediately affect the business of the day and could be discussed by the Strategic Planning Committee in due course. There is a general feeling that once again EDDC senior officers have already made their minds up on this, i.e. they decided years ago they did not want to lose control of local planning, that they considered that Dorset would be doing a ‘land grab’ of East Devon land, but were not prepared to discuss this openly with councillors or to explain their reasoning. This will be challenged.

Car Parking – several councillors put forward a Motion to overturn what was agreed by Cabinet re a public consultation on £1.20 per hour car parking charges until the results of the TAFF on car parking was concluded by Scrutiny. This again was turned down.

Change to the Constitution - It then transpired that changes to the Constitution would be more effective than a Notice of Motion because Cabinet can make decisions by resolution rather than through the full council for certain items. There was therefore another Notice of Motion proposing that the Car Parking Strategy be added to a list of 12 ‘discretionary’ areas of policy that requires approval by Full Council. This NoM was accepted and will be debated on 23rd October.

It has been quite challenging keeping up with all the emails about the forthcoming Full Council meeting.

I-pad update

It transpires that EDDC ward councillors can now have their emails coming into their phones and personal computers as we have for the past 4 years. It was a shame this has taken so long to resolve

but it does work now and it makes a massive difference to being able to work spontaneously and efficiently.

Pebblebed Heaths Consultation – Public Consultation starts 23rd September 2019 – 4th November 2019.

The East Devon Pebblebed Heaths is an area of rare lowland heath in East Devon. They consist of: East Budleigh Common, Lypstone Common, Bicton Common, Woodbury Common, Colaton Raleigh Common, Hawkerland Valley, Harpford Common, Aylesbearbe Common and Venn Ottery Common.

The heaths form part of the East Devon Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and it is also a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), a Special Protected Area (SPA) and a Special Area of Conservation (SAC). It covers 2,778 acres.

At a briefing at EDDC Cabinet on 5th September 2019 it was explained that we need to protect the pebblebed heaths from damage caused by greater population numbers and numbers of people visiting the heaths. For example, did you know that dog waste changes the chemical constitution of the soil which in turn has a knock on effect on the plants that can grow there and the wildlife that depends on them? That is why it is so important to pick up dog poo even in very rural areas. Grazing animals do not have that effect as they only 'recycle' the existing nutrients. The heaths have ground nesting birds that can be disturbed by dogs.

New ways of enjoying leisure time on the water also brings pressure on natural space for birds, for example the growth in paddleboarding means more birds are disturbed on the Exe Estuary. Bike riding, horse riding and increased footfall from walkers can cause erosion and run off from tracks and pathways. New dwellings within 10 kilometres of these precious sites can cause pressure on them and we have the prospect of 30,000 new homes being built within 10K of these sites. Do look out for the consultation on their website and respond to it. The consultation will focus on Entry to the heaths, Managing the car parks, Moving visitors away from more sensitive areas, Promoting less sensitive areas.

There is a **public event at Joney's Cross on 17th October from 1-5 pm** as part of the consultation.

Fire Beacon Hill Consultation. 17th September – 29th October 2019

You may remember there was a previous consultation at the end of 2018. For this second Consultation there were several public events in September 2019 and which will have already happened by the time you read this. Proposals including fencing the areas of fire beacon Hill, FB plantation, Harpford Common and Core Hill Wood to allow wider grazing of animals as has happened on our local commons in Newton Poppleford. The project is a joint effort of the RSPB, Forestry Commission, England Woodland Trust, and EDDC. For more information or to make a comment contact RSPB – tel: 01395 233655 or email FBHconsultation@rspb.org.uk

Four Elms Hill

Traffic has been disrupted lately due to felling of the ash trees along the southern bank that are affected by Ash die back. The trees belong to Clinton Devon Estates. They are investigating replanting of other broadleaf species to replace these, although not necessarily in the same site. They are looking to find hedgerow trees that will be resilient to disease and to climate change such as the Sweet Chestnut and Turkey Oak.

Val Ranger

Ward Cllr, Newton Poppleford and Harpford, 14th October 2019