

## **Annual Meeting May 2022- Report of District Councillor Helen Parr**

### **EDDC is being run by The Democratic Alliance.**

During the year the District Council has had to cope with the problems caused by Coronavirus, in the same way as every other organisation.

**Meetings are still being held on Zoom, and despite strong opposition, Councillors recently voted by a small majority to extend this till October.** No decisions are made by councillors. Decision making is delegated to senior officers who make decisions after listening to council debates on zoom, apart from the decision on the Budget which was taken at a meeting held in person, because only Councillors present at the Budget meeting may vote.

**Staff Wellbeing - Staff Surveys were carried out over the year, and responses showed a very worrying reduction in staff morale and wellbeing.** The pandemic had caused problems, but bullying and poor Councillor/Staff relationships were also reported. The Chief Executive made several reports to the Scrutiny Committee, [which acts as the council's critical friend], and presented an Action Plan. An Employment matter, normally the responsibility of the Chief Executive, had to be resolved at a Confidential Extraordinary Full Council Meeting 9 Feb 2021.

As result, a **Learning Review costing £18k, findings Confidential, was carried out by the Local Government Association to try to improve relationships at the council.** A Personnel Committee was established. The LGA made a number of recommendations, some of which were accepted by the Personnel Committee 22 March 2022, including strengthening the Code of Conduct; improving procedures for Grievances and Employment matters, and increasing training and support for new Leaders/ Portfolio Holders and Administrations.

**Budget and Car Park Charges- A Full Council Meeting was held 23 Feb 2022 at the Ocean, Exmouth, to agree the Budget, including revised car park charges.** The Cabinet had made the decision to **double parking charges** from £1.00 per hour to £2.00 per hour in the Prime Car Parks, the hot spots of Exmouth, Sidmouth, Seaton & Beer. Inland parking charges would increase 50% from £1.00 to £1.50 per hour, eg. in Axminster and Honiton. The Cabinet considered these charges would be reasonable regardless of the effect on the High Street and local residents. A previously unaffordable Wish List of projects costing over £700k was included in the Budget, made affordable by the extra revenue which would be earned.

These huge increases were agreed by the ruling group despite advice that the council could not simply raise car parking charges to bring in revenue to spend on other areas- this was not lawful under the terms of the Road Traffic Regulation Act. Income from parking charges must be calculated for the purpose of managing and maintaining car parks and for traffic management.

Following strong protest from Sidmouth, an Extraordinary Meeting of the Council had to be called to reconsider the charges in the Roxburgh Car park, Sidmouth. **The increases were very contentious, but the Budget was pushed through by the Democratic Alliance.**

**EDDC is administering Government Grant** giving a **council tax rebate** of £150 to every east Devon resident living in an A, B, C or D band property.

**Public Toilets-** the council received reports on the Public Toilets in East Devon and held a Consultation during the year. Despite strong objections, **Colyton Dolphin Street toilets** were listed for closure and disposal eg. to Colyton Parish Council. A period of 12 months was allowed for negotiations between CPC and EDDC on terms of the hand over, and the Unisex Disabled Toilet would remain open during that time.

It is doubtful whether any funding will be available, but hopefully the negotiations will be successful and CPC will find a way to take on the management of Dolphin Street toilets, which are absolutely essential to the town.

**Work on the revised East Devon Local Plan continued and a working Draft Plan has been presented with Strategic sites for development, and a possible New Town.** The draft plan was discussed over several meetings and sent back to be amended. A Seminar was held with Town & Parish Councils to discuss two issues- the Settlement Hierarchy [a table showing which settlements will have development, determined by available services/facilities], and whether Built Up Area Boundaries should be retained. One site has been allocated for development in Colyton- land at the Peace Memorial Playing Fields, adjacent to the Reece Strawbridge Youth Centre. EDDC has put out a further call for development land. **A public Consultation on the Draft Plan will be held in due course.**

**Colyton Parish Neighbourhood Plan-** EDDC planning officers supported the writing of Colyton Parish NP with expertise and advice. The DC held a Referendum on the NP where over 90% vote was Yes, and the Plan was Made /Adopted. EDDC must have regard to Colyton Parish NP policies along with policies in the Local Plan and National policies, when planning decisions are made. The huge amount of work carried out by volunteers over several years was recognised by EDDC and those involved were congratulated. Colyton Parish NP is one of a number of NPs that have been worked on during the year, with guidance from EDDC planning officers.

**A Governance Review of Colyford** was commenced by the District Council following a request from Colyford residents who wish to have their own Parish Council. Residents of Colyton Parish have been consulted and a report and recommendations is awaited.

**A new Action on Poverty Fund** has been opened by the District Council. Grants of between £500 and £5,000 are available for projects and activities to help reduce poverty in East Devon. For details on this and other grants available see EDDC website.

**River Axe Special Area of Conservation-** Natural England recently advised EDDC that new planning permissions for new homes, and other developments providing overnight accommodation, should not be granted in the catchment of the river unless they can be shown to be “nutrient neutral”. This is because of the sensitivity of the River Axe, which is a designated Special Area of Conservation.

The fundamental problem is that there are excessive levels of phosphates entering the river. Most phosphates entering the river come from agricultural activity, including run-off from farmed land. Much of the remainder comes from the waste water from human activity, associated with the houses we live in and business premises and buildings we use. Projects on farms to improve the quality of water discharge eg. covering yards, have been supported and funded by Natural England and the Environment Agency for many years. A mitigation scheme for new dwellings will however need to provide mitigation in perpetuity and so is proving much harder to achieve.

EDDC is now one of over 70 local authorities affected by this issue. **Both Colyford and Colyton are outside the River Axe Special Area of Conservation.** However Axminster is within the catchment area, and this possible embargo on residential building could have a serious effect on housing numbers in the Local Plan and put at risk the 5 Year Land Supply which the government requires district councils to maintain.