

East Budleigh with Bicton Parish Council – Chairman’s Annual Report 2023/2024

Introduction

The past year has been quite a quiet one in our parish with no major issues. The opening of the re-engineered Lower Otter Valley has been the only major development. Ensuring that East Budleigh with Bicton parish remains a desirable place to live and work is a success in itself, as evidenced by some national newspaper acclamations. With so many other areas struggling with social unrest and criminal activity, our parish remains a healthy, trustworthy and helpful community, which is appreciated by all who live here.

Having a broad range of community facilities and organisations is an important factor in this cohesiveness, but it is not all plain sailing. Obtaining sufficient volunteers for all these organisations is an ongoing challenge, including for our own Parish Council. It is an unfortunate dichotomy that it requires a major issue to bring more people to the fore. At other times, most Groups are short of volunteers and some volunteers have, necessarily, to work in more than one area. Recruitment of more volunteers may be an area for a major combined campaign next year, if groups continue to struggle.

Activity Plans

The final opening of the Lower Otter Restoration Project in November was the major event of the year. The improved footpaths have been welcomed by many visitors to the estuary and there is an increasingly changing environment. Bird varieties and populations are settling in and other habitats are being established. There is even a risk of the area being too popular, which was never the original intention (unlike the Axe Estuary with its visitor centre), so it remains to be seen how the area evolves. This project has now extended the range of the Pebblebed Heath King’s National Nature Reserve by about 90 hectares. The associated new cricket facility is fully operational, and the new pavilion is also becoming an attractive tea room and dining venue for visitors.

Housing development in the area remains uncertain. East Devon District Council is continuing to develop its Local Plan in consultation with towns and parishes, but the twist and turns of Government, together with an upcoming election has meant that there is still uncertainty and more work to be done before finalising the plan. In general terms, because the whole of East Budleigh with Bicton parish is within a National Landscape area, it is not anticipated that there would be major housing development within the parish. Modest development is possible. Once the Local Plan is finalised, our parish will need to revise its Neighbourhood Plan accordingly and to incorporate other aspects of change in our community and environment. It is also disappointing to note that the building of housing off Frogmore Road has still not begun, despite plans having been approved for a long time. Planning applications remain subdued, probably as a result of the stark increase in building material costs.

The speed warning signs in East Budleigh and Yettington continue to be effective in calming traffic, but our parish continues to be unsuccessful with “Twenty is Plenty” applications. Although the Parish Council has communicated with Stagecoach about some difficulties in Vicarage Rd, with offers of assistance for resolution, there has not been any response from the bus operator. It is therefore assumed at present that the bus service will continue as before.

The toilet / car park area has been operating smoothly following upgrades and thanks are due to the volunteers who cleaned up the car park. Parking in general remains an issue in the village, but unfortunately, the infrastructure precludes any obvious solutions. The Parish Council is working with Hall representatives in relation to potential Hall redevelopment, which may include public toilets.

The exceptional rainfall this winter has put our flood resilience plans under test, but helpful strategic clearing of the brook by householders and volunteers, together with upstream work of beavers, has prevented major incidents. Thanks are due to our Resilience Co-ordinator.

It is unfortunate that the future of Salem Chapel hangs in the balance. Although identified as a community asset in the Neighbourhood Plan, it is beyond Parish means to take over the building. It was also disappointing that we saw the demise of the historical Mark Tree in the High Street. Some new trees have been planted in Wynards Rd and The Rec.

The Parish paths continue to be in good condition, thanks to the efforts of our Paths Officer.

Membership

Following elections last year, there were insufficient Parish Council applicants to warrant a formal election, so all applicants were co-opted. This left the Council with two vacancies. Recently, however, Councillor Houston has had to resign due to domestic commitments, which has now left a further vacancy. Recruitment difficulties remain as outlined in the report's introduction.

Three new District Councillors have been elected to represent our area (lower Otter) and thanks are due to the retiring members for their long and diligent service. The new members can readily identify with matters in our area.

Precept

The precept (the funding raised from a proportion of Council Tax) for the 2023/24 year rose from £27,950 to £29,345, which represented a 4.99% increase. This increase compared favourably with a national inflation rate running at 11.1% and was the first significant precept increase in five years.

Finance

The Council 2023/24 budget was underspent by a net £2,900 due to cost savings in reducing toilet cleaning frequency. VAT receipts also outweighed expenditure due to timing lag. The savings have been banked for Reserves and consequently the Reserve has increased from £15,196 to £19,678. This sum represents 64% of the precept, which is within the recommended range for the Reserves (25% - 100% of precept). With unbudgeted heavy increases in insurance in 2024/5, the Reserves will provide a safety net.

Communications

Our Clerk, Judith Venning, continues to do an excellent job for the Council and parish in general and thanks are once again due. Judith has set up communication and technical systems that are now established and proving invaluable. Parishioners have found Judith very helpful with their queries and this continues to be the case.

In Memoriam

It was sad to hear of the death of the Late Lord Clinton who had been at the helm of Clinton Devon Estates for almost 60 years. CDE has supported the Parish in many ways over the years and there is little doubt that the Late Lord Clinton was personally responsible for much of that, for which the Community is thankful.

DW 3/5/24