

Report to West Hill Parish Council

November 2022

Jess Bailey, East Devon District Council (West Hill and Aylesbeare) and Devon County Council (Otter Valley)

An end to virtual meetings at EDDC.

At its meeting on 19th October EDDC decided to return to face to face meetings (for all the main committees) without waiting for the technical equipment to be installed in the Council offices at Blackdown House to enable live streaming/remote participation. This means that from and including 1st November members of the public cannot watch live stream meetings (or catch up later) and council members/members of the public cannot participate remotely. I voted against this proposal because in my view it denies members of the public and parish councillors the ability to properly scrutinize the decision making of the council in real time and limits the ability for EDDC councillors, members of the public and parish councillors to be able to participate remotely. Particularly at a time of rising Covid levels when meetings, especially strategic planning meetings are so lengthy, this does not seem sensible to me.

It is worth noting that 230 people watched the last strategic planning meeting on youtube, which shows that there is real interest in viewing the meetings on the new local plan. It will be interesting to see how many members of the public attend this week's strategic planning meeting 'in person' on Tuesday 1st November - I suspect considerably fewer people than 230.

So whilst some members at EDDC may trumpet the return to face to face meetings as a 'return to democracy' in practical terms choosing to return to face to face meetings when there is no live streaming/remote participation is in my view a backwards step. It is worth noting the real gender divide in the voting on this decision – with only two women councillors who voted in favour as opposed to twenty seven male councillors.

I understand that audio recordings of meetings will be uploaded onto the website, but I do not know how quickly this will happen. I have asked the Monitoring Officer to advise, but at the time of writing I have not received a response. There is an intention for meetings to be livestreamed again in the future but no date has yet been provided.

Local plan

The local plan is set to be discussed at the Strategic Planning Meeting on Tuesday 1st November.

<https://democracy.eastdevon.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?Cid=154&Mid=1941&Ver=4>

Key items to note are:

1. Officers are recommending that the draft plan will be the subject of public consultation from 7th November to 21st December. The committee will decide whether they wish to proceed with this.
2. In the 2022 call for sites there were no new sites submitted for West Hill (perhaps not surprising given so many sites have already been submitted!) but three existing sites were re-submitted <https://eastdevon.gov.uk/papers/strategicplanning/011122bpwesthill.pdf>
3. Councillors are being asked to endorse the principle of a new town. There are three options for a new town, with option 1 being the preferred option, option 3 as an alternative option, and option 2 being discounted at this stage. Further information can be found here including the the proposed areas

<https://democracy.eastdevon.gov.uk/documents/s18350/East%20Devon%20Options%20Appraisal%20Report.pdf>

Planning inquiry for the proposed quarry at Straitgate Farm

I uploaded daily reports from the Planning Inquiry from Cllr Roger Giles onto my blog which can be found here <https://jessicabailey.home.blog/>. At the end of the Inquiry the Planning Inspectors did not give any indication of how long it would take for the appeal to be determined, but I suspect it may be several months. As soon as I have any further information I will provide an update.

Questions to EDDC at meeting on 19th October

I asked the Leader and relevant Cabinet member two questions about the tree strategy and tree officer at the EDDC full Council meeting. The responses can be found at Appendix 1 of this Report below. You can also see the questions that I asked about (a) the Council's policy towards an anonymous FOI that had been submitted to me and others about the investigation concerning former Cllr John Humphreys and (b) investment zones together with the responses here: <https://democracy.eastdevon.gov.uk/documents/s18251/19102022%20DRAFT%20Members%20Questions%20Answers%20for%20Full%20Council%20Meeting.pdf>

Appendix 1

Procedure Rule 9.2 to the Portfolio Holder for Council & Corporate Coordination from Councillor Jess Bailey

I understand that there is currently only one tree officer in post, following the departure of other tree officers. Could the Portfolio Holder for Corporate Services advise the reasons for the departure of tree officers; what is being done to ensure a full complement of tree officers; and the impact of the severely reduced number of tree officers on the vitally important requirement to protect trees and hedgerows in East Devon including the woodland village of West Hill.

Answer:

We have made extensive efforts to recruit qualified Arboricultural Officers, advertising three times over the last 18 months and failing to appoint due to a shortage of qualified staff, relocation costs and our remuneration package. As a consequence following the most recent recruitment process this summer we have recruited a Tree Technician and more recently successfully appointed a Tree Officer, initially part-time, then full time in the new year. The acute shortage nationwide of suitably qualified and experienced Arboriculturalists remains a challenge and is one of those “identified professions” we are struggling to fill. There remains Tree Officer vacancy in the team. We will continue our attempts to fill all post as we recognise the importance of protecting the districts outstanding treestock. It goes without saying that our Arboricultural Team Manager has been doing an amazing job keeping the service running with support from external contractors to ensure that we are able to fulfil our most urgent and priority tree works but as a consequence of this situation we have not been able to respond to every request or inquiry from local residents or parish councils to come out and visit when requested. This will remain the case for a while until we can resolve the capacity and recruitment issues we are facing.

Procedure Rule 9.2 to the Leader of the Council from Councillor Jess Bailey. Please can the Leader advise what progress has been made in advancing the Tree Strategy following my notice of motion dated 27th July 2021 and how this strategy will be used to inform the emerging new local plan.

Answer:

We are jointly funding a Devon Tree Strategy working with DCC and the Woodland Trust. The work has been scoped and about to be tendered. Once this has been produced we have funding available to commission an East Devon specific piece of work, which will logically follow on from the Devon Tree Strategy. Our District Ecologist has created a draft tree policy for the new local plan, which outlines our desires and policy needs, based on other policies across the country and the Tree Strategy Plan on a Page and 20 point plan documents produced by the Strategic Lead. This only constitutes a list of “wants” in the current draft, rather than full drafted policies. Planning colleagues think this is fine for the moment, as the Plan work will be iterative for a while.

Supplemental question asked in the meeting and verbal response:

Cllr Bailey stated that the request for a tree strategy started following a Council Motion in July 2021, and so asked for a time commitment for when the East Devon tree strategy would be completed.

In response the Strategic Lead for Housing Health and the Environment said that he could commit on the first phase of the work which would be spring 2023. The East Devon work would follow on soon afterwards but he could not give a date.