

REPORT TO WEST HILL PARISH COUNCIL

CLLR JESS BAILEY, DEVON COUNTY COUNCIL, OTTER VALLEY WARD

OCTOBER 2021

BROADBAND

I am aware that slow broadband speeds continue to be an issue for many residents.

I have been liaising with Airband in relation to their contract with CDS. Unfortunately, the majority of West Hill is not covered under the CDS contract however Airband's network is close by, so it may be possible for residents to be able to access the network through a demand led scheme.

The parish council may wish to contact Lynda Sudlow at Airband to obtain contact details for a representative from the demand led team to advise the parish council.

DEVON COUNTY COUNCIL'S HEALTH AND ADULT CARE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

In September I attended Devon County Council's Health and Adult Care Scrutiny Committee. The committee is legally constituted to examine issues of public concern on health and adult care matters on behalf of the people of Devon.

Despite the unprecedented challenges faced by the NHS and social care crisis the June committee meeting was cancelled. This meant that there was no formal public scrutiny of health and adult care by the committee for the six months between March and September. Instead, there were a series of private masterclasses.

At one of the masterclasses, I had requested various agenda items for the September's meeting which I felt were important. These included the issue of face to face access to GPs and a full performance review including surgical wait times, accident and emergency wait times, ambulance response time and GP referrals. I also felt there should be a report on the issue of finances of the NHS in Devon. I understand £400 million cuts which have to be made by 2024 and the impact this would have on services. The NHS in Devon has been described repeatedly as one of the most financially challenged health areas in the country.

It was frustrating that none of these were included as agenda items.

I was also most concerned by the declaration of a crisis declared by the South Western Ambulance Trust on 8th September and felt that this should be brought as an urgent item. I was advised that the Conservative chair Cllr Sara Randall-Johnson did not see the major incident in the local ambulance service as an urgent item.

Eventually it was agreed that a representative from the Ambulance Trust would be invited to attend. Although, on the day of the meeting no one from the Ambulance Trust was able to attend.

The main item that was discussed at the meeting was the Long Term Plan/Integrated Care System update for the NHS in Devon. However, there was a lack of detail provided (including in relation to finances) to enable an understanding of what impact the Long Term Plan/Integrated Care System will have for residents and their care and what this all actually means in real terms.

Going forward, I will continue to press for the items which I believe to be priority matters for residents to be considered and a 'spotlight review' on the ambulance crisis, has at my request been included on the work programme.

BEAVERS ON THE RIVER OTTER

On 25th August DEFRA launched a twelve-week consultation on further beaver re-introduction. This follows a hugely successful five-year trial at the River Otter led by Devon Wildlife Trust.

I wrote to Cllr Andrea Davies the Portfolio Holder for the Environment at Devon County Council asking her to respond positively to the consultation and I am pleased to have received the following response.

Dear Jess,

Thank you for raising with me the issue of the current Defra consultation on the approach to beaver introduction and management in England, in which I have a keen interest. It's been fascinating to follow the experience of the beavers on the River Otter and, closer to home, I'm delighted to see the careful consideration being given to a proposed community-led beaver introduction on the River Caen around Braunton. Alongside the Devon Wildlife Trust's enclosed beaver site in northern Devon and the populations which have become established on the River Tamar and the Little Dart, Devon can claim significant experience of this topic.

Having discussed this issue with officers, I can confirm that DCC will be responding to this consultation. Rather than complete the online survey promoted through the consultation web site, I will sign-off our comments through the Cabinet Member delegated approval process. My intention is that these DCC comments should focus on a few of the most critical issues addressed by the consultation, informed by the experience of our close engagement in the River Otter Beaver Trial. Whilst the detail of this has yet to be prepared, my expectation is that we will:

- Support the principle and most of the specific elements of the proposed national approach to new beaver reintroductions (and, indeed, the retention of existing breeding populations);

- Highlight the critical role of a local management regime to ensure that any detrimental beaver impacts can be quickly and efficiently addressed, which is essential in order to maintain landowner and community trust and support;
- Emphasise the importance of identifying suitable forms of national support for the funding of local management arrangements, not just for areas with existing wild populations, but also to support new wild releases where a project proposal demonstrates tangible benefits;
- Also emphasise the essential need for flexible licensing arrangements to ensure that relevant parties can take lawful and timely action to address beaver impacts in accordance with the mitigation hierarchy.

Let's hope this consultation signals a positive way forward for re-establishing the presence of beavers across many parts of Devon.

Sorry it has taken me so long to get back to you, this is something really close to my heart.

Best wishes,

Andrea

As an East Devon District Councillor for West Hill and Aylesbeare I have been found to have brought my office of councillor into disrepute. I set out details below.

I "BROUGHT MY OFFICE OF COUNCILLOR INTO DISREPUTE" WHEN SAVING TREES

A complaint made against me by Robert Compton, a property developer, has today been partly upheld by East Devon District Council's Monitoring Officer. My actions, which included standing on the public verge under an oak and beech tree and then parking my car under them, stopped Robert Compton from felling the trees on a Saturday during national lockdown. This protected the trees until a Council tree officer attended and served a Tree Preservation Order (TPO).

Whilst dismissing the majority of the complaint made against me, the Monitoring Officer has concluded that by not leaving when the police asked me to 'I have brought my office of councillor into disrepute' and I am expected to make a public apology.

On Saturday 16th January, when I started to receive worried phone calls from residents, I quickly went to Oak Road, West Hill to see what was happening. The woodland village of West Hill has been blighted by developers pre-emptively felling trees over the years and I am always concerned about this controversial practice. It particularly worried me that this felling was happening on a Saturday during lockdown.

A large birch had already been felled and an oak and beech were soon to be removed. These formed part of a highly prized avenue of trees formally recognised as a 'valued view' by the community in the Ottery St Mary and West Hill Neighbourhood Plan, a planning document which has been voted on by residents.

Despite my best efforts and a series of frantic phone calls to Council officials I could not get a tree officer to attend at the time to protect the trees. The Council has in the past declined to protect these very trees with a TPO on the basis that they were not under immediate threat. Yet on the day when the trees were under immediate threat no one from the Council was available to protect them.

I was at a loss to know what to do and therefore felt I had to take direct action to save the trees. I was determined to save the wonderful trees and so I stood on the public verge underneath them which prevented further work.

I was not alone in being concerned about what was happening - other residents were equally dismayed. At some point the police arrived having been called out by someone, I'm not sure who. I have the utmost respect for the police who I'm certain were only trying to do their best in the difficult situation that was lockdown. They were however unclear on their power to send me home - which was not surprising given the constantly changing rules and laws at this time. I believed (and still believe) that I was lawfully present within lockdown rules.

When talking to the police I felt hugely conflicted between staying to protect the trees and leaving as the police indicated I should. After a while of engaging and explaining their views to me the police became more insistent that I should leave or I would be issued with a covid fine if I did not. I duly left and went home without any fine being issued. When I left, my car remained parked for the weekend on the verge, still under the trees.

As a result of my actions the trees are still standing, and had I not taken the action I did - including not leaving immediately on the arrival of the police - I have no doubt the trees in question, and possibly others, would have been removed.

I am disappointed that the Monitoring Officer has found me to have 'brought the office of councillor into disrepute', when trying to protect trees. I was doing what I thought was right and in the interests of the community I have been elected to represent.

It is incredibly common for developers to suddenly fell beautiful and mature trees to make way for development and in most instances no one can do anything about it. This time because of my intervention I am pleased that a mature oak and beech that form part of a beautiful avenue of trees were retained.

