

Annual EDDC ward member report for 2021/22

Cllr Sarah Jackson | 04/04/2022

East Devon District Council are still facing the challenges of dealing with the Coronavirus pandemic in terms of both service delivery as well as the physical services provided. The local government landscape has changed, and staff and officers are working hard to maintain and deliver the services you have come expect, making improvements where possible and - where there are disruptions - trying to find ways to mitigate them.

But Coronavirus is not the only matters of concern facing us nationally, as a District and within Axminster as a community. There are a number of other developments over the last year, as well as some live and ongoing matters. Unfortunately, I won't be able to go into all of these in this report for fear that it may become the next volume of 'War and Peace', but if you have any questions, or you would like more information, please get in touch.

I have also included some of the work I have undertaken outside of EDDC in my capacity as one of your ward members and some useful links for support, or further information.

Community Support

Over the last few months there have been millions given in grants to businesses to help with pandemic recovery, but many community projects across the district have also benefited from grants from EDDC too. This has been crucial for some organisations as it has come at a time when traditional fundraising has been very difficult indeed. Axminster has seen numerous projects receive support and there are probably too many to list here. However, support doesn't just mean EDDC grants. Councillors and officers at EDDC are always happy to provide community groups with assistance and advice wherever they can. Just last week EDDC hosted a "meet the fundraisers" webinar to help community groups and social enterprises build relationships with other organisations that offer grant funding like the National Lottery, Devon County Council and Devon Communities Together, and learn what they are looking for in a funding bid.

In Axminster, the return of benches to the Minster Green last year was very welcome. This helped create a bit of energy and community in the heart of the town that so many had enjoyed through the Pandemic, and which is otherwise only see on market day. I am also really pleased to hear that the Millwey Community Hall is open again as this gives a home to a real variety of community groups and is very well used indeed. Long may that continue.

There have also been some fantastic new projects pop up including the Community Shed, No Toy Left Behind, Axminster Banners to name just a few, as well a plethora of great new initiative from many of our existing community groups like Pippin's and The Community Waffle House and Nourish. I am really looking forward to seeing all of those projects currently in the planning stages come to fruition over the coming months and will help however, I can. The dedication some show toward the Axminster community never ceases to amaze me. How lucky we are!

Democratic Engagement

Virtual meetings - At present EDDC meetings are still largely happening virtually for a variety of reasons. As such, you can still attend EDDC meetings via Zoom or view them live on YouTube. We have seen great benefits from this approach from a democratic engagement perspective as well cost savings, however the decision to continue to meet online was largely due to health and safety concerns associated with the pandemic and the size and layout of the chamber at Blackdown House. This is due for review soon but if EDDC return to physical meetings instead, we hope that a hybrid approach can be devised to allow the continuation of public attendance and viewing online (as well as in person), but this is an ongoing challenge.

Public participation - The public are also able to request to speak at East Devon Council meetings, and there are other bodies such as the Planning Committee and Housing Review Board where your views as a member of the public are also greatly valued. If you feel strongly about a subject planned for discussion, I would wholeheartedly encourage you to contact the democratic services team at EDDC and find out how you can have your say. You are of course able to contact any of the elected members to share your views, at any time. You can find out which Committees are meeting how to view the agendas and minutes at the link at the end of this report.

Public Consultations – EDDC have undertaken numerous formal consultations over the last year on matters ranging from charging for use of public toilets, the Local Plan, and a variety of new strategies (still under development), as well as numerous other consultations which do not directly relate to Axminster so I will not go into these here.

Regeneration and Improvements.

Regeneration board (RB) - The future of Axminster is at a tipping point. I am still at a loss as to why the Regeneration Board was never established and why the Town Council was not invited to be at the top table when matters critical to the town's prosperity and economy were being discussed. The recent Urban Renewal report highlighted a number of issues that affect, and relate to, Axminster and identified it as one of the top 5 towns in Devon needing some extra focus, spending and local authority support. I am heartened to learn that the Town Council recently resolved to push ahead with the establishment of an RB in collaboration with other higher local authorities and key community stakeholders and I offer my help and assistance with anything that the Town Council wishes me to support, facilitate or promote.

The Skate Park – I will provide a little more detail on this one as it has been one of the subjects I have been asked about most over the last 12 months.

As of this time last year I think it is fair to say that this project had stagnated as it was unclear who would be responsible for driving the project forward. After some very productive meetings between various stakeholders last summer, we managed to work out a collaborative route forward. This new plan;

- Secures the allocated £150k of S106 funding (which would need to be returned to the developer if not spent by September!).
- Ensures that works deliver best value for money making the budget go further.
- Delivers a skate park to last and which is easy to maintain.
- Enables the community that will use it most to manage the site in a way that best serves their needs via the Axminster Skate park charity.

A lot of work has been going on behind the scenes at EDDC to get the various legal boxes ticked, coordinate land transfers and leases with the various stakeholders, and procure the works with the contractor. Subject to completion of these obligations - which I understand are imminent - we expect works to be commencing on phase 1 of the skate park very shortly (hopefully before the end of April).

This is excellent news and a great relief, but it means we now turn our attention to the funding shortfall for phase 2 of the development, which is substantial at £182k. The quote provided is subject review at the end of 2022 and with constructions costs rising rapidly nationally, these funds need to be found as soon as humanly possible to avoid the project becoming unachievable.

I have had initial discussions with senior officers and the Finance Portfolio Holder at EDDC about how we might go about putting in a bid for in-year capital funding to cover a big chunk of the shortfall. They were receptive and I am expecting a report on this to come before the Council for debate soon. I have everything crossed!

The Town Council has also previously committed to contributing a 'substantial sum' toward the project and has assisted the Axminster Skate Park (charity) with some costs already.

I hope that, through the two Councils, the majority of this funding can be secured, but there may still be a need for the Axminster Skate Park Charity to undertake some community fundraising to make up any remaining shortfall. The charity will also need to consider what reserves it will need for the parks ongoing maintenance and management.

Once we all have a clearer picture about funding shortfall for phase 2, I will request a meeting with all stakeholders to work out a plan of action. I would ask that you all support any community fundraising that the charity do undertake, however you are able, so that we can make sure we achieve a complete project, and the very best for our budding young skaters and BMX'ers – we are tantalisingly close now!

Jubilee Field was finally transferred from the ownership of the developer at Dukes Way to EDDC as a temporary measure to ensure that it was not retained by the developer indefinitely and was brought into public ownership as originally intended.

Since then, work has been ongoing to transfer this public amenity to the Town Council who were originally intended to inherit the site, and who are chomping at the bit to make this space amazing. This transfer is soon to complete and gives the Town Council the authority to make improvements to the park for the enjoyment of all.

In the meantime, EDDC officers have been assisting the Town Council in their planning for the site and even contributed several hundred daffodil bulbs toward the Town Council's community bulb planting project that took place last autumn. You can see these in bloom right now!

Public Toilets – Surprisingly public toilets are not a statutory service. This means that Councils are not bound by law to provide them, and some Councils are simply closing their facilities entirely. However, I am sure that you will all agree that they are incredibly important to our communities and visitors alike!

Unfortunately, for a very long time the public toilets (like many of the EDDC owned facilities!) have been neglected and proper investment into their ongoing maintenance has been lacking. Costs have increased and no provision has been made to upgrade them, meanwhile funding delivered to the District Council by central Government has been consistently and progressively cut. In short, they have become completely unsustainable.

This came to a head during the pandemic where cleaning was required to be more thorough and more frequent and compounded by a 'staycation' boom which put the public conveniences under unprecedented pressure, leading to some very unpalatable questions like "should they all be closed?".

EDDC launched a public consultation to establish if people would be willing to pay to use these facilities in order to keep them open in the long term. The answer that came back was 'yes'. The following strategy was formed:

- The most used facilities would be refurbished, upgraded and a small fee of 40p would be applied for each use to help safeguard them in the long term.
- Facilities in reasonable condition but used less intensively would be retained and remain free for now.
- Some WCs in areas already well served, would be disposed of by offering them to other councils or organisations to maintain as public toilets or turned into something else of value.

We only have one set of public toilets left in Axminster and these fall into the first group. At some point in the coming months, the public toilets at West Street are set to be refurbished, and a payment system installed, however, until then these facilities will remain free to use.

Car Park charges – so this has been a hot topic and it was always going to be difficult one.

Car parks are one of the few revenue-generating assets the District Council owns, they too cost money to maintain and they go some way to offset the running costs of some of our other facilities and services. Again, these have become increasingly costly to run, particularly in tourist hotspots where other services, such as waste & recycling and street cleaning are also put under incredible pressure during the summer months. No future proofing strategy had been implemented by previous administrations at EDDC either, and parking charges have not increased for 12 years! No one wants to see parking charges rise, but again this is not a sustainable approach, as it does not even keep pace with inflation.

As a result, the District Council have taken the difficult decision to raise the hourly parking charges in the parts of the District which see the most tourists. However, not all car parks in these towns are charged at the same premium. Those which are used primarily by residents to shop on their High Street will be charged at a lower rate. Further, no EDDC car park stay will cost more than £8, which is certainly cheaper than many other areas.

What does this mean for Axminster? Well, not much really. Our parking fees are not currently set to change as we are not a tourist hot spot when compared with other more coastal areas. However, the purpose of the rises is not designed to penalise residents or our High Streets and so there are other offers in place that ALL East Devon residents can benefit from. This is therefore a great opportunity to bring these to your attention too as they offer great savings.

EDDC winter parking rate: During the months of November to March the winter parking rate applies. This means you can park in any EDDC run car park for just £2 for the full day. You may not be aware, but during that period, if you parked in an EDDC Car park in Axminster, and then drove and parked in another EDDC car park in another town, your initial winter rate ticket is still valid and you are not required to buy another ticket that day!

Annual Car Park Permits: You can buy a car park permit to use any EDDC owned carpark in your selected town* for £120 a year. That works out at just £2.30 a week, and for context, if you use EDDC carparks 5 days a week for work, that is just 46p a day. This is staggeringly good value for money! What's more you can add extra towns to your permit for just £20 per year each, allowing you to customise your permit to suit you. You can then forget about finding change for the parking machine or navigating the RingGo app for the rest of the year! [You can find out more here](#)

* This does not include the carpark at Victoria place (formally NCP). Whilst managed by EDDC it is in private ownership and the landowner has unfortunately decided not to honour these carpark permits.

Coming Soon – Pay Monthly carpark permits: EDDC are also in the process of trying to implement a pay monthly system which would offer even greater flexibility and allow you to spread the cost over the course of the year.

EV charging points – this has been a bit of an ongoing and very frustrating battle for the officers responsible for implementing this scheme. There have been hiccups with the legal agreements with the supplier, however, it sounds as though these are largely resolved and the only hurdle remaining is getting power to each of the sites. With a fair wind, installation of the district wide scheme will begin in the next few weeks. As part of that scheme, installation of several rapid chargers is due in West Street carpark with hopefully more to follow under another scheme.

Planning and Development

Planning in General - The significant upswing in planning applications through the pandemic period which I reported on last year seems to have continued through into this year. In 2020, I considered and commented on around 60 planning applications, last year this number rose by around 65% to over 100 applications. This year I have already commented on about the same number of applications with a few still outstanding from the last few weeks. I have no doubt that this is reflected across the whole of East Devon and so pressure remains high on officers of the planning department.

Notable Planning Applications for Axminster

Development West of Prestaller Farm for 30 dwellings (21/3025/MFUL): This application has been met with objections from numerous members of the public as well as many of the statutory consultees. It is yet to come forward for consideration by the Planning Committee, and it may be that amended plans are submitted before this plan comes forward for consideration by the Planning Committee, particularly in light of the correspondence received from natural England about the health of the River Axe (I cover this shortly).

Solar Farm at Beavor Grange (21/2995/MFUL): this has received a mixed response and I anticipate it will come forward for decision fairly imminently.

If you are interested in the outcome of either of these planning applications, I would encourage you to follow their progress via the EDDC Planning Portal. You can find them by typing their application reference numbers into the search function. [East Devon Planning Portal](#)

The Local Plan – Planning matters have come to the forefront in recent times as the Planning Department are continuing to develop and update the EDDC Local Plan. This was overdue and the process is a long one.

What is The Local Plan?

This is the district-wide plan that lays out what can be built where and what infrastructure and features developments should and shouldn't have in order to meet the needs of the district and the wider community that resides there. This policy sits alongside the National Planning Policy Framework which is set by central Government, and Neighbourhood plans which refine things further to be specific to individual towns and communities. I am pleased to see work continuing with the Axminster Neighbourhood Plan, led by the Town Council.

It takes a long time to develop a Local Plan (our is expected to be complete in 2023/24) and within it, it must highlight the areas where development can meet the housing allocation which is set by Central Government. To date, no District Council has been successful in challenging this required housing allocation, but a failure to meet it takes planning decisions out of the hands of the local people through the District Council, so it is important that our Local Plan delivers and is representative of the needs of our communities.

EDDC has therefore taken a different approach to developing this Local Plan compared to previous years. The current plan was drawn up long before my time as a Councillor, but I understand that previously, work was undertaken to draw up a plan. This was then discussed, refined and sent out for public consultation.

So, what has changed? -

Consultation: This plan is going through several public consultations throughout its development. There has already been one last year looking at the principles that underpin the subsequent policy making that will follow and I would encourage everyone to engage and contribute to future consultations as they come forward.

Policy making in public - Discussions are being driven by the Strategic Planning Committee. This Committee meets in public and its reports and minutes are all available on the EDDC website [here](#).

Recognising specific community views – Before Neighbourhood Plans can be adopted, they too much go through public consultation and referendum. EDDC have catalogued all of the policies in the 20 Adopted Neighbourhood Plans within the district (this is more than most Districts have achieved with a further 20 more in production by their communities) so that they can use these to help inform policy writing. Of course, there will be no way to please everyone as communities need differ significantly, but this is information that was not previously available and will hopefully give planning officers a better insight while drafting proposals to share with the committee.

Ongoing Communications – You may have seen more articles in the local press and on social media relating to planning matters. Recently EDDC issued press releases asking landowners to identify land they would like to be included as a development site. It is important to highlight that each of the sites put forward will need to be put through a feasibility assessment before being presented to the Strategic Planning Committee for consideration. Whilst all theoretically feasible sites will be included in committee reports, there is no guarantee that any one particular site will make it into the final Local Plan. That said, please do remain engaged with the process so that you can make your views known, as and when consultations and public meetings take place.

In essence, the whole development of the Local Plan is being made more open and transparent, and your participation is essential. More information about the emerging East Devon Local Plan can be found [here](#)

Water Quality in the Axe Valley

Natural England recently wrote to EDDC with respect to the water quality in the River Axe and connecting Rivers and tributaries. The decline is because of pollutants entering the watercourse. Most of these pollutants appear to be because of poor farming practices as agriculture still occupies the river Axe Catchment area. However, run off and sewerage from commercial and residential estates plays a significant part too. As green space is built out, the impact on our watercourses is oftentimes negative. Natural England have therefore imposed a block on any further development which could negatively impact water quality until such a time as the situation is improved across the whole area and safeguards have been implemented to protect this watercourse and its habitats from further decline.

This could take significant time to resolve and has implications for most planning applications, be they small or for large-scale housing/commercial development although it is certainly a positive intervention to safeguard our natural environment and hopefully the start for improving the health of the River Axe and its tributaries.

However, this is very much a live issue, and the Strategic Planning Committee will be meeting via zoom to consider an officer briefing on this subject this week (5 April) which you can watch via YouTube – If you are interested but you missed the briefing, you can find out more about [Phosphates in the River Axe here](#)

Our Environment.

Glyphosate – Well, in short, by this summer, EDDC will have stopped using it! Over the last year the Streetscene team have been trialling all sorts of alternative, and less harmful, weed management options in the hope of phasing out the use of Glyphosate on EDDC managed land. As of last week (30th March), EDDC's Cabinet agreed to adopt the findings of these trials and switch to a vinegar-based alternative which will be supplemented by hand weeding. This is more labour intensive and is not as permanent a solution as Glyphosate so there may be a few more weeds around as a result, but the hope is that money can be assigned in the next financial year for the necessary equipment needed to apply super-heated foam, which is another tool in the team's armoury. This is a truly excellent outcome for our environment, particularly our pollinators!

The Climate Emergency - I am pleased to report that EDDC was recently recognised as having one of the best carbon reduction plans across the country by [CouncilClimatePlanScorecards.uk](#) Last year we appointed a Climate Change officer to drive these plans forward and she has been actively challenging her colleagues to make improvements in each of their departments. She has also been working with the wider community to raise awareness about how we can all make positive changes to help tackle the effects of climate change.

Waste and Recycling

Our teams are still facing ongoing resourcing issues and staffing shortages, due to covid absence, continue to be a problem. Where waste collections fail, the team attempt to collect as soon as possible but, if that is not achievable, they ensure that that round is collected the following week so that 2 collections are not missed in succession.

Despite the challenges, EDDC are still one of the very best performing councils for waste and recycling in the country, and in part that is down to our residents who do an amazing job at separating their recyclables which makes our crews job much easier. Thank you!

Did you know... EDDC do not use land fill for your general waste (black wheelie bins). Street rubbish, dog poo and general domestic waste are taken to an energy from waste facility just outside of Exeter to be incinerated with that heat then turned into electricity!

[More information on Recycling & Waste here](#)

Support for Ukrainian and Afghan Refugees

Afghan refugees are currently being housed in a hotel facility in Exmouth on a short-term basis and EDDC are responsible for ensuring that these facilities are fit and proper. However, the government run resettlement programme is managed by The Home Office and most of these families are choosing to be housed elsewhere in the country for a variety of reasons.

There have also been a few questions raised of late about what EDDC is doing with respect to Ukrainian Refugees scheme. The scheme is primarily managed by DCC and host families are providing accommodation for Ukrainian families fleeing Ukraine. We do not anticipate huge numbers will seek accommodation in East Devon for a multitude of reasons, but nonetheless we are playing our part in facilitating the scheme where they do. Devon County Council are responsible for all matters relating to health and social care which includes undertaking the necessary safeguarding checks for host families. EDDC is responsible for ensuring accommodation is suitable and appropriate and providing emergency housing assistance if the arrangement falls through for whatever reason.

And Finally...

I am really encouraged to see that the Town council has now filled all of its vacant seats. Well done to those new members who are giving their time to support their community and who will bring fresh enthusiasm, skills and energy to Axminster Town Council. I know you will all be facing a temporary adjustment period where you seek to realign your resources with the needs of the community which have undoubtedly changed but this year's Annual meeting with a focus on Community Spirit is a perfect start! I am really looking forward to seeing what the future brings and wish you every success in your endeavours. I will continue to assist where I can.

To all those that live and work in Axminster, I want to thank you. I included this in my report last year and I will no doubt do the same next year too, but I am honoured to represent Axminster at the District Council. In the last 12 months I have supported countless members of the public in matters ranging from housing concerns, business support requests, planning matters, access to information and resources. I really enjoy helping each of you, and the subjects covered are truly diverse, so I learn something new every day which helps me to be a better Councillor.

However, in the last 3 months, I have faced several challenges of my own, some of which are ongoing and I would like to offer both an apology and a thank you. To anyone who I have not responded to as quickly as I would have liked, or who I have missed, I am sincerely sorry and please bear with me. If you haven't heard back from me for a while, please give me a nudge.

I would like to thank those who have offered me support and granted me their patience and understanding. I really do appreciate it, and I will keep trying my best and will endeavour to do better in future.

It has been another very busy year at EDDC, and this report could be much, much longer (its already a very long report!), so, as ever, if you need advice or support from EDDC, or you would like more information about anything EDDC is responsible for, you can contact me by phone, email or post and I would be delighted to assist however I can.

Full contact information can be found either on [my EDDC profile](#) or via my [Councillor page on Facebook](#)

The East Devon App

I highly recommend downloading the East Devon App. You can use it to do all of the following:

- See the latest EDDC news
- Receive important notifications
- Access important contact numbers for EDDC and your local EDDC councillors.
- Find out when your next bin collection is and which bins are due to be collected (really handy around Christmas!)
- Request replacement bins and recycling bags.
- Report full damaged or missing bins, fly tipping, abandoned cars, dog fouling, graffiti, litter and missed bin collections
- Find your nearest, WC, carpark, library, recycling centre, leisure, or culture facility (and lots more).
- View a list of the closest eating establishments to you and see their current food hygiene rating.
- View a summary of live planning applications in your area

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