

# Blackdown Hills Parish Network

## AGM Minutes and Annual Report to the Network held on Thursday 29<sup>th</sup> June at 7.30pm Yarcombe Village Hall

### Present:

#### Steering Group:

Chairman: Heather Stallard (Hemyock PC)  
Catherine Bass (Culmstock, BHPN Co-ordinator)  
Lisa Turner (Blackdown Hills AONB)  
Ken Pearson (Clerk Stockland)  
Alison Weekes (Clayhidon PC)  
Graham Long (Upottery PC)  
Jocelyn Pritchard (Hemyock PC)  
Mike Bell (Membury PC)

#### Parish reps and other attenders

Margaret Lee (Pitminster)  
Elaine Mumford (Monkton)  
David Mumford (Monkton)  
David Gollin (Churchstanton)  
Lynne Spoons (Neroche)  
Bob Nelson (Broadhembury)  
Mike Canham (Otterford)  
John Barrow (Dunkeswell)

Apologies: Neil Punnett (Hemyock PC)

Wendy Reed (Kentisbeare)  
Rosanna Barton (Buckland St Mary)  
Richard Griffiths (Stockland)  
Tony Wiggin (Yarcombe)  
Clive Stone (Yarcombe)  
Mike Canham (Otterford)

#### Apologies

Chris Padget (Combe Raleigh)  
Sarah Clark (Monkton)  
Richard Excel (Monkton)  
Steve Horner (Yarcombe)

#### Councillors

Cllr Amanda Broom (SCC)  
Cllr Iain Chubb (DCC)  
Cllr Frank Rosamond (MDDC)  
Cllr Jenny Brown (EDDC Tourism Councillor)  
Cllr Colin Brown (EDDC)

Apologies: Cllr Paul Diviani (EDDC)

**17 parishes represented in total**

**1. Welcome and Introductions:** The chair, Heather Stallard, welcomed everyone to the meeting, introductions were made around the room for the benefit of new attenders.

**2. Minutes of 2016 AGM** were agreed.

**3. Chair's report:** HS reminded the meeting at the last AGM, the BHPN had just submitted an application for £4.6m ERDF money to bring improved broadband access to Blackdown Hills residents. While this had not been directly successful, as a result of the publicity received, there are now exciting developments with the company Gigaclear already installing fibre across the Hills, offering wider, ultrafast access. Qualifying criteria were substantially altered after the ERDF application deadline, rendering the BHPN application ineligible. HS thanked the bid team, Graham Long, Bob Nelson and Adrian McArdle for their dedicated commitment to the application which was completed at very short notice.

During the year, in its capacity as a stakeholder of the BH AONB, the BHPN organised the election of three Blackdown Hills parish representatives to the AONB management group, these are Jocelyn Pritchard, Graham Long and Bob Nelson, elected by member parishes from a field of seven nominees.

The Steering Group met with two of the three AONB MPs in November 2016, reporting back on BHPN activities in the preceding year, updating them on the key concerns (Housing & Planning, Traffic, Transport & Highways and Communications) and confirming that the BHPN would take a keen interest in Brexit negotiations. There is, for example, no clear information on the number of EU workers based in the Blackdowns Hills in any one sector, and agricultural settlements will be of vital importance to the rural community. The MPS are pleased to continue meeting on an annual basis and the BHPN working groups are researching a number of matters to inform the MPs at the next meeting in November.

During the course of the year the BHPN has supplied letters of support for funding applications for village hall refurbishments, and the Upper Culm Crayfish Project, on behalf of the Natural Futures team, which has been funded from Heritage Lottery Funds/.

Comments from the floor:

- Concern about affordable housing remaining available to those who need it.
- Council planning departments seem not to understand what keeps a small village alive, with small planning development applications for essential housing in villages being turned down while larger developments nearer urban areas are being approved.

# BHPN contd

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- The two county Highways departments do not appear to communicate at all.

**4. Financial report 2016-2017:** The financial outcome for the year showed an in year surplus of £78.44. Devon County Councillors contributed a total of £750 toward the cost of redesigning the website. Bank balance at the year end was £1862.13 and now stands a £1739.51. The full account remains to be audited and by agreement of the meeting will be presented at a future general meeting.

**5. Election of Steering Group 2017-2018:** The Steering group was re-elected en bloc and thanked for their input during the year by the Chair.

## 6. Reports from Working Groups:

Lisa Turner talked about the **Housing and Planning** leaflet, recently produced by the BHPN, for the benefit of Parish Councillors. This explains important points to consider with regard to the AONB, the National Policy Planning Framework, Material Considerations and the role of a Parish Councillor. LT asked whether Neighbourhood plans were properly considered by LAs.

Comments from the floor:

- **Richard Griffiths:** Stockland NP was over-ruled by EDDC planning officers in the case of a new school façade (the parish had wanted to retain the Victorian frontage, this was turned down); parish is now contesting a new housing development on the pub site. EDDC should be supporting re-opening the pub, to increase the sustainability of the village, while building the 6 houses elsewhere in the parish. Concerned at the motivation of some District Councillors.
- **Mike Bell:** current EDDC officers appear to consistently over-ride Membury NP, councillors perceive that planning officers are blocking perfectly reasonable suggestions which could do much to ensure sustainability.
- **Bob Nelson:** asked whether there had ever been any suggestion to develop an NP for the whole AONB (theoretically possible, Lisa Turner not aware of this having been done in other AONBs). Reported that Broadhembury has not had any bad experiences with EDDC planners.
- **John Barrow:** Reported that both Mark Williams and Paul Diviani of EDDC had expressed favour for making housing available specifically for sons and daughters of locals, Neil Parish MP and Mark Williams to discuss.

Jocelyn Pritchard introduced **Traffic, Transport and Highways** activities and thanked parishes for their responses to the questionnaire circulated earlier this year. This is being using to establish the extent of current difficulties encountered around public transport, concerns about road condition and where HGVs are particularly problematic. Urged all parishes to complete their responses for an all-round view in the AONB. Already have established that the number of parishes without any daily public transport is increasing, weekly services are also under threat.

Ken Pearson continued on Community Transport matters. Blackdowns Hills Community minibus is currently off the road, maintenance costs are too high to support its operation. Funds are being sought to replace it. There is £12.5k available to match fund a bid for another bus plus maintenance. An application was made for a Govt scheme last December which was finally announced 5 months later, but turned down, possibly due to demand being so high that very few schemes could be supported. Honiton TRIP does cover quite a large area of the south side of the Blackdowns Neither Somerset nor Devon County Councils have any funding available to support any services. For the young and the elderly, there is a real concern about rural isolation. There is a medical car transport scheme operated by Blackdown Support Group operated from the Blackdowns Practice in Hemyock.

Much discussion on road maintenance and the Devon County Road Warden scheme, which has not had very much take up, to the detriment of the available funding which has been halved. One or two parishes have found volunteers who undertook the free training to do risk assessments. Materials are available for purchase from Highways. Overall view is that this scheme cannot replace the regular service previously supplied by Highways in terms of restoring roads, in many cases the whole road needs to be dealt with by complete resurfacing rather than patching.

Comments from the floor:

- **John Barrow:** Dunkeswell has been able to create a layby for passing and improved drainage using their road warden. Also praised highly the new Devon Highways contractor.
- **David Gollin:** Churchstanton questioned whether SCC and DCC authorities actually discuss joint funding in areas like the Blackdowns. Suggested they be encouraged to talk across boundaries. Concerns over condition of roads and fingerposts in the AONB– SCC has a finger post maintenance initiative, not so in the Devon.

# BHPN contd

Graham Long talked about the **Communications** work, first to explain the outcome of the ERDF bid and to thank Heather Stallard for her wholehearted support for the initiative. He described the next leaflet to be published by BHPN for parish councillors to aid understanding of the range of broad band services, providers and opportunities available for residents in the Blackdown Hills. The leaflet will be available in a few weeks.

HS closed this part of the discussion by confirming that all these issues will be taken back to the MPs at the next meeting in November.

## The meeting then took a short break before Councillor introductions:

- **Somerset County Cllr Amanda Broom (Lib Dem)** represents Chard North, has also been Town and District Councillor in Chard Town. With her election to SCC in May 2017 she now represents the five parishes of South Somerset in the BHPN (two are BHPN members, Buckland St Mary and Tatworth & Forton). She has interest in transport, has met with the County Community Transport manager; she is also active in environment matters, and campaigns for a frack free Somerset. She is keen to be involved with the BHPN.
- **Devon County Councillor Iain Chubb (Cons)** was elected to the new Whimple and Blackdowns ward. He is acutely aware of the communication issues in the area. He knows the Blackdowns well, lives in Axminster, on a tripartite county boundary and understands the issues for the BHPN area. He is willing to attend PC meetings (21 in his area). He has raised the question of road maintenance, particularly the issue over the type of stone used in local roads, which is porous and allows water ingress. N Devon roads are less poor, largely due to the impervious granite gravel base used. Potential cost benefits in switching source of road rubble.
- **EDDC Cllr Jenny Brown (Cons)** is not directly responsible for any BHPN parishes, however lives in Monkton and is the councillor for tourism on EDDC. She wished to introduce the new Apple Trail Initiative, a walking trail to link Taunton with Sidmouth via a 60m trail, covering 19 parishes and passing 18 pubs, taking a route through Corfe, Pitminster, Clayhidon, Hemyock, Culmstock, Ashill, Uffculme, Kentisbeare, Broadhembury in the Blackdowns. The idea is that it would boost tourism, resuscitate interest in heritage apples, make opportunities for circular loops either side of the trail. The trail would be a 4-5 day walk on existing footpaths and by-ways and become another National Trail Pathway. Statistics show that walkers linger longer and spend more on this type of holiday. This will provide the impetus for new initiatives along the route for accommodation, shops, cafes, pubs, artisans etc. It is hoped to attract around 5000 people per year to the route. There will be a website and branded waymarkers installed. Any parishes on the route considering upgrading their fingerposts would be able to add the Apple Trail logo to the signposts. Please contact Jenny for more information at [jenny.brown@eastdevon.gov.uk](mailto:jenny.brown@eastdevon.gov.uk).
- **MDDC Cllr Frank Rosamond (Ind)** has been on the AONB management group for 18 years and has three parishes in his ward within the BHPN, Clayhidon, Hemyock and Culmstock. He chairs the Scrutiny committee and has frequent contact with the local MP, Neil Parish, who is very supportive of this rural community and its economy, with a particular interest in getting SatNav corrections to HGV mapping implemented. Frank also has frequent contact with the Planning Officer of the AONB, Lisa Turner, on matters of planning and housing, and is keen to ensure that the balance is kept between protecting the natural environment and landscape without excluding young people who wish to remain in the area but need affordable accommodation.
- **EDDC Cllr Colin Brown (Cons)** represents Dunkeswell and Combe Raleigh and is vice-chair of the Development Management Committee and on the Strategic Planning Committee which is involved in the development of the Greater Exeter Strategy

The councillors present were thanked for their contributions and recognition of the BHPN.

The co-ordinator commented that in circulating the information about the meeting, several councillors in the BHPN area did not respond to their invitations. The email client used tracks email activity and it seems that 4/6 County Councillor emails were unopened (2 replied, one of whom had not opened the email); although 9 of 11 District Councillor emails were opened, just 3 responded. One County Councillor from each County was in attendance this evening, together with one representative District Councillor from each of MDDC and EDDC. It is disappointing that Somerset Councillors have in general been less engaged with the BHPN than their Devon counterparts throughout the BHPN journey. While there are fewer parishes in Somerset compared with Devon (14 to 25) the population density is greater in the Somerset parishes due to their proximity to Taunton.

# BHPN contd

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## 7. AOB and date of next meeting

- **Ken Pearson (BHPN Steering Group)** raised the issue of paperless technology for parish councils, who need to understand what the opportunities are, once the right IT technology is in place. BHPN is planning to organise a training event on how to raise the funds to put this in place; may approach Cosmic in Honiton as a provider. More information in due course.
- **Cllr Clive Stone (Yarcombe PC)** welcomed everyone to Yarcombe Village Hall, pleased that Yarcombe has joined and felt that all the discussion had been very relevant. Particularly interested in whether other parishes have solved their **Parish lengthsman issues**, are there any shared posts being developed or in operation?
  - **Comments: Ken Pearson** suggested this would be a good way to economise on pothole tasks, or to club together to pay a regular road contractor for the work. **John Barrow** recommended attending the Regular Highways conferences in Devon to make contacts and press for action in parishes. **David Gollin** recommended reporting direct to the relevant County Highways authority and ensuring that a reference number is obtained for future communications. **Mike Bell** reminded the meeting that with a parish volunteer being trained through the Road Warden scheme in Devon, that volunteer is covered by county insurance.
- **Cllr Clive Stone** went on to discuss the campaign now just started to purchase the Yarcombe Pub, now on the market, but protected for the community as a Community Asset, under which order the community has 6 months to raise the funds to purchase the pub to ensure its continued use in the community. Envisage a wider remit for its activities than pub only, with perhaps a shop, toddler group or other valuable amenities for local people. Would welcome all suggestions and Letters of Support for this endeavour.

There being no other business the Chair closed the meeting at 21.40 with thanks to the Yarcombe parish for their hospitality, the AONB for continued support, the Steering Group for their work in the year, and to the Co-ordinator for her support for the BHPN.

The next meeting date for November will be announced in due course.