

Blackdown Hills Parish Network

AGM Minutes and Annual Report to the Network held on Friday 21st May 2014 at 7.30pm Blackdowns Healthy Living and Activity Centre

Present:

Chairperson: Heather Stallard (Hemyock PC)
Catherine Bass (Culmstock, BHPN Co-ordinator)
Lisa Turner (Blackdown Hills AONB)
Geoffrey Sworder (Dunkeswell PC)
Ken Pearson (Clerk Churchstanton)
Cathy Gardner (Clerk Stockland)
Bruce Payne (Wellington w/out PC)

Tim Barton (Hemyock)
Penny Lawrence (Hemyock)
Alun Tarr (Churchstanton PC)
Clive McIntyre (Kentisbeare)
Ian Firth (Churchstanton)
Graham Long (Upottery PC)
Gill Beardsworth (BHPN
volunteer)
8 parishes represented

Apologies received from:

Clr. David Reed (TDBC)
Clr. John Williams (TDBC)
Clr. Andrew Moulding (DCC)
Clr. Frank Rosamond (MDDC)
Clr. Paul Diviani (AONB/EDDC/DCC)
Alex Tasker, Membury

Welcome and Introductions

Heather Stallard welcomed everyone to the meeting which started at 7.30 pm

Apologies were received and noted.

1. Minutes & Matters Arising AGM 24/05/2013 & General meeting 13/11/2013

The Minutes of both the AGM of 24th May 2013 and the subsequent general meeting were agreed. Matters arising were taken within agenda items.

2. Chairperson's Annual report

The Chairperson thanked the Steering Group and Co-ordinator for their support during the year, during which there had been five meetings. The actions taken on Communications (including the website) and dealing with Traffic, Transport and Highways matters are moving along steadily under Catherine Bass and Ken Pearson respectively. Geoffrey Sworder has experienced difficulty in raising interest in getting a Planning subgroup together. The Steering Group responded to the AONB management plan consultation (due for publication soon) and has also provided an opportunity for the A303 Ahead team to meet parish representatives to obtain ideas for options to improve the Honiton to Ilminster section.

The Network had anticipated welcoming both Devon and Somerset County Council leaders to the General meeting on 13th November 2013, however Councillor Osman (Somerset) withdrew at the last minute, apparently concerned at detailed questions offered in advance of the meeting. This was very disappointing and resulted in a somewhat one-sided discussion.

Issues for the Network to take forward in 2014 include Broadband, provision of high speed access, particularly for rural businesses, some are considering moving out of the area, matters of highway maintenance and HGV route. Some parishes in the EDDC part of BHPN are engaged in developing a Neighbourhood Plan. There is a need to consider the advantages of clustering in parish groups to lobby more effectively.

Comment from the floor: Cllr John Hart (Devon CC leader) suggested at the November meeting that he would personally respond to emails from the public. An email sent directly to him after the meeting has still to receive a reply.

3. Annual Financial Report: Treasurer /Co-ordinator Catherine Bass

The treasurer reported that the Steering Group had decided to change the Bank to allow use of online payments and receipts. This was effected during the course of December 2013.

The account stood at £2,628.42 on March 31st 2013, having opened at £2,019.31 on April 1st 2013. A grant of £1,000 was received from TDBC toward developing the website and to increase revenue

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raising activities from advertising. The final report on the grant use was submitted in March 2014. The website is beginning to generate income from advertisers and through hosting a number of parish pages. Income support from the Network from participating parishes has dropped slightly since last year as not all parishes were able to contribute again, the imbalance between the preceding year and 2013-2014 is accounted for due to phasing of payments from some parishes. Full details are available in the audited account.

4. Endorsement of the Steering Group

The current members of the Steering Group were all prepared to continue although Cathy Gardner (Stockland Clerk) may reconsider this depending on her time commitment to the Ten Parish Neighbourhood plan. The Co-ordinator suggested that the Steering Group was elected en bloc.

The Steering Group was unanimously re-elected.

5. Reports from Action Groups

a. Communications and Website (Catherine Bass)

The website has continued to develop thanks in large part to the award of £1000 from TDBC which has enabled a number of people to receive training – there are now 6 administrators using and responsible for various parts of the website. Advertisers have been attracted to use opportunities to raise awareness of food/drink/provisions, accommodation and creative activities, a volunteer has been trained to help populate pages about community facilities and the events diary is being used regularly by a number of organisations, and all Parish Network activity is available for anyone to read. An RSS newsfeed is now available so individuals can receive alerts to new activity, meetings etc.

b. Traffic, Transport & Highways (Ken Pearson)

The TTH group hosted a presentation by the A303 Ahead group to enable parishes to make contributions to the options being developed by consultants and Devon County Council for ways to improve the A303 through the Blackdowns. This involved much discussion at the time on the merits or otherwise of dualling the road (although this was ruled out by the consultants as a viable option due to inadequate funding). It does seem that there are conflicts of interest between politicians and their constituents who are not being given adequate representation and little opportunity to debate alternate views. The A303 Ahead will report on possible options in early July.

Views shared from the floor indicated that while the A30/A303 debate for the AONB is important it is clear that there are larger issues of national infrastructure development (rail, housing, distribution networks) throughout the entire length of the A303 and A30 to Cornwall than are being included in the local debate. It is difficult to obtain neutral, unbiased data to inform debate.

6. Discussion Topic –‘Planning: in it together?’ - Working out ways to work better together to inform and influence planning decisions in the Blackdown Hills. (Lisa Turner)

LT observed that although the Community Plan published in 2011 was in favour of collective action on planning, it has been impossible to gather an action group to take this forward – and yet planning decisions and consultations generate much discussion at almost every meeting. Frequent complaints include lack of consistency in decision making, lack of understanding of planning measures and a perception that planners take little notice of opinions and recommendations offered at Parish level. Steering Group had hoped that a Planning Action Group would collate and share information and evidence from across the four local authority areas, take feedback on planning decisions from parish councils, and then to develop and offer back key phrases, text etc. with which PCs could reinforce comments on future planning applications in their parishes where the issues are seen to be similar. LT asked if these issues were still important, how could parishes best help one another with common issues, and what are they? Issues include understanding policy, the role of Local Authority officers or District Councillors on Planning committees, design recommendations, types of development. For example, recently amended Permitted Development Rights may be

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interpreted as allowing development of redundant farm buildings without further permissions, however AONB and National Park Authorities must still be consulted and approve such plans.

Several points emerged in discussion:

- Ensure that AONB policy is enshrined in planning policy – the evidence that LA planning officers genuinely ascribe to this requirement is very scant.
- To what extent to District/Borough Councillors understand the nature of AONB management and purpose and actively promote its observance.
- Serious difficulties in observing both AONB and National Planning Policy Framework in situations where leadership and decision making is insufficiently devolved to parish level.
- Development of the 10 parish Neighbourhood Plan in EDDC AONB parishes is welcomed, EDDC is finally advertising a new NP officer which may help address these issues.
- BHPN should consider whether parish clusters within other LAs could be beneficial.
- Some developments are leveraging in more Low Cost housing than is necessary and this is perceived to be a Trojan Horse in some situations, parishes need more expertise and better understanding of timescales, LA obligations to developer applications and appeal procedures.
- Communication on planning appears to be divisive on occasion.

The Steering Group agreed to take the Planning issues forward at their next meeting.

7. AOB

- a. Natural Futures project:** Bruce Payne (chair of NF group) brought meeting up to date with progress – funding was approved for the project (Making it Local) for consultations in progress to determine look at better community engagement in biodiversity projects to take forward; outcome of application to DEFRA to secure £250k for appointments to lead projects will be known in September 2014.
- b. Website:** Gill Beardsworth asked parishes to let her know of lettable community facilities for the website

8. The meeting closed at 9.30 pm.

Next meeting dates to TBA:

Steering Group 18 or 19 June 2014 tbc

General meeting Autumn 2014 tbc

AGM Spring 2014 tbc