

NEWTON & NOSS PARISH COUNCIL

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THE CHAIRMAN'S ANNUAL REPORT : March 2008

I have always been of the firm view that leaders should not outstay their welcome, since effective policy delivery cannot be maintained without a period of reflection and relaxation. For this reason I intend to stand down as Chairman in May but shall remain on the Parish Council. Therefore, this is my last Annual Report.

Normally I would spend a significant part of the report thanking people and groups individually. For reasons which are about to become apparent, space and time are against me. However I should like to thank all of my colleagues, particularly our newer members, for their hard work, support, enthusiasm, and diligence throughout the year.

Over the past twelve months there have been a number of important changes in the Parish. I was extremely critical of the previous deterioration in our neighbourhood policing arrangements and made sure that Devon & Cornwall Constabulary knew of our dissatisfaction. I am delighted to report that recent reforms have made a significant improvement. Particular praise goes to PCSO Sid Lawrence, led by NBM John Nolan; their commitment, dedication and enthusiasm in tackling local problems has been most helpful. I have told their superiors how pleased we are and I know other parishes deeply appreciate their services. In February I attended a meeting where many other parishes praised the recent reforms to neighbourhood policing. There may be concerns in some towns and cities over PCSOs, but Devon & Cornwall Constabulary have got it right in rural areas.

Last year I also expressed concern at the quality of highway maintenance. I think it would be fair to say that William Mumford is equally frustrated at the difficulty in freeing-up resources to maintain our highways. However, the Church Steps at Noss with a new surface and railings, is far safer than it was and those roads which have been resurfaced and re-lined are to a very high standard. We are assured more improvements are imminent, but they are long overdue.

Last year yellow lines in Noss were a topic of anxiety for some parishioners. The few that were instigated seem to have effectively improved traffic flow at pinch points. In Newton the re-lining of the Brook has made the best compromise over space and access, and we hope the situation at Yealm Steps will be better this year with tighter parking enforcement.

Traffic speeds continue to concern us, particularly as there is difficulty with the enforcement action which can be taken against drivers who infringe the 20mph limits. Speeding at the Newton Downs and Collaton junctions are particularly worrying. We shall continue to press Devon County Council to build an effective traffic calming measure at Butts Park (similar to the width restriction at Yealmpton?) and to address the issues at Collaton. We also need to consider how to reduce speeds in the 20 mph zones effectively. DCC is very difficult to engage with on this matter but we shall keep pushing - their view seems to be that there has to be a serious injury or death before action is taken. Our view is that several near misses are warning enough; this rule applies to Health & Safety at Work, so why not to our roads?

Some good progress has been made on footpaths this year. Thanks to the help of the surrounding landowners, we hope the recent improvements to the lower end of the Donkey Path have been appreciated. We are also very grateful for Richard Yonge's support for a footpath to link Collaton and Widey Cross. Costings and grant applications are being undertaken and we hope to begin work within the next year. The path will provide a safe route for walkers and cyclists away from one of the more dangerous stretches of roads. A similar
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scheme was proposed by DCC in 2003 but abandoned due to lack of funds. We hope a grant will be available this time.

On the subject of maintenance and improvements, we are assured by the contractor that re-pointing and repair work will begin soon on Pope's Quay. Should major maintenance work be required, it will be delayed until after the school summer holidays. The quay is safe but has a crack and some loose pointing. To safeguard the quay's longevity, we are keen to undertake preventative maintenance, particularly below the water-line. The sewage pipe from the pumping station to the treatment works has been re-laid by South West Water and we are grateful that Stoke Road was closed for such a short time.

Two major issues remain from our Parish Plan of 2004 – affordable housing and the prosperity of businesses. The future of our Post Office will be announced in the next few weeks. Whilst we are quietly confident, we must be prepared for the unexpected. Should this vital public service be threatened, we shall work with The Revelstoke Trust and tenants to ensure the service remains in the Parish. We may need helpers urgently if the unforeseen arises. Gary Streeter MP has assured The Trust that he would raise in the House of Commons the Government's instruction that the Post Office PLC should not announce any more closures until after the May local government elections, because of the adverse effect it may have on their outcome. So far, I have not found any reference to our MP raising the point. If I am wrong I apologise in advance, but the Easter recess approaches.

I am pleased to report the Co-Op has taken the trouble to discuss the proposed enlargement of their premises with us, SHDC planners and our District Councillor (and colleague) Suzie Cooper. To ensure the viability of the remaining shops on Newton Hill, we have made it clear that we see the Co-Op as an essential part of our Parish and that its present location should be retained. We have raised the issue of parking and the frequency of lorry deliveries and hope improvements will result. The Co-Op has reminded us that doubling the retail floor space will not have an effective pay-back from shop sales; they hope that by re-developing the whole site and incorporating additional accommodation, sufficient capital receipts can be generated to fund the scheme. Their next move will be to hold a public meeting once they have firmer plans to present. No formal planning application has been submitted yet. We are currently working with them to find a temporary location whilst re-building proceeds.

Since 2002 the Parish Council has been working hard to ensure the development of appropriate affordable housing. There was the Housing Needs Survey, the Parish Plan, the University Study, Community Housing Working Group, two public meetings, the Rural Housing Conference (with The Princess Royal) and numerous meetings with SHDC officers and politicians. I should like to be able to tell you that, after their detailed consultation on the Local Development Framework together with the Government's urgent need for councils to address the issue effectively, progress had been made and work would start on a modest scheme in the near future. Local landowners who had offered small sites from the Fairway to Newton Downs and from Hannaford to Membland, would know where they stood in the process, particularly those who had employed architects, developers and land agents. One would have hoped a level playing field would have been offered to all.

We would also hope that the special team set up by SHDC to progress the delivery of affordable housing across their District would be on top of the offers, engaging effectively with the community and landowners.

However, despite (unsolicited) plaudits from outside organisations as to the quality of our work and community involvement, I regret to report that SHDC has completely let us down, despite the best efforts of Suzie Cooper and myself.

The overwhelming wish of the Parish was that there should be some affordable housing on a
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modest scale, spread across several sites, and brought on stream one stage at a time as the need arose. The community and the Parish Council has always made it clear that dumping 40-50 properties in the wrong place was wholly wrong, particularly at Briar Hill Farm. Furthermore, it was agreed that any scheme should be of high architectural merit and not repeat the design, parking and space errors of Bishop's Court.

Despite what the landowner has stated in public, to the best of my knowledge no-one from the Parish Council (now or in the past) has ever said that 40-50 properties at Briar Hill Farm would be acceptable. If development was to take place on that site it should be on a modest scale, once the future location of the caravan park had been properly determined.

At the time of writing I regret to report the following:

- MIDAS is thought to be designing a scheme in excess of 40 homes for Briar Hill Farm, and has been engaging with SHDC officers. At the time of writing there has been no response from MIDAS to the Parish Council with regard to their intentions for the site.
- The land owner has confirmed in public there is a scheme afoot for 40 -50 properties (50% affordable) and that the issues of covenants and existing leases are being overcome, but he has chosen not to share his proposals with the community.
- The community, including our District Councillor, has advised the landowner and SHDC that 40-50 properties on that site is likely to be unacceptable and that any detriment to the roads around "The Green" will be strongly resisted.
- SHDC's preferred contractor is MIDAS

- Following a request from the Parish Council, South West Water has confirmed that slow, limited development can be absorbed by the current treatment works, and that they are obliged to upgrade facilities out of existing revenue. Only if a developer wishes to place a significant increased load on an existing system in a short time-frame do they ask for a contribution to ensure the system can deal with a sudden increase in demand.
- Over a year ago a landowner at Newton Downs submitted a scheme for an exclusive development of 15 affordable homes with their integral, eco-friendly reed bed sewage system. He engaged with the Parish Council and our District Councillor over his plans and was put in touch with SHDC officers. Despite assurances 2.5 weeks ago that his scheme, along with other sites in the Parish, would be consulted upon by SHDC, and that an urgent meeting would be arranged to liaise over how to ensure effective consultation could be achieved, at the time of writing, no such meeting has been arranged.
- The other day we were informed that SHDC had put the Newton Downs scheme on hold as they were "obliged" to MIDAS priority. (Proposals for Newton Downs and The Fairway have been with SHDC for at least 18 months – see next points.)

- Following the Community Housing Working Group's report, the owners of land at the western end of The Fairway submitted modest proposals for a mixed development of affordable and private homes. To date no response has been received from SHDC.
- David Rogers expressed concern at March's Council meeting that his offer of land had been ignored by SHDC.
- At no time has SHDC ever consulted on more than 25 affordable homes for the Parish and it is our view that, within the LDF planning process, they have not yet consulted properly on the suitability of any site, particularly after the critical nature of the Inspector's report into their Core Strategy.
- Similarly, because they chose to abandon their previous planning process which first raised Briar Hill Farm, this was never properly consulted on and was not adopted.

- Despite the best efforts of the community, including responses to the LDF, the alternative sites of The Fairway, Hannaford and Newton Downs, have never been properly responded to by SHDC.
- Despite recent promises, no community consultation is yet underway by SHDC.
- SHDC has not undertaken any consultation with regard to any site outside the existing development boundary concerning the development of property for the open market.

- Much public money has been expended by this Parish, Devon County Council, and the EU in ensuring that the Housing Needs Survey conducted in 2003 was of a proper standard. As a result of inefficiency and ineffectiveness, SHDC has allowed the survey results to become time expired. We have been informed that a new survey will have to be undertaken by SHDC at public expense but the resources to conduct the work may not be available. Once again, urgent action was promised but neither Suzie nor I have a date in our dairies to agree with SHDC how the survey should be undertaken.

I believe the facts of the case speak for themselves; as you ponder your increase in Council Tax from SHDC, I will leave you to judge whether you believe SHDC has served us well, offering value for money and good governance. The next time you hear a party leader say decisions affecting local communities should be taken from the ground up, ask how that party delivers its vision in practice. Perhaps Mr. Cameron should have a word with his colleagues at SHDC.

In case you are in any remaining doubt as to the effectiveness of SHDC's Planning Department, ask yourself why so many prominent development schemes in our Parish have got away with not being constructed as planned (inevitably larger), or being built in the wrong place without any enforcement action. Also consider why one property is allowed to make extensive modifications within a conservation area without planning permission, whilst a neighbour is advised that formal consent is required for a much smaller change of far less significance. You might wonder why, having worked extensively with one officer, your scheme has to make significant changes when that officer changes. As to the quality of design that SHDC favours, look at the new affordable houses on the former site of the Esso Station entering Ivybridge or the new Library development.

Looking ahead, it is likely that DCC and SHDC will have their futures determined in the next year. Both are likely to go as a result of the current review of local government in Devon. We must ensure that any parting gifts they leave are not blots on our landscape and that their replacement has better governance and accountability than at present. There is no doubt that DCC tends to focus most of its support and resources on Exeter (despite the efforts of our local councillor) and that SHDC Planning is overwhelmed by events and under resourced.

To conclude on a positive note I shall continue to ensure that a proper resolution is sought to the problem of affordable housing in this Parish. We have a duty to help those in need, without creating a backlash of inappropriate development. Whilst the higher paid in our society have benefited from a real net wage growth of 4%, those on average earnings or below barely achieve 2%, which does not match the true rate of inflation.

I am delighted to report that September's reception intake at the School is at capacity. Also, the Newton and Noss Network – run in conjunction with the School – is going from strength to strength. Claire Sealey, Colin Smith and their teams deserve our warmest gratitude. However, this Parish would not run properly without our key-stone of support Jacki Eschbaecher. I should like to thank her warmly for all her help and support and apologise for leaving undone those things which I ought to have done, and doing those things which I ought not to have done. Thanks to Tony, there may be some health in me!

Jeremy Brown,
 Chairman of Newton & Noss Parish Council.
 18th March 2008