

New Road/America Lane Schedule 14 Application – As you know an application to make New Road a ‘Byway Open to All Traffic’ and America Lane a bridleway has been submitted to the County Council. A thorough legal and consultation process will now take place to determine this application which will ultimately go to the Council’s Public Rights of Way Committee.

My own view is that I am supportive of New Road and America Lane becoming Public Rights of Way as they would facilitate an excellent pedestrian and equestrian link to the Tarka Trail and would benefit the overall Public Rights of Way Network. However, I would prefer that New Road was classified as either a Restricted Byway or Bridleway, rather than a Byway Open to All Traffic (BOAT) as I don’t think it would be appropriate for the lane to be made open to general vehicular traffic. Even if the road is classified as a ‘BOAT’ it will only be maintained to the standard of a bridleway so any potholes etc. would not be repaired by the Council. Nonetheless it is early days and I will keep the Parish Council and residents informed of any developments.

Financial Situation – The outturn figures have now been finalised and I can confirm that DCC came in with an underspend for the 2023-24 financial year. I cannot stress enough what an achievement this is given the wider challenges the Council has faced in the past 2 years, and this puts the Council on a firm footing for this new financial year. Compared with the neighbouring and wider local government family, Devon’s finances are in a far more secure position. Through this careful budget management, this has freed up additional resources for Highways which I will highlight in a moment...

Devolution - Away from the modernisation and finances, the other major development this year has been the Devolution Deal for Devon and Torbay.. The consultation has now closed and DCC and Torbay Councils have voted to approve the settlement. While this won’t for most people change things overnight, it is the start of a journey for Devon and puts us in a much stronger position to engage with Central Government, draw down more funding for economic and affordable housing regeneration schemes, and over time see a greater transfer of powers away from Westminster and down to Devon.

The immediate settlement includes:

1. Direct control of adult education to create up to 50,000 new training and retraining opportunities by 2030
2. Government transfer of over £16 million to invest in new green jobs, homes, skills, and business growth, and accelerate Devon and Torbay's transition to a net-zero economy
3. Stronger partnership with Homes England to create a joint local action plan for affordable housing schemes for local people and reduce homelessness
4. Even closer working between Devon and Torbay to improve the efficiency and co-ordination of public transport. There is an ambition to introduce a single ticketing system for travellers and investment in services to provide greater access to public transport
5. Devon and Torbay would be responsible for developing, designing and delivering the next stages of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund from 2025
6. Boosting and supporting high growth business sectors in Devon and Torbay, such as advanced marine engineering, defence, photonics and digital

There has been some fears expressed during the consultation that the new Devon and Torbay County Combined Authority will be too remote and focus funding on south Devon only at the expense of the north of the County and we will be ‘overlooked’...

I do not agree with that assessment and would point out that, with the recent exception of Levelling Up Funding, that both Torridge DC and Devon CC on their own have been regularly overlooked for the past 50 years! Carrying on with the status quo won’t change that... but I believe the Devolution Settlement will re-set our relationship with Government and the poor economic and social indicators in Torridge will mean this area is a priority within Devon. And to give a tangible example, I happen to believe if we’d had this set up in previous years then it would not have taken over 30 years to demolish the old Creamery site at Taddipport. Funding for a regeneration scheme could have been drawn down much sooner, and in a way that our existing local government organisations on their own simply haven’t been able to do.

Above all, in time I believe we will see more powers devolved down to Devon, away from central government bureaucrats in London, and without the need for having an 'elected Mayor' imposed on us. It is the start of a journey and an exciting opportunity for Devon and for Torrington Rural.

John Hart - As you may have seen in the local news, Cllr John Hart, the Leader of Devon County Council will be retiring in May after 15 years as Leader. He is likely to become the new Chairman of the Council in the next municipal year. Although not officially confirmed yet, Cllr James McInnes, County Councillor for Hatherleigh and Chagford and the current Deputy, is likely to become the new Leader at the Council's Annual General Meeting in May. Andrea Davis, County Councillor for Combe Martin Rural and Cabinet Member for Transport and Environment is likely to be nominated as the new Deputy Leader.

Special Educational Needs Settlement – Over the Easter period the Government have announced a new funding settlement for Special Educational Needs services in Devon, with £95 million being drawn down to help the County Council balance the SEND Budget and improve the service for our children and young people in Devon. This settlement was more generous than first expected, in part due to our overall careful financial management, as referenced earlier in my report. This settlement also helps to contribute to the Council's long term financial stability.

£10 million more for Highways – Thanks in part to the more generous settlement from the Government on SEND and prudent financial management, £10 million of savings the Council had made in the past financial year will now be re-allocated to Highways. The majority of this funding will be used to carry out more serviceability patching – which are resurfacing style repairs/patches – and can be used for defect and non-safety defect repairs. A further allocation will be used to boost the drainage budget further too.

If there are any local matters residents or the Parish Council would like me to look into then you know where I am, please do get in touch and I will follow them up for you.

Cllr Chris Wheatly TDC Report for Petrockstowe Parish Council – May 2024

Internal Overview and Scrutiny- We heard from public speaker Mike Teare, chair of the charity "Way of the Wharves" who spoke to the committee about the newly bestowed recognition of Bideford and the River Torridge's Heritage Harbour status- one of only 10 Heritage Harbours in the UK. This extends from Northam all the way up the River Torridge through Bideford up to Rosemoor Gardens in Great Torrington. There is no legal status or pot of money attached to it but brings a sense of identity and pride which can be drawn upon to develop the area and its cultural identity, promoting visitors to Bideford and its surroundings.

We had a call-in to scrutinise a decision made by the community and resources committee. Councillors on the scrutiny committee voted to endorse a climate change adaptation strategy for the region (Devon Cornwall and Isles of Scilly). Some councillors on the main decision-making committee had previously made comments relating to climate denial and conspiracy theories which is in total contradiction with our intentions as a council, having declared a climate emergency in 2019. So, it's been sent back to the community and resources committee to think again (and maybe do some homework on the realities of climate change!)

We also had a presentation from Chris Fuller our economic development officer in relation to the Torridge estuary. There are a lot of competing interests which need to be pulled together. We have the Appledore Clean Maritime Innovation Centre under way with the help of nearly £16M in levelling up funds, as well as the re-growth of Harland and Wolff at Appledore shipyard. There's also the Celtic Sea floating offshore wind in the pipeline, which has a huge ambition of creating 25GW of energy by 2050. Not forgetting our new Heritage Harbour status. The current strategy was adopted in 2014 and is way out of date given the huge number of changes taking place. We made a proposal for the council to develop a new strategy which would take all of new changes into consideration.

Grounds Maintenance- Richard Haste operations manager gave us an update. Grounds maintenance went in-house two years ago in April 2022. It was a positive report, he told us complaints have reduced across Torridge and they are able to be more flexible with grass cutting etc. There are 124 sites listed across Torridge with 700 different items.

In terms of planting, we now only purchase perennials. We have also purchased a shredder and produce our own compost. We have also purchased a "moss brush" which we were told is particularly good on churchyard paths... 6 biodiversity sites have been identified and link in with wildlife corridors. We have also increased the use of the

greenhouses in Victoria Park. We were told that the team are always willing to work with volunteers so don't be worried to get in touch.

Update on planning enforcement workload- We heard from Helen Smith our senior planning officer. There are currently 332 open cases, down from 446 in December last year. There are 2 full-time permanent enforcement officers. There was a spike of cases in 2021 and we had temporary provision of an extra officer Oct-March which saw 305 cases closed. Enforcement is not statutory but discretionary, but obviously needs to happen to ensure planning and associated building is done as correctly as possible. Enforcement starts off with a Planning Contravention Notice which is essentially a questionnaire (early stage). Following this there would be a formal enforcement notice. The first point is to try to negotiate but this doesn't always work. The council has also had 100% success on enforcement appeals over the past 4 years. Grant McGill, Helen Mason, and Kris Evely form the enforcement team.

Petrockstowe specific- Cheryl has recently spoken to planning officers about 3 enforcements cases in Petrockstowe that are still under investigation. The chair Malcolm Busby had also spoken to the enforcement officer on the phone and aware of the current situation whilst Cheryl was there.