

Putford Parish Council Chairman's Report 2017/18

I am pleased to present my Chairman's Report for the year 2017/18.

I would like to start by extending my personal thanks to fellow councilors, our Parish Clerk and parishioners for your contributions and support during my first year as Chairman. It is a credit to the parish that we have a full complement of 12 councillors who are willing to serve the community (with no resignations during the year). Our membership is evenly balanced and comprises six councilors from each of East and West Putford, a strong representation from the farming community and some relative newcomers to the parish. Together we make a strong, stable and cohesive team, well placed to serve the needs of our small rural community.

Unfortunately our Vice Chairman, Allin Bewes, has been unable to attend meetings during the year due to a prolonged period of illness. He has been greatly missed and we hope he is able to rejoin us soon.

I would now like to acknowledge some wider contributions to the work of the PC during the year:

- **County Councillor Barry Parsons** has given regular updates on Devon county wide issues and has championed much needed repairs to local roads most notably in East Putford for which we extend our thanks.
- **District Councillor Robert Hicks** attended one of our meetings and gave valuable advice on our stewardship application for Common Moor, East Putford. More recently he has allocated some grant money from his District Councillor fund to help with front end costs for which we express our appreciation.
- **PC Raquel Rowe** has provided regular updates on crime and policing in the area as well as encouraging us all to report crime and safeguard our own property even though we are fortunate to live in an area where crime rates are low.
- **Matt Barrow, DCC**, attended last year to provide an update on plans for roll-out superfast broadband in remote rural areas and we look forward to this work progressing.
- **Vanessa Saunders, Holsworthy Town Clerk**, stood in at short notice to support a tender opening procedure in the absence of our Team Clerk due to illness and we extend our thanks to her.

Common Moor: Over the last 12-18 months, the parish council agenda has been dominated by Common Moor (a 55 hectare site in East Putford designated an SSSI in 1988). In recent years there has been little management of the moor due to its ownerless status and it has been assessed by NE/DWT as unfavorable declining. The subject was brought to the PC's attention by a parishioner and since then we have deliberated long and hard on whether to enter a 10 year stewardship agreement with NE. Potentially it is a large and exciting project (probably the largest in the history of the parish). However, we are a small parish with limited resources and we have had to weigh up potential benefits with the risks of entering into such a long term agreement. Preparatory work has at times over-stretched our capacity and capability. As a consequence the Parish Council took a decision last year to take a pause, withdraw from last year's scheme and reapply this year. This decision has proved to be the right one as it has enabled us to put in place the necessary resources and processes to allow us to proceed with greater confidence if our application is approved this year.

I would like to express thanks to Councillor Myles Thomas for his leadership of the project and for his considerable investment of time and energy more recently supported by Lis Miller of Kivells as our newly appointed land agent. We are delighted to be working with Kivells as a trusted local business.

On behalf of the parish council, I would also like to acknowledge the considerable time and energy expended by Natural England and DWT especially Rob Dixon (NE) and Lisa Schneidau (DWT) and to note that DWT have undertaken maintenance work on the moor free of charge for the last two years.

So on to other business. After attending training for new chairs last summer, one of my aims has been to work with the Clerk and DALC to implement best practice and meet the legislative requirements for smaller authorities. I am pleased that we have made considerable progress in a number of areas for example:

- We now have a robust system for registering declarations of interest and approving dispensations.
- We have made a good start on meeting the requirements of the Transparency Code. This important code requires us to publish agendas, minutes and financial information on a publicly accessible website within prescribed timescales.

(I would like to thank the Putford Post Committee who have allowed us to use their website for parish council data and of course the Clerk and Councillor Thomas for getting this up and running. There is some work to do to update and maintain the data to achieve full compliance and the Clerk has this in hand.

- Following advice from DALC, myself and Councillor Ros Crout have reviewed the Clerk's contract of employment and Job Description and will undertake annual performance and development reviews commencing this year in line with best practice.

So to the future. I would like to propose three key aims for the coming year which we can discuss at our next meeting:

1. **To re-balance our agenda.** Whilst the management of Common Moor is likely to continue be an important part of our agenda, we need to ensure this not to the detriment of other parish business such as repairs to roads and signage, littering, broadband and mobile phone services to name but a few.
2. **To increase public participation and engagement.** It is clear that the public have been 'conspicuous by their absence' and we need to have confidence that we are truly representing the interests of the community we serve.
3. **To achieve full compliance with existing and emerging legislation** This will include new data protection regulations for which the parish clerk is undergoing training.

In summary, the parish council has made some good progress during a busy and challenging year with the help and support of all the people I have mentioned during my report, in particular our Lead Councillor for Common Moor and the Clerk. There are plenty of opportunities to further improve the effectiveness of the council and we will continue to strive for the highest possible standards. I have been truly proud to serve as part of the team and as your chair. Thank you.