



## Report on a talk by Peter Blyth given to the VGS on June 6<sup>th</sup> 2019 on the subject of what needs to be done to get a Blue Flag award for Sidmouth.

Peter Blyth is the Beach Safety Officer for East Devon District Council but his remit is much wider than just safety. He is responsible for Beach and Maritime areas including such things as safety rings, signage, dog ban areas, seagull feeding bans, and answering queries from the public. It falls to him to maintain and improve many things to do with East Devon beaches and also to apply for them to be granted [national and international awards](#). His work is as much geared to increasing the Tourist Economy as it is to preventing damage to the tourists and residents who use the beaches.

Pete started by telling us that before he had this job at EDDC he was Head Ranger with the National Trust at Branscombe and responsible for the beaches nearby. He joked that he was now covering the beaches which he hadn't covered then so it was something of a swap! He then went on to help us understand how the EDDC values beaches, and the obstacles any beach needs to overcome in order to be awarded Blue Flag status.

East Devon District Council's Streetscene section deals with the maintenance of all our green space, apart from Countryside reserves. It is divided into the east and west portions of East Devon, Barry Maher is the Streetscene Area Officer for Sidmouth, but Beach Officers work across the whole beach and maritime area of East Devon.

Pete has done a lot of work in tandem with Sidmouth Plastic Warriors and so knows Cllr Denise Bickley quite well. One of the things he has managed to do is supply them with equipment funded by part of a grant of £24,939 the EDDC received from the Government. [List of funding given to each authority](#).

Since he started working for EDDC in July 2017 he has been aiming to raise the profile of East Devon beaches. At the time when he was appointed many Councils in the South West had Blue Flag or Seaside Award status for some of their beaches, but East Devon did not. It has been a EDDC priority for some time to get an award for one of its beaches but Pete felt that it would be a good thing to aim for awards for all six of East Devon beaches.

Blue Flag is part of the [Foundation for Environmental Education](#), and is a [two tier system](#), the top tier, Blue Flag, indicates that you are one of the best beaches in the world. When it first started it was mainly focused on water quality but that is now only one of a range of requirements. The areas it now covers include environmental education, visitor welcome, visitor safety, and publicity/signage.

For beaches which can't reach the required Blue Flag standard in these areas there is the [Seaside Award](#) ( which might be considered as 'Blue Flag light' says Pete). The Seaside Award has two sections Resort and non-bathing Resort. Last year East Devon managed to get a Seaside Award for both Exmouth ( Resort) and Seaton ( non-bathing Resort) but due to workload were not able to apply for the other beaches including Sidmouth. Working on the base created last year [in 2019 every beach except Beer](#) received a Seaside Award; as Beer is such a small beach it will be difficult for it to reach the standards required. The only way to achieve the award would have been to include it with Seaton and Beer Councillors were opposed to that. As the criteria have changed slightly it may possible to get one

Exmouth received a Blue Flag award and it took a large amount of work and effort to get it to the required standard. Blue Flag status requires the beach to fit Resort bathing beach status so Seaton, and possibly Budleigh Salterton, will never qualify but as Sidmouth achieved the Seaside Resort Award this year it meets those criteria. To move Sidmouth from a Seaside Award to a Blue Flag would be good and Pete has heard from several different groups that there is a real appetite within the town to get a Blue Flag.

Estimates suggest that having a Blue Flag can add up to £30,000 to the local economy.

### **The reasons Sidmouth doesn't have a Blue Flag at the moment and the things we need to address to get one.**

The Blue Flag standards are quite taxing, there were only about 17 in the whole South West of England last year. The Blue Flag website makes it look easier to get one than it is in reality. This may be because they wish to engender interest and not put people off applying.

Water quality is out of anyone's hands as it can be affected by things like the weather, but Sidmouth doesn't have problem with changes of quality due to storm water and run-off from farmed fields. For the last four years Sidmouth would have been eligible in the water quality section.

Signage on the 'red top' sign on the Esplanade is currently not good enough but is on the EDDC list for upgrade. In Exmouth it cost £6,000 to bring the signage up to standard, for Sidmouth it will be about £3,000. There are also minor safety things which need bringing up to date but they are already in place in this year's budget

EDDC will not be asking the town to pay for upgrades, it is part of their responsibility under Health and Safety legislation.

Two or more drinking water points are needed on the beach, being able to get it free from cafes and restaurants doesn't count. The water point at Jacob's ladder doesn't count as it is considered to be a different beach, and the drinking water point in the Market Place doesn't count as it is not on the beach. A second drinking water point may be possible when the Drill Hall is redeveloped by Rockfish, or at the Lifeboat Station, or Port Royal toilets. It is not an insurmountable problem but it needs addressing. In Exmouth they have tap points which serve a dual purpose of providing both drinking water and water for floral displays.

The big obstacle is the need to have lifeguards, not absolutely impossible to get a Blue Flag without them but it is very difficult. The work of Jurassic Paddle has been queried as fitting the criteria for lifeguard presence but has been rejected. The fact that we have the Lifeboat station on the beach is also not sufficient because of the time it takes to 'scramble' it. The Blue Flag website says that you can have either lifeguards or life saving equipment, but in reality if there are over 50 visitors to the beach then they require a lifeguard presence. In Exmouth the RNLI provides the lifeguard cover and the cost is split between EDDC and RNLI, the cost is about £15,000 a year to both of them. EDDC is in discussion with Sidmouth Lifeboat and other water-based organisations about doing something similar in Sidmouth, but discussions are at an early stage.

There is a requirement for a Blue Flag beach to run at least 5 environmental activities a year. They supply a long list of activities which qualify and expect that a range of different ones from the list will take place. The Sidmouth Plastic Warriors beach cleans would count as one of these activities, [Sidmouth Rocks walks](#) run by the Museum and the rock-pooling activities led by the EDDC Countryside Team would count but the beach garden by Millennium Walkway would not as it is too small. Jurassic Paddle commercial activity doesn't count but an open-day with free taster activities would, as would surf lifesaving competitions. There is a possibility that some of the Science Festival, Regatta or Sea Fest activities might count. Again, 5 activities is not a stumbling block but something we need to think about.

The Blue Flag association is not looking to say no to people who aspire to gaining a Blue Flag and are very open to discussion and helping places reach the required criteria, but they are rightly determined to maintain standards.

The last requirement is that a group is established to oversee what is going on with the beach. This would be likely to be composed of Sidmouth Town Councillors and representatives of the groups involved in water-bourne or beach activities. The Group would be required to have at least two meetings, one in summer to walk the beach and note items of importance or interest with a view to correcting problems or building on positive things, and the other one in winter to hold discussions. There used to be one in Sidmouth but it has disappeared. It is hoped that one can be created soon.

The Blue Flag area does not have to include the whole beach, it is usually based on the dog ban area as a dog ban is a Blue Flag requirement. Exmouth's Sandy Bay is their area.

It doesn't have to have a lifeguard there all day every day as you can specify the times when you meet the Blue Flag criteria. You can also specify the time of year when the beach meets the criteria, so for example [Exmouth's Sandy Bay Blue Flag season](#) runs from 21<sup>st</sup> May to 1<sup>st</sup> September, 10 am - 6 pm

The actual Blue Flag can only be flown when you meet all the criteria but you can advertise the fact that it is a Blue Flag beach even when not flying the flag.

Pete's responsibility ends at the Esplanade, anything further into town is not under his control, so a question was asked about the proposed raising of the splash wall and if this might have an effect on our ability to get a Blue Flag. The answer was 'Not necessarily'. However, if the wall was so high that it blocked the view of the sea it might be a problem.

The final consideration about applying for Blue Flag status is the cost. It can be combined with the cost of getting a Seaside Award for a reduced fee, this year the combined cost has been £895 for Exmouth and it is expected that Sidmouth would be entered for the combined scheme too, when it happens. The combined cost has not been included in the budget for the coming year, as it is not expected that Sidmouth will have reached the necessary standards by then, but the cost of the Seaside Resort Award has. So if we reach the standard sooner than expected it would only cost approximately £200 extra to go for the Blue Flag as well. This cost may be able to be covered by EDDC or could be covered by Sidmouth Town Council if they wished.

In the future it may be that EDDC covers the cost of obtaining the initial Awards and thereafter the cost is funded by a mixture of sponsorship from local businesses and Town Council from the economic uplift created by being a Blue Flag resort. However, it is important to state that no decisions have been made yet, it is all still at the stage of looking at all possible ideas.

If we can get lifeguards for the beach by 2020 we could go for Blue Flag status at that time, otherwise it would be 2021: although pressures on the EDDC's budget mean that it can't be promised for then.

Further information about the Blue Flag organisation can be found on this [VGS website page](#) where links to the Blue Flag site and some of its publications are given.