

Torrige District Council

DRAFT

External Overview & Scrutiny



Annual Report

2012/2013



Membership of the Committee

Chair: Councillor P Pennington

Vice Chair: Councillor J Whitaker

Councillors: D Brenton, M Brown, A Eastman, B Edwards, D Fulford, J Lewis and B Redwood

Non-elected representatives: Dr D S McLellan, Mr A Rayner and Mr L Wrey (for part of the year).

Supporting the Committee:

Jenny Wallace, Head of Paid Service; Jon Walter, Corporate Services Manager, Sandra Cawsey and Susan Squire Democratic Services Officers.

The role of External Overview & Scrutiny

The Council has appointed two Overview & Scrutiny Committees, an Internal Overview & Scrutiny Committee and an External Overview & Scrutiny Committee.

The Internal Overview & Scrutiny Committee has the power to review the policies of the Council and its objectives, and is entitled to 'call in' decisions made by the Community & Resources Committee which are not yet implemented. They can also recommend that the Community & Resources Committee reconsider such a decision. Issues that remain unresolved will be referred to the Full Council for determination.

The External Overview & Scrutiny Committee has the same terms of reference as the Internal Overview & Scrutiny Committee, but scrutinises the performance of external public sector bodies operating within Torridge.

The External Overview & Scrutiny Committee is also the Council's Crime and Disorder Committee.

The Council remains committed to its current policy of involving the community in its decision making process and includes community representation on both Overview & Scrutiny Committees.

Introduction by the Chair

In many ways we stand at the doorway to the implementation of the many consultations which have taken place over the last three years of my Chairmanship of this Committee. The continuing changes under the Welfare Reform Act has now seen the introduction of measures including the local administration of the Council Tax reduction scheme, housing benefit reductions for under occupancy in social housing and the localisation of the discretionary social fund.

The public health issues as set out in the Health and Wellbeing Act and the need for the Local Authority to feed information into the whole realm of influencing health and social care policy for our communities needs in the coming years - given what appears an increasing pressure due to the above national average age of the residents of Torridge.

The advent of Police Commissioners alongside the Safer North Devon partnership brings further local issues of policing to the fore. The Localism Act will face many challenges for implementation across local issues.

All the above are the changes in the legislative framework now being practically worked out in local communities.

They say that politics is no more than a lot of wind. This has been somewhat true for Torridge given the issues around the renewable energy. The committee continues to monitor developments of the Atlantic Array with a view to maximising gains and minimising impact on the area.

Broadband remains a challenge. Given the quality of service now evident in Cornwall - it is hoped that the rollout of an increasingly improved service will bring benefits to all across Torridge. The importance cannot be under emphasised at all levels of our communities and local business.

Torridge has its extremes. Low household incomes, particularly for the working age group, high ratios in wages to house prices and a very beautiful environment in which we live. North Devon Plus, AONB and the North Devon Biosphere have been significant contributors.

In conclusion I would like to thank both Councillors and Officers for the enthusiasm they have given to this committee throughout the year. The many areas of networking will provide a continuing base for Torridge to be an important influence in the coming years.

Phil Pennington

Chair – External Overview & Scrutiny Committee

A look back at 2012/2013

The External Overview & Scrutiny Committee have looked at a number of issues and received numerous presentations throughout the year including:

Localism

During the early part of the year the Committee received regular updates on the implementation of the Localism Act.

The Committee kept a watching brief on the developments of the Localism Act prior to its implementation and the formal training that was provided to all councillors.

Atlantic Array

The Committee monitored the progress of the work being done on the application for the Atlantic Array and received regular updates from Councillor Whittaker and the Special Project Manager.

In May the Vice Chair, Councillor Whittaker, who is a member of the Atlantic Array Working Group, attended a field trip to Wales in connection with this and reported details back to the Committee.

Broadband in the Torridge Area

The Committee received two informative presentations through the year from Mr Paul Coles of BT regarding "The Big Build". He explained that BT would be investing in superfast broadband which should cover two-thirds of the UK by the end of 2014 and that Bideford will be the first place in North Devon to have new fibre optic broadband. Torridge addresses with post codes of EX39 that are linked to the Bideford Exchange would be able to receive superfast broadband.

Subsequently Councillors visited Superfast Cornwall in order for Members to fully understand the benefits superfast broadband will bring to Torridge and closer working between the Council and BT was established.

The Committee also received regular updates from the Economic Regeneration Officer on the BDUK rural broadband project which is a £94 million investment to transform broadband speeds for businesses and residents to ensure around 90% of premises have access to fibre optic broadband by the end of 2016, and deliver a minimum of 2mbs for all premises by the end of 2016. BT has subsequently won this contract and have agreed to keep the Committee updated on developments.

Crime & Disorder

The Committee received an informative presentation from Ms A Palmer (Safer North Devon) and Chief Inspector T Davies (Devon & Cornwall Police) which included updates on the Safer North Devon Partnership and the new draft Strategy which included a 5 year action plan. The Committee were given information about the Safer North Devon Hub and that it had gained national recognition for its initiative. The results evidenced smarter working practices, and victims of anti social behaviour receiving better support through improved liaison with the voluntary sector and Local Authorities. Members were encouraged to send a message to their communities "keep reporting incidents of anti-social behaviour".

The Committee also had a joint meeting with North Devon Council to receive an informative slide presentation by Kate Morne and Sergeant Lee Henderson which gave an overview of anti social behaviour for 2012/13 across North Devon and Torridge.

Health & Wellbeing

Over the year the Committee monitored the progress of the changes occurring in connection with local Health Service provisions. Councillor Boyd (Lead Member of Health in Torridge and Member of Devon County Council's Health Scrutiny Panel) provided updates to the Committee.

In November a presentation was received from Dr Chris Bowman and James Wright Clinical Commissioning Manager regarding the implementation of the new Clinical Commissioning Group.

The Committee also received a presentation from Tracey Polak Assistant Director of Public Health who updated the Committee on the process of transferring the Public Health function to local authorities and our area to Devon County Council.

The Committee subsequently agreed to monitor the changes and to be involved as widely as possible.

Citizens Advice Bureau

Mr Steve Davis, Chief Executive of the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB), gave an interesting and detailed slide presentation to the Committee. Mr Davis explained the purpose of the organisation and outlined the main activities. He advised that the CAB rely on volunteers who are members of the community and who make up a large percentage of the staff. He referred to the grant money received from Torridge District Council and gave details of its use. Members were advised of the CAB's key challenges and opportunities for 2013/14.

The Committee acknowledged the value of all the services provided by the CAB and the range of support it provides for local residents through the commitment of volunteers.

Tarka Housing

The Committee received two half yearly performance updates from Tarka Housing and the Council's Housing Manager. The presentations also detailed the achievements made by Tarka since the transfer of the housing stock in December 2007. The Committee made recommendations to the Community & Resources Committee on Tarka's proposal to vary three of the original promises in the offer document. These recommendations were subsequently approved.

The Committee acknowledged that the housing conditions were significantly better under Tarka than they would have been under Torridge District Council. Tarka have invested 3½ times more than Torridge would have been able to invest.

National Illegal Money Lending Team

The Liaise Manager from the England Illegal Money Lending Team gave a very interesting presentation under the heading "Stop Loan Sharks".

The presentation highlighted the importance of the Stop Loan Sharks campaign and how relevant it was in the Torridge area.

Following the presentation the Committee offered support and publicity for the Project. This included Councillor Redwood touring the district in a Shark Suit and an advertisement "Stop Loan Sharks" being displayed on the side of TDC refuse lorries. It also resulted in presentations being made to parish councils at the Area Advisory meetings.

This ensured a considerable amount of publicity for this important issue and the Committee were thanked by the National England Illegal Money Lending Team for the support.

Rail and Bus Routes

Throughout the year the Committee received reports and updates regarding the rail and bus situation in the Torridge area.

The Stagecoach Group asked TDC to comment on their bid for the Great Western Franchise. The Committee sent a letter supporting the submission from the Tarka Rail Association.

The Committee were also informed of concerns regarding the bus service between Bideford and Barnstaple Hospital and also concerns regarding a re-route which omitted to stop at Bideford Pannier Market. The Committee were proactive in this and letters were sent to the bus companies and Devon County Council regarding the re-routing of the town bus service.

AONB

The Committee received a joint presentation on behalf of the AONB by Rose Day, AONB Partnership Chair and Mr D Edgecombe.

An overview of the organisation which included its purpose, main activities and the finances received from the Council, together with other core contributions was given.

Mr Edgecombe referred to the Performance Data and details of current work and projects being undertaken by the organisation. He referred in particular to the Cordiale Project which was 60% complete and was due to be finished December 2013. This was a £3.2m EU project involving AONB communities in local distinctiveness and landscape projects with priority areas in Torridge, Hartland and Westward Ho!

Biosphere Reserve

The Committee received a presentation from Mr A Bell, Manager, North Devon Biosphere Service on the overview of the organisation and explained that its purpose was to provide management and co-ordination for the UNESCO Biosphere Reserve in Northern Devon. The presentation included details on the funding received from Torridge and other sources and project expenditure for 2012-13. Mr Bell referred to the Performance Data and gave details of Projects currently being undertaken by the Organisation within Torridge.

Taw and Torridge Voluntary Services

The Committee received an interesting and informative presentation from Karen Nolan, Manager Torridge CVS and Maria Bailey, Chair Torridge CVS. The presentation included details of the purpose and main activities of the organisation and the financial support that TDC provide to TTVS. The Committee were advised of the current projects that were underway and the number of volunteers being used. Details of how they measure performance was given in their Annual Report. The Committee recognised the important role that volunteers make to our communities.

Community Transport Associations

The Committee welcomed Mrs Cathy Withall, Co-ordinator for the Holsworthy Rural Community Transport who gave an interesting and detailed slide presentation on the Organisation. She outlined the difficulties small rural areas face and explained that the purpose of the Organisation was to provide transport for those who have no transport available and have difficulty accessing public transport for any reason.

The Committee also welcomed Mr Duncan Goodman of Torridge Community Transport Association Limited who stated that the purpose of the Organisation was to provide a transport safety net; support individuals, groups and communities with no other viable transport options to have as much equality of opportunity and to be as socially included as those with personal transport options; to provide access to services, social activities, education and training as well as to fulfil domestic needs such as shopping. Mr Goodman advised that the Organisation was based in Bideford and covered 36 parishes from Hartland across to Winkleigh.

The Committee recognised the importance of these organisations within Torridge particularly as it is such a rural area. The Committee agreed to advertise these organisations as widely as possible.

Plough and Share Credit Union

Paula Anscomb gave an interesting and informative presentation on the work of the Plough and Share Credit Union. It was anticipated that due to the Welfare Reforms there would be an increasing need for the Credit Union's service. There were currently no Service Points in Bideford or Torrington but these were identified as key areas with developments in the pipeline and they would be looking for Volunteers to help with this. Ms Anscomb stated that there was a low awareness of the Credit Union and they have no resources for publicity or marketing; knowledge of the service is mainly spread by word of mouth.

The Committee agreed to help advertise the Service as widely as possible and recommended that the Council offer the option of pay deductions for staff.

North Devon+

Sue Gear the Chief Executive of North Devon+ gave an interesting presentation and updated the Committee on the work of the organisation and the projects that North Devon+ had recently been involved with.

The Committee welcomed the Study of the Market and Supply Chain for locally landed fish and look forward to the results and also welcomed the number of new Apprenticeships as a result of the January to July 2012 campaign.

Transform

Mr Gary Smith gave an interesting and informative presentation and updated the Committee on the work of Transform in the Torridge area.

The Committee were informed that the work in Bideford is an 18 month programme which is half way through and due to end in November 2013. He advised that from research data they had established specific areas to target their work and this included private sector housing, work with children and families and also community work in Northam. Mr Smith advised that a Lottery Bid Application had been put forward to continue work in Torridge for five years; the outcome will be known in June 2013.

The Committee agreed to keep the work of Transform under review and to invite Mr Smith to a future meeting for an update.

Other items covered by the Committee:

Reduction of the Court Services in Barnstaple

Members of the Committee attended a joint meeting with North Devon Council's Scrutiny Committee to discuss the proposed changes to the Barnstaple Court Services

The Committee agreed to send a letter on behalf of the Committee to HM Courts & Tribunal Services strongly opposing the reduction of the Court Services in Barnstaple.

Cleanliness

Mr R McCormack, Joint Head of Operational Services addressed the Committee and gave a brief overview on the work carried out by his Department and how it is covered. The Joint Head of Operational Services requested that his service be notified of any issues of cleanliness as soon as possible so that they can look to rectify any problems.

Tyco Electronics

The Special Projects Manager updated the Committee regarding the job loss situation at Tyco Electronics in Bideford and advised what Torridge were doing to help the employees.

Legal Aid

The Committee received an update from the Solicitor advising on the latest information concerning legislative changes. He stated that the Act would come into force April 2013, and that the consequences of the changes would not be fully known until the changes were operational. The Committee agreed to keep this issue under review.