



DRAFT

**Torrige District Council
External Overview & Scrutiny**



**ANNUAL REPORT
2013/2014**

Membership of the Committee

Chair: Councillor J Whittaker

Vice Chair: Councillor M Langmead

Councillors: M Brown
P Christie
P Davies (until 4 November 2013)
A Eastman
B Edwards
T Johns
P Pennington
C Simmons (from 11 December 2013)

Non-elected representatives:

Dr D S McLellan
Mr A Rayner (resigned on 12 December 2013)
Mr L Wrey
Mr P W Topham (from 5 March 2014)

Supporting the Committee:

Jenny Wallace, Head of Paid Service
Jon Walter, Corporate Services Manager
Susan Squire, Democratic Services Officer

The Role of External Overview & Scrutiny

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

The Overview & Scrutiny Committees have the power to review the policies of the Council and its objectives, and are 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 decisions. Issues that remain unresolved will be referred to the Full Council for determination.

The External Overview & Scrutiny Committee 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

It's been another busy and interesting year for this Committee. In common with those that have gone before, Members have continued to consider and in some cases challenge, the delivery of a considerable range of services that exist across the district.

At times the Members' remit has continued to be that of interested observers. Whilst at others there has remained the role of taking a 'critical gaze at' or 'making a closer examination of' one or other of the organisations, which to some degree receive grant aid from the Local Authority.

The role of these organisations is varied. So in order to capture the most complete understanding of what they deliver to our local communities, they present to Members, using an especially constructed template. The information thus provided gives those present the best idea of how effective their efforts have been. Scoping Meetings have also been held on occasions when Members have felt that these could add value to the learning on the day.

Whether it's from an observing and learning point of view, or that of 'a critical friend', the variety of practical support available throughout Torridge remains impressive. Members have seen this from such as a Fire and Rescue perspective to that of the support being delivered through the Citizens Advice Bureau. They have also been able to consider and comment upon local concerns around such as the proposed development of the Route 39 Academy on the one hand, to that of the proposed closure of the inpatients beds at Torrington Cottage Hospital on the other.

There have, as ever, been some standing items to consider at each meeting. Issues that remain current on every Agenda. This year saw the proposed Offshore Wind Farm, the Atlantic Array receive such attention, with regular updates provided for Members. A mention must be made here of Alan Rayner, an Independent Member on the Committee, for the superb flow of information he provided on such a sensitive topic. Then at the eleventh hour things changed and the proposal vanished from view, or more relevantly from the local seascape.

The challenges faced by many in Torridge resulting from the legislative changes of the past few years are considerable. So a significant role of this Committee will remain I hope, to be willing to 'take up the baton' on behalf of those less able to do so themselves. I must thank my Vice Chair, the other elected Members, the Independent Members and all the appropriate Officers for their support and encouragement. I really do feel that the work of this Committee is one that does embrace everyone involved with it.

Jane Whittaker

Chair – External Overview & Scrutiny Committee

A look back at 2013/2014...

At the start of the 2013/2014 municipal year the Committee considered its role and the level of scrutiny undertaken. It was agreed that External Overview and Scrutiny Committee did fully and effectively match levels of scrutiny and overview required.

As part of the review the presentation template used by organisations was amended and the Forward Plan and items to be kept under review in 2013/2014 were agreed.

A distinction was made between the organisations invited to attend Committee because they received grant funding from Torridge District Council and those who came as guests, to provide information to Committee.

The External Overview & Scrutiny Committee have discussed a number of issues and received numerous presentations throughout the year.

As part of the process, two scoping meetings were held to consider questions and issues, in advance of the organisations attending.

The Overview & Scrutiny Committee's of Torridge District Council (TDC) and North Devon Council (NDC) have established a good and mutually beneficial working relationship and in 2013/2014 two joint meetings were held. A North Devon Councillor also attended the TDC Committee to contribute to discussions on Torrington Cottage Hospital.

The following issues were covered by External Overview & Scrutiny Committee:

Atlantic Array

The Committee monitored the progress of work being carried out on the application for the Atlantic Array Off-shore Wind Farm and received regular updates from Mr Rayner and Councillor Whittaker.

Over the course of the year developments on the Atlantic Array application progressed and the Committee considered all aspects of this. The timescales involved were monitored. The Committee made recommendations to the Community & Resources Committee who took action based upon these recommendations. Recommendations included the need for an all Councillor discussion on the Atlantic Array (a Special Plans Committee inviting all Councillors was held) and the need for a Position Statement to be developed. Members contributed to the Local Impact Report and noted the discussions and concerns that had arisen from when the representatives of 5 Parishes had met.

At the meeting on the 11 December 2013 it was confirmed that the application for the Atlantic Array had been withdrawn.

Broadband in the Torridge Area

The Committee received a presentation from British Telecom detailing developments with its delivery of Rural Broadband. Questions were prepared and forwarded to British Telecom in advance of the meeting. Mr P Coles and Mr L Boon endeavoured to answer questions and addressed issues raised by Councillors.

Rural superfast broadband continues to be monitored and reviewed by the Committee including the delivery of Superfast Broadband to some areas.

Crime & Disorder – Joint Sub Committee (Torridge District Council and North Devon Council)

Joint Crime and Disorder meetings were held with North Devon Council. During the meetings, regular reports were received from the Safer North Devon Partnership. The Committee were advised that the Safer North Devon Partnership priorities for 2013-15 included reducing anti-social behaviour, alcohol harm and domestic abuse.

Information about the Virtual Court Live Link System was given to the Crime & Disorder Committee and on the 9 January 2014, Members had a tour of the Virtual Courts and Livelink System.

The Committee learnt of the considerable concerns and issues regarding alcohol consumption in public places.

Route 39 Academy

Route 39 Academy had received a level of publicity and was considered as a matter affecting both the area and its residents. Under the Committees Terms of Reference a representative was invited from the Academy to attend the Committee. The Chair of Governors did so and gave an informative presentation and answered many questions from the Committee.

The Committee heard about the plans the Academy had regarding some of the proposed development and received more general information about the student numbers and the staffing levels. Members appreciated the opportunity they had to learn more about the Academy as it helped to gain a better understanding about some of the issues which have come about as a consequence of its development. Some Members felt that the whole process needed to be more transparent so the Committee will continue to monitor the Academy's progress as it moves forward with its plans.

AONB

The Committee received an informative presentation from the AONB. Following which Members asked questions and gained a greater understanding of its current operation and its links with other partner organisations.

During the course of the presentation, the AONB representative explained the scope of its role and offered to be involved with the coastal issues at the Pebbleridge Westward Ho!, Northam Burrows and Bucks Mills.

Health & Wellbeing

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

In August 2013, Torrington Cottage Hospital was placed on the agenda for discussion. This followed concerns about the proposed closure of the hospital and loss of the local 'in patient's beds'. Up to 25 members of the public attended this meeting to voice their concerns and hear Members discuss the item. Over the year the Committee has scrutinised and monitored the on-going developments concerning the Torrington Hospital; taking the role of a 'critical friend' to the NHS Trust and Clinical Commissioning Group.

Committee Members have actively supported Torrington residents with attendance at town meetings and marches and the Committee Members have passed a Resolution calling for a full and open consultation process. This was sent to the Chief Executive of Northern Devon Healthcare NHS Trust and also the Clinical Chair Northern Locality of Clinical Commissioning group.

The Committee has continued to maintain communications with the NHS Trust and Clinical Commissioning Group and do so in order to ensure that the strength of feeling of the residents regarding the changes from a hospital to Care Closer to Home are continued to be monitored.

Dr McLellan was nominated and appointed to represent the Committee on the Torrington Community Cares Oversight Group. Dr McLellan has attended meetings and provided detailed reports back to Committee.

The Committee noted concerns regarding potential changes affecting other hospitals in the Torridge area. A letter of concern was written to Health Watch Devon about the potential Ward closure at Bideford Hospital.

Torrington Community Cares was included as a standing item on the agenda and the Committee continue to carefully monitor developments.

Citizens Advice Bureau

Mr Steve Davis, Chief Executive and Mr Stevens, Chair of Trustees of the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB), gave an interesting and detailed presentation to the Committee on developments with the Citizens Advice Bureau. Mr Davis explained the challenges faced by the CAB and that changes in the welfare benefit system had created additional work.

Following the presentation, the Committee made recommendations, including that closer working partnerships were investigated between Torridge and the CAB.

Tarka/Westward Housing

The Committee receive two half yearly performance updates from Tarka/Westward Housing and the Council's Housing Manager.

A scoping meeting was held prior to the first presentation and Members prepared questions which were forwarded to Tarka Housing in advance of the meeting.

The Committee recognised that the relationship with Tarka Housing was at a new stage. It had been more than five years since the Council had transferred its housing stock to Tarka Housing and the transfer agreement and 'promises' which had covered the first five years had, in the main, ended.

Members discussed and agreed with Tarka Housing that there was a continuing contractual arrangement but that a new partnership relationship was needed between the two organisations and that External Overview & Scrutiny would provide a strategic overview regarding this.

During the course of the meetings, concern was expressed regarding issues at the Mount, Appledore. As a consequence steps were taken and the Chair attended a successful meeting with the Chair of the Leaseholders Association and two residents. Arrangements were also made for the Westward Housing 'information bus' to visit the Mount to provide additional support and information to residents.

The Committee also discussed concerns expressed by the Residents Association in Torrington and a Manager from Westward Homes subsequently attended one of the Associations meetings.

Biosphere Reserve

The Committee received an informative presentation from Mr A Bell, UNESCO World Biosphere Reserve Co-Ordinator. Details of current projects and partner organisations were provided, including information about the working groups involved with the Biosphere Reserve.

The Committee were informed that the Biosphere Reserve was a unique destination in Torridge and North Devon which created both opportunities for jobs and attracted visitors.

Further to the presentation, the Committee discussed problems caused by water run-off from new developments and enquiries were made of the Planning Department as to what current requirements are in place when new developments were being considered.

Taw and Torridge Voluntary Services

The Committee received a wide ranging presentation from Julia Lock, Chief Executive and Jo Manley, Project Support Manager for the Taw and Torridge Voluntary Services (TTVS).

The Committee were advised that a Sports Forum which TTVS had taken a lead role in was due to start in October 2013 and copies of the TTVS newsletter were distributed to Members.

The Committee also recognised the important role that volunteers make to our communities and the considerable support the organisation provides to voluntary and community groups throughout the district.

Community Transport Associations

The Committee received detailed presentations from Mrs Cathy Withall, Co-ordinator for the Holsworthy Rural Community Transport and Mr Duncan Goodman from Torridge Community Transport Association.

The purpose of the Associations is to provide transport for those who have no transport available or have difficulty accessing public transport for any reason and the Committee were advised that rising fuel and car insurance costs and an increase in population, (particularly the elderly population) were challenges for them in the future.

Income and expenditure details were discussed in some detail and consequently it was recommended that Torridge enter into Service Level Agreements with the Holsworthy Rural Community Transport Ltd and Torridge Community Transport Association.

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. It was noted that North Devon+ were undergoing a re-structuring and reduction in staffing numbers.

Members were shown a short film presentation detailing the success of apprenticeships in Torridge.

Prior to the meeting scoping questions, compiled by Members of External Overview & Scrutiny had been forwarded to North Devon+ and these questions were answered during the course of the presentation.

The Committee continue to be actively involved in Torridge's working relationship with North Devon+.

Transform

Gary Smith the Transform Manager provided a wide ranging update on the work undertaken by the programme across various parts of the district during the year. One key issue had been identified as private sector housing and in particular empty properties.

The Committee were informed that Transform was in the last ten weeks of its programme and would be consolidating the steering group it established to enable it to carry on.

The Committee were appreciative of the detailed work carried out by Transform for the Torridge area.

After the presentation Members discussed the Green Deal and concerns were expressed regarding the regulation of Letting Agents and the Housing Manager provided an update on empty properties.

Devon & Somerset Fire & Rescue Service

Two Officers from the Fire Service gave an excellent presentation and provided details to Committee of the geographical area covered, personnel, staffing and equipment. The variety and range of the work carried out by the Service was illustrated.

Members learnt how the Fire Service was concerned about the number of 'hoarders' who posed a fire risk to themselves and nearby residents and the arrangements that had been put in place to try to manage this.

Others topics covered included the high death rate of young drivers in the North Devon area and the need to recruit more retained firefighters at local fire stations.

Consultation by Devon County Council on proposed cuts to services

In response to a consultation by Devon Council Council on proposed cuts to services which would affect the lives of many local residents a Special Joint Meeting was arranged.

The Special Joint Meeting was held on 13 March 2014 with North Devon Council to formulate a response to the Devon County Council consultations. The meeting was held in the Civic Centre, Barnstaple and 7 Torrridge District Councillors, 2 Independent Representatives and 2 Officers attended from Torrridge. 15 North Devon Councillors and up to 80 Members of the Press and Public were also in attendance. Guest speakers addressed the Committee representing different service users affected by the proposed cuts. The services affected included day centres, residential care homes, youth facilities and support for addressing domestic violence.

Outcomes from the meeting were forwarded by way of a list of Resolutions and Questions to the Press, to a SPARSE meeting in London, to local Members of Parliament and to Devon County Council.

It was agreed that a delegation would be sent from Torrridge and North Devon Councils to Exeter at a date to be arranged to discuss these proposed cuts further. The consultation process is being considered at this time by the External Overview & Scrutiny Committee.

Other items covered by the Committee:

Designated Persons (Social Housing Complaints)

It had been decided that the 'Designated Persons' role created by the Localism Act 2011 was to be placed with the External Overview & Scrutiny Committee.

After discussion, Councillors P Davies, M Langmead and D Lausen were nominated and appointed as Designated Persons with regard to mediating social housing complaints.

Over the course of 2013/2014 the Committee received updates:

- Rural Fair Share Petition Campaign - the additional cost of providing rural services and the disproportionate funds received from Government were discussed. A press release was issued and petition circulated.
- Empty/Second Homes – the Housing Manager provided specific updates
- TE Connectivity (TYCO) – the Special Projects Manager provided updates
- Torridge Bus Services - following concern about bus services on Sundays Devon County Council were contacted querying the lack of services on Sundays in Torridge and access to the Bideford Pannier Market via public transport
- Tarka Rail Association's new strategy document