

# Torridge Estuary Strategy

## 2025 - 2030

The Torridge Estuary Strategy was developed in partnership between Torridge District Council and key estuary stakeholders representing a range of interests.

### Key Principles:

- establish a clear vision for the estuary and provide a clear basis for future decision-making;
- foster economic growth through investment and regeneration;
- inform and engage stakeholders in its implementation;
- protect and improve maritime infrastructure for marine-related uses;
- preserve and enhance the estuary's special environmental status;
- support the exercise of the Council's statutory harbour authority powers in the public interest.
- capture a clear balance between future growth potential and celebrating distinctive heritage.
- planning for rising sea levels and resilience.

The Council therefore intends that this Strategy will be a key document in determining the future direction for the estuary, including its economically- important maritime activities. This Strategy is guided both by a local vision for the Torridge Estuary and also through the wider context of the North Devon and Torridge Clean Maritime Growth Vision, capturing the key opportunities for growth in the region.

There is no single body with overall responsibility for the protection, management, promotion and marketing of the estuary and use by its different stakeholders. This Strategy's objective is therefore to promote a more coherent approach to managing the estuary, clarify its ambition and to underpin the clear need for strong partnerships.

It must also be emphasised that this is a strategy with a focus on the Torridge Estuary. However, activity within the Taw Estuary directly impacts on the Torridge Estuary, and the inter-relationship is inseparable. Nature does not recognise the delineations. This is one water body, so on a nature recovery level there is an inevitable cross-over of impacts which need to be considered, such as with water level risks. Furthermore, this Strategy directly supports activities outlined in the North Devon and Torridge Economic Strategy, and so alongside the Torridge Estuary, the Taw Estuary and waterfront infrastructure will also need to play a collective role to achieve those wider objectives.

It is intended that this Strategy will set a direction of travel for the Council in the undertaking of its own responsibilities, whilst also enabling stronger overall estuary management through renewed and strengthened partnerships around a collective vision- consultation and shared perspectives have been at the heart of developing this Strategy. This Strategy therefore lays out clear areas both of opportunity and need but will require delivery through strong partnerships and funding secured for long-term impact.

The Strategy will have a 5-year timeframe. However, this is currently a time of great change and uncertainty for Councils given Local Government Reorganisation. As such, a 3 year review will be undertaken in 2028. This Strategy will be flexible enough to change priorities in light of any new and emerging evidence or moment of shared opportunity, and to allow a more detailed action plan to be developed and pursued.

In the longer term, it is recognised that a single, separate overarching body with statutory responsibility for the management, care and protection of the Estuary may be required to deliver on the ambitions of the Torridge Estuary Strategy. However, there is also a clear recognition that any future scope increases could only be delivered through significant external support and funding, and delivered through partnerships to explore the best possible future models, roles and responsibilities.

## A Clean Maritime Growth Vision – a context for future growth

In January 2023 Torridge District Council secured £15.6m funding from the Levelling Up fund to deliver the Appledore Clean Maritime Innovation Centre, putting the Torridge estuary at the heart of national innovation opportunities in the sector.

The North Devon and Torridge Clean Maritime Growth Vision (2024 – 2029) goes further by outlining the inter-connected opportunities within the marine and maritime sectors and the possible benefits to the region:

*“Our vision is for a growing and dynamic blue economy, built on a long maritime heritage and culture, where our rural and coastal setting shifts from decline and deprivation to being a thriving partner in delivering critical priorities in Net Zero, energy, health and food security. By playing our role in a bigger picture we will help decarbonise the maritime sector and create lasting positive benefits for our community, our economy and the wonderful natural environment of North Devon and Torridge.”*

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That future is not about the giant infrastructure construction for floating offshore wind assembly or availability of a deep-water port. Instead, the vision lays out opportunities for how passionate, skilled and insightful people and organisations can be supported to come together and use the estuary and the sea as a productive asset to create commercialised, impactful solutions to drive forward our clean maritime sector, linked to our vibrant green economy.

Within that, there is a key role for the Appledore Clean Maritime Innovation Centre, alongside Navantia’s Appledore shipyard, and with skills partners, to facilitate innovation and the field testing of innovation. A large part of the focus of the Innovation Centre will be within the field of Zero Emission propulsion systems development and integration. The innovation centre has been designated as establishing a National Centre of Excellence by the National Shipbuilding Office, a status with significant opportunity both for the local economy and environment. But that status also involves working with wider partnerships, both local and national. The estuary therefore has a potentially key role to play in supporting the testing of innovations to assist within those partnerships and to drive competitiveness for business users across a range of fields now and into the future, including autonomous vessels, propulsion system, even for water quality, blue natural capital and smart environmental intelligence interventions. There is therefore a clear need for data sets to align with other locations, such as the Smart Sound in Plymouth, to create a wider testing ecosystem.

There must also be a clear recognition of the role within the Defence sector that the Appledore shipyard has traditionally occupied, and of the importance of fostering

innovation and delivery given the turbulent world of modern politics. Navantia has an established Defence track record, and local conditions need to be favourable, including skills and supply chains, to ensure competitive advantages can be achieved where possible. With RM Instow and Zeta Berth on the shores opposite, and RM Chivenor a short trip up the Taw Estuary, the sector's presence must be acknowledged and fostered to align with local objectives.

The coastline off Torridge and North Devon provides an ideal location for seaweed cultivation, and the estuary has a potentially important role to play in supporting that industry to grow. When harvested, the crop needs to be landed and ideally have a large amount of water content removed as quickly as possible before onward transport for drying or biorefining. The landing of those crops provides a way to bring the community into the sector through witnessing this onshoring process in the same way that crowds gather to see heritage vessels or other cargoes coming into Bideford Port for unloading. However, at this point there remain a large number of unknowns associated with the industry, and to what extent it will be able to scale remains unclear. Onshore infrastructure and support will be critical to that future growth locally, unlocking both economic and environmental benefits.

There has been an explosion of interest in water quality, set against the reality that efforts to improve water quality across the country are not happening as quickly as people wish. The estuary faces a number of water quality issues. Partnership working is essential in order to establish concerted 'source to sea' efforts to monitor and then put in place interventions that systematically improve the water quality- an ambition which links to the wider goals of the Appledore Clean Maritime Innovation Centre. Resulting water quality improvements in the estuary will support local nature recovery and create opportunities for wider physical and mental health benefits.

As an ideal base for operations and maintenance activities, with proximity to The Crown Estate's Celtic Sea floating offshore wind arrays and local strengths in smart environmental intelligence, including from the North Devon UNESCO Biosphere, we will enable technology to reduce risks, enhance safety and improve efficiencies. Work has already been undertaken to understand the potential vessel requirements and tidal implications, and it is essential that Torridge District Council works closely with future partners to ensure that information is suitably disseminated and actioned to unlock the right kind of economic growth for the region.

The wider Growth Vision is underpinned by two additional key factors – supporting the local community to feel proud of the activities on the water and also to benefit from them, including through access to skills and employment as well as through being able to directly use the water for leisure.

Proud of our heritage, excited by an innovative future, with clear benefit for our communities, local economy and local environment.

These are major opportunities ahead. But each also contains significant unknowns and a requirement to not only work in partnerships but also to balance the varying needs- from environmental urgencies through to the need to create highly-skilled, well-paid jobs which inspire both our current and next generation. Crucially, therefore, to ensure that communities are able to turn back towards the water, re-engaging and benefitting from the River Torridge which has shaped our places.

## Consultation and approval

In preparing this Strategy the Council has engaged with a range of key stakeholders to identify any opportunities or constraints which they feel may apply to the future of the Estuary. Those stakeholders include;

- Taw and Torridge Estuary Forum.
- Bideford Harbour Board.
- Bideford Harbour Users Group (HUG).
- North Devon UNESCO Biosphere.
- North Devon Biosphere Foundation.
- Harland & Wolff Ltd / Navantia SA Ltd.
- Mark Burnett, Seiche Group and also Northern Devon Futures Clean Maritime Champion.
- Brad Bunyard, EV Parts.

As well as those consultations, the Council has invited members of the public to comment on a draft version of this Strategy, with 458 responses provided through an online form.

## A vision for the future of the Torridge Estuary and its communities

The estuary, as we see it today, results from the interaction of human activity on the physical environment and its flora and fauna. Lying at the centre of the North Devon UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, the Bideford and River Torridge Heritage Harbour was officially recognised as a Heritage Harbour by the national Maritime Heritage Trust in January 2024, creating a unique offer among the existing Heritage Harbours by providing such a clear juxtaposition of both maritime heritage and environment.

Ensuring that the balance of being proud of the estuary's heritage whilst shaping an exciting future based on innovation and both economic and environmental opportunity is at the heart of this strategy. Fostering and cherishing that balance will require collaboration and multiple parties sharing in the delivery of this collectively developed vision.

This Estuary Strategy must be viewed alongside the objectives of the North Devon and Torridge Economic Strategy (2024 – 2029) and the North Devon and Torridge Clean Maritime Growth Vision. Collectively they share a clear ambition – to enable and encourage the community to turn back towards the water; for employment, leisure, wellbeing, culture and pride.

Our Vision is for the Torridge Estuary to play a regional and national role with clear local benefits, and for the local conditions to enable and encourage waterfront activity along the Torridge. That thanks to the water and the surrounding communities we can lead the way in decarbonising the maritime economy, cleaning our waters and generating skilled, well-paid employment for the local workforce and creating both environmental and cultural benefits in tandem.

Our towns and communities need to not only play a major role in this but also to feel the benefit, bringing the industries to the fore in a way that can build engagement and raise aspiration levels- helping young people to want to learn the skills, get local jobs and stay within our communities.

### Appledore: an innovation quay front

At the heart of this initiative lies the Appledore Clean Maritime Innovation Centre (ACMIC) and an emerging vision for an innovation quay front. A quay front at the heart of providing solutions and vessels to support decarbonisation, delivering local prosperity and undeniable benefits for UK Plc stemming from associated manufacturing and exports. From clean propulsion systems, using both green electric and green hydrogen, through to supporting strengths in autonomous vessels and smart environmental intelligence. The estuary needs to be positioned and branded as a natural venue for research, development and testing of clean maritime innovations, working with key strategic partners including universities, Maritime UK SW and government bodies

including the Department for Transport, National Shipbuilding Office and partners such as the Connected Places Catapult and even National Composites Centre. That in turn links to the opportunity behind the designation of ACMIC as a National Centre of Excellence for the National Shipbuilding Office.

The realisation of those opportunities will:

- Foster the creation of new supply chain clusters in the local economy, as well as improving local skills through investment in education and training in traditional and emerging maritime industries such as aquaculture, autonomous vessels, environmental intelligence and future Floating Offshore Wind opportunities in the Celtic Sea;
- Support proposals which seek to upgrade infrastructure, such as electric charging units for vessels, across the estuary which stimulate both decarbonisation and skilled job creation;
- Enable the Torridge Estuary to play a role within future green shipping corridors, playing a wider role in the decarbonisation and promotion of shipping across the peninsula. This in itself should support Navantia's Appledore shipyard being at the heart of both new build and retrofit activities both regionally and nationally, enabling the yard to play its traditional role as a major employer, skills generator and driver of the local economy; and
- Facilitate work with local and national partners to explore the feasibility of installing a smart monitoring system in the estuary to support research and development testing processes and also to monitor live water quality, further facilitating clean waters and wider usage, ideally linking to other data monitoring sources, such as the Plymouth Smart Sound, in order to create a unique regional testing environment.

To achieve these ambitions a funded and measured strategic approach to dredging in the river will need to be developed and enacted. This will maximise the potential of the estuary's waterways, understand the seasonal variations of the river and support the opportunity to generate higher-skilled, higher-salaried employment for local residents of all ages, whilst serving to inspire young people to stay locally for their working careers rather than losing our existing talent.

The Torridge Estuary Strategy also aligns with the Department for Transport's Maritime Decarbonisation Strategy, supporting the development of decarbonising technologies and delivering green shipping futures. This Torridge Estuary Strategy has at its core the ambition to deliver on making Britain a clean energy superpower and to kickstart economic growth, building on UK expertise and innovation to support investment and growth whilst creating leading decarbonisation solutions.

### An outstanding natural environment

The estuary is designated nationally and internationally for its landscape and nature. The Council will continue to use its powers to protect and enhance the estuarine environment, working in partnership to deliver the North Devon Coast National Landscape's Management Plan 2019 – 2025 (and subsequent successor plan), the Biosphere's Nature Recovery Plan (NRP) and the emerging statutory Devon Countywide Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS), whilst supporting action to meet the Water Framework Directive.

Protection of that sensitive environment needs to be of paramount importance, and it is critical to ensure that an imbalance is not achieved as a result of other activities, such as increasing leisure use of the water. Decarbonisation efforts connected to the innovation quayfront must also be applied in order to protect the estuary's ecosystems.

The Council is a member of the Devon Climate Emergency Partnership and will pursue action to reduce the causes of, and adapt to, climate change, including consideration of sea level rises.

We will promote active travel around the estuary and encourage residents and visitors to use this environment responsibly. Where plausible efforts should be made to strengthen connections from the Tarka Trail to Bideford town centre, with linkage to Brunswick Wharf in East-the-water. Efforts should also be pursued to improve cycleways to Westward Ho! and Appledore, both for leisure and commuting purposes. Alongside this consideration should also be given to providing improved opportunities to sit and admire, with benches lacking both on the quayfront in Bideford and also on the Tarka Trail. However, these proposals do not fall within the remit of Torridge District Council and so work will need to be undertaken to ensure strategic partners are able to appreciate the importance of these schemes and are supported to secure funding and deliver.

### Clean waters

The Clean Maritime Growth Vision lays out a vision for an estuary without diesel trails, playing a role for the economy and the planet. However, the current issue of water quality goes well beyond that and is a major concern both for residents and visitors. To truly achieve clean and usable waterways, including for natural fish nurseries, the national issue of pollutants, and in particular run-off from land and sewage, needs to be addressed at a local level, giving confidence to water users and providing safe living conditions for our ecology. Live water monitoring and real-time data using accessible, clear applications and advice is of enormous importance to create confidence to all users of our waters. The North Devon UNESCO Biosphere is currently initiating a project to achieve precisely this, rather than forcing water users to rely on updates about recent

sewage discharges. This is a project supported and part-financed by Torridge District Council.

That impact can only be achieved through the application of a catchment-based approach to prevent issues where possible rather than react retrospectively- and with all responsible organisations working in partnership. The North Devon UNESCO Biosphere is already undertaking precisely that with its pioneering work on the “Smart Biosphere” in North Devon. The project works with local businesses and experts as well as global leads in the field to provide real-time analysis of water quality, aimed at providing real-time bathing alerts, and root cause analysis of where issues are coming from, so as to be able to pinpoint interventions. This now needs to be expanded from the River UMBER catchment (Combe Martin) and applied to the Torridge and has the opportunity to link with the emerging River Champions movement.

The Council, through its role as a local planning authority, will seek new development to contribute positively by seeking to apply Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDS) that manage surface water run-off. Through the preparation of the new local plan, and working in partnership, the Council will explore opportunities for applying novel approaches, such as nature based solutions to help manage water quality.

Beyond this, South West Water (SWW) has a responsibility to both prevent sewage entering the estuary and to clean up existing damage. Through this Strategy there is an opportunity for SWW to work ever-closer with the Biosphere on this catchment approach, and for Torridge District Council to also work with partners such as The Crown Estate, the Environment Agency and other strategic partners in order to support and address the issue as urgently as possible. At the same time there is a need to collectively engage with the agricultural and dairy sectors to prevent agricultural pollution entering the estuary and to support productivity. The local planning authority can support positive change to farming practices by facilitating changes to farm-based infrastructure, however to enable this suitable government funding needs to be provided to these important sectors.

#### A thriving Bideford port and town centre

The Council will safeguard Bideford Town Quay for port-related use and support the continued operation and growth of Bideford as a working harbour. This sense of Bideford as a working harbour is critical, being agile to maximise current and future opportunities to handle existing and new niche commercial cargoes. Beyond this, the Town Quay should continue to ensure it meets the needs of the local commercial fishing industry, whilst encouraging its future growth, where activities cannot be accommodated at Appledore. However, an improved blend of activities needs to be achieved to stimulate a far greater sense of commercial and social activity on the quay.

The Bideford Regeneration Strategy lays out a clear vision for the town's future. As a core priority, it is recognised that the quay front needs to play a more central role in the life of the town, and steps need to be taken to bring the beautiful space back to life to create a far greater economic and community role. From live music to markets to repairing the defunct tidal fountains, the waterfront needs to return to becoming the true jewel in the town's crown- an asset most places in the country would look at with envy. Efforts should be made to explore how increased flexibility of the quayfront could enable other uses, such as food and drink, bars, entertainment and a general café culture could create a positive impact for the community and local economy. The quayfront is the town's main asset and needs to truly become a location the community is proud of and one where people can spend time together. However, that usage must not prevent the working functions of the Port.

Alongside that, the development of Brunswick Wharf in East-the-Water will be an important step towards achieving that goal, creating an interplay between the two sides of the river and generating additional footfall, vibrancy and energy for the town.

The Council will maintain and work to enhance marine activities and waterfront facilities at Bideford in order to attract visitors, whether by land or sea, by:

- undertaking a detailed study of future compatible uses of Bideford port and quay front, from commercial to events to leisure and wellbeing, in order to make more of the unique jewel within Bideford's crown, including how this will improve linkages to the core town centre;
- encouraging the expansion of existing passenger-ship operations (MV Oldenburg, SV Waverley and also riverfront tours or evening cruises) from the Town Quay;
- exploring current and future requirements for dredging in order to maintain suitable and appropriate access to Bideford Quay.
- ensuring that Bideford Quay is safe from Anti-social Behaviour and creates an engaging and welcoming place which is at the heart of the town's appeal moving forward. That will include a lighting and CCTV strategy to provide full inclusion and increase the perception of safety, as well as continuing to work with the Police to address issues, especially in the vicinity of the Lundy building;
- undertake a full public realm review to not only attract people to the quay front but once that they are there, to spend more time enjoying it, helping to create a sense of playfulness and enjoyment that makes spending time in the town and at its riverside more enjoyable for all. Signage, wayfinding and public art will all need to play a role within that; and
- work with the Bideford and River Torridge Heritage Harbour to develop a compelling narrative around the area's distinctive maritime heritage, and through that build local awareness and pride. That may include steps such as improved

signage and ensuring that heritage references blend with innovation nods through the public realm strategy; and

- use the Discover Bideford platform to raise awareness of the wide range of events and activities which take place in Bideford, including exploring push-notifications to ensure residents and visitors are aware of upcoming opportunities which suit their preferences.
- supporting efforts to use the quay as a base for additional water-related activities such as kayak tours.

Where possible, including working with the Local Planning Authority, efforts should be made to improve the aesthetics of the approach ways in to Bideford, especially from Great Torrington, in order to celebrate the town and also raise overall standards of appearance.

#### A role for the Floating Offshore Wind industry

Proximity to the Crown Estate's leasing areas for Floating Offshore Wind (FLOW) in the Celtic Sea provides a unique window of opportunity for the Torridge Estuary as part of a multi-port system proposed by developers. The lack of any single port across the South West with the required functionality, capacity and access to deep water means that functions will need to be split across a wide geography, also enabling flexibility within weather cycles.

The Taw and Torridge estuary isn't deep enough to support FLOW farm construction activity. The industrial scale of activity, for example dealing with 300 metre turbines, is simply not deliverable nor compatible with our area. However, it is the closest harbour to the site. That short distance to the Project Development Areas (PDA) creates a significant economic advantage for basing Operations and Maintenance activities within the Torridge Estuary for the 30+ years of wind farm operations. PDA 3, the closest to the coastline of Torridge and confirmed to connect into region, was awarded in June 2025, and so significant next steps will now need to be taken to engage with the lease-holding developer.

Deep water moorings laid at Crow Point also provide an additional opportunity to support vessel activity within the estuary, providing a safe place to lay up at all tidal conditions. Future consideration should be given to how awareness of these moorings can be amplified in order to support both the commercial and leisure markets.

The North Devon and Torridge Clean Maritime Growth Vision provides details of the wider opportunities and support as a collective vision from Torridge District Council and North Devon Council.

### Removing freight and carbon from the road network

In 2024 and 2025 ten cargo ships delivered animal feed and wood pellets to Navantia's "New Quay" in Appledore, which removed the equivalent of over 110 lorry journeys from the roads per vessel. The carbon savings alongside the road capacity implications create a sizable impact for people and planet. The tidal constraints of the estuary ensure that these vessels need to be carefully timetabled to berth, both in Bideford and Appledore. However, this blend strengthens future agility, viability and vibrancy for the Torridge estuary and furthers the decarbonisation ambitions of the region.

To support this there will be a clear focus on;

- marketing and therefore increasing awareness of the ship / cargo handling and other activities at Bideford Town Quay, working with national agents and trade organisations to demonstrate the potential decarbonisation gains of switching to water transport; and
- exploring future infrastructure and storage needs, such as to further support cargo transportation and the onshoring of seaweed harvests along with future enterprise needs.

### Wellbeing on the water

The waters of the Estuary offer rich and varied leisure uses and are well-used for a range of activities, from sailing to rowing, paddleboarding to kayaking. The Bideford Regatta and gig club events bring crowds and vibrancy to the water and the riverbanks, whilst the Bideford triathlon is one of the highlights of the local sporting calendar (along with Bideford Blues athletics events) which also generate positives for the local economy. As for the commercial sector there is an urgent need to develop and deliver a coordinated dredging policy to avoid silt on the banks from constraining activities, and engagement with bodies such as the rowing clubs needs to be undertaken.

In common with other similar tidal estuaries in the south and south west, activities on the water are inevitably influenced by the tidal cycle range which can govern tidal access timings and can occasionally restrict use, both commercial and leisure. However, this is where it is essential for the space to present a mixed offer to ensure that the quayfront can be activated throughout the tidal cycle. Investigations should also be pursued as to whether there is benefit to water users in creating additional storage facilities, as per the Ilfracombe watersports centre, to strengthen access to the water and widen engagement and opportunity.

This tidal cycle dictates the days / times when the Lundy passenger service can operate from Bideford and similarly, the Instow ferry has to stop running at low water period,

thereby restricting the on-demand movement of visitors between Appledore and Instow and restricting, but not preventing, wider water-taxi opportunities.

For leisure sailors, the estuary offers around 500 drying moorings, mostly at Instow. The estuary provides a mix of different sailing options, including open sea access. Where vessels use outboard motors there is a clear desire to support their transition to clean fuels, continuing to support local branding and protecting our waterways from diesel residues. Furthermore, future consideration should be given to the removal and safe disposal of antifoul to prevent additional pollution to the waters that are providing the leisure opportunities in the first place.

Recognition also needs to be given to the fact that the Torridge Estuary has too often become a graveyard for abandoned vessels, capitalising on the array of ownerships and management structures within the estuary. Collective action needs to be taken, including with The Crown Estate, to explore how these wrecks can be safely removed. Public consultation demonstrated the passion of the community to remove these abandoned vessels and to create a process to avoid any form of future repeat. However, it is also an undeniable fact that the process comes at a significant financial cost and often enters uncertain legal waters, an additional reason why Torridge District Council cannot act unilaterally but needs wider support and partnership approaches.

Access to the water for all remains a major priority, with Torridge District Council committed to ensuring its facilities are fully accessible where possible. However, on a social mobility front, efforts also need to be made to constantly ensure that barriers are removed which allow as wide a cross-section of our community as possible to use our blue spaces for health and wellbeing.

Furthermore, where increased usage is encouraged and supported so an understanding also needs to be created of the inherent dangers of the water, with training and safety considerations also of enormous importance.

The multi-use trails of the Tarka Trail and the South West Coast Path are a major draw to the area, although improved linkages need to be made to ensure that the flow of users can also be brought into the towns through which they pass. These trails serve as a scenic route both for leisure and, in the case of the Tarka Trail, commuting. However, both have significant mobility constraints, including for wheelchair users. Nonetheless, both provide stunning views and a highly important opportunity for residents and visitors alike to enjoy the area's open spaces and environment whilst engaging in a healthy lifestyle.

### Cultivation and ecology

The Taw-Torridge Estuary is of major importance for its overwintering and migratory populations of wading birds. In addition, rare plants grow along its shores. The estuary's wide tidal range is reflected by the very large areas of mudflats and sandbanks present. Together with beaches and saltmarshes, the area provides a rich and varied source of food for many birds and other animals.

The site regularly supports nationally important numbers of curlew, golden plover and lapwing. Other species of waders such as redshank, dunlin and oystercatcher are also abundant.

Torridge District Council worked in partnership with Natural England, the RSPB, North Devon Council and North Devon AONB Partnership and part funded a report to identify the location of high tide roosts and to understand effects of disturbance arising from recreational activity on wintering water birds in the Taw Torridge Estuary<sup>1</sup>. This found that walkers with dogs off the lead are the overwhelmingly dominant cause of disturbance to wintering bird species on the estuary. Disturbance arising from other event categories is rare. This disturbance is detrimental to the estuary's waterbird populations and is increasing as dog ownership has risen and there is increased recreational access to roost areas. The Council has undertaken a programme to increase awareness and to educate dog walkers of the issues and how to act responsibly.

Together, the Taw and Torridge contributes the second largest area of coastal salt marshes and saline reedbeds in the region. Salt marshes are considered to be one of the most productive ecosystems in the world. Many birds, juvenile fish, crustaceans and molluscs use marshes as nurseries, including commercially important fish species such as sea bass. Salt marshes are important for climate change and are known to accumulate sediment and organic matter at a rate that compensates for sea level rise, as well as providing carbon storage at approximately 10 times the rate observed in temperate forests. The IUCN states that salt marshes are "critical components to future carbon management discussions and strategies".

The Taw and Torridge supports typical estuarine species such as mullet and flat fish, also bass and pollock and, on migration, salmon, sea trout and eel. Many invertebrates are found in the extensive sandbanks exposed at low tide. Mudflats occur more towards high water mark, rocky outcrops, seawalls and stones on the banks provide a substrate for algal growth and beds of mussels.

Intertidal sand, muddy sand and mixed sediments have an important role in fundamental ecosystem processes, including nutrient cycling and providing nursery grounds for fish.

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<sup>1</sup> [Identification of Wintering Wildfowl High Tide Roosts & Recreational Disturbance Impacts on the Taw Torridge Estuary Site of Special Scientific Interest \(SSSI\) - NECR281](#)

The Torridge Estuary already hosts oyster and mussel beds, whilst the neighbouring River Taw is known as a sea bass nursery. Cultivation of oysters and mussels can play an important role in cleaning the water.

With continuing improvements in water quality, the Estuary can potentially support a wider range of sustainable pisciculture and aquaculture activities, which the Council will encourage, with strict environmental standards to promote protection and enhancement of the estuary rather than creating commercial damage.

Climate change and sea level rises will continue to create pressure on the estuary and the challenge for land alongside the estuary. Room should also be given for nature around the estuary - allowing roll back of habitats, while additional development must also be considered against the importance of protecting waterfront spaces for the range of uses laid out in this strategy.

The Council will continue to work with residents and visitors to reduce disturbance to wintering bird species on the estuary.

#### The role of culture in place-making

The River Torridge has shaped life across its estuary to form the area we know, live in and work in today. That heritage, recognised in part, through the award of the Bideford and Torridge Heritage Harbour status, is a pivotal element of the culture of our communities. But culture never sits still.

As our towns turned away from the sea as a source of employment and pride, so prosperity declined, stimulating under-employment, creative stagnation and an exodus of young people, taking with them the energy and imagination that made our place thrive. As we enter a new period of focus on the development of a dynamic blue economy it is therefore imperative to ensure a stronger, renewed connection with the water again.

The Torridge Estuary Strategy seeks to reconnect the water with the towns again, in particular in Bideford as the heart of activity. That reconnection needs to take the shape not only of enabling improved access to the water for leisure purposes but also in the form of public realm which spotlights the Torridge and the town's heritage whilst also reflecting maritime futures, using that contrast as a means of expression and engagement.

However, cultural expression and engagement should not only be through passive appreciation. Partners such as Burton at Bideford and Libraries Unlimited, both Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisations (NPOs) sit on the edge of the Torridge in Bideford. These are dynamic bodies with the power to stimulate and involve residents and visitors alike in high quality culture, regardless of background or financial status. The estuary should therefore form the basis for co-created cultural programming that is relevant, inspiring and aspirational. As well as youth-led commissions, cultural activity

should enable opportunities for emerging creatives and innovators to work alongside established counterparts, building a dynamic and distinctive local creatives sector which local skills providers should also feed into, as advocated in the Bideford Cultural Investment Plan and supporting a Just Transition for all.

## **Roles and responsibilities**

### Land ownership

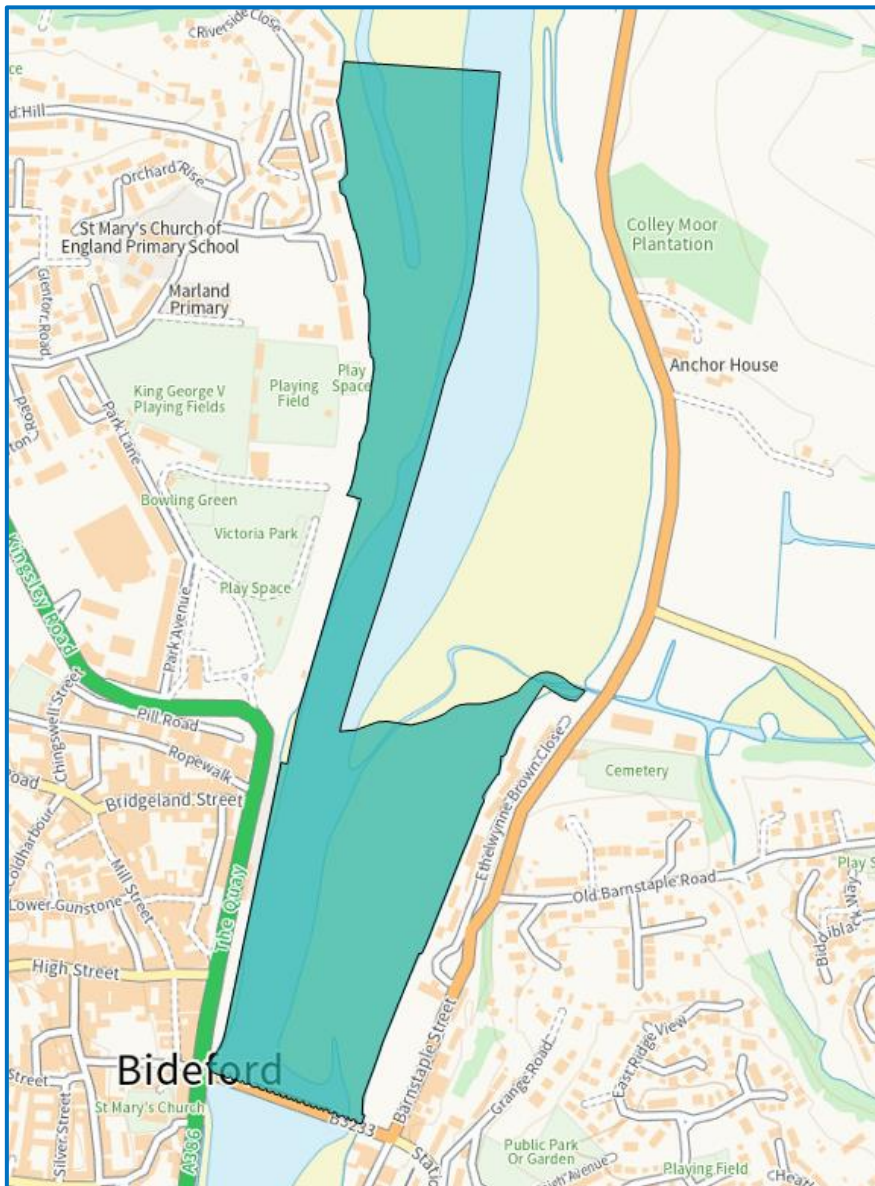
The bed of the River Torridge and the Estuary (referred to as the fundus) is owned and administered by the Crown Estate. The Estate offers leases for individuals and organisations to use the fundus. On that basis, Torridge District Council presently hold a lease for large parts of the River Torridge, the estuary and some parts of the River Taw. Torridge District Council reserves the right to use the powers to charge given to it in the Crown Estate lease but at present, does not do so.

Other fundus owners do charge boat owners for the use of moorings.

### Torridge District Council

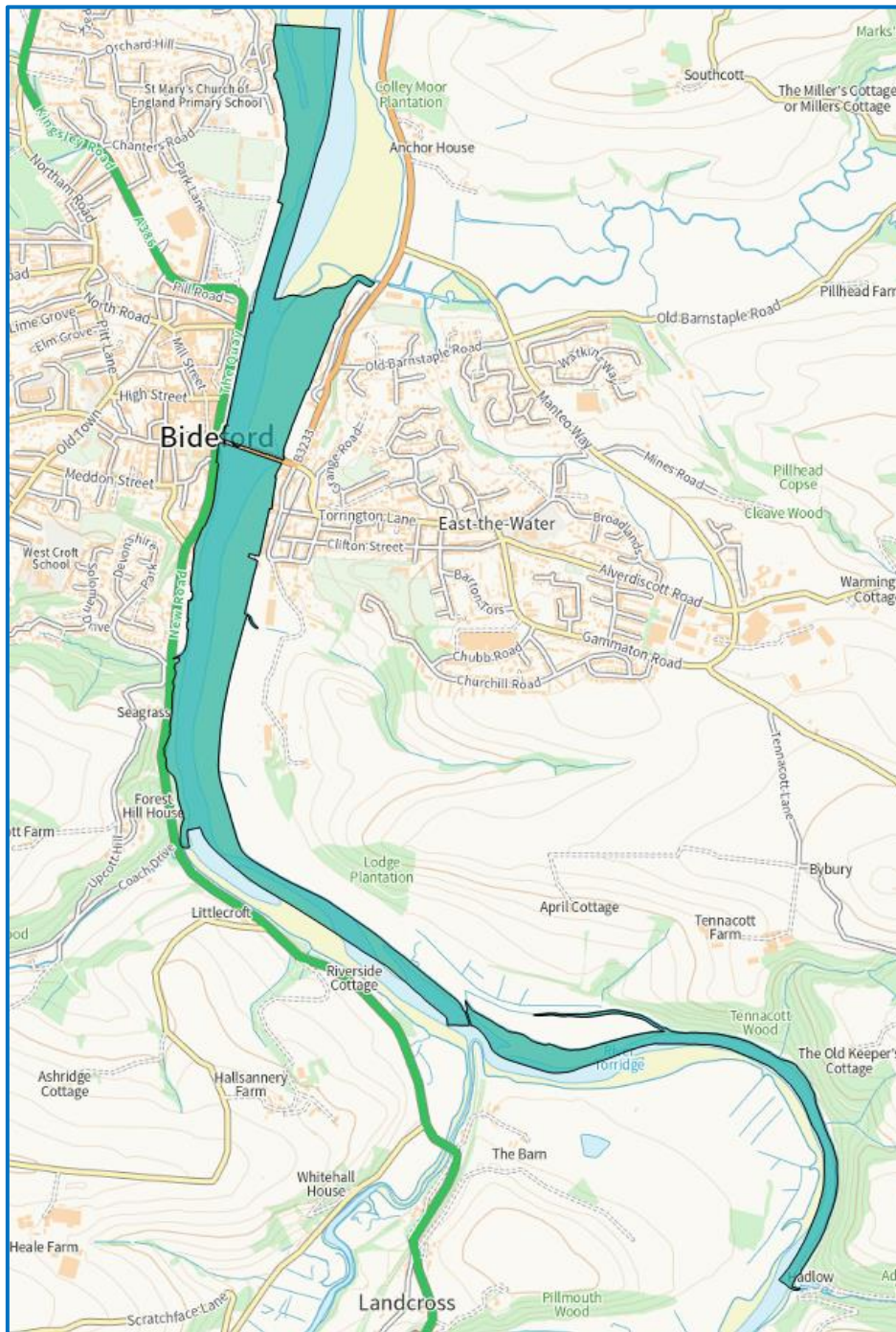
Bideford Harbour is a Municipal Port, owned and operated under Act of Parliament by Torridge District Council and is the statutory harbour authority for the Port of Bideford. The Statutory Harbour area is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Port of Bideford - Statutory Harbour Authority Area



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Figure 1(a): Full Statutory Harbour Authority area of jurisdiction



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The Council and its Harbour Master have powers to regulate the harbour area shown in Figure 1 and 1(a), including power to make byelaws. Byelaws adopted on 9 July 1894 remain in force today.

#### Planning and the delivery of sustainable development

The marine and terrestrial planning systems play a critical role in ensuring that the estuary and its environs are developed in a sustainable manner, balancing the need for development to meet the socio-economic needs of communities and visitors, whilst seeking to protect and enhance what is special about its built and natural environment.

Torrige District Council, alongside North Devon Council, are the local planning authorities for their respective areas, and have the responsibility for setting out how the terrestrial area surrounding the estuary will develop over the long term and for also considering individual development proposals. They have a responsibility for considering development proposals down to the mean low-water limit within their geographical boundaries.

Councils have a responsibility to prepare a local plan that sets out the vision for how their local area will develop over the coming decades. It plans for the delivery of development that is required to meet the needs of local communities whilst setting out strategies and approaches to help manage issues and opportunities on diverse matters such as habitats, landscape, flooding and tourism. Recognising the interconnectivity of North Devon and Torrige – including the shared estuary - Torrige District Council and North Devon Council work together to plan for the future of northern Devon as a whole.

The North Devon and Torrige Local Plan 2011-2031 is the key statutory development plan that guides development across the whole of northern Devon. The Council, in collaboration with North Devon Council, and working with a wide range of stakeholders and partners, is currently preparing a replacement plan that will shape how the area develops over the coming decades, whilst seeking to protect and enhance what makes the area special. This will include consideration of the estuary and how to optimise its use as an asset, balancing the potential impacts of inevitable development pressures and challenges such as coastal squeeze that are presenting as a result of climate change, and developing and applying approaches and strategies that take opportunities to bring about positive change.

The Council's development management service, working within the framework of national policy and the local plan, is responsible for considering planning proposals to ensure that they are contributing to the delivery of sustainable development, balancing the need for development whilst applying checks and balances to protect and enhance what is special about the area's natural and built environment. That development

management service is, however, also dependent upon national legislation as well as the Local Plan, and so the national context must still be considered.

### Devon County Council

Devon County Council is the minerals and waste local planning authority and holds a responsibility for the strategic planning for the future of these matters across the area and for considering associated planning proposals. The Devon Minerals Plan 2011-2033 recognises the role of the estuary in the sustainable management of minerals and safeguards the Quay at Bideford along with Wharfs at Appledore for their role in minerals landing and staging.

### Harbour dues and charges

A distinction is made in harbour legislation between dues and charges, "dues" being those general sums payable by harbour users and which are not levied by reference to use of a specific facility at the harbour and "charges" being sums levied in return for the provision of a service by the harbour authority.

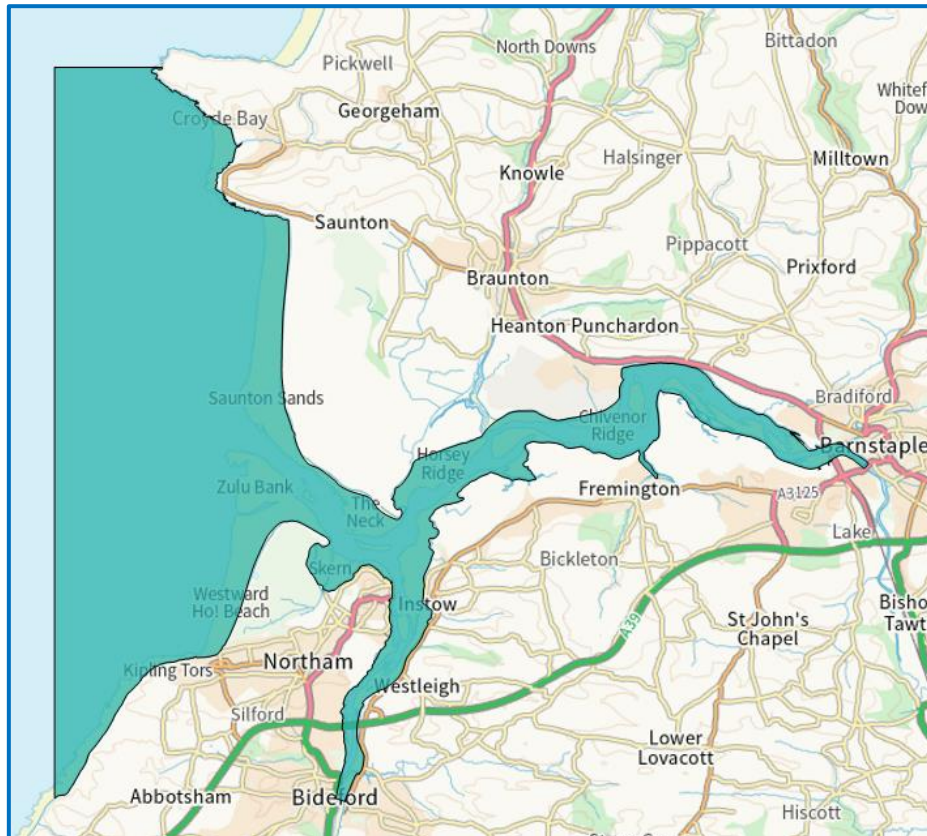
The Harbours 1964 Act included powers for the harbour authority to lay moorings within the harbour and to make reasonable charges for their use. Today, Torridge District Council, as the Statutory Harbour Authority (SHA), collects dues and fees for ships that are visiting and are moored in the SHA area.

The Council does not receive any harbour dues or charges from anyone who uses the estuary outside the Council's harbour area. Those users may or may not make payments to third parties, depending upon the nature and location of their use.

### Pilotage

The Council is also the pilotage authority (known as the competent harbour authority) for the estuary. The Council's area of jurisdiction downstream of Bideford Bridge (Figure 2) was extended by The Bideford (Pilotage) Harbour Revision Order 1988 to cover a much larger area than the Council's statutory harbour authority area.

Figure 2: Competent Harbour Authority downstream area of jurisdiction



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The Council has determined that pilotage should be compulsory for ships over 50m in length, which means that those ships must use a pilot when entering or leaving the Council's pilotage area. The pilot is also employed to act as the Council's Harbour Master. The pilot is supported by a relief pilot, and the Council has a legal obligation to provide a crewed pilot boat which transports the pilot to / from each ship.

In some cases, exemption from the requirement to use a pilot may be granted (a pilotage exemption certificate) where a ship's master or mate has passed an

examination and entered the harbour with sufficient frequency to be aware of its navigational characteristics.

The Council charges for each occasion that a pilot is used by a ship (known as an act of pilotage). The Council uses income received to pay the costs of providing the service and to fund future capital expenditure on, for example, a pilot boat berth, replacement pilot boat engines, or a new pilot boat, if required.

North Devon Council (NDC) pays 20% of the annual net costs incurred by the Council in the provision of pilotage services and receives 20% of any net annual operating surplus.

#### The Marine Management Organisation (MMO)

The Marine Management Organisation (MMO) has the responsibility for managing the marine environment in the United Kingdom, including marine planning below the mean high-water mark. It is responsible for preparing marine plans and also the licencing of a wide range of activities, operations and development. The South West Marine Plan<sup>2</sup> seeks to enhance and protect the marine environment and achieve sustainable economic growth while respecting local communities both within and adjacent to the marine plan areas, seeking to deliver sustainable development in the marine environment.

In the estuary environment, there is often an overlap of the terrestrial and marine planning responsibilities. In such circumstances, the relevant local planning authorities and the Marine Management Organisation will seek to align and co-ordinate their activities and responsibilities in order to streamline processes and to try and optimise outcomes.

#### Harbour Management Committee - Known as the Harbour Board

The TDC Community and Resources (C&R) Committee acts as the Duty Holder<sup>3</sup>, responsible for the safe and efficient operation of the Port of Bideford. The administration of the port is delegated to a management subcommittee of the C&R committee which is informally known as the Bideford Harbour Board. The Harbour Board is tasked with the performance and management of the Council's legal functions as statutory harbour authority and competent harbour authority. The Harbour Board meets quarterly and reports to the Community and Resources committee.

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<sup>2</sup> [The South West Marine Plans Documents - GOV.UK](#)

<sup>3</sup> See the Port and Marine Facilities Safety Code – which describes marine roles and responsibilities in Ports. (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/port-marine-safety-code>)

### Taw and Torridge Estuary Forum

The Taw and Torridge Estuary Forum was founded in 1980 jointly by the Council and North Devon Council. It is a voluntary body, and its role is to act as an independent voice for the estuary.

Its wide membership includes other voluntary organisations, local parish and town councils and business interests, as well as sporting, conservation, environmental and historical organisations.

The Forum's role includes acting as a consultee body for the Council, NDC and other regulatory bodies and representing estuary interests through membership of other relevant bodies.

As a voluntary organisation, the Forum has no separate legal status or powers. It does, however, seek to influence ways in which the estuary is used and to promote best practice through the publication of codes of practice covering topics such as mooring whilst also commenting on relevant Planning applications which impact on the estuary.

### Bideford Harbour Users Group

The 2025 Port Marine Safety Code requires each Statutory Harbour Authority to maintain a stakeholders or port users consultation group, normally referred to as a Harbour Users Group (HUG).

The Port of Bideford established its HUG in May 2024 and its terms of reference and membership are described in Port of Bideford Safety Management System Section 18. In short, the HUG is a body designed to act as a voice and to represent all harbour users about the workings of the port. The Port management is required to listen to the opinions of the HUG but is not obliged to adhere to them.

### Port of Bideford, Harbour Users - Voluntary Code of Conduct

The Port of Bideford and its Harbour Users Group have together agreed to develop a voluntary Code of Conduct for all harbour users. The Code of Conduct is a voluntary, non-statutory agreement made by all stakeholders on how the harbour is to be used, and it seeks to answer all those questions that might not be immediately apparent from legislation, policies and Byelaws etc. The Code will be iterative, learning from user input to continue to evolve and improve. The latest version is held on the TDC Harbour website as a part of the Port of Bideford Safety Management System.

The main subject areas it addresses are items such as:

- Navigation and Communication on the river - how fast, who to speak to, services available etc;

- Launching and recovering smaller vessels – where, how and how much.
- Register of small vessels - to try and reduce the number of derelicts.
- Berths and moorings - where and how.
- Access to the river - steps, ladders, mud.
- Harbour dues - who to pay and when.
- Fishing - where you can and can't.

## The Longer Term

This strategy aims to bring together those who have a stake in the wellbeing, prosperity and husbandry of the Torridge Estuary, respecting their different needs, interests and ambitions.

In the longer term it is recognised that a fundamental review of the needs of the economic and environmental stakeholders may be required to understand how best to look after this precious marine asset.

As part of that there is an awareness that a Harbour Revision Order could be a future option with a view to creating a separate statutory body with the power to administer and protect the Torridge Estuary. However, Torridge District Council recognises that this will require careful liaison with and support from key stakeholders including the Crown Estate, UK Government, Devon County Council and the Marine Management Organisation to fully understand the opportunities and threats this might present. It is not a step that Torridge District Council is able to take without external support, funding and partnerships due to the inherent risks and increased scope of management required.

Furthermore, this strategy has been developed at a time of significant uncertainty with regards to Local Government Reorganisation. The strategy therefore puts in place a vision for the future, one which needs to be pursued regardless of the political structures in place to drive them.

## Conclusion

The Torridge Estuary is a beautiful place, flanked by rolling hills and proud communities. Yet that beauty hides an array of challenges laid out in this high-level strategy. However, the core message of the strategy is that of opportunity, and a need to turn towards the waters again to not only protect them but also enhance and responsibly capitalise upon them. In turn that provides a clear route to energise our economy, improve wellbeing and to provide guardianship for our diverse estuarine wildlife, all while strengthening the appeal for investment, innovation and to ensure that the estuary is truly a great place to live, work and visit.

When adopted an action plan to deliver on the ambitions of the Torridge Estuary Strategy will be published for approval within a 6 month period. That action plan will be developed collaboratively with partners, and an open invitation is extended to stakeholders determined to make a positive difference and help shape the estuary's future and present.