

TORRIDGE DISTRICT COUNCIL

EXTERNAL OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY MEETING

Greenhouse - Riverbank House

Wednesday, 16 July 2025 - 6.00 pm

- PRESENT Councillor H Thomas (Chair)
- Councillor A Brenton (Vice-Chair)
- Councillors L Bach, S Harding, T Johns, D Smith and C Wheatley
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- ALSO PRESENT L Adam - Programme Delivery Manager
- S Kearney - Head of Communities & Place
- L Glover - Corporate Services Officer
- K Hewlett - Electoral and Democratic Services Officer

311. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Shepherd, Councillor Hodson and the Head of Legal and Governance (& Monitoring Officer) for Torrridge District Council.

312. MINUTES

It was proposed by Councillor Smith, seconded by Councillor Brenton and –

Resolved:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 04 June 2025 be agreed and signed as a correct record.

(Vote: For 5, Abstentions 2)

313. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

None.

314. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

Members were reminded that declarations of interest should be made as and when the specific agenda item to which they related was under discussion.

315. AGREEMENT OF AGENDA ITEMS PART I AND II

No items.

316. URGENT MATTERS BROUGHT FORWARD WITH THE PERMISSION OF THE CHAIR

None received.

317. NORTH DEVON PLUS

The Head of Communities and Place for Torridge District Council declared an interest as the Co-Chief Executive of North Devon Plus.

The Co-Chief Executive and Programme Delivery Manager for North Devon Plus went on to provide members with a detailed presentation, summarised below.

The Co-Chief Executive provided an overview of the North Devon Plus structure, highlighting its public/private partnership model, the composition of the Board, and the areas of expertise within the organisation. Members were informed about the organisation's extensive experience in supporting local development, particularly in agriculture and strategic bid writing.

The Programme Delivery Manager went on to outline North Devon Plus achievements since 2015, including support for over 4,880 small businesses, despite operating with a small team of just seven members, including two recently appointed agricultural advisors.

Further details were shared about the business support and project management programmes that had been offered to small businesses and start-ups. Since the end of EU funding, North Devon Plus had successfully secured a portion of the Shared Prosperity Fund, which enabled the continuation of bespoke advisory services.

The Co-Chief Executive explained how funding had been managed to maintain free services for users, noting the role of the £20,000 annual contributions from Torridge and North Devon District Councils, which had remained unchanged since 2014. Members asked how current funding compared to the historic EU funding North Devon Plus used to receive, and it was confirmed that funding was now significantly lower, requiring the organisation to adapt accordingly.

The discussion then moved on to the variety of Grant Investment Programmes. During discussion the Rural Prosperity Fund was highlighted, which had seen increased demand for net-zero initiatives like solar panels and energy generation.

Members were also advised that North Devon Plus, in collaboration with West Devon Business Information Points and the DR Company, had also been instrumental in helping farmers access new agricultural grant schemes. It was confirmed that the initiative had reached 480 farms in Devon and 126 in Cornwall and had been extended for another year due to a 12-month extension of the Shared Prosperity Fund.

Members were also briefed on North Devon Plus's work in Clean Maritime and Green Energy. The Clean Maritime and Green Energy Officer role, which supported both Torridge and North Devon District Councils, was explained in detail. Projects supported by this role included the Appledore Clean Maritime Innovation Centre, the Green Hydrogen Routemap, Floating Offshore Wind initiatives, and the Aquaculture Strategy. In response to a query about the salary, it was confirmed that the role had been funded through the Shared Prosperity Fund and income generated by the post.

The Programme Delivery Manager concluded with a summary of strategic support and bid writing activities, including collaboration with Torridge District Council on the Levelling Up Funding Partnership Programme, where North Devon Plus had taken on a governance role in project management, monitoring, and evaluation.

Members were asked for their questions.

Following a question regarding support available for small and high street businesses, the Programme Delivery Manager detailed the type of bespoke support available in terms of cash flow, business plans and marketing strategies.

Further detail was provided on the benefits for smaller startup businesses and the agricultural support highlighted in the presentation, it was also confirmed that all the support provided by North Devon Plus was available for free.

Members asked if there were trends in small and startup businesses and whether AI was one of these. The Programme Delivery Manager identified trends including hospitality, retail, tourism, and health and wellbeing. The potential impact of AI was recognised in terms of small business, and work to raise awareness of it's application was already in place.

Following a question regarding the structure and budget of North Devon Plus, it was confirmed that the annual turnover was approximately £320 thousand last year. There was discussion regarding the composition of the Board and how the Board were considering ways to further engage with the private sector to ensure fair representation and further develop the specialism of the organisation.

Members asked if the support was open to Charities and Community Groups, and it was confirmed that North Devon Plus support is open to these groups - though take up wasn't as high.

There was a discussion regarding marketing of the organisation, and there was an acknowledgment that more marketing support to promote the services and highlight the impact of North Devon Plus would be positive. However, the Co-Chief Executive and Programme Delivery Manager noted the need to balance this with the maintaining of the core business and managing and maintaining the services being provided. Members were assured that this need was recognised and work was underway to address it.

Members went on to ask what North Devon Plus would want and the Co-Chief Executive highlighted the complexity of managing short term funding streams and how the organisation had to constantly adapt to ensure the continuity and consistency of the services being provided.

Members discussed the impact of Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) and the impact for the organisation. The potential change in terms of Governance was explained, and there was recognition of the importance of maintaining a local focus and understanding of the rural communities in Northern Devon.

Following a question on the health of the local economy the Programme Delivery Manager and Co-Chief Executive advised the economy locally was hugely reliant on small and micro businesses, and explained how the knowledge of the company, in terms of the issues experienced locally, was shared. There was some context provided in relation to the impact of national decision making.

Following a question related to the promotion of green energy manufacturing, the Co-Chief Executive explained that North Devon Plus would take their lead from the Economic Strategy and confirmed that net zero targets were part of this.

Finally members asked about the Leader 4 funding stream and whether anyone at North Devon Plus was providing this support. The Programme Delivery Manager advised how this work was still taking place, but had been scaled back as a result of a cut to the core funding.

Chair thanked the presenters for attending.

318. ANNUAL REPORT FOR EXTERNAL OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 2024-2025

Chair introduced the Annual Report and asked members if there were any comments.

Following a brief discussion it was proposed by Councillor Bach, seconded by Councillor Wheatley and –

Resolved:

That the Annual Update be approved and taken to Full Council.

(Vote: For Unanimous)

319. ACTION LIST

Chair reviewed the action list with members and the following updates were provided:

- Action 220 – Representatives from Devon County Council have agreed to attend the External Committee planned for September.

- Action 307 – Bideford Town Council interest will be followed up by Democratic Services. TTVS and DALC have been contacted and Members to promote the vacancies for Parish Representatives at their Parish and Town Councils.

320. CONSIDERATION OF THE FORWARD PLAN

Following a detailed discussion on the forward plan the following was suggested:

- That the new Executive Officer for Libraries Unlimited be invited to Committee.
- Democratic Services were asked to contact the relevant DCC officer and Councillor Cottle-Hunkin (DCC Cabinet Member for Rural Affairs and Broadband) to discuss an item on rural delivery of Broadband.
- Members requested that colleagues from Health were invited to Committee to discuss the Bideford Hospital Site and community hubs.
- That South West Water be invited to Committee to discuss sewerage in Bucks Mills.
- That an invitation be extended to RLNI in terms of their TDC contract and coastal water safety.

The meeting commenced at 6.00 pm and closed at 7.14 pm

Chair:

Date: