

TORRIDGE DISTRICT COUNCILINTERNAL OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY MEETING

Virtual Meeting via Zoom with Public Access via YouTube  
<https://tinyurl.com/TorridgeYouTube>

Tuesday, 7 July 2020 - 10.00 am

- PRESENT                    Councillor P Watson (Chair)
- Councillor P Hames (Vice-Chair)
- Councillors C Cottle-Hunkin, J Gubb, S Langford, J Manley,  
T Inch, S Newton and S Harding
- Mr S Dengate and Mr I Harper
- ALSO PRESENT            S Dorey                    - Senior Solicitor  
                                  S Hearse                   - Chief Executive  
                                  D Heyes                   - Interim S151 Officer  
                                  S Kearney                - Planning & Economy Manager  
                                  M Richards              - Democratic Services Officer  
                                  T Vanstone              - Senior Electoral & Democratic Services  
   Officer  
                                  J Walter                    - Governance Manager  
                                  C Dobbs                    - Service Improvement Officer
- Councillor K James

1.     APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Boughton (Councillor Harding substituted).

2.     MINUTES

It was proposed by Councillor Manley, seconded by Councillor Newton and –

Resolved:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 11 February be agreed and signed as a correct record. A recorded vote was taken.

<b>Councillor</b>	<b>For</b>	<b>Against</b>	<b>Abstain</b>
Cllr C Cottle-Hunkin	X		
Mr S Dengate	X		
Cllr J Gubb	X		
Cllr P Hames	X		
Cllr S Harding			X

Mr I Harper	X		
Cllr A Inch	X		
Cllr S Langford	X		
Cllr J Manley	X		
Cllr S Newton	X		
Cllr P Watson	X		

(Vote: For 10, Abstention 1)

3. ACTION LIST

Minute 69 – no change

Minute 56 – It had previously been agreed that the Committee would look at environmental and social governance (ESG) rather than ethical investment.

4. PUBLIC CONTRIBUTIONS

There were no public contributions.

5. 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.

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

In light of the updated Covid-19 restrictions, Councillor Inch asked for an indication as to when public meetings might be held in person again.

The Interim Head of Paid Service responded that current legislation does not permit meetings to be held in that format at the moment, albeit Parliament was now sitting but was governed by a different set of legislation. The LGA is lobbying to revert to the holding of meetings in person and information has been circulated to all members about holding hybrid meetings. Consideration had to be given to the possibility of members of the public wishing to attend meetings and to the size of committees.

The opinion was expressed that one of the benefits of continuing to hold remote meetings is that it facilitates those councillors not on a particular committee taking part in meetings.

7. AGREEMENT OF AGENDA ITEMS PART I AND II

There were no Part II items.

8. QBR Q4 -19-20

The QBR was presented by the Service Improvement Officer and the Finance Manager.

The Service Improvement Officer ran through the performance highlights for each of the Council's goals and explained that unemployment levels had been used as performance measures and that unemployment levels in Torrington were below the national average. The impact of Covid-19 was not expected to be seen until October 2020. However, it was already clear that the number of Universal Credit applications had doubled in the South West.

- Waste & Recycling had already surpassed the goals set by both TDC and the Government and figures continued to improve.
- The percentage of planning applications determined on time and appeals in favour of TDC continued to rise.
- The number of visits to the customer hub carried on falling whilst e-mail and web contact had increased.

The Finance Manager reported an underspend of £151,000 during 2019/2020 and it was recommended that this sum be transferred to the Transition in Government Funding Reserve to meet the pressures of Covid-19.

An additional £200,000 had been put into the 2019/2020 in anticipation of an expected increase in demand on homelessness services. However, there had been an underspend against budget in this area.

Savings had been made on staffing, the main factors being:

- Changes within waste & recycling which had reduced overtime
- Customer Services now working from one site
- The move towards to Universal Credit had created vacancies which have not been filled
- Other vacancies amount to about 2% of the staffing budget

Savings had been made in other areas:

- Business rate income
- Financial incentives for waste & recycling
- Reduced fuel prices had resulted in lower costs in respect of refuse and cleansing vehicles
- A retender for insurance
- Contingency reserve not utilised
- Income from crematoria, car parking and rent

The Finance Manager gave details on the funding of and spend on capital projects, together with information on interest rates and cash balances.

The figure for the start of the current financial year is £13.4m.

Members had been asked to submit any questions prior to the meeting and a Q&A document was presented. The document had not been published in the public domain due to time constraints, but it will be made public following the meeting. If Zoom meetings continue, future requests for questions on the QBR will be sent out earlier in order that responses can be collated and incorporated in the slide presentation.

The document was reviewed, and supplementary information was provided/ additional questions raised as follows:

**Brunswick Wharf** - Progress updates will be presented in each of the quarterly business reports.

**Torrington Panier Market** – The Property & Procurement Manager will prepare a response to the additional questions relating to the size of hoppers, flooding, new lighting and painting the front of the pannier market. To be circulated to Committee Members.

**Bridge Buildings** - The response provided referred to the budget rather than a £figure. The Finance Manager stated that the costs were residual costs as the building was unoccupied and it was anticipated that 2020/2021 costs will be under budget.

**IFS and Southampton Short and Medium-Term Plan** - The Devon Economic Recovery Prospectus had been circulated to all Members and Non-elected Members. This document outlined the immediate short-term and medium-term response to the recent asks of Government in terms of funding. The Northern Devon Futures Group had recently presented to Full Council a longer-term visionary plan and work will be progressed on this.

**The Strategic Plan** – The Strategic Plan was due to have been considered by Full Council just as the Covid-19 lockdown came into force. Time has been set aside in September for a review, which will reflect the impact of Covid-19 on the Council's finances. The revised Strategic Plan will then be presented to Full Council and all Members will have an opportunity to discuss and comment.

The Planning & Economy Manager reminded Members that the existing Economic Strategy was to grow from within; a strategy which had been successful in attracting grants. If Members wished to change the way the area is marketed then this is something which can be debated when the Strategic Plan is discussed

**Leader 5** - The Planning & Economy Manager told the Committee that the programme had now closed for new applications. Not all of the money had been spent but it had been fully allocated together with additional grant funding and it was anticipated it will be defrayed by the end of December.

An explanation about the business support offering was given. The scheme had proved very successful, was likely to exceed targets and had been given an extension from Devon County Council.

**Harbour Board** –The Harbour Board has been looking into ways to generate new income from the harbour, including management of moorings and perhaps increasing the number of moorings, but progress has been slow due to Covid-19 and other factors outside the control of TDC. A report will be submitted to the Harbour Board for consideration, followed by a recommendation to the Community & Resources Committee.

**Empty Properties** – The Interim Head of Paid Service confirmed that there is no incentive to encourage shop owners to let space above shops for accommodation, rather there is a disincentive to keeping properties empty in that council tax is charged on empty properties at higher rates than previously.

The Planning & Economy Manager spoke about the difficulties in modifying properties above shops for accommodation. There were considerations pertaining to the conservation state, building regulations in respect of safe access and egress in the event of fire, insurance implications and security in that there is generally only one entry point. There have been many changes in planning to try to encourage accommodation over shops. However, the latest strategy, which ties in with the work with the Future High Streets Fund, is to focus retail and core town centre activity on a smaller area to release shops on the periphery for accommodation. This will take time and involve policy changes.

**Housing** – Throughout the review of the Q&A document, there were several discussions on affordable housing, social housing, empty properties and temporary accommodation. It was evident that Members were very concerned about these topics. The Interim Head of Paid Service suggested that a larger piece of work needed to be done to enable members to evaluate the options.

The Planning & Economy Manager explained that one of the reasons larger sites rarely met policy obligations in respect of affordable housing was the cost of infrastructure provision. The viability of imposing such planning conditions needed to be reassessed and discussed further with North Devon Council in relation to the Joint Local Plan.

**Climate Change** – Electric Charging Points: Parking Charges

The Planning & Economy Manager told the Committee that free parking for people using electric charging points had not been included in the parking order, thus those paying for parking, whilst charging, were doing the right thing. He added that there are 2 separate fees for using these bays, one for parking and one for the electricity. The charge for using the electricity is managed by an independent company. In addition, fixed charge penalty notices will be issued to anybody using the bay who is not hitched up to the charger. The full set of regulations around this will be e-mailed to the Committee for clarity.

The Senior Solicitor provided further clarification regarding the lease of the parking spaces to the independent company which is also responsible for the electrical equipment. Torridge District Council receives some income from the electricity but

TDC does not make a charge for the parking spaces. The parking order will need to be amended to reflect the fact that TDC no longer has control over that area.

It was proposed by Councillor Newton, seconded by Councillor Manley and –

Recommended:

That the surplus of £151k, achieved in 2019-20, be transferred to the Transition in Government Funding Reserve to meet the pressures of Covid-19.

A recorded vote was taken.

<b>Councillor</b>	<b>For</b>	<b>Against</b>	<b>Abstain</b>
Cllr C Cottle-Hunkin	X		
Mr S Dengate	X		
Cllr J Gubb	X		
Cllr P Hames	X		
Cllr S Harding	X		
Mr I Harper	X		
Cllr A Inch	X		
Cllr S Langford	X		
Cllr J Manley	X		
Cllr S Newton	X		
Cllr P Watson	X		

(Vote: For – unanimous)

## 9. CONSIDERATION OF THE FORWARD PLAN

The Chair asked Members whether they were happy for future Zoom meetings to take place 10.00am. A show of hands indicated that this suited most Committee Members.

The Forward Plan was reviewed and duly updated, with the addition of:

- affordable housing
- peer review

and the removal of :

- External Grants Task & Finish Group as this had now run its course.

A meeting of the Income generation Task & Finish Group to be set up.

The meeting commenced at 10.00 am and closed at 11.25 am.

Chair:

Date: