

TORRIDGE DISTRICT COUNCILINTERNAL OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY MEETINGMeeting via ZoomTuesday, 18 August 2020 - 2.00 pm

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

Councillors P Hackett and N Laws

10. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

There were no apologies for absence.

11. MINUTES

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

Resolved:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 7 July 2020 be agreed and signed as a correct record.

A recorded vote was taken.

<b>COMMITTEE MEMBER</b>	<b>FOR</b>	<b>AGAINST</b>	<b>ABSTAIN</b>
CLLR BOUGHTON, R			X

CLLR COTTLE-HUNKIN, C	X		
MR S DENGATE	X		
CLLR GUBB, J	X		
CLLR HAMES, P	X		
MR I HARPER	X		
CLLR INCH, A	X		
CLLR LANGFORD, S	X		
CLLR MANLEY, J	X		
CLLR NEWTON, S	X		
CLLR WATSON, P	X		

(Vote: For 10, Abstentions 1)

## 12. ACTION LIST

Further updates to the action list were made as follows:

**Minute 69 That a response be made to the relevant offices of Central Government raising concerns about the local authority settlements over the years and the uncertainty that it is creating.**

**It was agreed a response will be made when Central Government papers are released for consultation.**

The comprehensive spending review is expected towards the end of the year. However, should there be a 2nd wave of Covid-19, it might be delayed to the start of next year. Further information will be provided as it comes forward.

**Minute 8: 7 July - QBR Q4 -19-20 - Electric Car Charging Fees  
To amend parking order to reflect that TDC no has control over these areas.**

The Senior Solicitor recapitulated that the spaces are leased to a third party and TDC has a share in the income from those charging points.

## 13. PUBLIC CONTRIBUTIONS

There were no public contributions.

## 14. 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.

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

There were no matters brought forward.

16. AGREEMENT OF AGENDA ITEMS PART I AND II

There were no Part II items

17. QBR Q1

Slide presentations were received from the Service Improvement Officer and the Interim Section 151 Officer.

The Service Improvement Officer presented a summary of the highlights of QBR 1:

**Goal 1 - Prosperous and Sustainable Economy**

- ✓ Speedy payment of grants to support local business – The Government had specified that the payments should be made as quickly as possible and TDC had ranked 6<sup>th</sup> best in the country
- ✓ 99.3% of invoices paid on time
- ✓ Good progress with Future High Street Fund Bid
- ✓ In depth Architectural Heritage Fund Viability study for the Globe in Torrington – Additionally a bid for a grant of £100,000 had been submitted to take the project forward
- ✓ Safe re-opening of high streets

**Goal 2 – Safer, Stronger, Healthier Communities**

- ✓ Housing Options maintained high level of service during lockdown
  - ✓ Accommodation of 11 individuals in response to Covid-19
  - ✓ Temporary accommodation provided for all owed an accommodation duty (24-26 households accommodated during lockdown)

Further work needed to be done on empty homes and the delivery of new homes/affordable homes. Because of Covid-19 lockdown builders had not been working and this had had an impact on the number of new/affordable homes being delivered.

**Goal 3 – Protecting & Enhancing our Quality Environment**

- ✓ Waste and recycling collections had continued during lockdown – the only service suspended had been bulky waste but this had been reinstated in June
- ✓ Record recycling levels (57.3%) mainly due to increased collection of glass/cardboard. 15% more than 2 years ago.

## Goal 4 – Effective Customer Focused Council

- ✓ Fast response from IT team enabled homeworking for an average of 120 officers per day, allowing for uninterrupted delivery of most services
- ✓ Zoom technology rolled out to allow decision making Committees to re-convene
- ✓ Improved turnaround time in planning applications – 99% approved on time
- ✓ 53% increase in Environmental Protection Enforcement activity
- ✓ Reduced sickness levels!
- ✓ Staff redeployment during lockdown to help address the crisis
- ✓ Good levels of cooperation between the Council and other agencies

A reduction in Council Tax and Business rate collection levels had been identified.

The number of confirmed Covid-19 cases recorded in Torridge was well below regional and national levels, however Covid-19 was already starting to show a big impact on the economy, with 35% of the workforce being furloughed and 4,100 self employment income support claims (72% of total) being received. TDC had introduced measures and put systems in place to support residents and the economy.

There had been a channel shift from physical to digital approaches, with e-mail being the main way in which contact was made with the Council. The Service Improvement Officer explained that the 72% increase in blocked e-mails was not only spam but also fraud attempts. Social media was becoming more and more important to the Communications Team.

The Interim S151 Officer presented slides showing the financial impact of Covid-19 as at end of June and the projected financial outturn for Quarter 1: 2020-2021.

At the end of June, losses had been predicted in revenue from car parking, planning, building control, land charges, licensing and rental from commercial properties. The Bank of England had cut the base rate from 0.75% to 0.01%. Additional expenditure had been incurred to address home working; additional agency staff for Waste & Recycling to cover staff self-isolation; support to Town and Parish Councils and increased responsibilities in relation to homelessness. Lost income was anticipated from Council Tax collections and business rate. Although £727,000 had been received from Central Government a deficit of £2m had been predicted at the end of June.

The current projected financial position for the financial year 2020/21 is a break even position. The major changes from the financial position forecast in June being:

- Increased Central Government Financial support, in particular:
  - Funding for administrating the business support grant scheme
  - Compensation for Council for their loss income from fees and charges (the full details of this scheme have yet to be released)

- Reduced income losses from fees and charges, in particular car parking (due to increased visitor numbers) and planning income actually being in excess of budgeted expectations.

To date the Council has not seen a significant increase in the number of working age claims for Local Council Tax Support, however as Furlough starts to unwind it is anticipated that the number of claims will rise will change.

There are, of course, caveats and uncertainties which could influence the latest projections, such as

- Potential future lockdowns
- The extent of Council Tax Support claims
- Vulnerability to businesses failing and consequently a reduction in business rate revenue
- Decisions made by the Council to help local business or voluntary groups which will incur TDC expenditure

The accounts showed quite large cash balances but £7m of that has to be repaid to Central Government (unspent business support grant).

The projected cash balance as at end of March 2022 stands at between £2m and £3m and the Council was confident that it would have sufficient resource to undertake key responsibilities up to March 2022.

The Committee reviewed the answers to the questions which had been submitted prior to the meeting.

More detail was requested, and information provided as follows:

#### Timescale for rolling out broadband

Airband have been contracted with lot 4 of Connecting Devon and Somerset. Zones 6 -9 are in Torridge and works have already started on Zone 4 which is North Devon, with completion of all zones in lot 4 by the beginning of 2022. Airband will be providing, under a non-disclosure agreement, a programme of roll-out to communities in northern Devon. This will highlight where there will be no programme of improvement, so that TDC can work with those communities to find alternative solutions.

#### Use of the Harbour and Estuary

The Estuary Strategy was produced in 2014 and a review of the Authority's powers and responsibilities had been carried out by UK port advisors and a firm of London solicitors which had concluded that TDC had no responsibility for marine safety and should divest itself from involvement as the Council had neither powers, equipment or resource to manage this. The only estuary controls in existence now are through a multi-agency voluntary code of conduct. There are more controls in the harbour area, where in fact jet skis are prohibited.

A discussion took place on jet skis and reference was made to the recommendation for Community & Resources to look at this aspect. Members expressed concerns about safety and the need to establish who is responsible for the management of leisure craft.

Recycling polystyrene

It was noted that the Authority does not have the capacity to collect or facilities to process.

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

Resolved:

That the highlighted costs pressures shown on page 16 of the agenda under Budget Monitoring Highlights be recommended to C&R for approval: Consisting of the following sums:

1. Contribution towards property maintenance pressures £110K
2. Funding for Apprentices and Trainee posts £51K

A recorded vote was taken.

COMMITTEE MEMBER	FOR	AGAINST	ABSTAIN
CLLR BOUGHTON, R	X		
CLLR COTTLE-HUNKIN, C	X		
MR S DENGATE	X		
CLLR GUBB, J	X		
CLLR HAMES, P	X		
MR I HARPER	X		
CLLR INCH, A	X		
CLLR LANGFORD, S	X		
CLLR MANLEY, J	X		
CLLR NEWTON, S	X		
CLLR WATSON, P	X		

(Vote: For - unanimous)

18. ETHICAL INVESTMENTS

The Senior Capital Accountant guided Members through the briefing paper, highlighting categories and types of ethical investment and outlined the benefits and risks of each option.

Members were informed that the current Treasury Management policy had strict criteria for selecting investments (treasury deposits) and consideration had to be given to security, then liquidity and then yield. The current mandate was that deposits can be invested in UK F1 rated banks but there was no authority to invest in share or bond funds.

Discussion took place on the definition of ethical, the types of companies to invest in and the security of funds.

It was proposed by Councillor Inch and seconded by Councillor Watson

That:

The Income Generation Task & Finish Group look at ethical investment.

The composition of the Task & Finish Group was agreed.

Mr Dengate asked that environmental and social governance also be considered, not just the ethical element.

19. CONSIDERATION OF THE FORWARD PLAN

The Forward Plan was reviewed and updated.

The Chair confirmed that the meeting on 29 September will commence at 2.00pm.

The meeting commenced at 2.00 pm and closed at 3.35 pm

Chair:

Date: