



Torrige District Council
External Overview & Scrutiny

ANNUAL REPORT
2020/2021

Introduction by the Chair

The year got off to a fairly slow start due to Covid-19 lockdown restrictions. However, it was not long before Zoom meetings were set up and established as the new norm during the pandemic. As we started to scrutinise, it became very apparent that the Coronavirus was having a huge impact on businesses and communities. All of the partners who presented to the committee shared accounts of the impact of Covid. It is evident that the aftermath of the virus will need to be addressed throughout the coming year.

This report includes a brief summary of the role and responsibilities of Overview and Scrutiny, the work undertaken over the past year and the various outcomes, although the link to outcomes is not always discernible until much later on.

I would like to pay tribute to my fellow members for their commitment in serving the committee and seeking to provide the best services for our residents. I would also like to thank our support officers for their involvement in and the contribution they have made to our meetings.

Over the last year, we have discussed topics covering a range of aspects of community life and council services and we were given insight into some complex issues.

We set ourselves some priorities as you will see in the report and we will continue to scrutinise partners and examine issues which face our residents and communities.

I hope you find this Annual Report interesting and that it gives you an indication of the work carried out by the committee and the accomplishments we have achieved in striving to make our communities safer, stronger and healthier.

Councillor P Pennington
Chair – External Overview & Scrutiny

The Role of External Overview & Scrutiny

The Council has 2 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 selected external bodies and organisations serving the community within Torridge.

The External Overview & Scrutiny Committee is also the Council's Crime and Disorder Committee.

Committee Membership

Chair	Councillor P Pennington
Vice Chair	Councillor C Cottle-Hunkin
Councillors	L Ford S Harding C Hawkins S Langford C Leather J McKenzie S Newton
Non-elected Representatives	Mr P Topham Vacancy x 2
Support Officers	S Dorey, Head of Legal & Governance J Williams, Public Health & Housing Manager K Brown, Democratic Services Officer S Cawsey, Democratic Services Officer M Richards, Democratic Services Officer

Work carried out in 2020/21:

In July, the committee had its first meeting via Zoom. The main focus of the meeting was the forward plan and identifying the top priorities for discussion:

- Housing
- Covid-19
- Unemployment
- Brexit
- Broadband
- Play Strategy

The committee also considered in depth how it could improve the quality of scrutiny. Councillors agreed that it was better to concentrate on doing a few things well, things where the Committee could effect a real change. It was also felt unnecessary to bring organisations in if they were performing well. Whilst it was acknowledged that a direct focus would be more constructive it was noted that it was important to comment on wider topics in order that silence was not misinterpreted as contentment

Torridge District Council: Play Strategy – 18 November 2020

The updated Play / Open Space Strategy was first reviewed by the committee on 2 September. Members discussed the document and felt it was over-general and did not contain enough detail. Provision had been considered in light of the recent budgetary pressures and options for asset transfers had been discussed.

A revised version of the strategy document, with a focus solely on play areas, was brought back to committee on 18 November. The revised version was more structured and clearly identified the goals the Council hoped to achieve.

Members agreed that the overall strategy document was a good document; the rationale was sound; and the aims and aspirations were good.

Having put forward various amendments, the committee resolved that the Play Area Strategy (subject to any amendments required and when accompanied by all necessary additional information) be endorsed and that it progress to Community and Resources Committee for adoption at the earliest opportunity.

A further recommendation was made that a maintenance budget for play areas be allocated.

Outcomes:

On 1 February, Community & Resources resolved that the Play Area Strategy be adopted.

On 1 February, Community & Resources resolved that no maintenance budget for play areas be allocated.

On 16 March. Having been called in by the Chair of External Overview & Scrutiny, the Community & Resources resolution, that no maintenance budget for play areas be allocated, was considered by the Internal Overview & Scrutiny Committee. Following further discussion, the Internal Overview & Scrutiny Committee voted unanimously against the resolution of the Community & Resources Committee.

The matter will now be presented to Full Council for consideration.

Community Safety Partnership – 25 November 2020

The joint meeting with North Devon Council was chaired by the Chair of North Devon's Crime and Disorder Committee.

The North Devon & Torridge Community Safety Partnership is a statutory body set up under sections 5-7 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998. It is made up of representatives from several agencies involved with crime, disorder and community safety. There is a joint Community Safety Partnership (CSP) board between North Devon and Torridge which meets on a quarterly basis. The Chair of the Joint CSP, Superintendent Toby Davies, attended the meeting to deliver the CSP's annual report. Information and statistics were provided on a range of subjects from counter terrorism and modern-day slavery; the emergency response to Covid; to funding and local crime.

Of particular interest were the Safer Summer Scheme and the Street Marshall Programme, which members would like to see continue.

Superintendent Davies listened to members' observations and will feed these back to the Police & Crime Commissioner and relevant bodies. He took on board that members would like to see case studies included in the next annual report, together with Anti Social Behaviour statistics.

A recommendation was made that Communications be put out to enhance the reporting of ASB and how it is dealt with.

Outcomes:

Torridge District Council has posted on the website some useful information about Anti Social Behaviour which is easily accessible either by searching "Anti Social Behaviour" or using the link <https://www.torridge.gov.uk/article/16511/My-neighbour-is-causing-me-problems-with-their-behaviour---what-can-i-do>

The Economic and Social Impact of the Pandemic – 20 January 2021

Taw & Torridge Volunteer Service (TTVS), Torridge, North & West Devon Citizens Advice and Encompass were invited to the meeting on 20 January to give updates particularly in light of the impact of Covid-19. Prior to the meeting, each organisation had also provided an annual report for members' perusal.

TTVS provided statistics and information relating to the organisation's activities over the past year which included projects such as carer support; financial inclusion, making sure people receive all the benefits they are entitled to; care for older members of the community incorporating dementia cafes and help at home. Mr Hill confirmed that TTVS had seen an increase in mental health issues, particularly in the younger cohort; and loneliness, including members of staff now working remotely.

Vicki Rowe of North & West Devon Citizens Advice presented the impact report for the period April – September 2020. She explained how her organisation had adapted to continue offering a service throughout the pandemic. Demand had predominantly been in relation to welfare benefits and Citizens Advice support had generated a £330,425 uplift of income to households. A 60% increase in demand on services for Covid-related debt management was anticipated.

ClairE Fisher, Encompass, gave an insight into rough sleeping, homelessness and housing need in the district. She also informed members about the charity's money and debt advice services.

Following the 3 presentations, a round table discussion took place, with all 3 charities contributing responses to questions. Members suggested the charities work more closely together to avoid duplication of services.

The Committee had recommended to Full Council that they write to the MP and government to continue funding support to the charities.

The Committee had resolved that it be recommended to Community & Resources/Full Council that, when they consider the budget, they continue to fund Citizens Advice and TTVS.

Outcomes:

The committee's recommendation was noted at the Full Council meeting on 22 February.

Westward Housing – 10 March 2021

Barbara Shaw, Chief Executive of Westward Housing gave an informative talk about the organisation's values, priorities and strategies. She gave details about the housing stock and planned developments and spoke on the collection of rental income, arrears and financial assistance, particularly in light of Covid-19. Westward Housing had given an assurance at the start of the pandemic that customers falling behind with payment due to Covid would not lose their homes.

The presentation was complemented by a report from TDC's Housing Options Team Leader about Devon Home Choice, a programme which enables people to look for council and housing association homes and to select and bid for a property they would like to live in.

Engagement with Local MP – 10 March 2021

The Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey Cox QC MP had been invited to the meeting but had not been able to attend. However, a list of questions from the Committee was submitted and a very detailed reply was received from Sir Geoffrey ahead of the meeting. Members discussed the responses which covered a range of topics from the EU–UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement, the Future Agriculture Policy and the Planning Reform to the unsuccessful Future High Streets Fund bid, the new Levelling Up Fund and broadband.

A letter of thanks was sent to the MP.

Petroc College / Promoting Youth Employment – 28 April 2021

Mr Sean Mackney, Chief Executive & Principal of Petroc College, delivered an interesting presentation. The committee learnt about the college's values and strategy; the challenges it had faced and addressed during Covid and its hopes and aspirations for the future. There was an overall feeling of positivity about the service it offers and its approach to education in an ever-changing landscape.

The Leader of the Council and the committee welcomed the ongoing collaboration with the college and looked forward to hearing about future exciting innovations currently being worked on.

Partner Evaluations

Further to the interview survey carried out in 2017 of Torridge District Council partners who are periodically invited to discuss their work with the Committee and the subsequent introduction of the Partner Evaluation Form, Mr Topham, Non-elected Independent Member, has continued to analyse the feedback from our partners and has provided the following update:

We have continued to invite external partners giving presentations to evaluate their experience of the Committee and its impact on their work with Council residents. The Partner Evaluation Form (PEF) is digitally delivered to partners after each presentation meeting, inviting them to rate and comment on key aspects of their working relationship with the Committee.

As described in last year's Annual Report, external partners continue to positively evaluate their engagement with the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. One area where partners consistently give a lower rating of the Committee is in relation to the communication of recommendations made and actions planned after the presentation. It is hoped that the resolution, below, will help to address that concern by partners.

In October 2020, Committee Members conducted an appraisal of the value of the PEF after 18 months of use. After reviewing a summary of partner feedback over that period and considering options for its continuing use, the Committee made the following recommendation:

That the evaluation procedure continue as is but with the recommendations being included in the form and that a Member is linked with a particular organisation and they follow up with that organisation a couple of times a year.

(Vote: For 4, Against 3, Abstentions 2)

It was agreed that a group of members will work to revise the form and procedure in accordance with the resolution.

The Forward Plan

The Committee's Forward Plan groups partners and topics in line with TDC's strategic aims and we are pleased to report that the presentations above gave the Committee the opportunity to look in more depth at how the Council and its partners achieve stronger, safer, healthier communities; a prosperous and sustainable economy and an effective and customer focused offering.

Public Participation

Our Committee welcome the Public Contribution when a resident raises issues. External Overview and Scrutiny would welcome more. Unfortunately, only one speaker raised concerns, this was about the viability of hospitality businesses due to the corona virus shutdown. Members of the Committee, plus ward council members, did a visit in the light of concerns raised. Given that hospitality is a vital part of the economic and social fabric of our community, the speaker was guided to ask to address the Full Council. Unfortunately, this has not yet taken place.

There will be so much to consider as the Torridge community recovers from the events of this year. Health, housing, education, the economy and policing are but a few. Members of the public raising matters would improve the delivery of the meeting.

Members of the public are welcome to attend any of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meetings. Public speaking is allowed on any matter.