

## **QBR3 2021/22 – March 2022 – Advance Q&A**

### **Highlights – QBR Page 2**

Funding Question from **Ian Harper**

Community Renewal Fund what is being done to promote this?

**Chris Fuller, Economic Development Officer**

Significant communications were put out to celebrate the overall award and also then to support individual projects as they have come forward. The funding for Middle Dock is not yet at the point where we can speak publicly about much of the work that is being undertaken, but as it moves forward this will be important to promote.

Bridge Buildings Question from **Ian Harper**

Disposal of Bridge Buildings, what is the difference between original offer, that was rejected, and current, also what are the projected savings to the Council.

**Sean Kearney, Head of Communities & Place**

Previous bids for bridge building (i.e. offers that didn't complete) were discussed as part II items and the financial details are not in the public domain. We have received £460k for the sale of bridge building (before VAT).

We reduced the bridge building costs by £6k for 2022/23 reflecting the sale of the property. Prior to the building being vacated the budget for Bridge Building was £47k, with circa £27k being business rates (which are not paid on empty listed buildings).

### **Income Monitoring – QBR Page 3**

Cost Centre Question from **Ian Harper**

Northam Burrows - Is this a cost centre, if so what is the current position?

**David Heyes, Finance Manager**

Northam Burrows is a costs centre, overall the cost centre is projected to under spend by circa £90k, being mostly explained by the increased opening time and subsequent additional income.

Following the build have any problems arisen, including maintenance?

**Sean Kearney, Head of Communities & Place**

The building is within the defects period so any snagging issues or matters of minor maintenance related to installation are referred to the construction company for resolution. The only issue of note has been the security roller shutters as there have been a few problems with them. The Council is in discussion with the construction company to seek a solution.

## Budget Monitoring – QBR Page 4

Overspends Question from **Cllr Langford**

In overspends what is 'VAT Shelter'? Obviously I know what VAT is but what exactly does 'shelter' refer to?

**David Heyes, Finance Manager**

Just prior to Torrington Council transferring its housing stock it signed a contract with Westward Housing commissioning them to upgrade its housing stock. As technically at the time, the contract was signed the properties were in the ownership of the Council, the VAT could be reclaimed on the subsequent works (as a general rule, Housing Associations cannot reclaim VAT on the vast majority of their activities).

The VAT reclaimed on these improvement works is passed over to the Council. In the early years of the agreement with Westward Housing they retained 40% of the VAT reclaimed, with 60% being transferred to the Council; the Council now keeps 100% of the VAT recovered.

As, in the early years Westward Housing retained 40% of the VAT, they have "front loaded" the improvement works and consequently the improvement works subject to the VAT shelter have declined in recent years. The Council, after receiving communication from Westward Housing is forecasting an under achievement of VAT Shelter income for 2021/22.

Overspends Question from **Ian Harper**

Premises related costs

Supplies and services

Professional fees

Bank charges and court fees

If the above are above budget, what is the budget and explanation please?

**David Heyes, Finance Manager**

**Premises Related costs** - There are many costs captured within premises related, Repairs, Gas, Electric, Water, Security patrols etc... The main variances within the £60k reported are

£43k - relating to utility costs (Gas & Electric across the various Council premises)

£20k - Northam Burrows – empty of Sceptic Tanks (not correctly budgeted for) and other repairs related works

£20k - Works in default – dangerous structure

(£20k) - reduced business rates liability – primarily Caddesdown Business Centre

Total Premises related costs are circa £1m

**Supplies and Services** - Supplies and service covers a wide range of expenditure items the most significant variances being

£43k overspend - on software with the most significant items being

£18k overspend - New Grounds Maintenance software package in advance of service being bought in house

£16k overspend - New Social Media software package to align with launch of new website.

Other significant supplies and service over spends include £15k where the Council has engaged a company to uncover businesses which should be subject to business rates, the company is reimbursed on a no win on pay basis. So overspends on this area are offset by future increased business rate income

### **Professional Fees – 3 main areas**

Planning Budget - £36k - £10k overspend various factors increased use of District Valuer reflecting increased planning applications

Corporate land Budget - £10k - £9k overspend - mainly costs associated with formulation of Housing Strategy and Sports Pitch consultancy (Torrington ATP)

Markets budget - £0k - £12k overspend – costs associated with Bell Tower at Torrington Pannier Market

**Bank Charges and Court Fees** - The Council is forecasting an overspend on bank charges of £18k this is mainly due to increased costs in making Track and Trace payments to people instructed to self isolate. The payments need to be made by faster payment at a cost of £2.5 per payment, in addition the Council has also had to make use of faster payment for Household Crisis payments. Furthermore the Council's bankers Lloyds had in previous years failed to levy a charge for BACS payments the Council made. The total budget for bank charges is circa £70k

Court Fees there is a £9k predicted shortfall on court costs income awarded to the Council for outstanding Council Tax debts, the budget income figure is £141k

## **Local Economy – QBR Page 9**

Investment Portal Question from **Cllr Langford & Ian Harper**

Re 'Promote the District to attract inward investment' it states that there is an 'historic inward investment portal which cannot be accessed or removed'. What does that mean? could an explanation be given regarding difficulties regarding the historic portal

### **Chris Fuller, Economic Development Officer**

There is a historic website which was created to "promote" northern Devon, established well before my time. However, nobody now seems to have access to that website in order to change the content. The license is due to expire in the near future and it will not be renewed, so that portal will no longer be active.

Inward Investment Question from **Ian Harper**

Marine event, were there positive outcomes for Torridge from this event, also note in Harbour Masters report to Harbour Board an offer was made to assist with the Wind Array and Seaweed farm how are these progressing?

### **Chris Fuller, Economic Development Officer**

The marine events have a series of objectives:

- To support business growth in the region within the marine sector, including to raise regional and national awareness of investment opportunities in the region

- To build awareness and interest in Middle Dock as a future marine-focused site. The marine event successfully achieved this and prompted a number of follow-up enquiries. The next marine event will have a specific Floating Offshore Wind focus, and so the momentum built from the first event will then create stronger sign-ups and increased awareness and interest in Middle Dock for private sector usage when it becomes operational.
- There has been ongoing links with the Harbour Master about both Middle Dock and the potential seaweed farm, who have been very positive about the support they have been provided so far by TDC.

## Local Economy – QBR Page 10

Economic Strategy Question from **Ian Harper**

Whilst events have moved on this strategy has been waiting for some time, when will it be completed particularly in relation to Torridge?

**Chris Fuller, Economic Development Officer**

The Recovery Prospectus was approved for a 3-year period, which will then transition into the next Economic Strategy, along with NDC.

## Our Environment Our Future – QBR Page 20

Play Strategy Question from **Cllr Langford**

Deliver the Play Strategy Action Plan. I appreciate this was written before the actionable Pids were finally agreed by Full Council but I find it hard to see how the plan can be On Target if Victoria Park phase 1 was supposed to be done by Spring 2022.

**Adrian Avery, Community Project Officer**

The QBR provides the following current position:

- Identify (via parish & town engagement) which sites are to be transferred /retained by March 2022.
- Phase 1 Victoria Park improvements by Spring 2022 Phase 2 - Victoria Park improvements by Summer 2023
- All TDC play areas to be rated as at least good (in line with the PAS) by Jan 2023.

We have identified the list of potential sites to handover' to parish/town councils. The next step is to discuss these with the relevant parties (Bideford, Torrington, Shebbear, Sutcombe and High Bickington). We recognise that improvement works are required prior to the Parish/Town Councils taking on the sites.

Victoria Park improvements were very much an aspiration when we set the Phase 1 date back in early 21, but obviously we have been unable to achieve this. Although we hope to make some improvements this year if possible, we need to move this date to Spring 2023.

Point 3, regarding all areas to be rated as good, is still on target.

Apologies, overall this Strategic Action is not on target.

## Our Council – QBR Page 27

Efficiency Question from **Cllr Langford**

LE168c (Pre-Planning Application Response Times) - How would the fee structure being reconsidered provide a more efficient service?

### **Shaun Harrington, Planning Manager**

Planning-related fees were introduced so that users of the planning system, rather than taxpayers in general, meet the costs incurred by local planning authorities in deciding planning applications. The planning application service is also funded by fees for planning applications. A general increase of 20% to the planning fees was introduced by the Town and Country Planning (Fees for Applications, Deemed Applications, Requests and Site Visits) (England) Regulations 2017 which took effect from the 17<sup>th</sup> January 2018.

Local planning authorities may charge for providing discretionary services under section 93 of the Local Government Act 2003. Where charges are made, they must not exceed the cost of providing the service.

The National Planning Practice Guidance (NPPG) states that to ensure transparency, where local planning authorities opt to charge for certain pre-application services, they are strongly encouraged to provide clear information online about:

- the scale of charges for pre-application services applicable to different types of application (e.g. minor or major and other)
- the level of service that will be provided for the charge, including:
- the scope of work and what is included (e.g. duration and number of meetings or site visits)
- the amount of officer time to be provided (recognising that some proposed development requires input from officers across the local authority; or from other statutory and non-statutory bodies)
- the outputs that can be expected (e.g. a letter or report) and firm response times for arranging meetings and providing these outputs.

TDC's current pre-app fee charging schedule was last amended in April 2015 and the current fee schedule does not meet the cost of providing this particular service. It is noted that when compared with fee schedules of other Local Authorities, certain categories of development attract a fee far less than that requested elsewhere. However, a review of the fee structure would not necessarily only focus on fees to help meet the cost of the service, but the service provided including adding value to applicants and efficiency of process (meeting numbers, site visits etc) including through potential additional categories including 'in principle' and 'fast track' options to be explored.

## Our Council – QBR Page 28

Enforcement Question from **Ian Harper**

EF3 (cases visited within 14 days) and EF4 (complainants updated)

What is case load for enforcement officers?

### **Shaun Harrington, Development Management Manager**

In relation to Enforcement caseloads –

Grant McGill – 282;  
Nicola McGill – 192.

It should be noted that the above figures include cases that are being monitored including where formal Enforcement action has taken place, and there is a compliance period.