

TORRIDGE DISTRICT COUNCIL

EXTERNAL OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY MEETING

Caddsdow Business Support Centre - Bideford

Wednesday, 1 June 2022 - 2.00 pm

PRESENT

Councillor C Cottle-Hunkin (Chair)

Councillors S Harding, C Hawkins, C Hodson, S Langford, N Laws, C Leather and P Pennington

Independent Member L Bach

ALSO PRESENT

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| H Barton | - Vice Chair, Natural Devon and Chief Executive, Devon Wildlife Trust |
| S Kearney | - Head of Communities & Place |
| J Williams | - Public Health & Housing Manager |
| T Vanstone | - Senior Electoral & Democratic Services Officer |
| K Hewlett | - Electoral and Democratic Services Officer |

138. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Kenton Baker, Staci Dorey, Councillor Manley, Councillor Woodhouse and Councillor Wiseman

139. MINUTES

Chair ran through the minutes of the External Overview & Scrutiny Committee meeting held on Wednesday 27 April 2022.

It was proposed by Councillor Leather, seconded by Councillor Harding and –

Resolved:

That the minutes be agreed as a correct record of the meeting.

(Vote: Unanimous)

140. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

No requests for public participation were received.

141. ACTION LIST

Chair reviewed the action list with members

It was confirmed a report will be added to the agenda for the next meeting of External in relation to the funding for Citizen's Advice.

Following an update from Councillor Harding in relation to Bucks Mills sewerage systems members requested an action for Democratic Services to chase South West Water for a response to questions.

142. 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.

143. AGREEMENT OF AGENDA ITEMS PART I AND II

There were no part II items.

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

No items.

145. NATURAL DEVON

Chair introduced Harry Barton (Chief Executive, Devon Wildlife Trust), who was attending the Committee to provide an update on the progress of the Nature Recovery Network map.

A detailed and comprehensive presentation was provided for members, which summarised the establishment of the Nature Recovery Network (NRN) and accountability, along with the current situation and condition of some of Devon's habitats.

The policy drivers that have helped to establish the Nature Recovery Network were highlighted for members. The target set by scientists - that 30% of land and sea should be 'in recovery for wildlife' – was explained, along with the challenges this represents for Devon.

The presentation went on to highlight the work that took place to pull together data and develop a NRN map of the habitats within Devon, several maps helped to demonstrate the work that has taken place to pull together and refine data, to then provide a picture of the potential for urban and rural habitats locally.

The Nature Based Solutions approach was highlighted to members, along with work taking place locally to map the potential land that could be used for sequestering carbon and providing natural flood management. It was explained

that a similar project is also underway to do this work within local marine habitats.

The National Food Strategy and the three-compartment model was then highlighted to members and the importance of looking at the 3 areas together when looking at how to use land in future.

Finally, the Nature Recovery Network webpages were shared with members, along with planned work for the next 12 months.

Members were asked for their questions.

Members highlighted the historic farming of the area and recognised the impact this had on peatland and culm grass locally. It was asked how farmers could be compensated appropriately to re-establish some of these habitats, along with the wildlife corridors needed to connect them up.

The representative from NRN recognised members comments and explained the potential opportunity for ELMS (Environmental Land Management Scheme) to compensate farms. The issues with ELMS and the Sustainable Farming Incentive were recognised however.

Members were advised of the support available from the Wildlife Trust to help farmers identify areas of their land that could be re-purposed for habitats and provide the most benefit. It was recognised there was a need for more strategic work to look at connecting smaller wildlife habitats and the importance of wildlife corridors to better connect them.

Members asked about the loss of Culm Grass habitats and what this was due to. It was explained there were a variety of reasons - habitats being drained, planted with conifers and also neglected were mentioned. It was stated that work to reintroduce culm grass is taking place with farmlands.

Members asked about the parts of Dartmoor releasing carbon from dry peat bogs and whether this was salvageable. It was explained that this was possible, but the impact of longer drier summers did make it harder, along with the impact of industrialisation from Victorian times. Some of the work taking place to manage the impact was highlighted.

Members asked how the NRN were involved in relation to planning policy. There followed a discussion regarding the issue of cumulative impact and local planning. The Head of Communities and Place advised this could be considered at the local plan stage. The current issues surrounding the target for 5-year housing supply was mentioned, along with Torridge's work with ANOB and the biosphere to gain the best outcome locally.

Cllr Pennington declared a personal interest due to his farming background.

During discussion on farming and food production policy, some frustration was expressed with the ELMS system and subsidy regime. The current food crisis

was recognised, and it was felt that one way the Government could help would be to provide more clarity regarding the schemes they have in place for farmers.

Members suggested that a recommendation could be put forward from the Committee to write to the local MP and DEFRA recognising these concerns and seeking more clarity in relation ELMS and the subsidy regime.

There was a query in relation to funding, the setup of the NRN and how Torridge are involved. It was confirmed that the council provide funding through the planning budgets and there is an annual contribution to Devon County Council of around £2,000.

Members asked about the future work of the NRN and it was explained there would be a focus on carbon elevation and flood defences, along with connectivity and marine. Whilst also maintain and developing the work that's already in place and continuing to support farmers.

The Chair brought members back to the recommendation.

It was proposed by Councillor Pennington, seconded by Councillor Cottle-Hunkin and –

Resolved:

To write to the Secretary of State for DEFRA and local MP Sir Geoffrey Cox. To ask them to bring forward clear directions in regard to future land usage, with particular focus on the Environmental Land Management Schemes (ELMS).

(Vote: For, unanimous)

A further recommendation was proposed by Councillor Cottle-Hunkin, seconded by Councillor Langford and

Resolved:

For the Committee to impress the importance of the Nature Recovery Plan, in relation to policy making, with the Joint Planning Policy Committee.

(Vote: For, unanimous)

Members asked what support the Nature Recovery Network would want from Torridge District Council going forward.

In relation to the planning process, it was suggested that further work to build nature into developments would help. The need for high quality developments, of a high ecological standard with green spaces was highlighted. As well as continuing to feed into the county wide work taking place with partners. The carbon plan was provided as an example.

Members asked how people would be able to access the support of the Wildlife Trust Farm Advisors. It was explained that the posts allocated to Taw and Torridge were no longer funded, but they are based on the Tamar and other

Devon Catchments. The Northern Devon Natural Solutions project (funded by the Environment Agency) was highlighted to members instead, this was focused on looking and how to manage land to benefit the water resource. This work of Farm Advisors was explained as very proactive, with farms being contacted directly, but they could also be contacted if people were interested.

Following a short discussion on reintroduction of species the Committee members thanked Harry Barton for attending on behalf of the Nature Recovery Network.

It was agreed that contact details would be shared with members.

146. ANNUAL REPORT - EXTERNAL OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY

The Chair presented the draft annual report for members.

It was agreed that Councillor Newton should be listed as a member of the Committee and a typo was noted on page 7 of the report.

Proposed by Councillor Pennington, seconded by Councillor Cottle-Hunkin and

Resolved:

That the annual report, with the agreed amendments, should be agreed by Full Council and published.

(Vote: For, Unanimous)

147. CONSIDERATION OF THE FORWARD PLAN

It was confirmed that Councillor Manley had arranged for Sue Matthews to attend the meeting on 20th July to discuss the Link Centres and mental health provision. It was also confirmed that the Citizen's Advice report would be heard at this meeting in July too.

Members suggested that the clinical commissioning lead for dentistry be invited to the 14th September meeting to discuss local provision.

The joint Community Safety Partnership update was suggested for the 26th October and an invitation will be extended to the Burton Art Gallery for the 7th December.

Members highlighted the report received from Staci Dory last week in relation to Citizen's Advice. Specific mention was made of non-means tested benefits and work with the Seamoor Unit. Members raised concern that they were hearing that some people were finding it hard / were unable to contact Citizen's Advice.

It was suggested that there should be a focus on means tested benefits and a report was requested, along with details of how the digitally disadvantaged are able to contact the service was requested.

The Head of Communities and Place advised that this information could be requested as part of the funding report coming to the July meeting. It was suggested the Chief Executive could be contacted for comment.

Members were advised that there are offices at Bideford, though there appeared to be gap in provision for rural areas.

Members requested confirmation on whether the Play Strategy sat with Internal or External Overview & Scrutiny. The Head of Communities & Place explained that there was not a QBR for the play strategy, so Internal would not be tracking the strategy.

Following a discussion regarding the play strategy and where the feedback on this work should be heard, it was suggested that External should continue to review the strategy and the social value of play areas, given their involvement in the process so far.

It was agreed to remove the grounds maintenance item from the forward plan as this service has now come in house and will be covered through Internal Overview & Scrutiny.

There was a proposal from Councillor Pennington to keep Ground Maintenance on the External forward plan. Following a discussion regarding the role of External and Internal scrutiny there was no seconder for the recommendation.

It was agreed that the Play Strategy would be added to the February meeting of the forward plan.

The meeting commenced at 2.00 pm and closed at 3.33 pm