

TORRIDGE DISTRICT COUNCIL

INTERNAL OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY MEETING

Caddsdwn Business Support Centre, Bideford, EX39 3BE

Tuesday, 26 July 2022 - 10.00 am

PRESENT Councillor P Watson (Chair)

Councillors R Boughton, R Clarke, J Gubb, P Hames, S Harding and S Langford

Mr S Dengate and Mr I Harper

ALSO PRESENT S Hearse - Chief Executive
S Dorey - Head of Legal & Governance (Monitoring Officer)
D Heyes - Finance Manager (Section 151 Officer)
J Walter - Strategy, Performance & ICT Manager
T Vanstone - Senior Electoral & Democratic Services Officer
K Hewlett - Electoral and Democratic Services Officer

Councillors C Hodson, N Laws and P Pennington

191. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for the meeting were received from Councillor Inch and Councillor Cottle-Hunkin.

192. MINUTES

Chair reviewed the minutes for the 14th June 2022 with members.

It was proposed by Councillor Harding, seconded by Councillor Gubb and – Resolved:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 14th June 2022 be agreed as a correct record.

(Vote: For 6, Against 0, Abstentions 3)

193. ACTION LIST

Chair reviewed and updated the action list with members.

The Head of Legal and Governance (& Monitoring Officer) updated members on action 177. It was explained that no one was affected by the housing benefit backlog due to payments being backdated. It was also confirmed that significant progress had been made - a reduction from 380 pieces of work outstanding to 210. It was proposed by Councillor Hames, seconded by Councillor Clarke and agreed that the action be completed. (Vote: For – unanimous.)

194. PUBLIC CONTRIBUTIONS

There were no public contributions.

195. 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.

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

There were no urgent matters.

197. AGREEMENT OF AGENDA ITEMS PART I AND II

There were no Part II items.

198. QBR 1 - FINANCIAL PAGES ONLY

It was explained that the report would cover financial pages only.

The Section 151 Officer provided a verbal update summarising the report, providing the salient points for members. The headline figures were explained for members and some context was provided regarding the scale of the issues being face by TDC.

Specific mention was made of the housing crisis the Council is facing and the impact of inflation.

It was confirmed that in the first 3 months of this financial year the Council had already spent more on temporary accommodation than in the whole of each of the previous 3 financial years.

The forecasted overspend was highlighted, along with the work taking place to address the needs of residents in the district. It was explained this was a statutory responsibility for the Council.

An update was provided in relation to TDC staffing costs, a pay offer had been sent from the Employer to the Unions that day. Members were advised of the additional costs as a result of this offer.

Projected spends on utilities and fuel were highlighted for 2022 and 2023, and it was explained there was potential for an additional income from temporary deposits due to the interest rates rise.

Members were advised of the Transition in Government Funding Reserve and how this would be used to meet the 2022-23 deficit.

Following an update on recruitment and retention members reviewed the QBR question and answers. Members were asked for any questions not already raised.

Whilst discussing the question about Council Tax collection rates the team were congratulated by members.

When discussing the question from Mr Harper regarding PV units it was asked what happened to the electricity produced over weekends when no staff were in the offices. The Section 151 Officer confirmed this was sold back to the National Grid.

Members also queried the income generation possibilities from installing solar panels on more TDC buildings. The Chief Executive explained this would need to be considered as part of the PIDs and Capital Programme, however the Capital Programme was already overspent so there would be implications to consider.

In relation to Mr Harper's question on the deficit Mr Harper explained he was happy with the answer, whilst recognising the difficult decisions that would need to be made in the future. The Chief Executive highlighted the work of the cross-party Member Budget working group and explained that a report with the member's recommendations would be heard at Full Council on the 5th September.

Following a query regarding the payment to RLNI, it was confirmed this was for lifeguards at Westward Ho! and was required for the Blue Flag status.

The questions from Steven Dengate were reviewed and there was discussion regarding questions on statutory and discretionary spend.

Members asked for clarity regarding the reports going to Full Council on 5th September. It was confirmed there were two reports - one from the Section 151 Officer on the financial position of the Council, and a separate report from the Member Budget Working Group setting out their recommendations.

It was asked if decisions would be expected at that Full Council meeting and it was confirmed that this was the hope.

199. CENSUS 2021 - INITIAL RESULTS

The Strategy, Performance & ICT Manager presented a summary of the initial Census results for 2021 and explained how this data could be used to inform decision making.

A detailed presentation reviewing the results nationally and for the region was provided. It was explained that the 2021 Census was the largest online census to have taken place, but these initial results were the main headline data and didn't provide the level of detail expected for the District / Ward level.

It was hoped that the release of more results in October would provide some more specific detail for District level. A list of the potential results that may be released was highlighted for members.

Following the presentation members were asked for their questions and there was a discussion in relation to the increase in the number households during the time between Censuses and how this correlated with the number of properties being built and access to housing locally.

Members noted the report.

200. DIGITAL BY DEFAULT AND ICT STRATEGY

The Strategy, Performance & ICT Manager provided some background to the Digital by Default and ICT Strategy and explained that this Committee had agreed and signed off the last Digital by Default Strategy back in August 2017.

It was explained that this Strategy was therefore due a refresh, especially following the impact of Covid and the acceleration of ICT use as a result.

It was explained that the aim was to keep pace with changes outside of the Council and consider how people want to access services going forward. Ensuring the Council has the infrastructure to meet this demand, and the security and Cloud technology to provide a service.

It was explained that the document was a framework for continuing TDC digital transformation, whilst recognising the needs of those who wish to access services and contact Council using the more established forms of communication.

There was a discussion around digital exclusion and access to technology, as well as the lack of signal in some areas of the district. The need for face to face contact was recognised and it was explained this would continue to be a consideration – the work of the Customer Service team was highlighted as a solution that is already in place.

It was confirmed the next steps would be for a report to go to Community and Resources Committee and members were asked for their endorsement. An action was agreed to add the forward plan for Community and Resources Committee.

It was proposed by Councillor Langford, seconded by Councillor Clarke and - Resolved:

To provide member endorsement of the Digital by Default and ICT Strategy from Internal Overview & Scrutiny Committee.

(Vote: For – Unanimous)

201. TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION

The Head of Legal & Governance (Monitoring Officer) added to the previous updates regarding the issue of Temporary Accommodation.

It was explained that the Council is seeing an unprecedented demand in people needing temporary accommodation. The role of the Housing Options team was explained, along with the complexities of the situation for the Council.

While it was recognised that numbers were high, it was explained the main challenge was related to people needing the temporary accommodation for longer. This was due to a lack of affordable permanent tenancies in the area, it was also explained that people were finding it hard to afford to maintain their tenancies once housed. Agencies, like the CAB and Encompass, were also reporting back that affordability was a key concern.

The additional issues resulting from an increase in holiday accommodation and the cost of living crisis were highlighted as also having an additional impact on the situation.

The Head of Legal and Governance (& Monitoring Officer) summarised the work taking place to try and alleviate the pressures and highlighted how this was linked to the budgetary situation that had already been discussed.

It was confirmed that the team were currently working on a policy, which will come to a future committee, looking at subsidising rent to save on the costs of temporary accommodation. This would be a short-term solution to address the current housing crisis. It was recognised that longer term solutions to the crisis were needed at a national Government level.

Members asked about the Pods and potential conversion of buildings, it was confirmed that this work was progressing.

The importance of gaining the support of Full Council to help alleviate the situation was stated.

It was stated that a white paper had been due this Autumn and the MP – Sir Geoffrey Cox – was aware of the issues facing Torridge. Councillor Clarke suggested he could update members at the next Committee regarding a planned meeting with Sir Geoffrey Cox.

Members queried how often LHA rates get reviewed, whether they were linked to inflation and whether Government should be lobbied. The Chief Executive stated that this had been raised, but LHA rates are not uplifted in line with inflation and were last changed around 10 years ago.

Members queried whether families in temporary accommodation must pay Council Tax. It was explained that in some cases, where temporary accommodation becomes a longer term arrangement people may become liable, as the property would be considered their main residence. It was confirmed that anyone staying in B&B or hostels would not be liable. The complexities of the assessment process and the management of all the different situations was recognised.

Following further suggestions to lobby regarding funding and budgets the Chief Executive confirmed that these issues continue to be raised with the MP but it is with the Government and required legislative change.

Members queried the valuations of the properties in the district in terms of Council Tax and reflected on the increase in house prices seen within the district in recent years. It was confirmed that the valuations used were based on 1993 house prices and this hadn't been reviewed by Government since.

Members reflected on the complicated nature of the situation and recognised the huge personal impact for local residents, they offered their support to the team in the managing of this.

The meeting commenced at 10.00 am and closed at 11.05 am