

TORRIDGE DISTRICT COUNCIL

EXTERNAL OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY MEETING

Town Hall - Bridge Street, Bideford, EX39 2HS

Wednesday, 1 February 2023 - 6.00 pm

PRESENT

Councillor J Manley (Chair)

Councillor C Cottle-Hunkin (Vice-Chair)

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

K Baker and L Bach

ALSO PRESENT

S Dorey	- Head of Legal & Governance (Monitoring Officer)
A Avery	- Community Engagement Officer
M Wright	- Head of Leisure Operations
T Vanstone	- Senior Electoral & Democratic Services Officer
K Hewlett	- Electoral and Democratic Services Officer

175. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

None received.

176. MINUTES

Chair reviewed the minutes with members page by page.

It was proposed by Councillor Langford, seconded by Councillor Pennington and

Resolved:

That the minutes of the meeting held on Wednesday 7 December 2023 be agreed as a correct record.

(Vote: For 8, Abstentions 2)

177. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

None received.

178. ACTION LIST

The action list was reviewed by members.

179. 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.

180. AGREEMENT OF AGENDA ITEMS PART I AND II

No items.

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

Chair requested that future meetings of the External Overview and Scrutiny Committee be held at 6pm. Members were in agreement.

182. ACTIVE TORRIDGE

Chair introduced Matt Wright Head of Leisure Operations at Active Torridge.

The Head of Leisure Operations (HOLO) then provided members with a detailed presentation on the progress of Active Torridge and the three leisure facilities – Torridge, Torrington and Holsworthy.

A summary was provided detailing achievements since taking over the contract from the outgoing operator. The impact of recent refurbishment and repair works were highlighted, along with work to support the TUPE of staff over to Active Torridge.

Some background was provided regarding the challenges that were faced and improvements that had since been put in place. The increase in membership take up, as well as swimming lessons were highlighted as some of the key achievements in the last 12 months.

The HOLO then went on to provide a detailed account of future plans for Active Torridge, along side the recognised risks for the company – Energy costs, aging building infrastructure and managing the capacity at the 3 sites were all noted.

Members were asked for their questions

Following a question in relation to work with groups and clubs in the community the HOLO arranged to contact Active Walk.

Members asked if contingency was in place for the aging buildings and complex pool system. The HOLO confirmed this was in place and went on to explain that, while servicing and management of some fixtures and fittings was managed by Active Torridge, the TDC Property Team were responsible for 'major plant' works and Active Torridge met with the team regularly – both informally and formally – to ensure that all obligations are being met.

Following a request for more detail in relation to profitability and viability it was explained that this wasn't something that could be shared in an open meeting due to commercial sensitivities, but the HOLO confirmed how this was tracked and reported to Board on a regular basis.

Members queried if the viability of the centres was monitored individually. It was confirmed that the accounts are monitored separately for the three sites and then reviewed as an overall picture for Active Torridge. It was further explained that, due to Active Torridge being within the affordable costs it was being monitored as an overall business and this would be consistent with the approach within the leisure sector.

The Head of Legal and Governance (& Monitoring Officer) added that Torridge District Council (TDC) set the service specification and budget for Active Torridge and within this it was asked that all three site remain open and what services to run on behalf of the Council.

Following a further question regarding viability and the cost and cross subsidy of the three sites the Head of Legal and Governance (& Monitoring Officer) responded. It was explained that Full Council had agreed the scope of the budget and the service specification for Active Torridge. The service specification detailed what Active Torridge were expected to provide TDC for the money – this was all being achieved within the budget and all those required services were running. However, it was confirmed that Full Council requested any modification to the service specification would be run through Full Council if the requirements set out were not being met.

The Head of Legal and Governance (& Monitoring Officer) confirmed that Key Performance Indicators were set out within the contract. She also provided an overview of the process in terms of the service specification and the obligations for Active Torridge in reporting back to TDC on their performance, which included attending this committee.

Members asked about the report from UK Active and concerns regarding Energy Support, which is due to end on 31 March. HOLO confirmed that currently Active Torridge do receive this support. It was explained that various organisations are lobbying to challenge the decision to not include leisure going forward and to raise awareness of the impact of the decision.

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

Resolved:

Write to MP and request that this is raised as a concern.

(Vote: For – Unanimous)

During the meeting various members noted the positive feedback being received from the community following Active Torridge taking over and thanked staff for their work.

Specific mention was made in relation to swimming lessons and members asked if the crash course for those unable to swim was still being provided for free and the HOLO confirmed they were free of charge.

More detail was requested regarding the GP referral programme. The HOLO provided members with the background to this provision. He explained the role of the Exercise Referral Leads at GP surgeries and the funding available and how Active Torridge have built strong links locally and built the provision into the service.

Members noted the Section 106 monies that would be available via the larger applications for planning in the area, specifically mentioning Northam.

Councillor Cottle Hunkin and Councillor Langford declared an interest as Board Members for Active Torridge.

Members thanked the HOLO for all that had been achieved within 10 months of Active Torridge taking over and requested that their thanks be expressed to all the staff.

183. PLAY STRATEGY

Chair welcomed Adrian Avery (Community Project Officer) who introduced himself and explained the purpose of his report was to update members in relation to the Play Area Strategy.

The Community Project Officer referred members to the papers supplied at the meeting, which provided a comparison on ratings from May 2021 and February 2023.

An overview of the work that has been taking place was provided for members. It was noted that there had been significant improvements in the previous 12-18 months, but the target to reach all play areas rated as good was still to be achieved. Two further play areas have moved to a good rating since December.

The number of departments involved in progressing the improvements within TDC was noted, especially the work of the Estates Team.

The inspections process was explained for members and it was confirmed that the introduction of more independent inspections was being planned.

The work of the Grounds Maintenance team was also highlighted, along with the use of a new portal for reporting issues at play areas.

It was confirmed that there was still an ambition to reduce the stock, but the challenges of this were recognised.

The planned work at Victoria Park was mentioned along with plans to work towards Green Flag status.

Members were asked for their questions.

Following a question in relation to Green Flag status, it was confirmed that none of the parks in the area currently have this status. The Community Project Officer highlighted some of the potential sites that were being explored.

Members noted that, given initial concerns regarding the set budget, they were please to see improvements and that the budget is working well.

Clarity was sought regarding the funding regarding Short Close play area and Chestnut Drive. The Community Project Officer explained the funding allocation and how it was being proposed to use this. It was confirmed that the communities using the areas had also been consulted and they had engaged and supplied their ideas on how to use the sites.

Members noted the lack of movement on Victoria Park, the delays in hearing back on funding bids was highlighted and the Community Project Officer recognised this frustration and was awaiting the outcome of the Rural Prosperity Fund bid.

Following discussions regarding the rating of Westward Ho! Green site it was agreed that the Community Project Officer would meet with Councillor Hodson and Councillor Laws on site to discuss concerns.

Concerns were raised by members in relation to the inspections process being completed internally.

There was a query in relation to the budgets being used for maintenance rather than improvements. The Community Project Officer recognised that they were still dealing with the legacy of work that hadn't been completed in the past. The aim of the strategy was to first deal with maintenance issues, before starting on improvements and bringing sites up to a better standard.

The skate park was also noted and a rating of excellent was explained as relating to the play element of the area only.

There was a discussion in relation to budgets and the challenges associated with managing safety alongside the replacement and improvements of sites. The Head of Legal and Governance (& Monitoring Officer) explained the council's position in terms of the available budget and a focus on maintenance. It was explained that this was why the Play Strategy was also focused on community engagement and work with Parish and Town Councils.

Members queried the criteria for rating the play areas and restated the need for more detail on how rating decision are made. The Community Project Officer explained the rational for the reporting on the sites and detailed the inspection processes in place.

Members asked how many items had been removed and not replaced. The Community Project Officer confirmed that most have been replaced now and the work was on track – where areas were marked green.

Following a discussion regarding funding and budgets the Community Project Officer confirmed that applying for Section 106 money was part of his role and this was done at the start of applications, but it took time for the funds to become available. The work to access these funds was also highlighted.

The importance of robust inspection regimes were highlighted and the need to build in capacity and revenue for regular checks and record keeping to be completed was felt to be key way to evidence that parts have been viewed and checked.

Following a query regarding Green Flag Status it was recognised that there was only a benefit to apply for this status and it was confirmed the Community Project Officer would be taking this forward.

Members asked for more details in regards to work on Victoria Park. The Community Project Officer provided members with a summary of the bid for funding and work to plan for a larger scale item to be a feature in the park.

The community engagement work was detailed for members, which included the survey which received over 900 responses, mostly from young people.

Following discussion regarding other successful lottery bids for Parks in Devon it was confirmed that Lottery funding was being explored for Victoria Park.

Following a query in relation to the funding of an independent annual inspection of all sites the Community Project Officer confirmed that these discussions are taking place with the Contract Manager currently. Members stressed the importance of these independent inspections.

Members noted the progress that has been made and thanked the Community Project Officer for his time.

184. CONSIDERATION OF THE FORWARD PLAN

Members reviewed the Forward Plan and the following additions were agreed:

- North Devon Plus to be added to the Forward Plan for 2023-24 meeting cycle.

The meeting commenced at 6.00 pm and closed at 7.31 pm

Chair:

Date: