

Torrige District Council

Draft Productivity Plan 2024

Background and introduction

During the Local Government Finance Settlement for 2024-25 the Government announced that every Local Authority was required to produce a Productivity Plan. Whilst recognising the huge effort Local Government has done to improve productivity and efficiency the Government indicated the need and desire to go further and to enable the sector to learn from one another by highlighting what works well, what the common themes are, where there any gaps and what more we need to do to unlock progress.

Torrige's Productivity Plan responds to this challenge by highlighting what we have done, are doing and plan to do in the future and, also the constraints that impede our ability to improve even further.

We already have a performance framework recognised externally as good practice that we will continue to benchmark our productivity gains as we implement our Strategic Plan and associated strategies to deliver the best possible services for our residents, communities, businesses and visitors.

Our Place

Torrige District Council is located in Northern Devon – bordering Cornwall to the west and looking out over the Bristol Channel. As one of the largest lower-tier Local Authorities in terms of land size we cover a wide array of locations from market towns, historic fishing villages and farmland to valleys and stunning coasts

The district is classified by the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs as 'mainly rural' with over 80% of residents living in areas defined as rural or in market towns

Our rurality can pose unique challenges, as it places us on the periphery of local authorities – we are poorly connected to many major urban centres and cities. There are no rail stations within Torrige, the nearest station being in Barnstaple which is a 20-minute drive away from Bideford (longer by bus). The nearest cities, Plymouth and Exeter, are each over an hour's journey away by car – with limited options for public transport.

The district has been selected as one of twenty local authorities to be part of the Government's Levelling Up Partnership due to our low performance in comparison to

other authorities in terms of education and skills, pay, productivity and health. The Levelling Up Partnership could allocate Torridge up to £20m of funding for projects and interventions to boost our performance in these areas should this policy area survive into the next Government following the July 2024 General Election.

The key metrics used to consider Torridge appropriate for a Levelling Up Partnership were low performance across:

- NQ Level 3+ (% of total population)
- Healthy life expectancy
- Median Gross weekly pay (£)
- GVA per hour worked

Our Council

We are an ambitious Council striving to improve everything about Torridge for the District and the people of the district. We understand the challenges that arise from the rurality of the area where we are located and with a mix of rural, coastal and town centre geography our services must be designed and delivered to match this.

It was the Councils' and councillors understanding of these challenges that informed the development and of our new Strategic Plan was approved in December 2023 for the next five years that reinforces the council themes of Local Economy; Communities, Health and Housing; Our Environment, Our Future; and Our Council. The Plan was approved after taking account of feedback following a period of public consultation, thereby ensuring that community views informed the council's priorities.

This Strategic Plan [Torridge Strategic Plan 2024-2029](#) is now at the heart of addressing the many challenges and issues we face and a number of supporting and facilitating documents and strategies are being implemented at the same time and on the same agenda as this Productivity Plan:

- The Torridge Place Story [\(insert link\)](#)
- The North Devon and Torridge Economic Strategy 2024-2029 [\(insert link\)](#)
- The North Devon and Torridge Clean Maritime Growth Vision [\(insert link\)](#)

The Council has a joint Local Plan with our neighbouring authority and strategic partner North Devon Council. Both Councils have approved to move forward and prepare a new local plan recognising that to deliver the many ambitions and strategic objectives of both councils and the Northern Devon region we need a plan that provides for and facilitates these.

Transformation and resources

The Council has continually delivered its budgetary commitments, which has produced a relatively resilient financial position with modest levels of reserves.

However, in keeping with all local authorities across the country short term Government Finance Settlements do little to enable Councils to prepare sustainable, evidenced and data led savings and transformation plans.

Torrige has ensured that the impact of long-term reductions in Central Government Funding are managed to minimise where possible any corresponding detrimental impact of service provision to our residents and communities. This has involved many difficult decisions around increases in fees, charges and Council Tax where the Council has discretion to do so in order to preserve the level of services expected.

The Council also took the decision to set up a Local Authority Trading Company to take over the running of our leisure services during the pandemic, which is subsidised through local taxation. The importance of leisure (a discretionary service) to our residents and communities reaches far beyond just sporting activity and is a vital service for health and well-being across the district.

We continually seek opportunities to support our residents and communities including increasing the provision of our homelessness and temporary accommodation facilities due to the increase in our number of households seeking this kind of support, which has ballooned from less than 10 households in 2019 to now around 70. It is not simply housing that is required, but wider cost of living support, with associated health and well-being support.

Improvement a continuous journey

The Council prides itself seeking ways to continually improve and measures itself against the targets incorporated into its Strategic Plan, which in turn are cascaded through to individual business / service plans.

All Members were involved in developing the Strategic Plan through an all-member workshop. Lead members were involved in fine tuning the ideas before a period of external consultation was undertaken. This was to ensure the direction of travel the Council was proposing was in fitting with our residents, businesses and communities' expectations and desires.

The Council's Internal Overview & Scrutiny Committee is delegated the responsibility for the quarterly review of performance against the Council's plans.

The Council's performance management framework has been heralded as good practice by the Local Government Organisation (LGA) so we are confident that this

additional assurance on top of the approach to developing the Strategic Plan sets us in good stead for improvement.

The Council recognises the value of external review has on improvement and therefore in April 2024 invited the LGA to undertake a Corporate Peer Challenge. A copy of the report (insert link) was reported to Full Council on 15 July 2024 with recommendations for Members to consider implementing to continue our improvement journey.

The introduction of the Office for Local Government (Oflog) by Government is intended as a means by which to:

“help make local government even better”

“increase understanding about the performance of local authorities, warn when authorities are at risk of serious failure, and support local government to improve itself”

Whilst Oflog collates specific data in relation to Local Government performance there was no intention of using such data to generate Local Authority league tables. This is due primarily to the fact that no one Council is the same and each Council has evolved over 40 years of existence to its current position taking account of numerous factors and decision along the way.

However, that said Torridge has been highlighted with reference to the data as a high performing Council, which is still is a matter to be proud of.

In addition to this the Council has supported Oflog with one of intended purposes to share experiences with other similar Councils in areas where we are performing well. In January 2024 Torridge we were asked by Oflog to present at a roundtable event how we operate our Waste and Recycling Services as the data highlighted, we are performing to a high standard. Our current recycling rate stands at 55.3% for 2024-24.

These performance standards are not isolated. The Planning Service has been restructured and is fully staffed and functioning well, which was recently acknowledged with a commendation from the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI); “Torridge were recognised for having made a significant investment in training and willingness to support new staff through mentoring and career progression, which has since enabled the team to grow and retain personnel. The training was also noted for a focus on how to encourage good built development, pragmatic decision making and a conscious effort to reach out and engage with developers and private customers to overcome obstacles and achieve more positive outcomes.

The team structure is now built around “a growing your own ethos” where we have recruited staff at various stages of their career paths, e.g. apprentices and graduates, and have supported this with professional training opportunities.

Recognising where improvements can be made then implementing them to enable the Council to progress is crucial.

Results for 2023-24 illustrate that 90% of our Major Planning Applications were determined within 13 weeks, 93% of minor applications within 8 weeks and 89% of other applications dealt with within 8 weeks.

As the Council prepares and readies itself to embrace the emerging opportunities for the area, we have bid for and been successful in an award to build on and strengthen the Planning Service with £65k awarded through the Planning Skills Delivery Fund. This funding will be used to increase capacity and improve processes and policies to enable more effective working practices in the future.

Barriers preventing progress

Whilst the Council strives for continuous improvement, we recognise that there is always more that can be done to improve and others we can learn from. However, there are certainly areas that Torrington along with all other Councils regard as barriers impeding and hindering our ability to progress further.

The Local Government Financial Framework, which Local Government has to work within is broken and requires fundamental change rather than continual tinkering around the edges:

- The continued use of single year settlements is demonstrably counter productive for Councils' financial and service planning and often leads to ill thought-out reactionary service change rather than a truly accountable measured approach.
- Within the annual settlement the continued use of the multitude of both "ringfenced" and "un-ringfenced" funding pots many with different approval mechanisms and timings.
- The top-down approach to restriction on the approach to fees and charges from Planning fees to Council Tax referendum limits and Council Tax discounts and exemptions. These should be locally driven and accountable through the local democratic process.
- Competitive bidding for grant (capital in particular) funding, which are extremely costly, wasteful and with time restrictions that often make it impossible to deliver effectively.

The Local Government Financial accounting and auditing standards need a complete overhaul. Much of the information included in the financial statements is irrelevant and hardly recognisable by any local elector. There is far too much emphasis paid on assets through the accounting methodology and auditing that adds no value to the accounting process, which adds significant costs both to the accounting and auditing process. If this area alone was revised it would make significant improvement to the external audit process and resolve many of the time

delay factors that we are currently experiencing in getting Local Government Accounts through the annual processes.

Joining up of Government departments especially around policy development and implementation. The silo working arrangements make it sometimes nigh on impossible to deliver services effectively at a local level. This is quite rightly highlighted when considering work round housing, homelessness and asylum dispersal.

In Conclusion

We are a Council confident we deliver good services and service improvement across the district recognising though that there are boundaries and constraints; whether financial, resource, and, or national policy restrictions that restrict the ability to take performance further.

We are an ambitious Council, which is clearly demonstrated in the strategies and plans we have in place, and are developing to improve Torridge for our residents, businesses, communities and visitors alike.

We recognise we cannot do this alone and will share the journey with peers and partners who we work with and are respected by.

We will continue to lobby for change in areas where we feel it further improve our chances of making Torridge a better place.