

Agenda Item

REPORT OF Head of Communities and Place
To: Community and Resources Committee
Subject: Estuary Strategy – Recommendation from Overview and Scrutiny
Date: 22/07/24 **Reference:**

PURPOSE OF REPORT:

To consider the recommendation from Overview and Scrutiny Committee (Internal) that “The Council urgently needs an updated Estuary Strategy and that this work should be added to the relevant work schedule or Business Plan” and to provide options

1. INTRODUCTION

On April the 24th 2024 Overview and Scrutiny Committee (Internal) received a progress report from Officers on the preparation of a new Estuary strategy. Disappointed that work had not progressed as they wished the committee resolved to refer the matter to Community and Resources Committee for direction.

2. REPORT

Background

In October 2012 Bideford Harbour Board requested the preparation of an Estuary Strategy and Port and Harbour Business Plan in order that they can better manage the Estuary and Port in synchronicity with, and for the overall benefit of, the council and users. This request was endorsed at C&R committee in Feb 2013 and permission to proceed was received.

The work required to prepare the current Estuary strategy, detailed below, needed input from multiple professional disciplines and specialist external expertise was sought.

UK Port Advisers were commissioned to produce the strategy in March 2013. The commission value was £32,000 at that time.

UK Port Advisers work, which has integrated all relevant disciplines, covers the creation of a high-level strategy for the (relevant parts of the) Taw/Torridge estuary. The strategy that they produced incorporates a high level port and harbour business plan for Bideford. It also includes a review of the existing local legislation under which TDC acts as statutory and competent harbour authority and the extent that changes were or may be needed in order to facilitate TDC's future management of the port and estuary.

1. The content of the high level strategy addresses:

- land allocation and use;
- any needs identified in the port and harbour business plan;
- the Taw and Torridge estuary and coastal management strategy;
- key stakeholder views;
- environmental stewardship and duties;



- relevant economic considerations; and
- applicable policy, law and regulation.

Similarly, the content of the high-level port and harbour business plan deals with:

- the future viability of the port;
- its current organisation and management;
- a brief overview of the market;
- an overview of the port's operational capability and needs;
- a review of optimal future geographic locations and land use;
- financial performance to date;
- the port's brand and market position;
- relevant business risks; and
- the governance and management framework.

The main body of the strategy is set at a high level and the general thrust of the document, including the legislative environment that it describes, remain relevant, although many of the specific actions identified within the Port and Harbour Business Plan section are now outdated.

The second list above was relevant in 2014 at point of strategy adoption but is now somewhat out of date and its presence within the strategy document dates the document considerably.

In 2022/23 Internal O&S conducted a review of the 2014 strategy and recommended a number of sections of the document should be updated or strengthened and that this should become a subsequent business plan action for the economic development team.

Progress on delivering the recommendation above has been slow for a number of reasons but most relevant is the fact the team has been fully engaged in delivering projects and initiatives that contribute to the delivery of the Council Strategic plan and the absence of an updated strategy has not hindered this activity.

At Internal O&S on the 24th April Officers presented an update on this item..

A slide presentation was delivered which highlighted the following:

- Initial review by Internal Overview & Scrutiny and context
- Appledore Clean Maritime Innovation Centre
- Celtic Sea FLOW and Harland & Wolff
- Initial review challenges and progress
- Next steps

A lengthy discussion took place and it became clear that while the original recommendation of the Internal O&S working group in 2022 remained relevant there were further actions that the committee now wished to introduce for inclusion within an updated strategy and a much greater piece of work would be required to address what was emerging in discussion.

Detail was provided to the committee about the North Devon & Torridge Maritime Network that had recently been created, organisations involved, the aims and objectives of the group and how it fits in with the Levelling Up Partnership.

Following a query regarding sufficient staff resources, the Head of Communities & Place advised, that jointly with North Devon District Council and through North Devon Plus, a



specialist had been recruited for a 12-month period to assist the Council and provide some extra capacity.

The Chair emphasised the need for an updated document, which encapsulates all the new ideas and opportunities, that can then be fully scrutinised by the Committee and requested a timeline to see greater evidence of a new strategy.

It was proposed by Councillor S Newton, seconded by Councillor C Cottle-Hunkin and resolved:

That the Internal Overview & Scrutiny Committee recommend to Community & Resources Committee that the Council urgently needs an updated Estuary Strategy and that this work should be added to the relevant work schedule or “Business Plan”.
(Vote: For – unanimous)

3. IMPLICATIONS

Legal Implications

The legislative context of the council’s responsibility in its relationship with the Estuary is described in the current strategy and this should be updated in either a refresh of the existing strategy or the preparation of a new one.

Financial Implications

A refresh of the existing strategy would be delivered within existing staff resources during 24/25. The appointment of external advice to prepare a new strategy would cost in the region of £50K and there is currently no budget to support this activity

Human Resources Implications

Within existing resources

Sustainability Implications

These will be a key consideration in any new strategy.

Equality/Diversity

None directly related to the decision to be taken at this meeting

Risk Management

These would be key considerations in the preparation of a new strategy. The risks associated with not having a new strategy at this point in time are considered to be low. The greater risk would be in preparing a document in the absence of vital information that is due to emerge during the year as the result could be a strategic document that stifles the Council’s ability to exploit opportunity deliver its approved strategic plan.

Compliance with Policies and Strategies

To be considered.



Data Protection (GDPR) Implications

None

Climate Change

To be considered and referenced in any new document

Ward Member and Leader Member Views

This is a recommendation from Overview and Scrutiny committee (Internal). Consultation on the issue has been with that committee.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The current Estuary Strategy is now 10 years old and some aspects of it are undeniably out of date. Equally it makes no reference to the emerging opportunities and much work is currently underway to define those opportunities and subsequently the intelligence that this work will provide will inform the development of a more detailed future strategy.

Officers consider that when the time is right and there is sufficient clarity on what role the authority might want/ need to play in the regulation and management of the Estuary, a future strategy will be helpful in directing actions towards achieving the best outcomes for the council, commerce, community and the environment. In the meantime, the direction provided within the realms of the existing strategy, regulations and powers associated with management of the port of Bideford, estate management controls and the strategic intent set out in both the emerging North Devon and Torridge Economic Strategy and the Maritime Growth Vision provide a good basis for Officer activity and strategic plan delivery. On this basis, a new strategy is not considered necessary at this point in time and a refresh of the existing document would suffice.

Torridge DC and North Devon Council have recently provided funding for a joint Officer (employed by North Devon +) and the assist in the development of policies and projects that strengthen the position of Torridge and North Devon in the maritime environment.

Although this report is in response to a recommendation from Internal O&S it should be noted that the Harbour Board Working Group have an important role to play in the preparation of any revised or new Estuary Strategy.

Officers consider that at this point in time there are realistically two matters for consideration by this committee, those being:

1. Whether to support the recommendation from Internal O&S, that the Council urgently needs an updated Estuary Strategy and that this work should be added to the relevant work schedule "Business Plan".

And if so,

2. Whether this work should be a refresh of the existing strategy to provide a document that can provide high level strategic guidance within the scope of the existing document and that it will not include a full list of actions to support it at this time, or, a new strategy document is commissioned, funding is sought for this and external expertise is procured to produce it at an estimated cost of circa £50K.



5. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that members consider if they support the recommendation from Internal O&S that the Council urgently needs an updated Estuary Strategy and that this work should be added to the relevant work schedule or “Business Plan”.

And if so, Officers are either tasked with

1. Refreshing the existing strategy in consultation with Harbour Board Working Group and Internal O&S
or
2. Funding is sought for the preparation of a new strategy and a further report is presented to the committee when sufficient funding has been identified and the body of work has been fully scoped.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Consultations: Chief Executive, Head of Legal and Governance, Finance Manager and S151 Officer, Head of Operational Services, Economic Development Manager
Contact Officer: Sean Kearney
Background Papers:

