

REPORT OF **Leader of the Council and Chief Executive**

To: **Full Council**

Subject: **Torrige Corporate Peer Challenge**

Date: **17 March 2025**

Reference:

PURPOSE OF REPORT:

To present to Full Council an update of progress made on the action plan following the Corporate Peer Challenge that took place at the end of April 2024.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Local Government Association (LGA) Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) is a visible and transparent framework of Local Government review and assurance conducted by the sector for the sector.

Torrige invited the LGA to carry out a CPC at the end of April 2024 the last such review took place in 2017.

The conclusion of the process back in Aril 2024 was a series of recommendations from the Peer Team used to form the basis of an action plan, which was presented to Full Council on 15 July 2024.

The purpose of this report is to provide Full Council with an update on progress against those recommendations.

2. REPORT

LGA CPC is a recognised system of assurance conducted by “Peers” both Councillors and Officers in senior political and officer roles at councils that are broadly similar to Torrige.

The process is intended to provide “critical friend” support and assurance and it is not an inspection. The key areas covered by the CPC were:

- Local priorities and outcomes
- Organisational and place leadership
- Governance and culture
- Financial planning and management
- Capacity for improvement:

The Peer team appointed were::

- Lead Officer Peer: Ian Knowles, Chief Executive at West Lindsey District Council
- Lead Member Peer (Independent): Cllr Hannah Dalton, Leader Epsom and Ewell District Council
- Member Peer (Lib Dem): Cllr Lisa Spivey, Cotswold District Council
- Officer Peer: Dr Alison Knight, Director of Place, Broxbourne Borough Council
- Officer Peer: Kirsten Burnett, Head of Policy and OD, Hyndburn Borough Council
- Officer Peer: David Clark, Service Director, Governance, Democratic and Legal Services, Somerset Council



- Peer Challenge Manager: Kathryn Trant, LGA Regional Adviser for South-West

During their visit to Torridge the peer team met with 85 people, which included councillors, staff and external partners & stakeholders and also held 30 workshops.

It was really pleasing on many fronts that many good points were highlighted and we recognised that there are always things that can be done differently, which would help us improve the way Torridge works and operates that would be beneficial to our residents, businesses, communities and visitors and there are a range of recommendations that were made and captured into an action plan.

The Corporate Peer Challenge action plan was reported to Full Council on 9 September 2024 and the latest position on each of the actions presented is attached as Appendix 1 and a summary of each of the areas is highlighted below.

Levelling Up Fund and Partnership (now known as Torridge Community Regeneration Partnership)

Over the course of 2024 the Torridge Levelling up Partnership that was announced in the Government's Spring Budget 2023 hit a number of barriers that caused delay in the overall process, which included a General Election (called May 2024 and held in July 2024) and Autumn Budget (31 October 2024) being the main causes.

Whilst it has now have been rebranded as the Torridge Community Regeneration Partnership after surviving these significant national events and challenges and was formally announced by Government on 3 March 2025. Due to the significant size and impact of the proposed programme of works would have on operational capacity of the Council it would have been somewhat premature to have implemented a wide range of measures without certainty on whether the partnership would continue.

However, there were still many actions pursued to position the Council in a state of readiness in the event a decision from Government was forthcoming. This was especially the case in light of the forecast deadlines for completing the work programme (originally set at 31 March 2025). The actions would also serve to improve internal governance and reporting over a wider agenda and projects and therefore consider appropriate to continue to work on them. Ultimately the deadline for the partnership has now been extended to 31 March 2027.

Groups Leaders have met and agreed a draft "Governance and Reporting Framework" attached as Appendix 2, which sets out a framework where major projects, initiatives and strategies are reported, governed, managed and monitored appropriately with both Member and Officer oversight in place. This will include measures to ensure that the projects within the programme have in place mechanisms to track performance linked to outputs on a consistent basis.

Capacity to Deliver

We already have in place an external project team (reporting in to the Council via the Major Project Manager and Senior Management Team) for the Appledore Clean Maritime Innovation Centre.

We also have an external team ready to be stood up for the Holsworthy Agri Business Centre project, which is subject to reaching agreement on the jointly owned land around the cattle market.



These models of delivery can be replicated across other projects and work in currently underway to plan and schedule resources for all the projects in the programme. There is already in place external resources to support planning, legal and communications.

Member Development, Behaviour and Review of Procedures

A Member Development Working Group (MDWG) was created to empower councillors to drive their own development and review several processes and procedures. The Group is made up of the Group Leaders of each of the Political Parties.

Several areas have been reviewed, which will be reported fully to the Council's AGM in May 2025 when the Council's Constitution is reported.

As reported above and attached as appendix 2 a revised framework for Governance and Reporting of major areas of work and projects has been developed where Group Leaders take a strategic role working with SMT. This in part enables the Leadership Team meetings to be removed from the Constitution with the regular bi-monthly meeting open for all members to attend that will ensure improved briefings and member input into major projects, strategies and areas of work.

The MDWG group has also reviewed the provision of training and development both immediately following District Elections, but also on an ongoing basis.

There are a number of areas that are still to be reviewed, which will be covered at the next MDWG meeting scheduled for 4 April 2025 and these include Lead Members roles following the removal of the Leadership Team, Planning Call in and Notices of Motion. The references made in the action plan and recommended by the Peer team to address instances of poor councillor behaviour also needs further consideration.

Golden Triangle

Statutory officer meetings and a forward work programme around governance issues to include the Annual Governance Statement and the corporate risk register is now in place. Meetings take place on the first Monday of each month.

Financial Sustainability

The Council's Budget 2025-26 and Medium Term Financial Strategy was approved by Full Council in February 2025. Whilst the Budget is balanced and can be balanced for the next couple of years this can only be achieved through the allocation of reserves, which is unsustainable. Attendance at the Member Budget Working Group through 2024 was low and not all political groups were being represented. This will be discussed at the next MDWG on 4 April 2025.

Risk Management

Risk management has now been strengthened and reported more openly and transparently (where possible). The Risk Management group has been reconstituted and now meets regularly and outputs will be reported via the Group Leaders and SMT framework as shown at Appendix 2 .

Partnership Working

There are a range of regular strategic partnership meetings that place, which the Leader and Chief Executive attend. Northern Devon Futures, One Northern Devon, Team Devon,



Devon Districts Forum, Devon and Torbay County Combined Authority. The Leader, Deputy Leader and Chief Executive also meeting regularly with North Devon Council.

Climate Change

Changes to the service business plan format have been made to ensure that climate change/ carbon reduction measures are now embedded with the document. Operational Managers in partnership with service lead members can agree the individual actions included. This will act as a delivery tracker and provide data for presentation within the QBR. This is, of course, in addition to the annual Carbon Footprint report that is presented to community and resources committee. This document reports the organisations progress towards net carbon neutrality by category, highlights areas of underperformance and suggest priorities areas for intervention.

The specific route to 2030 with service specific actions remains under development. What is becoming clearer is that achieving the carbon neutrality by 2030 target is going to be extremely challenging.

Review of HR Policies

HR policies, terms and conditions and working arrangements have been reviewed and considered by unions, which have been approved and implemented.

Communications

A range of improvements has been made to ensure our external communications are on much better footing with more regular press releases now issued, communications plans in place for major works and fortnightly staff newsletters produced. Improvements and changes made to the Member communications is due to be reviewed at the next MDWG scheduled to meet on 4 April 2025.

3. IMPLICATIONS

Legal Implications

None directly related to this report.

Financial Implications

None directly related to this report

Human Resources Implications

None directly related to this report

Sustainability/Biodiversity Implications

None directly related to this report

Equality/Diversity

None directly related to this report

Risk Management



None directly related to this report

Compliance with Policies and Strategies

The report refers to the Council's Policies and Strategic plans

Data Protection (GDPR) Implications

None directly related to this report

Climate Change

None directly related to this report

Ward Member and Lead Member Views

Is a Council-wide report and plan so Ward member views not applicable

Comment from Leader of the Council Cllr Ken James

There has been considerable progress made on most fronts since the action plan was reported to Full Council on 9 September 2024.

Quite clearly some of the significant challenges highlighted by the Peer Team were awaiting a government announcement throughout the year, which as we now know was only made a few weeks ago. However, notwithstanding that progress has been made to improve Member Governance and oversight as well as keeping our members better informed through more regular and diarised briefing sessions.

There is still work to be done over the next couple of months, but I am confident that working with the other Group Leaders and SMT will be able to implement the remaining recommendations and deliver on the Council's ambitions.

Date of Consultation – 10 March 2025

4. CONCLUSIONS

The LGA Corporate Peer Challenge is a very well-respected improvement and assurance framework that operates within the Local Government Sector. It is not an inspection process although It does involve a comprehensive review of how the Council operates across key areas.

We welcomed the Peer Team to Torridge as critical friends and we equally welcome the report produced by the team, which is already helping us to provide service and other improvements across the Council.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

That Members:

- Note the report and progress made which is highlighted in the report and in the attached action plan.



SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Consultations: Date of Consultation – 10 March 2025

 Officers Consulted –
 Staci Dorey, Head of Legal and Governance
 Sean Kearney, Head of Communities and Place

Contact Officer: Steve Hearse, Chief Executive

Background Papers:

