

TORRIDGE DISTRICT COUNCIL

EXTERNAL OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY MEETING

Town Hall - Bridge Street, Bideford, EX39 2HS

Wednesday, 4 June 2025 - 10.00 am

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| PRESENT | Councillor H Thomas (Chair) | |
| | Councillor A Brenton (Vice-Chair) | |
| | Councillors L Bach, C Hodson, T Johns, P Shepherd and D Smith | |
| ALSO PRESENT | S Dorey | - Head of Legal & Governance (Monitoring Officer) |
| | H Page | - Housing Options Manager - Housing Options & North Devon Against Domestic Abuse Housing Officer |
| | K Hewlett | - Electoral and Democratic Services Officer |
| | S May | - Corporate Services Officer |

302. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Harding and Councillor Wheatley.

303. MINUTES

It was proposed by Councillor Bach, seconded by Councillor Brenton and –

Resolved:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 12 February 2025 be agreed and signed as a correct record.

(Vote: For 5, Abstentions 2)

304. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

None received.

305. 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.

306. AGREEMENT OF AGENDA ITEMS PART I AND II

There were no Part II items.

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

Chair highlighted the vacancies for three non-elected members on the Committee. It was explained these had been vacant for some time and had proved difficult to fill. Members were asked to contact the Chair to make any recommendations of how to promote.

There was discussion on possible ways to promote the vacancies and a potential candidate's details were to be shared with Democratic Services.

An action was also agreed to write to TTVS to ask for possible solutions.

308. HOUSING OPTIONS - SUPPORT FOR THOSE EXPERIENCING DOMESTIC ABUSE

Chair introduced Helen Page, Torridge District Council (TDC) Housing Options Manager, and the Domestic Abuse Officer for Housing Options.

The Housing Manager and officer went on to deliver a detailed presentation on the introduction of the Domestic Abuse Officer role, which works across North Devon Against Domestic Abuse (NDADA) and TDC.

The presentation provided members with an overview of the local provision, some of the gaps and barriers to access in terms of housing, and how the new role - funded until 2024 by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) - aimed to join up the work of the two services and improve outcomes. The presentation also touched on the changing landscape of domestic abuse provision in Devon and the new integrated service called Devon Domestic Abuse Alliance.

The presentation detailed how the new role worked alongside the Housing Options team to support people experiencing domestic abuse, and how this benefited people accessing services, and the Housing Options Team as well. Statistics on referrals and engagement were shared, as well as the types of onward referrals - demonstrating the benefits of the new role in terms of service delivery.

Finally, the presentation provided some context in terms of how the new post fits within the overall Devon-wide response to domestic abuse, and the aim to have a more 'one service feel'. Members were also advised of the aim to increase housing provision in Devon and how this worked in terms of the support provision.

Following the presentation Members had the opportunity to ask questions.

Members asked if the team were seeing any increase in referrals from more diverse groups. The Housing Manager explained that referrals and presentations were mostly White British, and went on to highlight the complexities of providing support in terms of the local provision available. During discussion the Housing Officer explained there was a growing awareness of the issues some communities experience alongside domestic abuse, such as Honor Based Violence. Member were then made aware of the Olive Project in Exeter, who work specifically with BME communities.

Members went on to ask how the officer managed their own personal safety when providing support. The Housing Officer advised of how they plan for their safety and manage lone working. The Housing Manager went on to explain the risk assessment processes that are in place.

Members asked what percentage of cases involved children and young people. Though statistics were not available for the meeting, anecdotally it was felt that more than 50% of cases involved children and young people in some way and they would often involve complex needs. It was explained how these complexities impact on the suitability of provision and can cause delays, but that the move towards more self-contained units would help better support families. Out of area placements were identified as especially challenging in terms of providing advocacy and ensuring support could be replicated in the new area.

It was queried whether 25 hours a week was adequate for the role and whether there was a need for further funding, the Housing Manager reflected on the role of the officer and how they bridge the gap between the two services – NDADA and TDC Housing Options – it was felt that there was capacity within both these teams to manage the caseloads, and it was also noted that information sharing was easier and faster. The Housing Officer explained their role and how caseloads were managed in their absence.

It was confirmed that funding was in place for 2 to 3 years and it was felt this provided the time to gather statistics on the impact. It was acknowledged future funding streams were hard to predict at this point in time, and there was a need to see how provision across Devon developed. The Housing Manager explained TDC were the only team to apply for funding for an officer, though the move in Devon was to a more collaborative model of support through the integrated service – Devon Domestic Abuse Alliance.

Following a question about reporting concerns where there wasn't consent, members were advised that a referral to safeguarding teams would be required.

Members recognised the skills and experience the officer was bringing to TDC, and asked about the resilience of the team and whether the partnership work with North Devon was in place and functional. The Housing Manager and Housing Officer provided assurance in terms of the new joint housing officer post and reflected on the upskilling of other team members – both from TDC and NDADA – it was also explained that the new role had helped to improve working relationships with other services. It was confirmed there was a reciprocal

arrangement with North Devon and ongoing conversations on how to improve resilience within both services.

There was a question regarding the role of the Police and their expertise in managing cases of domestic abuse. The Housing Officer provided some background in terms of the triaging of domestic abuse cases and how the high and very high risk cases were managed. It was felt that the Police response for these cases was very good and the specialist officers supporting those experiencing domestic abuse were very qualified – the Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARAC) were highlighted during discussion.

There was recognition that the response could vary for those experiencing domestic abuse where the risk was not this high. However, it was confirmed Police training on the risk assessment model (DASH) was in place and it was felt that working relationships were positive – examples of good communication links were shared.

In response to a comment on the risk assessment model and decision making, members asked about the referrals not considered to be domestic abuse. The Housing Manager explained there were not a high number of these cases, and it meant that a different more appropriate type of support would be offered instead.

Following a question on the safe houses and how these are used across the district, the Housing Officer provided detail on the usual length of stay and how these were used as an interim measure whilst more secure housing was identified. It was confirmed that the provision in the district was always in use and didn't stand empty.

During the meeting there was further discussion in terms of security and helping people and families to stay put / remain in their own home. It was confirmed that cases would have a budget to ensure properties were safe and how this was managed in terms of risk levels.

There was a question regarding the proportions in terms of men and women, and the impact of recent Court ruling in terms of the definition of a woman and biological sex. The Housing Officer advised that the number of men coming forward and disclosing abusive relationships was increasing nationally, the Housing Manager agreed to confirm the statistics following the meeting.

Following the meeting the Housing Manager and Housing Officer provided the following statistics. The Housing Officer has a caseload of 93 clients, 84 female and 9 male.

It was explained that the Court ruling would not impact on the provision, and the law in terms of employment and the Equalities Act had not changed. It was recognised that provision needed to be tailored and that support should not be impacted.

Members asked what more TDC might be able to do as an Authority and the Housing Manager reflected on the changing landscape in terms of provision and felt that once the Devon Domestic Abuse Alliance had fully established itself it would be clearer what kind of resources were needed, the freedom to explore new ideas was considered important.

Members reflected on the need for good monitoring of the outcomes and success of the work – given the impact of Local Government Reorganisation specifically. The Head of Legal and Governance (& Monitoring Officer) advised that this was required as part of the funding agreement and that a monitoring process were already established as a result.

Chair thanked both speakers for their presentation.

309. 2025-26 FORWARD PLAN AND MEETING SCHEDULE

The Chair reviewed the Forward Plan with Members and the following was agreed:

To invite North Devon Plus to attend the July Committee and the Joint Community Safety Partnership to be held on the November meeting date.

To add the following to the list of suggestions for future Committees:

- Cllr Smith declared interest and asked for Globe Hotel to discuss potential funding.
- Royal Mail due to poor delivery service
- Devon Highways to talk about the state of the roads.
- Food Banks to attend and discuss the need and social situation for Food Banks.
- Presentation of CEO from Libraries Unlimited. Cllr Thomas declared interest as a user of the library.
- Look at Bideford Minor Injury Unit and the possible use of these facilities across other local towns. Cllr Hodson advised she was happy to advise Chair of any development in terms of discussion at the Devon County Council Health and Adult Care Scrutiny Committee.
- Fire service, Coastguard and Ambulance Services.
- The introduction of the Family Hub Model.

It was agreed the Chair and Democratic Services would meet outside the meeting to populate the Forward Plan.

310. ACTION LIST

Chair reviewed the Action List with members and the following updates were provided.

212. Link Centres – Although there was no further update at the time of the meeting, Councillor Hodson confirmed she would continue to keep members updated.

220. Children's Centre – Cllr A Brenton provided an update in terms of the new Family Hub model and the developments since the last meeting. The changes in provision were highlighted for members and it was confirmed that a reorganisation was still taking place, along with a change in the locality to North Devon, Torridge and Mid Devon. Given the significant changes, members were keen to add Family Hubs to the Forward Plan.

The meeting commenced at 10.05 am and closed at 12.03 pm

Chair:

Date: