

Torbay Community Conference

2019 Report

This Report summarises the key issues, concerns, ideas and suggestions for action that were discussed at the Torbay Community Conference hosted by Torbay Council and held at Parkfield, Paignton on 11 September 2019.

Clarity CIC was engaged by Torbay Council to help design, organise and facilitate the Conference. This Report was compiled by Stephen Woollett, a Clarity Director, and draws on the reports of group discussions and other feedback from Conference participants.



Summary

The Torbay Community Conference, held on 11 September 2019, was designed to help Torbay Council develop a new and more engaged relationship with individuals and communities across the Bay. Over 120 people from communities across the Bay participated including Council members and senior officers.

Four key overarching messages emerged from Conference discussions:

- There needs to be a change of culture in the Council and in communities.
- Trusted relationships with communities need to be built.
- Communication with communities and individuals needs to improve.
- Celebration of the Bay's assets and civic pride need to be encouraged.

Conference participants also identified a wide range of actions that could be taken to build stronger communities; enable and support community activity; and strengthen the relationship between the Council and local people.

These suggestions include recommendations for fundamental cultural and organisational changes, which may have strategic, policy and resource implications, and a series of "quick wins" - relatively straightforward but important operational improvements which also clearly demonstrate the Council's commitment to act and act relatively quickly.

As independent Conference Facilitators, Clarity feels that the event achieved its desired outcomes and was an excellent starting point for a "new conversation" with communities. It was effective in re-setting the tone for the much more engaged relationship the Council (and communities themselves) seek.

Clarity has identified seven key elements which it believes will be especially important in translating the Council's determination to engage with communities more effectively into real change "on the ground".

1 Background and Context

1.1 The Torbay Community Conference was designed as the first stage in helping Torbay Council develop a new and more engaged relationship with individuals and communities across the Bay. This desire for more effective and sustained engagement with communities represents a key element in the Council's broader ambitions for fundamentally re-designing how the Council operates. The very substantial financial pressures on the Council demands that "new ways of doing things" are explored and that local people and community groups are better able to utilise their assets, skills and capacity to improve the quality of life for individuals and strengthen their communities.

1.2 The tone and theme of the Conference was clearly reflected in the strapline *Together We Can...Start a Conversation*. This emphasis on the Conference starting a dialogue and being the first stage in a new approach is important. It reflects a recognition that the Conference was seen as part of a journey of continuing engagement, albeit one that had not yet been fully mapped out. It also highlighted the importance of the Conference itself demonstrating a new tone and approach by the Council – with considerable emphasis on the Council (members and officers) being primarily in listening mode.

1.3 The public description of the Conference captured its purpose as follows:

Torbay Council needs people and communities to be more involved. We want to have better on-going conversations with individuals and communities, and we want ideas on how individuals, organisations and communities can help us make Torbay thrive. This conference is an opportunity for you to share these ideas, tells us what can be done differently and highlight great examples of community action from which we can all learn.

1.4 The desired outcomes of the Conference were:

- Local people understand that Torbay Council wants a different and more engaged relationship with communities.
- Torbay Council and local people have identified some of the barriers and constraints to greater community engagement and what action is needed to facilitate and support this.
- Torbay Council and local people are more willing to engage with each other in exploring new approaches and identifying solutions.

1.5 A consultation on establishing additional Town Councils in the Bay was launched by the Council earlier in the year¹. While it was felt at the outset that it would be entirely appropriate for the Conference to embrace discussion about the relative merits of new Town Councils, given the parallel consultation process already underway, this should not be an explicit theme.

1.6 A summary of the conference structure, an explanation of how the discussions were captured and recorded (not least to inform this report) and a note on Conference participants are included in Appendix 1.

1.7 One of the keynote speakers, Doug Scrafton (Chair of Par Track Ltd) provided some useful advice for councils and communities as part of his presentation and this can be found in Appendix 2.

1.8 A list of the Conference discussion themes is in Appendix 3 and a summary analysis of the feedback from Conference participants is in Appendix 4.

¹ Brixham already has a Town Council

2 Key Messages

2.1 Four overarching (and related) messages emerged from the Conference discussions.

- There needs to be a **change of culture** in the Council and also in communities.
- **Trusted relationships** with communities need to be built.
- **Communication** with communities and individuals needs to improve.
- **Celebration** of the Bay's assets and **civic pride** need to be encouraged.

Culture Change

2.2 Participants generally perceived that the Council had a *"you can't do this because"* attitude and wanted to see this shift towards a much more positive *"can do"* approach. It was suggested that in responding to groups and communities the Council should think in terms of *"how can we do this together or help you to do it"* and be less risk averse. This change in thinking and attitude needed to be embraced throughout the Council.

2.3 The Council was also seen as having a critical role in encouraging a more confident *"can do"* culture within individuals and communities. One group identified the need to *"give the community permission to help themselves and each other"*. Another group felt that the Council should *"lead by example and assist in educating and changing mindsets"*. The need to build the confidence of people to report poor practice (for example in relation to sub-standard housing) and to whistle blow was also identified.

Trusted Relationships

2.4 The need to *"trust each other"* was referred to throughout the Conference discussions. This is clearly part of the culture change theme but was specifically highlighted in several group discussions. The need for *"trusted relationships"* between communities and the Council were seen as particularly important but trust within the Council (for example between members and staff) and trust between communities, the Council and other agencies were also flagged. The need to *"remove the barriers"* which impact on trust was identified.

2.5 The importance of reducing the bureaucracy and *"red tape"* associated with community activity (events were specifically cited) was flagged by participants. One group suggested that *"rules and regulations should be seen as a set of constraints rather than a stop sign"*.

Communication and Transparency

2.6 There was a general call for improved communication between the Council and communities and the public. Some felt that existing communication processes were disconnected, inadequate and slow. There was a call for greater clarity and transparency with some perceiving the Council as a *"closed door"*. The lack of communication on how some key issues were being handled and where matters were in the decision-making process. One group observed that *"silence is damaging"* because it fuels uncertainty, distrust and speculation.

Celebration and Pride

2.7 The importance of civic pride and celebrating Torbay's assets and achievements were also common themes running through several discussions. This was seen as especially important in the context of the Bay's natural, built and coastal heritage. But the importance of celebrating and sharing best practice, including in relation to community activity generally, was highlighted throughout the Conference. (All

group facilitators were tasked with starting off discussion by identifying good practice and successful and innovative approaches.)

3. Potential Action - Strategic and Cultural Changes

3.1 We have drawn out from the reports and feedback from Conference discussions a series of suggestions and recommendations which seek to address the “big messages” outlined above. These are potentially quite fundamental changes and shifts in approach which have strategic, policy, systems and cultural aspects. Some will have significant resource implications. These are summarised below.

3.2 Council organisational change

- Explore how to empower staff to be more flexible and responsive in engaging with the public and communities.
- Improve communication between Council departments
- Explore the scope for a single connecting point in the Council – helping community groups identify the most appropriate people in the Council for their needs.
- Explore the scope for a simple community small grants programme.

3.3 Community engagement

- Follow up the Community Conference with a targeted programme of involving and connecting with those groups and geographical communities less likely to engage with the Council. *(It is understood the Council is already planning a series of local community conversations which may address this issue.)*
- Develop a mechanism for engaging young people with the Council and in helping community groups to involve young people more effectively. *(Note that the Imagine This Partnership has been playing a leading role in consulting and engaging children and young people.)*
- Support the development of stronger relationships between schools and their local communities,
- Explore the establishment of local “one stop shops” to bring the Council (and other agencies) “closer” to local communities.
- Explore the scope for a holiday or tourist tax to generate additional resources

3.4 Community development

- Work with Torquay United FC to further build their engagement with the community, especially young people.
 - Develop an overall strategy for the use of the Bay’s heritage buildings.
 - Support the development of Community Builders.
 - Undertake or commission a comprehensive mapping of community groups and assets – and make this widely accessible. This could also identify duplication and help facilitate collaboration. *(This information may already be available through TCDT.)*
 - Support the further development of social prescribing.
 - Explore or support the development and implementation of a volunteer strategy for the Bay.
 - Strengthen the connections between housing providers, relevant agencies and community groups.
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4 Potential Action – Quick Wins

4.1 We have also identified a series of “Quick Wins” suggested by Conference participants. These are relatively straightforward, generally operational changes or improvements which are important in their own right and also clearly demonstrate the Council’s commitment to act. These are set out below.

4.2 Community development and enabling community activity

- Streamline and simplify the licensing and regulatory requirements for community events and provide information and guidance for community organisers. Also provide a “myth buster” clarifying the position on common assumptions, for example in relation to health and safety.
- Explore the scope for collective or collectively negotiated insurance cover for community activity.
- Encourage and support Council officers to make available and share their expertise with community groups.
- Provide advice and guidance to groups undertaking their own risk assessment.
- Review what support is currently available (through the Council and other agencies) to community groups and social enterprises and seek to fill the gaps and/or improve awareness of existing support.
- Actively seek individuals and groups to undertake and/or participate in environmental, coastal, open space and heritage improvements.
- Support and encourage community weekends, festivals and other events.
- Review and improve the Council’s web site to make information and resources for community action more accessible.
- Support or provide a programme of training for the Chairs of community groups.

4.3 Strengthening Community Engagement

- Deliver or commission a training programme for staff (and Councillors) around community engagement and working with community groups and volunteers.
 - Develop a community engagement protocol/framework to use in designing and developing new projects and seeking funding – ensuring the community is involved from the start
 - Improve the availability of information on individual staff contacts and their roles and responsibilities on the Council’s web site
 - Develop a protocol or guidance for contractors around engagement with communities. (This could be built into service specifications and contracts.)
 - Explore with Torbay Community Development Trust how <https://torbaytogether.org.uk/> can be developed and expanded to take on a broader role around community engagement.
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5. Conference Evaluation

5.1 Sixty-nine participants completed individual Feedback Forms expressing their views on the Conference itself, further community engagement activity and how they would like to continue to be involved and informed. This is a very impressive response rate for an event of this type and the feedback provides useful intelligence for the Council in planning its approach to community engagement in the future. A summary analysis of the feedback is in Appendix 4.

5.2 Overall, across all criteria against which participants were invited to assess the Conference, 88% rated the event excellent, good or satisfactory. The roundtable/group sessions, the core part of the Conference, were especially highly regarded with 80% rating this excellent or good and 97% rating it satisfactory, good or excellent. Participants were most critical of the information and instructions provided in advance of the event and the venue – although 69% and 61% respectively still rated these satisfactory, good or excellent. Over 40 specific suggestions for how a Conference of this type could be improved were received and these should be used to inform the planning of future events and other engagement activity.

5.3 Participants indicated the preference for further engagement activity and opportunities. Their responses were as follows:

Engagement activity	% participants responding
Annual Community Conference	65%
Regular Social Media Updates	59%
Quarterly Cabinet Conversations	43%
Question Time sessions ahead of Council meetings	42%
Surgeries with Ward Councillors	33%
Facebook Live Discussions	23%

5.4 Not surprisingly, given the positive attitude to further engagement opportunities indicated above, 90% of the 69 participants responding wanted to be sent further information about engagement events; 87% wanted to receive the Conference Report and 42% wanted “*more information about getting involved in my area or a particular service*”.

5.5 Furthermore, participants were asked if “*there are areas or services that you are interested in getting more involved in?*” An impressive 49 people responded positively to this question, covering a wide range of types of activity.

6 Clarity's Independent Perspective

6.1 We were impressed by the generally constructive tone of discussion at the Conference and that the majority of participants engaged actively in exploring how the Council can build a deeper and sustained relationship with communities. The discussions highlighted a wide range of achievements, successes and good practice and generated a substantial number of thoughtful ideas, suggestions and recommendations. These ranged from those requiring a fundamental shift in culture and approach to practical and quite detailed operational proposals. A substantial amount of material (written, video and audio) was generated by the Conference and all this needs to be shared with and reviewed by relevant councillors and officers.

6.2 We think the approach adopted by the Leader and Deputy Leader, other members of Cabinet and the Senior Leadership Team at the Conference clearly showed that the Council was in "listening mode". In our view it demonstrated to participants that the Council really did want to hear what people and communities thought and genuinely wanted their ideas and solutions. We think then that the Conference was effective, in re-setting the tone for the much more engaged relationship the Council seeks.

6.3 As this report sets out, Conference participants voiced a strong desire for a change in the culture and mindset within the Council. We sense this is also recognised by many within the Council. How this fundamental change can be achieved is beyond the scope of this report, but we think the following seven key elements will be especially important in translating the Council's determination to engage with communities more effectively into real change "on the ground".

- A **community engagement strategy** setting out core ambitions, outcomes, values, principles and practices which is embedded in the work of all the Council's Directorates and Departments.
- A programme of **ongoing community engagement and consultation over the coming year** or so with a focus on involving people and communities that tend not to engage readily with the Council.
- A programme to **empower and build the capability of staff** to engage more readily with communities.
- **Improved communication mechanisms** enabling people and communities to more easily access support, information and influence and keep more closely informed on the progress of key issues and decisions within the Council.
- The implementation of a series "**quick wins**" which are relatively straightforward to put in place, valuable actions and demonstrate the Council's commitment to addressing issues raised at the Conference and elsewhere.
- A dialogue with relevant agencies and networks (such as TCDT) to explore how individuals and **communities can be supported to build their own capacity and capability** to take on new roles and responsibilities.
- Establishing a "space" – possibly online – to **celebrate and show case success** and good practice in community engagement, highlighting in particular good "teamwork" between the Council and communities.

6.4 In our view the Conference achieved its desired outcomes (as set out in section 1.4) and provides an excellent foundation for further targeted engagement with communities of interest and place.

Appendix 1 Conference Structure, Reporting and Participants

Structure

1 The Conference was structured to comprise three key elements. Firstly, the Leader of the Council set out the context and purpose of the event at the start and the Deputy Leader reflected on the key themes and outlined key next steps at the end of the event. Secondly two speakers from outside the Bay (Jennie Hartnoll, Mendip Health Connections) and Doug Scrafton (Par Track Ltd) shared their experiences to provide inspiration, example and challenge. And thirdly, and most importantly, the bulk of the Conference was devoted to small group discussions, most of which were focussed on a specific theme. (These themes are listed in Appendix 3)

2 These group discussions provided the key opportunity for participants to share their knowledge, concerns and ideas. While Council members and senior officers were facilitating these discussions, their main role was to listen. Facilitators of the themed groups were tasked with focussing discussion around the following points:

- Examples of good, interesting and innovative examples of community action and involvement in the Bay that could be built on and learnt from; and
- How local people can be enabled to become more involved in meeting the needs of their community; what the Council needs to do (differently) and what support do communities need to take on new roles.

Capturing the Conversation

3 A range of tools were used to capture and record group discussion and the individual views, ideas and concerns of participants. These were:

- a. Four short concise statements from each themed group discussion reflecting key points and “messages” These were recorded on paper and verbally presented in the final session.
- b. Detailed notes of all group discussions compiled by allocated “reporters” amounting to 90 sheets of A2 paper.
- c. Individual suggestions posted on the Conference Comment Boards.
- d. Individual audio interviews with Sound Communities.
- e. Individual video interviews with Torbay Council Communications Team.
- f. Individual Feedback Sheets mainly reflecting participants’ comments on the structure, organisation and content of the event.

4 All of the above material has been or is being collated and will be used to inform the Council’s next steps and will be shared back with participants, the wider public and other stakeholders. The material from a, b and c above have provided the basis for this report.

Conference Participants

5 The Conference was designed for 120 “community” participants, a reflection of the capacity of the venue and the need to enable constructive small group discussion. In addition, the event needed to accommodate Councillors, members of the Senior Leadership Team and other officers who would be acting as group discussion facilitators and reporters and providing other support. Potentially the event would involve around 180 people in total.

6 The Conference was intentionally promoted as being open to any members of the public as well as representatives of community and voluntary organisations and other agencies. The event was “fully booked” in advance.

7 On the day, a large number of people who had registered in advance did not turn up – not unusual for an event of this type – meaning the Conference had around 80 community and public representatives participating. (This also meant that some who arrived at the event on spec could participate.) In retrospect the total number of people involved seemed appropriate for the structure of the event and ensured most group sessions enabled good levels of participation in discussion.

8 The majority of participants (registered and attending) appeared to be associated with community and voluntary groups and other agencies – with around 30 participating as individuals without any obvious organisational relationship. There was a general view that many of the participants were familiar faces and there was some disappointment that more “new” people did not attend. This is not unexpected but flags an important issue for future engagement activity – more effort needs to be made to reach those people and communities who tend not to readily engage with the Council.

9 It was specifically highlighted that young people were virtually entirely absent from the event. Again, this is not unexpected. In practice engagement events need to be specifically designed to work for young people and require carefully targeted marketing through youth organisations and networks and schools and colleges.

10. The data from the Participant Feedback Forms show that 44% stated they were from Torquay, 35% from Paignton (including Preston) and 15% from Brixham, though note that only 54 people give this information.

Appendix 2 Advice from Doug Scrafton (Par Track Ltd)

Advice to Community Groups

- It's complicated! Be certain of your capacity
- Be patient – it will take longer than you think
- Be clear about what you want and how you can achieve it
- Be reasonable – don't ask for the impossible
- Be assertive – argue your case
- Be pushy – and go to a senior level if necessary

Advice to Councils

- Community groups need to be treated differently
- Clear steer from political and senior officer level
- Culture of cooperation
- Senior contact who can bring various part of the Council together
- You cannot always expect the degree of certainty with community groups that you have with subordinate councils. Choose the right group
- Then trust them – be flexible and creative
- And be prepared to shell out a little seed money (legal advice, initial insurance, some capacity building) – it will repay dividends

Appendix 3 Group Discussion Themes

	Topic
1.	Good health – good care How can local groups and individuals support people to be healthy, happy and independent?
2.	Children – our future How can we work together to enable children and communities to thrive?
3.	Housing and homelessness What can we do together to ensure people have decent, affordable homes and homelessness becomes a thing of the past?
4.	Our environment How can we work together to make the most of our parks and green spaces?
5.	Our heritage and built environment What can we do together to help preserve, protect and raise awareness of our wonderful heritage and built environment?
6.	Stronger communities What can we all do to help build a greater sense of belonging and stronger relationships across Torbay?
7.	Arts and Culture How can we work together to maximise arts, culture and events in Torbay?
8.	Climate Change Emergency How can individuals and local groups work with the Council to make a positive impact on climate change?
9.	Maritime and Natural Environment How can we work together to make the most of our maritime and natural environment?
10.	Being involved How do you want to keep in touch with and influence what the Council is doing and planning?
11.	Open Session
12.	Open Session

Appendix 4 Summary of Participant Feedback

Table shows % of participants who scored on the relevant criterion.

	A Good or excellent	B Satisfactory	C Poor or unsatisfactory	A+B Satisfactory good, or excellent	Number scoring on criterion
Information/Instructions prior to event	44%	30%	25%	74%	67
Purpose clearly communicated	45%	39%	16%	84%	69
Pace and interaction	60%	31%	9%	91%	67
Speakers/presentations	70%	25%	8%	95%	67
Practical/roundtable sessions	80%	17%	3%	97%	65
Length of event	67%	25%	7%	92%	68
Venue – room, facilities	44%	38%	17%	82%	69
Average overall score*	59%	29%	12%	88%	

* The average overall score is simply an average of the percentages across all criteria relating to a specific rating. It provides a simple indication of how participants rated the Conference as a whole.