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Dear Member

## **OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD - WEDNESDAY, 11 MARCH 2026**

I am now able to enclose, for consideration at the Wednesday, 11 March 2026 meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Board, the following reports that were unavailable when the agenda was printed.

<b>Agenda No</b>	<b>Item</b>	<b>Page</b>
5.	<b>Call-In of Cabinet's Decision on Implementation of the English Riviera Beach Standards</b> Response to Call-in	(Pages 3 - 12)

Yours sincerely

Governance Support  
Clerk

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The English Riviera Beach Standards (ERBS) have been developed to provide a locally-designed, outcome-focused framework that supports clean, safe, welcoming and well-managed beaches, aligned to Torbay's status as a premier coastal destination.

The ERBS focus on what matters most to residents, visitors and businesses, enabling high standards of cleanliness, accessibility, safety and facilities, while supporting sustainable use of the coastline and the delivery of the English Riviera Destination Management Plan. They are intended to support better place outcomes rather than compliance with a global award scheme that does not reflect local conditions or operational realities.

## **1. Has the Council consulted on the changes with interest groups such as the Marine Conservation Society and Surfers Against Sewage?**

The English Riviera Beach Standards (ERBS) support the focus on ensuring a quality experience for beach users and is not intended to be an environmental or water-quality designation. They do not change bathing water testing, environmental protection requirements, marine habitat responsibilities (such as seagrass), or the roles of the Environment Agency or Natural England.

Because the ERBS do not alter environmental management, consultation with groups such as the Marine Conservation Society (MCS) or Surfers Against Sewage (SAS) was not required.

This approach ensures that environmental protections remain robust with the ERBS focusing on quality, user experience and local stewardship.

## **2. What consultation has the Council had directly with the tourism industry and attraction providers?**

When the inspection took place and the challenge over compliance was initially raised in August of last year the issue, and the Council's short term response, was briefed to the ERBID. This briefing has been shared with ERBID board through the ERBID chief executive's report and the attendance of the Director of Pride in Place at those meetings. The issue was reported in August and November's board meetings.

There is an understanding from the ERBID for replacing Blue Flag with a local standard, based on operational difficulties with Blue Flag criteria, alongside the need for a locally controlled framework aligned with Torbay's offer, and integration with the English Riviera Destination Management Plan. This reflects a shared emphasis on delivery focused standards and positive outcomes, rather than a compliance led approach, maintaining and enhancing our reputation as a high quality destination.

The Destination Management Group, the group which supports the Council and oversees the Destination Management Plan, has not identified Blue Flag retention as an issue.

**3. What consultation have the ERBID Company carried out? What questions were put, when were they put, what feedback was received and what analysis took place?**

ERBID Co has not undertaken any wider levy-payer consultation.

ERBID has made clear the importance of a high-quality beach environment in their feedback and reminded the Council of the importance that visitors to the destination attach to this.

**4. Did the Council work with other coastal local authorities to lobby for changes to the Blue Flag scheme to make them less onerous?**

Blue Flag is governed internationally by the Foundation for Environmental Education (FEE), and the criteria are set at a global level. In England, Keep Britain Tidy administers the scheme but cannot change or relax the criteria.

The Director of Pride in Place and the Portfolio Holder for Pride in Place approached Keep Britain Tidy to ask whether any flexibility or interpretation might be possible. Keep Britain Tidy referred the question to the international Blue Flag jury.

The response confirmed that the criteria must be applied in full, with no scope for local interpretation or adjustment.

There was therefore no route for Torbay, or any UK local authority, to negotiate changes to the requirements. The development of the scheme is a proactive local response through a framework that is deliverable and locally accountable.

**5. What thought did the Council give to developing a regional alternative scheme with neighbouring local authorities?**

A regional scheme was considered but discounted because neighbouring coastal authorities operate different beach management models and service levels, and a shared standard would require joint governance structures that do not currently exist. The locally defined standard also supports clear ownership and accountability.

The English Riviera is also a distinct tourism brand, and ERBID's Destination Management Plan applies specifically to Torbay.

A local scheme was therefore the most workable and aligned option.

## **6. Why was this new policy not developed utilising Overview and Scrutiny or Cabinet and Shadow Cabinet meetings (CASC)?**

The decision related to participation in a voluntary, non-statutory award scheme. Changes of this nature fall within established delegated arrangements for beach management service standards enabling timely delivery and operational responsiveness.

The English Riviera Beach Standards were developed as an operational quality framework to support delivery of the upcoming beach season. They are intended to support front line delivery and improvement not introduce new regulatory requirements.

## **7. Has an impact assessment been done on the potential impact of ditching the Blue Flag scheme and introducing the new scheme?**

Officers assessed the implications of both continuing with Blue Flag and adopting the ERBS with a focus on the outcomes we want for residents, visitors and businesses in line with the Corporate & Community Plan themes.

- **Tourism and brand impact:**

ERBID Co analysis shows no measurable link between Blue Flag status and visitor numbers. The English Riviera brand is familiar to domestic visitors and aligns with wider destination marketing.

- **Operational and safety impact:**

Blue Flag would require segregated zones for swimmers, paddleboarders, surfers and powered craft, including a 100-metre exclusion zone for powered craft.

Implementing these requirements in Torbay would stop mixed-use water activity, deter boat owners and marine leisure visitors, negatively affect Harbour and Marine economies, create a fragmented user experience for residents and visitors, and breach a Harbour Byelaw, making such zoning unlawful.

- **Financial impact:**

The ERBS is cost-neutral and will save the annual Blue Flag participation fees, allowing those resources to be reinvested directly into Torbay's beaches.

- **User experience:**

The ERBS enable a stronger focus on cleanliness, accessibility, facilities and safety, areas beach users identify as most important. Prioritising quality and the everyday experience rather than compliance.

Conclusion:

Remaining within the Blue Flag framework would have introduced negative impacts for visitors, water users, and Torbay's marine economy without delivery commensurate benefits for the place.

Adopting the ERBS provides a more appropriate, locally tailored, and sustainable approach that supports better outcomes, local accountability with no negative impact on tourism.

### **8. How many departments in the Council have been involved in the development of this proposal?**

Input came from the services directly responsible for beach operations and tourism liaison:

- Beach Services
- Tor Bay Harbour Authority
- SWISCo
- Communications
- Economy

Environmental Health were not involved, as ERBS does not alter statutory environmental or water-quality responsibilities.

### **9. What elected Members have been engaged with?**

Engagement included:

- The relevant Cabinet Portfolio Holder, who was kept aware of the development of the ERBS

The portfolio holders for Place Services & Economic Growth and Tourism, Culture & Events and Corporate Services were also briefed. The work progressed within existing delegations due to timescales, the need to confirm feasibility with Blue Flag's national and international bodies, and because the issues related directly to the delivery of the upcoming beach season.

Once it became clear there were no alternative options or flexibility available, the proposal was taken through the appropriate route for awareness and transparency.

### **10. What is the cost so far of developing this proposal?**

There has been no direct expenditure beyond officer time.

The ERBS has been developed in-house, with no consultant or design costs, and is cost-neutral to operate. Savings from Blue Flag participation fees can now be reinvested in Torbay's beaches.

Initial Elements to cover at call in:

1. Work through the list of all current Blue Flag beaches and how, with the new Criteria on zoning, most, if not all would not gain future Blue Flags - going through each specifically. Most Councillors don't even know the beaches where we have the current awards and therefore can't know how meeting / or not the criteria would mean no or only a few awards.
  - Breakwater Beach, Brixham.
  - Broadsands Beach, Paignton.
  - Meadfoot Beach, Torquay
  - Oddicombe Beach, Torquay
  - Preston Beach, Paignton
  - Torre Abbey Sands, Torquay

Due to the risk of and exposure to easterly winds, zones would have to be marked by significant buoyage and anchor chains sitting on 30kg blocks, even with this level of infrastructure there is significant risk of the buoyage being disturbed/washed ashore during spring tide and east wind.

This level of anchorage would cause significant environmental impact to the seagrass beds and would be counter intuitive to the measures put in place to prevent vessels anchoring in these areas

Due to the gentle slope of the beaches and the significant tidal range, in order to provide suitable zoneage during all tidal states the amount the buoyage and associated ground tackle would be significant. At hightide the buoyage furthest out to sea would be particularly suseptable. movement. At low water there would be significant length's of ground tackle exposed and therefore presenting a danger to beach users

2. List of beaches gaining Environment Agency 2025 top Bathing Water Classification of 'Excellent' with data from full classification showing that Torbay and the English Riviera are THE Premier Tourism Resort (449 designated bathing waters were assesses. 297 (66.1%) met the Excellent Standard. We have 13/14 or 92.86%). This needs to be perfectly fact checked.

In 2025 13 out of our 15 (86.6%) bathing water beaches were accesssedto be of excellent quality.

23100	Maidencombe	Excellent
23200	Watcombe	Excellent
23300	Oddicombe	Excellent
23400	Babbacombe	Excellent
23501	Anstey's Cove (Torquay)	Excellent
23600	Meadfoot	Excellent
23700	Beacon Cove	Excellent
23800	Torre Abbey	Excellent
23900	Hollicombe	Excellent
24000	Paignton Preston Sands	Excellent
24100	Paignton Paignton Sands	Good
24200	Goodrington	Good
24300	Broadsands	Excellent
24500	Breakwater Beach (Shoalstone)	Excellent
24600	St Mary's Bay (Devon)	Excellent

3. Compare how we have been testing our waters with how we will moving forward; comparing with levels under Blue Flag (we test each beach, I believe, 20 times in the session - that testing carried out independently. I don't understand the 5 times and doubling mentioned in paper work. Is that the

Blue Flag requiring a minimum of 5 tests, and we are saying we'll do at least 10? Will we be carrying on with Environment Agency testing which I assume we are and also having an extra round of tests?)

Under Blue Flag, beaches must have a minimum of five water samples per bathing season. This is the international minimum standard.

In Torbay, the Environment Agency already samples our designated bathing waters far more frequently. Most sites receive around twenty samples per year, and none fewer than ten.

Under the English Riviera Beach Standards, this is strengthened by committing that each designated bathing water will receive a minimum of ten samples per season. If the Environment Agency delivered fewer than ten at any site, the Council would commission independent third party sampling so the public always has a current and reliable picture.

Current Environment Agency sampling numbers

Twenty samples: Maidencombe, Watcombe, Oddicombe, Ansteys Cove, Meadfoot, Hollicombe, Preston, Paignton, Goodrington North, Goodrington South, Breakwater, St Marys Bay

Fifteen samples: Torre Abbey

Ten samples: Babbacombe, Beacon Cove, Broadsands

This shows that Torbay already exceeds Blue Flag minimums and that ERBS formalises and guarantees these high testing standards.

The primary reason for testing is to allow the public to make informed choices about where they bath and take reassurance from recent and up to date results.

Under the ERBS results will be published ten times a year instead of 5. They will be published on the ER and Council website and also displayed as notices on the relevant beaches.

Historic water quality data will be published going back 4 years instead of the currently required 1 year.

4. How, without the new scheme, we would have nothing to shout loud about our wonderful beaches.

If Torbay had stepped away from Blue Flag without a replacement, we would have lost a recognised and visible way of demonstrating beach quality to residents,

visitors and businesses. Blue Flag is a familiar public award with core requirements for water quality monitoring, on site information, education and safety. Leaving without an alternative would have left a noticeable gap.

Without the English Riviera Beach Standards in place, Torbay would have had no locally controlled year on year quality mark focused on Torbay priorities and identity, creating a promotional and reputational gap when national Blue Flag announcements are made each May.

We would have had no visible and recognised way to show the quality of our beaches despite strong operational standards, and no way to clearly demonstrate the excellent water quality of our beaches to the public even though many sites receive about twenty samples each year.

We would have lacked a formal mechanism to present our higher testing commitment of at least ten samples, with independent third party sampling where Environment Agency rounds ever fell short, presented in a way that the public can see beach by beach and online.

We would have had less ability to showcase local distinctiveness, including Geopark story, seagrass and proportional safety models, within a framework we govern ourselves, and reduced confidence for seafront businesses and partners who rely on a visible quality standard.

ERBS fills that gap. It is a scheme we own and can improve annually, with clear signage and digital information that reflect Torbay beaches as they really are.

It provides a platform for beach specific interpretation, QR linked pages and habitat sensitive practice within a single, consistent local standard.

ERBS retains what people expect, clear water quality information, on beach signage and safety, but under local governance and with a higher testing commitment of at least ten samples at every designated bathing water, with independent third party tests if any site falls below ten, so the public always has a current picture.

Removing Blue Flag without ERBS would have left Torbay with no badge, no benchmark and no local narrative, and no way to showcase the excellent water quality we already achieve. ERBS preserves public confidence and gives us the right platform to tell Torbay fuller story.

##### 5. List how our scheme is actually an improvement.

Higher and more reliable water testing standards

Blue Flag requires a minimum of five samples per season. ERBS guarantees at least ten samples at every designated bathing water. If Environment Agency sampling

ever fell below ten, ERBS commits us to independent third party testing so results remain current and reliable.

Local ownership, local control and clear accountability

ERBS are managed, reviewed and improved directly by Torbay, so decisions reflect local coastline, local conditions and local priorities.

Environment first and habitat sensitive management

Blue Flag includes prescriptive requirements that can require fixed infrastructure such as buoyed zones. These are not always appropriate in sensitive areas with seagrass and natural features. ERBS allows proportionate, evidence based management that protects these habitats.

Stronger storytelling, interpretation and visitor information

ERBS gives us the freedom to explain what makes each Torbay beach unique. This includes interpretation, QR linked digital content and consistent branding that reflects the UNESCO Global Geopark identity and local heritage.

Proportionate, risk based safety models

ERBS supports locally assessed, site appropriate safety measures, rather than prescriptive arrangements that do not reflect Torbay varied beach profiles.

Fairness and suitability across all beach types

ERBS recognises Excellence, Quality and Compliant Natural Beaches so undeveloped coves and natural beaches are not penalised.

Better value for money and smarter investment

Resources can be focused on improvements that matter locally, including access, signage, environmental protection, water safety communication and water quality information, rather than on external accreditation structures.

Shared local governance through a Beach Stakeholder Forum

ERBS embed strong local governance so outcomes are not solely the Council view. A twice yearly Beach Stakeholder Forum, meeting at the start and end of each season, will review Environment Agency classifications and in season evidence, consider site by site performance and agree outcomes such as Excellence, Quality or Compliant Natural Beach, along with updates to signage and QR linked information. Membership includes local beach businesses and operators invited directly, ERBID as a standing member, environmental partners including university input where appropriate, water safety organisations such as RNLI or Surf Life Saving, Tor Bay Harbour Authority and Beach Services. The Director, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder, will sign off the agreed updates ahead of each season. This provides transparent decision making, independent challenge and continuous improvement within a locally owned framework.

