

Minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Board

11 February 2026

-: Present :-

Councillor Long (Chair)

Councillors Cowell, Douglas-Dunbar, Foster, Johns, Law, Spacagna (Vice-Chair),
Stevens and Tolchard

(Also in attendance: Councillors Billings (virtual), Bye, Barbara Lewis (virtual),
Chris Lewis, David Thomas and Tyerman)

50. Apologies

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Fellows. Apologies were also received from the following Cabinet Members: Councillors Jackie Thomas (who was represented by Councillor David Thomas) and Councillor Tranter.

51. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of the Board held on 14 January 2026 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

52. Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were made.

53. Budget Monitoring - Revenue and Capital Quarter 3 2025/2026

The Cabinet Member for Housing and Finance, Councillor Tyerman, outlined the submitted Budget Monitoring report for 2025/2026 which set out the quarter 3 position in respect of the Council's Revenue and Capital Budgets. Cabinet Members and Directors also attended the meeting and responded to questions as well as Councillor Tyerman.

Councillor Bye provided an update since the report had been published and advised that the Children's Services overspend continued but the wording in the report needed further refining. This was driven largely by high-cost placements and reliance on unregulated provision. Some progress had been made reducing unregulated placements, but more work needed to be done. The Government had agreed to write off 90% of historic Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) overspends, however, future funding arrangements remain uncertain with the Government taking over the funding for SEND from 2028.

Members asked questions in respect of the following:

- What was the actual cost difference between regulated and unregulated children's placements, and how do these compare financially and operationally?
- What would the cost implications be if the Council provided its own placements, including the potential benefits of managing the market more effectively?
- Why was progress slow in transitioning children out of unregulated provision? Was this due to delays in obtaining Ofsted registration, availability of appropriate placements, or other barriers?
- Why were waste disposal costs higher than expected? Was more residual waste being sent to the Energy-from-Waste (EfW) plant than planned? What factors were driving this increase? (A written response would be provided.)
- Could reassurance be provided that historic debts labelled as old or historic were being reviewed thoroughly, with proper tracking of business rates and council tax recovery processes?
- Were the current levels of write-offs for Council Tax and Business Rates typical compared to previous years and national benchmarks?
- What early intervention steps were taken when residents start falling into arrears, and were they consistently being signposted to support such as the community helpline?
- Why was the Integrated Care Organisation (ICO) not included within the Council's financial sustainability plan, given it presents a risk area?
- Why was there such a large overspend in AOTAS (educated other than at school) and school place allocations, despite reduced numbers? What cost pressures or quality issues are driving this?
- What solutions exist to resolve issues around Torbay Coast & Countryside Trust (TCCT) parking passes, particularly in relation to fairness and integration with the Council's parking tariff structure?
- Why were charges in TCCT car parks different from others, and how could these be rationalised without inappropriate cross-subsidising between car parks?
- Could alternative permit options or differential pricing be explored to better reflect the different destinations, usage patterns, and operational costs of TCCT car parks?
- When we refer to collection rates could it include percentages e.g. what does good look like compared to the budget. (A written response would be provided to this and a note for future reports.)

The following responses were provided:

- Unregulated placements were not automatically cheaper; cost was dependent on the complexity of need and availability rather than the regulatory status. Ofsted registration does not necessarily make it cheaper, it is more about the quality of the provision. Some providers were pursuing Ofsted registration, but competition between authorities for high-need placements keeps costs high. Average cost of placements was £8,500 per week locally, compared to £6,000–£7,000 nationally.

- If the Council partnered to run its own children's homes, it could manage the market more effectively like other authorities. This may stabilise costs, but regulatory compliance, staffing, and specialist infrastructure mean in-house provision isn't inherently cheaper but it provides greater control over quality and availability.
- Progress was slow in moving children out of unregulated provision due to:
 - delays in achieving Ofsted registration for suitable placements;
 - limited availability of specialist placements for complex needs; and
 - market competition between local authorities.However, progress had been made in recent months, with two children due to move into Ofsted-registered placements shortly.
- The Team was reviewing the end-to-end process for business rates and council tax debts and was working to ensure that debts were not allowed to become too historic. They were also appointing a new enforcement agent and increasing early intervention to prevent arrears escalating. Some debts relate to Covid grants, so validation work was ongoing to ensure accuracy.
- The write-off levels were typical although the Council has not reviewed debt as regularly in recent years, explaining why the figures may appear elevated.
- Steps taken when residents fall into arrears include signposting to the Community Helpline, with early engagement encouraged. Previously, residents may not have been connected with someone skilled enough to arrange realistic repayment plans. Members were encouraged to ask residents to speak to the Team early because ignoring someone getting into debt only creates a bigger problem.
- A separate transformation plan exists for the ICO with regular updates to Directors. Sustainability plans cover pressures within existing Council budgets (e.g., children's placements), whereas the ICO sits within a different programme structure.
- Although numbers in AOTAS have reduced from 72 to the 30s, costs have risen because:
 - quality improvements have offset savings from reduced numbers;
 - more families have secured high-cost independent school placements; and
 - pressures remain around children with autism requiring out-of-area specialist placements. (A written response was requested for more detail.)
- TCCT car parks previously had lower fees, and the Trust was cross-subsidising some parking. Council car parks operate differently: the Council cannot use ANPR cameras (unlike TCCT), which increases staffing and enforcement costs. If fees remain different between Trust-transferred car parks and others, this will create cross-subsidisation, which was not considered appropriate. A strategic review of charges, zones and permits will be undertaken over the next six months. Extra parking revenue seen this year was considered a one-off due to an excellent summer and not necessarily repeatable.

Resolved (unanimously):

1. that the Overview and Scrutiny Board notes the forecast revenue outturn position and amendments made to the published 2025/26 Capital Investment Plan;
2. that the Cabinet be recommended to carry out a strategic review of car parking charges, zones and permits taking into account the location of the car parks and those which are now the responsibility of the Council having been transferred from the Torbay Coast and Countryside Trust and report to a future Overview and Scrutiny Board meeting; and
3. that the Director of Finance be requested to ensure that the future Capital Programme reports include initial implementation date for the project, e.g. point approved at Capital and Growth Board, so that the Board can see the start date and help focus on the difficulties of delivering the Capital Programme.

54. Performance Report 2025/26 - Quarter 3

This item was deferred due to an error in publishing the full performance information.

55. Torre Abbey Business Plan

The Leader of the Council, Councillor David Thomas presented the submitted report which provided an update of the Torre Abbey Business Plan and responded to questions together with the Head of Culture and Events, Phil Black and Director of Pride in Place, Alan Denby.

Members asked questions in respect of the following:

- Was the chapel now open, and if not, what remaining work was required and what was the timeline for completion?
- Why was the café still failing to generate profit, and what structural or operational constraints prevent it from becoming financially viable?
- How much revenue do events (e.g. the Christmas market/Winterfest) actually generate, and were these events contributing enough to justify continued investment?
- Were current event spaces being fully utilised, or were there opportunities to expand community events, cultural programmes, or partnerships?
- Was the Napoleonic history of the Abbey and wider Bay being adequately promoted, and could a stronger heritage narrative attract more visitors and income?
- Was the Friends of Torre Abbey group now active, and what role will they play in supporting events, heritage activities or volunteer coordination?
- How was Torre Abbey being marketed as a wedding venue, and was the marketing approach effective in converting enquiries to bookings?
- Could additional Abbey spaces (e.g. Spanish Barn, undercroft or Palm House) be made more usable year-round, and what investment would be required?
- What benchmarking data exists to illustrate whether Torre Abbey could ever break even, considering visitor numbers, secondary spend, and event income?

- What percentage of target visitors was Torre Abbey trying to capture, and how will this be monitored within the 2026–2030 Business Plan?
- What were the long-term plans to reduce subsidy requirements for Torre Abbey, and what scenarios exist for financial sustainability?
- How does Torre Abbey integrate with the wider Destination Management Plan, including heritage trails, walking routes (e.g. Monk's Walk), and connections across the Bay?

The following responses were provided:

- No, the chapel is not yet open, and more work was required. The Team was focusing on the New Beginnings project, and progress had been slowed by staff absence on site. A Funding bid was likely later this summer.
- The reasons the café was still unprofitable include:
 - public sector employment costs (salaries, pensions, overheads) making it significantly more expensive than privately-run cafés;
 - successful café operations typically rely on couples or small owners who do not draw formal wages; and
 - similar issues were seen with Cockington Court café.Therefore, the public sector cannot run cafés profitably.
- Events like Winterfest have been held (two weekends). They help with footfall but:
 - income data was not detailed in the agenda;
 - several events do not translate into significant revenue (e.g. Bay of Lights raised profile but did not produce income and negatively affected weddings)
 - Event spaces were not being fully utilised. Members noted opportunities to:
 - attract more community events;
 - increase heritage-themed activities;
 - enhance links to wider Bay heritage stories (Napoleonic);
 - use the Spanish Barn as a year-round venue once heated; and
 - review how Torre Abbey integrates with the Destination Management Plan (due March).
- The Napoleonic history and wider heritage were currently underplayed. Officers agreed this should be expanded within the 2026–2030 Business Plan, as the historic narrative (including 800+ years of Abbey history) was a strategic opportunity for tourism, education, and events.
- The Friends of Torre Abbey group had paused activities due to discussions around charitable status, but will now be reactivated to support:
 - volunteer activity;
 - heritage events; and
 - community engagement.
- The Team works with the Council's weddings service to market weddings, including:
 - attendance at wedding fairs;
 - information made available online;
 - promotional brochures; and

- Wedding bookings have been affected in previous years by clashes with events (e.g. Bay of Lights).
- The following spaces could be utilised more:
 - the undercroft;
 - the Palm House; and
 - the Spanish Barn.
- Improvements such as heating the Spanish Barn could turn it into a 12-month venue, supporting more events and weddings.
- Members noted the lack of numerical data and benchmarking. Torre Abbey has always been said that it will never break even, but a proper financial model was required to confirm this. Officers recognised the need to provide:
 - footfall data;
 - projections;
 - secondary spend figures; and
 - financial scenarios.
- Visitor targets and monitoring had not yet been defined. Visitor key performance indicators (KPIs) will be shaped by:
 - the Destination Management Plan (due March);
 - the “New Beginnings” project; and
 - revised business plan for 2026–2030.
- Current figures: 16,000 paying visitors, 26,000 total footfall.
- Will Torre Abbey will always require a subsidy. Officers will develop options showing:
 - operational efficiency improvements;
 - income generation (events, weddings, exhibitions);
 - heritage-based programming; and
 - improved retail and catering secondary.
- Officers confirmed Torre Abbey will link into the Destination Management Plan through:
 - English Riviera Walking Tours;
 - Monk’s Walk;
 - town-wide heritage interpretation; and
 - Bay-wide partnerships.
- The new DMP (draft early March) will help define visitor markets, messaging, and year-round opportunities.

Resolved (unanimously):

1. that the Cabinet Member Cabinet Member for Tourism Culture & Events & Corporate Services is recommended to include the following within the 2026-2030 business plan for Torre Abbey:
 - Napoleonic links;
 - promote historical links across the whole of the bay; and
 - Monk’s walk tie into English Riviera Walking Tours;
2. that Members of the Board email Councillor Jackie Thomas any additional suggestions they have for inclusion;

3. that the Torre Abbey Business Plan 2026/2030 be presented to the Board prior to final sign off; and
4. that a written response be provided to the Board on the data on footfall and projections of footfall and what the financial business case is. What the Council is doing to mitigate requirements for any subsidy. Will it always require a subsidy and what is the Council doing to manage this.

Chair