

Record of Decisions

Implementation of the English Riviera Beach Standards

Decision Taker

Cabinet on 17 February 2026.

Decision

1. that the English Riviera Beach Standards (ERBS) be implemented as Torbay's locally owned beach quality framework, and replace the participation in the Blue Flag scheme;
2. that the ERBS would apply a two-tier recognition system (Excellence and Quality Standards) for eligible beaches, with Compliant Natural Beach designation for undeveloped sites;
3. that the operational framework and assessment criteria be approved as set out in the submitted report, including baseline thresholds, scoring methodology, and the annual review process be delegated to the Director of Pride in Place in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Pride in Place to complete any minor revisions required for the effective implementation of the ERBS; and
4. the former Blue Flag accreditation budget (£11,000) be reallocated towards practical improvements required to meet and exceed the ERBS criteria.

Reason for the Decision

The implementation of the English Riviera Beach Excellence and Quality Standards (ERBS) as Torbay's locally owned beach quality framework would replace participation in the Blue Flag scheme. The new ERBS framework would provide a more appropriate, environmentally sensitive and cost-effective approach to beach management within Torbay.

Implementation

This decision will come into force and may be implemented on 2 March 2026 unless the call-in procedure is triggered (as set out in the Standing Orders in relation to Overview and Scrutiny).

Information

Torbay's beaches were central to the area's identity, economy, health and wellbeing. They support tourism, biodiversity, recreation and community life. While the Blue Flag scheme had historically offered recognition, its increasingly prescriptive requirements no longer aligned well with Torbay's diverse coastline, sensitive marine environments and operational realities. In response, Torbay Council had developed a locally defined framework that retained high standards while allowing proportionate, place-based management. The English Riviera Beach Excellence and Quality Standards aligned closely with the strategic priorities of the English Riviera Destination Management Plan 2022 to 2030, which set out the ambition to reposition the English Riviera as a high quality, sustainable and year round coastal destination.

At the meeting Councillor Billings proposed and Councillor Jackie Thomas seconded a motion that was agreed unanimously by the Cabinet, as set out above.

Alternative Options considered and rejected at the time of the decision

The options considered were:

Option 1 – Continue with Blue Flag Accreditation:

Advantages:

- Maintains international recognition and a widely understood quality mark.
- Provides consistency with other UK coastal destinations.

Disadvantages:

- Increasingly prescriptive and operationally restrictive for Torbay's beaches.
- Requires costly infrastructure changes (buoyed zones, lifeguard patrols) incompatible with local conditions and sensitive habitats.
- Estimated cost: £72,000 initial setup + £191,000 annual pressure (lifeguards, maintenance, accreditation fees).
- Risks damaging seagrass meadows and natural character of beaches.

This option was discounted, the option was financially unsustainable, environmentally harmful, and misaligned with Torbay's strategic priorities for flexibility and local accountability.

Option 2 - Withdraw from Blue Flag without introducing a replacement standard:

Advantages:

- Immediate cost savings on accreditation and compliance.
- Removes operational restrictions.

Disadvantages:

- Loss of any formal quality assurance framework for beaches.
- Negative perception from residents, visitors, and businesses; reputational risk.
- No structured approach to maintain standards or drive improvements.

This option was discounted. This option would undermine public confidence and destination marketing, leaving beaches without a clear accountability framework.

Option 3 Implement the English Riviera Beach Standards (ERBS)

Advantages:

- Locally owned, flexible framework tailored to Torbay's coastline and environmental sensitivities.
- Aligns with the English Riviera Destination Management Plan and Torbay Local Plan.
- Delivers higher standards tailored to Torbay's local requirements, ensuring water quality, accessibility, and visitor experience improvements that reflect the area's unique coastal character. Avoids costly and unsuitable infrastructure requirements.
- Investment retained locally for practical improvements (access, signage, biodiversity).

Disadvantages:

- Requires initial stakeholder engagement and branding work.
- Loss of international Blue Flag recognition (mitigated by strong local branding and communications).

This was the preferred option as it delivered a proportionate, environmentally responsible, and cost-effective approach while maintaining high standards and supporting Torbay's strategic vision.

Is this a Key Decision?

No

Does the call-in procedure apply?

Yes

Declarations of interest (including details of any relevant dispensations issued by the Standards Committee)

None

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20 February 2026

Signed: _____ Date: _____
Leader of Torbay Council on behalf of the Cabinet