

Meeting: Overview & Scrutiny Board

Date: 6 May 2026

Wards affected: All

Report Title: Terra Firma – English Riviera Geopark Review

When does the decision need to be implemented? No decision required

Cabinet Member Contact Details: Councillor Jackie Thomas, Cabinet member for Tourism, Culture and Events

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1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1. Terra Firma is a National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) supported project intended to strengthen the long-term foundations, governance and delivery capacity of the English Riviera UNESCO Global Geopark.
- 1.2. The UNESCO designation provides international recognition, but Torbay has historically struggled to fully capitalise on it. Current arrangements are fragmented and rely heavily on goodwill and Council funding, limiting the opportunity the designation offers for Torbay.
- 1.3. The core proposal is to put in place the structure, capacity and approach required for the Geopark to function more effectively over the long term by simplifying and clarifying governance, strengthening leadership and decision-making, improving financial sustainability, and making the Geopark more accessible, relevant and useful to communities, partners and visitors.

2. Reason for Proposal and its benefits

- 2.1. Terra Firma helps deliver the Council's vision of a healthy, happy and prosperous Torbay by reinforcing Torbay's distinct identity through its internationally recognised UNESCO Global Geopark status and improving how residents and visitors experience, understand and value Torbay's unique natural environment.
- 2.2. By strengthening governance and leadership, the project reduces reliance on informal arrangements and individual goodwill and creates a more resilient organisation able to plan, deliver and demonstrate impact—particularly important given likely pressures on Council capacity and funding.
- 2.3. Terra Firma places strong emphasis on engagement, interpretation and access, including improved digital presence, education and interpretation strategies and targeted activity to

broaden and diversify audiences. This supports Pride in Place by strengthening intergenerational understanding of place and helping younger people feel connected to and invested in, Torbay's natural environment, supporting ambitions to develop rewarding career opportunities in the green and blue economy.

- 2.4. Terra Firma also explores how the Geopark can better support sustainable tourism, partnership working and local business development (for example through themed experiences, packaged offers and more collaborative working between partners). This has the potential to increase dwell time, spread economic benefit across the Bay and support year-round activity rather than seasonal peaks.

3. Recommendation(s) / Proposed Decision

- 3.1. Overview & Scrutiny Board is invited to note the report and offer recommendations to Cabinet for sharing with the English Riviera Geopark Organisation.

4. Appendices

None

5. Background Documents

None

Supporting Information

6. Introduction

- 6.1. Terra Firma responds to longstanding recognition that the Geopark's arrangements are too fragmented and reliant on informal goodwill and Council support, limiting Torbay's ability to secure the full value of its UNESCO designation.
- 6.2. The project's core focus is organisational resilience: putting in place the structure, capacity and approach required for effective long-term operation. This includes simplifying and clarifying governance, strengthening leadership and decision-making, improving financial sustainability and shifting the organisation towards clear delivery and impact.
- 6.3. A central element is the retention of ERGO Ltd as the Geopark's host entity, alongside work to transition it to a Community Interest Company (CIC) model, ensuring that Geopark opportunities are delivered by a dedicated team rather than one Council employee and voluntary partners. In parallel, Terra Firma proposes a refresh of the Geopark Management Group (GMG) with clearer remit and accountability and stronger links to performance and evaluation.
- 6.4. Terra Firma is funded primarily through an NLHF grant of approximately £250,000 running through to 2027. The papers indicate an anticipated steady-state cost of around £70–75k per annum for core coordination and governance, to be met through ERGO's fundraising and diversified income, with a clear expectation-setting arrangement between the Council and ERGO.
- 6.5. The project is focused on organisational resilience and impact, developing the foundations required for the Geopark to function effectively and structured around three strands of work:
- Organisational Resilience
 - Governance and management review
 - Transition of ERGO Ltd to a more robust legal form (recommended as a Community Interest Company)
 - Board refresh and skills diversification
 - Financial modelling and income diversification
 - Engaging Communities and Audiences
 - Development of a new Geopark website and digital presence
 - Education and interpretation strategy and toolkit
 - Targeted engagement with younger people and underserved communities
 - Developing People and Partnerships
 - Fundraising and revenue resilience beyond the life of the grant

6.6. These strands are supported by commissioned specialist consultants and overseen through a Project Board and Advisory Board with the following activity currently underway:

Governance and Hosting Arrangements

- A governance review has been completed and considered by the Geopark Management Group, with a clear direction of travel agreed:
 - Retention of the Geopark as a standalone entity
 - Transition of ERGO Ltd to a Community Interest Company (CIC)
 - Recruitment of new directors to strengthen skills, diversity and leadership
 - Reform of the Geopark Management Group to improve accountability and delivery focus
- A phased timetable is in place to establish the CIC, initially appointing interim directors and then developing a recruitment strategy and governance handbook.

Project Delivery and Commissioned Work

- A series of themed working groups are actively meeting, covering:
 - Learning and education
 - Volunteering
 - Governance
 - Data and communications
- Interim reports from consultants on volunteering, learning and governance are informing the next phase of delivery, with implementation plans in development.

Digital and Engagement Activity

- The brief for a new Geopark website and user experience design has been published, with shortlisting and interviews scheduled.
- The website is intended to support multiple audiences, from residents and visitors to educators and the scientific community.

Evaluation and Learning

- An independent evaluation framework is in place, with a midpoint evaluation survey live to assess progress and inform course correction.

6.7. The intended end state is expected to be not simply a restructured organisation, but a step-change in how the Geopark functions and contributes to Torbay. Specifically, the project aims to deliver:

- A robust, credible and accountable governance model, with ERGO operating as a CIC capable of entering partnerships, generating income and employing staff.
- Clear leadership and decision-making arrangements, reducing reliance on informal structures and individual goodwill.
- A financially literate organisation with a clear understanding of the true cost and value of the Geopark, and a realistic plan to cover an estimated steady-state requirement of c.£70–75k per annum.
- A Geopark that is more visible, accessible and relevant to residents, particularly younger people, through improved interpretation, education and digital engagement.
- Stronger integration of the Geopark into Torbay's wider place narrative, visitor economy, and community life, supporting sustainable tourism and year-round economic activity

6.8. Ultimately, Terra Firma is intended to move the Geopark from being a well-regarded but under-powered designation to a confident, delivery-focused asset that actively supports Torbay's identity, economy and environmental stewardship.

6.9. While Terra Firma is externally funded and Geopark-led, the Council will be asked to provide a clear Service Level Agreement setting out expectations between the Council and ERGO/CIC, including outcomes, KPIs and review cycles. Alongside this there will be ongoing senior officer engagement to ensure the Geopark is aligned with place, regeneration, culture and environment priorities. While no automatic commitment is assumed, there is an implicit expectation that the Council will support transition to a sustainable funding model and consider its role as a strategic partner where this aligns with corporate priorities.

6.10. Terra Firma represents a positive step forward to address long-standing structural weaknesses in how the UNESCO Global Geopark operates. The project is actively progressing and is aligned with Pride in Place and wider corporate priorities such as the deepening relationship with National Lottery Heritage Fund, Arts Council England and sits alongside Agatha Christie as a globally positioned asset that supports the visitor economy. Handled well, it offers the opportunity to use the designation for tangible community, economic and place-making benefits for Torbay.

7. Options under consideration

7.1. Option 1: Do nothing. This would risk a continuation of the status quo and the under development of the UNESCO Global Geopark as a key contributor to Torbay's sense of place and improved wellbeing.

- 7.2. Option 2: Support the direction of travel, including the transition of ERGO to a CIC, and agree a clear Service Level Agreement (SLA) that sets out roles, outcomes, KPIs and review arrangements. This option supports stabilisation and improved accountability while keeping expectations explicit.

8. Financial Opportunities and Implications

- 8.1. Terra Firma is funded primarily through a National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) grant (c.£250,000) running through to 2027, which supports the programme of work including commissioned specialist support.
- 8.2. Any Council financial implications are expected to relate primarily to (a) officer time to agree and monitor a Service Level Agreement (SLA) and (b) any decisions the Council may take on ongoing support to the Geopark coordination function. No additional budget is sought or committed and any future funding proposals would need to be considered through the Council's normal decision-making and budget processes.
- 8.3. There are opportunities for the Council to work in partnership with ERGO (and the proposed CIC) to strengthen bids to external funders and to develop more resilient income streams. Potential routes include sponsorship, commissioned activity, philanthropic support, trading/earned income linked to visitor experiences, and collaboration with wider place-based programmes (while ensuring any arrangements are legally compliant and represent value for money).

9. Legal Implications

- 9.1. Legal advice may be required to review the proposed SLA.

10. Engagement and Consultation

- 10.1. Terra Firma has involved the development of themed working groups, co-ordinated by externally funded consultants and including a wide range of local stakeholders and interest groups. Alongside the working groups, an Education & Interpretation Strategy with Enabling Toolkit, focusing on youth and underserved communities is coming to the end of a pilot engagement phase, prior to refinement and implementation.
- 10.2. Throughout the Terra Firma project to date, suggestions and recommendations have been shared with the Geopark Management Group, for feedback and consideration.

11. Procurement Implications

- 11.1. Should the Council be required to procure goods or services for ERGO the commercial services team will be involved to ensure proper process is followed.

12. Protecting our naturally inspiring Bay and tackling Climate Change

- 12.1 Terra Firma supports delivery of the Council's priority to protect our naturally inspiring Bay and tackle climate change by strengthening the Geopark's capacity to champion Torbay's globally significant geodiversity, landscape and coastal environment. The programme's focus on engagement, education and interpretation (including improved digital content) will help residents and visitors better understand climate and nature impacts and encourage

low-impact behaviours. Work to develop sustainable tourism offers and partnership working provides an opportunity to promote greener travel choices, reduce seasonality pressures and manage visitor impacts on sensitive sites.

13. Associated Risks

13.1. Key risks arising from the Terra Firma programme include:

- Failure to secure diversified income streams could lead to renewed pressure on the Council for ongoing support.
- Without a clear Service Level Agreement (SLA), there is a risk of blurred accountability between the Council and the Geopark, particularly given the Council's role as administrator rather than owner.
- As the accountable body for the UNESCO designation locally, any under-performance or governance failure would reflect on the Council's reputation regardless of formal arrangements.

14. Equality Impact Assessment

Protected characteristics under the Equality Act and groups with increased vulnerability	Data and insight	Equality considerations (including any adverse impacts)	Mitigation activities	Responsible department and timeframe for implementing mitigation activities
Age	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 18% of Torbay residents are aged under 18 years old. • 55% of Torbay residents are aged between 18 to 64 years old. • 27% of Torbay residents are aged 65 and older. 	The project includes targeted engagement activity to broaden and diversify audiences, including work with younger people through the Education & Interpretation Strategy and digital channels.	Ensure engagement and volunteering opportunities are designed to be accessible and age-appropriate (e.g., family-friendly activities, safeguarding where required) and that communications use a mix of channels to reach different age groups, including schools/colleges and older residents.	ERGO / Geopark CIC with Torbay Council
Carers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At the time of the 2021 census there were 14,900 unpaid carers in Torbay. • 5,185 of these carers provided 50 hours or more of care. 	No adverse impacts are anticipated.		

Care experienced	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> As of January 2026, there were 277 former care experienced young people aged 18-24 in Torbay. 	The programme has identified care-experienced young people within its target audience for youth engagement. There is potential for positive impact through confidence, skills development, volunteering and pathways into green/blue economy opportunities. No adverse impacts are anticipated.	Co-design opportunities with youth services and partners; ensure safeguarding, trauma-informed practice and clear support routes; provide low-cost/no-cost participation options and travel/access information.	ERGO / Geopark CIC with Torbay Council
Disability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In the 2021 Census, 23.9% of Torbay residents answered that their day-to-day activities were limited a little or a lot by a physical or mental health condition or illness. 	Without careful design, some Geopark content, events and site-based activities could be less accessible for disabled people due to physical access constraints at outdoor locations, sensory/cognitive barriers in interpretation materials, or digital exclusion. The programme's emphasis on improved digital presence and interpretation provides an opportunity to enhance accessibility and inclusion.	Apply inclusive design to web and digital content; provide accessible formats on request; ensure events consider step-free access, seating, quiet space and clear wayfinding where practicable; signpost accessible routes/sites; involve disability groups in testing materials and experiences.	ERGO / Geopark CIC with Torbay Council
Gender reassignment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In the 2021 Census, 0.4% of Torbay's community answered that their gender identity was not the same as their sex registered at birth. 	No adverse impacts are anticipated		

Marriage and civil partnership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Of those Torbay residents aged 16 and over at the time of 2021 Census, 44.2% of people were married or in a registered civil partnership. 	No adverse impacts are anticipated.		
Pregnancy and maternity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Between 2013 and 2024, the rate of live births (as a proportion of females aged 15 to 44) has been slightly but significantly higher in Torbay (average of 56.0 per 1,000) than the Southwest (53.4) and broadly in line with England (56.3). For the period 2022 to 2024, rates in Torbay (44.6) have been significantly below England (50.0). 	No adverse impacts are anticipated		
Race	<p>In the 2021 Census, 96.1% of Torbay residents described their ethnicity as the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1.6% as Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh 0.3% as Black, Black British, Black Welsh, Caribbean or African 1.5% as being of Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups 96.1% as White 0.4% described their ethnicity another way. 	The programme aims to broaden and diversify audiences, including through targeted engagement with underserved communities.	Work with community partners to co-design and promote activity; use inclusive language and imagery.	ERGO / Geopark CIC with Torbay Council

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Black, Asian and minoritised ethnic communities are more likely to live in areas of Torbay classified as being amongst the 20% most deprived areas in England. 			
Religion and belief	<p>The 2021 Census showed that the residents in Torbay identify their religion and/or belief as the following;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 48.5% are Christian 0.4% are Buddhist 0.2% are Hindu 0.6% are Muslim Less than 0.1% are Sikh 0.1% are Jewish 0.7% have another religion 43.2% have no religion 6.3% did not answer 	No adverse impacts are anticipated.		
Sex	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 51.3% of Torbay's population are female. 48.7% of Torbay's population are male. 	No adverse impacts are anticipated.		
Sexual orientation	<p>In the 2021 Census, residents described their sexuality as follows;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 89% as Straight or Heterosexual 1.7% as Gay or Lesbian 1.1% as Bisexual 0.1% as Pansexual 	No adverse impacts are anticipated.		

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 0.1% described their sexuality another way • 7.4% of people didn't answer the question 			
Armed Forces Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In 2021, 3.8% of residents in England reported that they had previously served in the UK armed forces. • In Torbay, 5.9% of the population have previously served in the UK armed forces. 	No adverse impacts are anticipated.		
Additional considerations				
Socio-economic impacts (Including impacts on child poverty and deprivation)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Torbay is ranked as the 39th most deprived upper tier local authority in England in the Index of Multiple Deprivation 2025. 			
Public Health impacts (Including impacts on the general health of the population of Torbay)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For the five-year period 2020 to 2024, data shows there is a 6-year life expectancy gap between males who live in Torbay's least and most deprived areas and, a 3-year gap for females. 			
Human Rights impacts				
Child Friendly				

15. Cumulative Council Impact

15.1. None

16. Cumulative Community Impacts

16.1. None