

Report title: English Riviera UNESCO Global Geopark – Terra Firma

Report to:	Overview & Scrutiny Board
Date:	09 th September 2026
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Wards affected:	All

1. Summary of Report:

Terra Firma Project: Governance, Impact and Financial Sustainability of the English Riviera UNESCO Global Geopark is a two-year project funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund. This report provides the autumn update requested by the Overview and Scrutiny Board following its consideration of the predecessor report in May 2026. It summarises progress since that report and sets out the proposed next steps to strengthen governance and accountability, improve clarity of impact and value, and place the English Riviera Geopark on a more sustainable financial footing while retaining Torbay Council's strategic role and support.

2. Recommendations and Proposed Decision:

Since the May report the review has determined the preferred approach to supporting the English Riviera Geopark Community Interest Company (ERGCIC) is through the Torbay Heritage Place programme.

This will see, subject to the relevant decision-making and funding approval processes, support of up to £250,000 provided to establish a three-year fixed-term Strategic Delivery role to support the transition to the new ERGCIC.

The Board is asked to provide its views on the governance, impact and financial sustainability considerations set out in this report, recognising that any formal decision on funding will be taken through the appropriate executive decision-making route.

3. Reasons for Recommendations/Proposed Decision:

The Terra Firma project was commissioned to review the Geopark's governance arrangements, impact framework, and financial sustainability, and to make recommendations to secure the long-term stewardship of the internationally significant UNESCO designation.

The Geopark faces several challenges:

- **Declining Grants & Government Funding** - grant funding for environment, heritage, and place based work is increasingly competitive and short term. This limits predictable income and requires stronger strategic positioning.
- **Pressure on Local Authority Budgets** - Torbay Council faces sustained financial pressure and potential impacts from Local Government Reorganisation. Core funding is not guaranteed long term, making diversification essential.
- **Limited Internal Capacity** - the Geopark currently lacks dedicated fundraising, project development or commercial capacity, restricting its ability to bring in new income or pursue major opportunities.
- **Low Public Visibility** – across Torbay, awareness of the Geopark is modest, limiting opportunities for sponsorship, visitor giving, or earned income tied to brand strength
- **Values Aligned Income** - all income activities must align with UNESCO values, avoid commercial misuse of the UNESCO brand, and reinforce educational, environmental and community benefit.

The Geopark faces a 'capacity trap': it requires more resources to grow income, however, it needs more income to build capacity. The proposed way forward as set out in section 2 is intended to provide enabling support that helps the Geopark build its own capacity, diversify income and reduce its historic reliance on Council support over time. Successful delivery will ensure that the Geopark has a strong and sustainable future, where it can become self-sustainable and income generating.

The English Riviera Geopark Community Interest Company (ERGCIC) was established in June 2026. The Terra Firma project, which is supporting the new governance structure, runs until mid-2027. The current intention is for ERGO Ltd to remain in place until the end of the project, after which ERGCIC would take over the stewardship of the UNESCO designation and coordinate delivery across the whole Geopark.

The proposed ERGCIC Strategic Delivery role would focus on partner coordination, project development, fundraising and commercial development. It would be employed by ERGCIC and established as a fixed-term role, with no commitment to ongoing Council funding beyond the approved period and a further decision is taken. The purpose of the role is to provide the capacity required to unlock growth, improve delivery and reduce reliance on Council funding over time.

A new English Riviera UNESCO Global Geopark website is currently under construction, as part of this project, and is expected to launch later this year.

4. Background and Context:

The English Riviera UNESCO Global Geopark has held international geopark status since 2007 and UNESCO Global Geopark status since 2015. The designation requires robust governance, active community benefit, and regular international revalidation. It is an internationally recognised designation covering the whole of Torbay. It delivers cultural, educational, environmental and economic benefits for residents and visitors but operates in an increasingly constrained funding and governance environment.

The Geopark is a critical cultural and environmental heritage asset for Torbay, contributing to Pride in Place, education, sustainable tourism, health and wellbeing, and our international profile, under the UNESCO banner.

The Terra Firma review (April 2026) identified that while delivery is strong, the current Geopark arrangements:

- place excessive reliance on Council capacity,
- lack a fully operational independent body able to hold funds and contracts and be more agile than the Council can be, and,
- do not maximise the designation's potential for partnership working, income generation, and impact measurement.

5. Alternative Options Considered:

The alternative options were set out for Overview & Scrutiny in the May 2026 report.

6. Contribution to Council Priorities:

The proposals in this report support Torbay Council's vision of a healthy, happy and prosperous Torbay by strengthening community identity and pride in place, supporting sustainable growth in the visitor economy, enabling more effective partnership working, and protecting an internationally significant natural and cultural heritage asset at relatively low cost to the Council.

The proposals align with Council priorities by being: i) resident-focused and inclusive, ii) evidenced through a clear Impact Framework, iii) asset-based, making more of Torbay's UNESCO designation and aligning with a key theme in the Torbay Heritage Strategy 'caring for our historic assets', iv) the proposals detailed here are efficient, enabling, and partnership-led

7. Consultation and Engagement:

The Terra Firma project includes several working groups that involve residents and representatives of local organisations focused on: governance, education & skills development

(lifelong learning), and data and communications. These groups ensure that local residents are fully engaged and consulted about the direction the Geopark will take over the next 3-5 years.

8. Implications:

Financial Implications:

To implement the recommendations and reap the benefits of a more sustainable Geopark that reduces the financial commitment on the Council over time, will take around £70k per year for FYs 2026/27, 2027/28, 2028/29. The Torbay Heritage Place programme steering group will prepare a bid for the Torbay Heritage Place programme for the cost of resourcing the Strategic Director role. The value of this role lies in the ERGCIC being more agile than the Council can be and in benefitting from the Strategic Director having accountability and oversight of how the Geopark is marketed internationally and keyed in to other projects and organisations across Torbay.

Legal Implications:

LGR could have legal implications if the boundary of the Geopark needs to be redrawn

Corporate Parenting/Children and Young People:

Better linking the Geopark opportunities with child-friendly activities, local schools, colleges, and career pathways is part of the strategic forward plan

Associated Risks, Risk Tolerance Level and Mitigations:

Full risks are set out below:

Risk	Risk score before mitigations (likelihood x impact)	Mitigations	Risk Score after mitigations (likelihood x impact)	Risk tolerance
LGR could pose a risk that the boundaries of the UNESCO Geopark must change, resulting in the need to re-apply for the designation		Completing the UNESCO revalidation on time; addressing outstanding recommendations from previous revalidation.		
Failure to secure external funding for the Strategic Director role		Discussing the Torbay Heritage Place bid with colleagues from Heritage Fund, so that they recognise how this supports the wider priorities for Torbay Heritage Place.		
Blurred lines of accountability between the ERGCIC and the Council		The Council is the UNESCO accountable body where ERGCIC will be responsible for driving business forward – any perceived performance issues by ERGCIC could reflect badly upon the Council. Need to be explicitly clear of the relationships in		

		marketing & public facing communications.		
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Contributions to tackling climate change or achieving carbon neutrality:

The English Riviera UNESCO Global Geopark regulations encourage environmental stewardship, conservation, protection, and sustainability across all areas of business

Social Value Considerations:

Opportunities for improved health, wellbeing, reduced isolation, physical activity, active travel in line with the Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP).

Procurement Implications:

The ERGCIC Strategic Lead role would be advertised externally in line with our policies.

Other Implications:

9. Equalities 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	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 development of ERGCIC improves capacity for 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 - family-friendly activities, with safeguarding where required. Ensure that communications use a mix of channels to reach different age groups, including schools/colleges and older residents.	Council and ERGCIC
Carers	At the time of the 2021 census there were	No adverse impacts		

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
	14,900 unpaid carers in Torbay. 5,185 of these carers provided 50 hours or more of care.			
Care experienced	As of January 2026, there were 277 former care experienced young people aged 18-24 in Torbay.	No adverse impacts		
Disability	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.	Some Geopark content, events and site-based activities could be less accessible for physically disabled people due to 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; 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.	ERGCIC and Torbay Council

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
Gender reassignment	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 impact		
Marriage and civil partnership	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 impact		
Pregnancy and maternity	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	No adverse impact		

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
	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).			
Race	In the 2021 Census, 96.1% of Torbay residents described their ethnicity as the following: 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. - Black, Asian and minoritised ethnic communities are more	No adverse impact		

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
	likely to live in areas of Torbay classified as being amongst the 20% most deprived areas in England.			
Religion and belief	The 2021 Census showed that the residents in Torbay identify their religion and/or belief as the following; • 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 impact		
Sex	• 51.3% of Torbay's population are female. • 48.7% of Torbay's population are male.	No adverse impact		

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
Sexual orientation	In the 2021 Census, residents described their sexuality as follows; • 89% as Straight or Heterosexual • 1.7% as Gay or Lesbian • 1.1% as Bisexual • 0.1% as Pansexual • 0.1% described their sexuality another way • 7.4% of people didn't answer the question	No adverse impact		
Armed Forces Community	• 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 impact		
Additional considerations:				

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
Socio-economic impacts (Including impacts on child poverty and deprivation)	Torbay is ranked as the 39th most deprived upper tier local authority in England in the Index of Multiple Deprivation 2025.	No adverse impact		
Public Health impacts (Including impacts on the general health of the population of Torbay)	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.	As many Geopark locations involve physical activity e.g. walking, cycling, swimming, and spending time in nature, the impacts of the Geopark on Public Health are entirely positive, promoting better mental well-being and physical health.		ERGCIC and Torbay Council
Human Rights impacts		No adverse impacts		
Child Friendly (Children's Rights Impact Assessment (CRIA) considerations): <i>Summarise the CRIA considerations for this proposal, including which groups of children and young people may be affected (e.g., care experienced)</i>		Positively child-friendly owing to children and young people being central to the audience development and educational packages.		ERGCIC and Torbay Council

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
<i>children/young people, care leavers, children with SEND), how their rights and best interests have been considered, and any engagement undertaken with children/young people and/or their representatives. Set out any mitigations to address identified adverse impacts and how these will be monitored.</i>				

10. Cumulative Council Impact:

The proposal has a limited direct impact on Council capacity because the proposed role would sit within ERGCIC rather than the Council. The principal Council impact is the need to maintain clear strategic oversight of the UNESCO designation, ensure appropriate governance and reporting arrangements, and consider any funding proposal through the relevant decision-making route.

11. Cumulative Community Impact:

The proposal is expected to have a positive cumulative community impact by strengthening the Geopark's ability to work with residents, schools, community groups, businesses and environmental partners. Improved coordination should help broaden participation, increase visibility of the designation, and support projects that connect heritage, nature, education, wellbeing and the visitor economy.

12. Monitoring and Evaluation:

Progress will be monitored through the Terra Firma project governance arrangements and, subject to approval of the proposed support, through reporting by ERGCIC on delivery, income generation, partnership development, public engagement and progress towards a more sustainable operating model

Appendices:

Background Documents:

Terra Firma – English Riviera Geopark review – report to Overview & Scrutiny Board 6th May 2026