

# Housing and Community Services Scrutiny Panel

**Wednesday 10 December 2025**

## **PRESENT:**

Councillor Gilmour, in the Chair.

Councillor Coker, Vice Chair.

Councillors Allison, Penrose, Poyser, Ricketts (Substitute for Councillor P.Nicholson), Simpson (Substitute for Councillor Dingle), and Stevens.

Apologies for absence: Councillors Cuddihee, Dingle, Finn, Freeman and P.Nicholson.

Also in attendance: Councillor Tom Briars-Delve (Cabinet Member for Environment and Climate Change), Councillor Sue Dann (Cabinet Member for Customer Experience, Sport, Leisure & HR, and OD), Councillor Chirs Penberthy (Cabinet Member for Housing, Cooperative Development and Communities), Kat Deeney (Head of Environmental Planning), David Draffan (Service Director for Economic Development), Glenda Favor-Ankersen (Head of Elections and Democratic Support), Rhys Jones (Chief Executive, PAL), Caroline Marr (Senior Policy Advisor), Professor Steve Maddern (Director of Public Health), Andy Sharp (Interim Service Director, Street Scene and Waste), Ann Thorp (Facilities Manager, Soft Services), Gary Walbridge (Strategic Director for Adults, Health and Communities), Elliot Wearne-Gould (Principle Democratic, Governance and Scrutiny Officer), and Oliver Woodhams (Head of Finance).

The meeting started at 1.00 pm and finished at 3.20 pm.

*Note: At a future meeting, the Panel will consider the accuracy of these draft minutes, so they may be subject to change. Please check the minutes of that meeting to confirm whether these minutes have been amended.*

## **Appointment of a Vice-Chair**

Due to the Chair's submission of apologies, Councillor Gilmour (Vice-Chair) Chaired this particular meeting.

The Panel agreed to appoint Councillor Coker as Vice-Chair for this particular meeting.

## 18. **Declarations of Interest**

There was one declaration of interest made:

<b>Minute</b>	<b>Councillor</b>	<b>Interest</b>	<b>Description</b>
21 – Plymouth Active Leisure	Poyser	Personal	Employee of YMCA

19. **Minutes**

The Panel agreed the minutes of the meeting held on 22 October 2025 as a correct record.

20. **Chair's Urgent Business**

There were no items of Chair's Urgent Business.

21. **Plymouth Active Leisure (PAL)**

Councillor Sue Dann (Cabinet Member for Customer Experience, Sport, Leisure and HR and OD) introduced the PAL Contract Extension report and discussed:

- a) This was Councillor Dann's final report to Scrutiny as a Cabinet Member, and she was pleased to present it for pre-decision scrutiny;
- b) Plymouth Active Leisure Ltd (PAL) had been established in 2022 in extremely challenging circumstances during the COVID-19 pandemic, opening with reduced visitor numbers at the same time as rapidly rising utility costs and inflation, which made the first year of operation particularly difficult;
- c) Councillor Dann had worked closely with Rhys Jones (Chief Executive of PAL) since 2023, undertaking significant work to stabilise and improve performance across the service;
- d) Despite a challenging start, PAL's current management arrangements had delivered a significant impact, with key performance highlights including:
  - i. memberships increasing by approximately 48%;
  - ii. growth in the swim school of around 31%;
  - iii. an increase in income of approximately 29%;
- e) The social impact of PAL's activities, measured using a recognised national social value tool, was estimated at around £11.7 million of added social impact for Plymouth's communities;
- f) The Life Centre alone welcomed over one million visits a year, with more than 50,000 unique users. PAL also operated other key facilities including the city's pools and outdoor leisure sites, demonstrating its reach beyond a single venue;
- g) In addition to sport and physical activity, PAL contributed to other Council priorities including tailored offers for looked after children and care leavers, and delivery of health-related programmes such as new "Active Referral" schemes for residents with long-term health conditions;

- h) PAL was due to receive national recognition from Swim England, with a memorandum of understanding due to be signed at the Life Centre, evidencing the quality and reputation of its swimming and aquatic offer;
- i) PAL formed part of the Council's "family of companies", which allowed a more commercial, flexible approach while retaining strategic control and alignment with corporate priorities;
- j) A new Chair had been appointed to the PAL Board in 2024 and, since that appointment, a full strategic review of PAL had been undertaken to address early issues, ensure financial sustainability, and position PAL to grow and move into its "next phase";
- k) The Strategic Plan underpinned PAL's contribution to "Thrive Active", including the ambition to make Plymouth the most physically active coastal city, and to support residents to live happier, healthier and more active lives;
- l) The Strategic Plan was built around three core pillars:
  - i. increasing participation and engagement;
  - ii. improving health and wellbeing;
  - iii. inspiring people in Plymouth, including supporting the development of talented swimmers and divers and running facilities to a consistently high standard;
- m) Sustainability was central to PAL's ambitions, both in terms of financial resilience and environmental responsibility, including work to reduce carbon emissions from facilities;
- n) PAL had developed an ambitious 20-year financial plan which would involve total investment of approximately £200 million over the lifetime of the contract. The scale of commitment was a key reason for bringing the proposal to scrutiny;
- o) Under the proposed business plan, the Council's annual management fee would reduce significantly over time, from around £700,000 per year to approximately £50,000 per year. By the end of the plan, the arrangement was forecast to generate a budget surplus;
- p) Due to the way PAL was structured, a proportion of the surpluses generated would be reinvested directly back into the Life Centre and other facilities to meet ongoing and historic maintenance needs, recognising that running large, complex leisure facilities, particularly pools, required substantial and sustained investment;
- q) PAL had taken out start-up loans at the point of its creation, and servicing and repaying these loans was built into the longer-term financial package and business plan presented to the Panel;

- r) To enable the scale of investment and to provide certainty, PAL was seeking a new 20-year contract with appropriate break clauses for both parties, allowing the development of a long-term investment plan while ensuring that both PAL and the Council could review progress and, if necessary, reconsider the arrangements at defined points;
- s) Council officers, led by the Director of Public Health and the Leisure Partnership Manager, had undertaken detailed due diligence on the proposals, supported by external consultants, and the detail of this work was set out in the written report;
- t) As part of the proposed extension, there would be a detailed suite of annual Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), an annual business planning process, and strengthened governance arrangements, including a proposal for an annual report back to scrutiny;
- u) In Councillor Dann's view, setting up PAL had been the right decision. Over the last three years the company had become more successful each year, with ambitious plans that aligned strongly with the city's "Active Thrive" ambitions and the wider public health agenda;
- v) The proposals would place PAL on a long-term, sustainable footing, enabling it to be creative and innovative and to further develop links with the National Marine Park and the wider creative and leisure sectors in the city;
- w) From the Council's perspective, the proposal represented a financially beneficial option which would reduce liabilities over time, create the potential for future profit, and deliver significant social and health outcomes for residents, supported by a committed Chief Executive and a strengthened Board.

Oliver Woodhams (Head of Finance and Deputy Section 151 Officer) provided an overview of the financial modelling and risks and discussed:

- x) The existing £1.6 million working capital loan from the Council reflected the difficult post-COVID start-up period and remained owed by PAL;
- y) Although PAL was on a recovery trajectory, detailed financial modelling indicated that further working capital support of between approximately £0.7 million and £0.9 million would be required to maintain adequate working capital and provide an appropriate "cushion" to enable PAL to trade efficiently and effectively;
- z) The financial model underpinning the proposals was prudent and there was a strong track record of recent improvement alongside additional growth opportunities that had not yet been built into the model, representing potential "upside risk";

- aa) External consultants had independently reviewed and challenged the Council's assumptions and concluded that they were reasonable;
- bb) There was inevitably financial risk associated with the decision and it would be wrong to present it as risk-free, but further due diligence, sensitivity analysis and modelling would be carried out in advance of the Cabinet decision in February;
- cc) Governance measures, including financial KPIs, annual business planning, and strengthened oversight, were being developed to monitor ongoing performance and risk.

Rhys Jones (Chief Executive, Plymouth Active Leisure) addressed the Panel and discussed:

- dd) A detailed set of draft KPIs had been developed, in collaboration with the Director of Public Health, and would shortly be considered by the PAL Board;
- ee) The KPIs covered expected areas such as attendance, demographics, age profiles, financial performance and social outcomes, and were designed to be output and outcome-focused, reportable and of clear value to the Council;
- ff) The new Strategic Plan was explicitly Plymouth-focused, aligned with the Plymouth Plan and wider city priorities, and had been developed following engagement with Cabinet Members and officers across portfolios;
- gg) Governance arrangements within PAL had been significantly strengthened over the previous 12 months, including refreshed Board membership, the creation of relevant sub-groups and enhanced self-scrutiny, making the organisation "night and day" compared to its early years;
- hh) Rhys Jones viewed the current position as "ground zero" in terms of having the right governance, leadership, and plan in place, and that PAL now needed the opportunity to deliver what should have been achievable from day one;
- ii) The company had dealt with three extremely challenging years characterised by unprecedented increases in utility costs and above-inflation rises in the National Minimum Wage which could not have been predicted when PAL was created in 2021;
- jj) Despite these challenges, PAL had stabilised operations and developed a plan to repay historic debts and deliver additional benefits for residents;
- kk) There was substantial untapped potential in areas such as the swim school and diving programme, which were not yet back to their pre-COVID levels, giving confidence that additional growth was achievable;

- ll) A recent gym refurbishment at the Life Centre, funded through Council borrowing, had already out-performed its original business case, providing further evidence that PAL could deliver solid, realistic business plans;
- mm) Given the existing footfall (over one million visits a year to the Life Centre alone) and the breadth of new opportunities, Rhys was confident that PAL could deliver the growth and income required under the proposed plan.

Professor Steve Maddern (Director of Public Health) contributed on governance and contractual arrangements and discussed:

- nn) The proposed break clauses were a central feature of the contract extension and were designed to give assurance both to the Council and to PAL;
- oo) The first substantive break clause was proposed at around five years, allowing the Council to review whether the additional working capital support had delivered the expected improvements and to reconsider the contract if necessary;
- pp) Further break clauses would be built in over the term of the contract, providing additional checkpoints and flexibility;
- qq) The KPIs were scheduled to be finalised and agreed by the PAL Board within the month and were significantly more robust than those in place 12–14 months previously.

David Draffan (Service Director for Economic Development) added:

- rr) As Chair of the PAL Board, he had legal duties under the Companies Act and that his fiduciary responsibility was to PAL rather than directly to the Council, which required him to be satisfied as to the financial resilience of the business before supporting the proposals;
- ss) The business was fundamentally sound but required two key things: sufficient working capital to address start-up and post-COVID pressures, and investment to deliver a growth plan capable of servicing its debts over the life of the contract;
- tt) Approximately £1.9 million in start-up costs was entirely predictable for a new business of this nature and the proposals would put PAL on a stable footing to manage these costs and future investment;
- uu) The plan would lever approximately £200 million over the term of the contract, reduce the management fee from around £700,000 to £50,000 within the first 10 years, and generate an estimated £4 million surplus by the end of the plan;
- vv) The plan would provide a £250,000 per annum facilities management budget and a further £4 million capital contribution to maintain and improve facilities,

while fully dealing with all loans and generating approximately £4.7 million of new income;

- ww) Extensive Board development, including three away days and a detailed governance review, had taken place. The Board collectively “owned” the vision and financial plan;
- xx) The culture within PAL was positive, with a high-quality Chief Executive, new appointments in finance and business roles, and strong staff commitment;

In response to questions, the Panel discussed:

- yy) Concerns about financial fragility, higher-than-anticipated costs and lower-than-expected savings, and whether the proposals were sufficiently robust rather than simply reflecting an aspiration for PAL to succeed;
- zz) The scale of the additional working capital request (up to approximately £0.9 million) on top of the existing £1.6 million loan, and the evidence that PAL would be able to repay both existing and new loans over the life of the contract;
- aaa) The importance of clearly defined, measurable KPIs and whether these had been fully drafted and agreed, noting that Members wished to see KPIs covering participation, demographics, health outcomes, financial performance and social value aligned to key city strategies such as the Plymouth Plan;
- bbb) The national context in which many leisure facilities and operators were under severe financial pressure and, in some cases, closing, and whether PAL’s assumptions about growth and surplus generation were realistic in that environment;
- ccc) PAL already benefitted from an exceptional asset base and very strong footfall at the Life Centre and other venues, which placed it in a different position to some national comparators, but ongoing monitoring of risk remained essential;
- ddd) The full range of strategic options that had been considered, including:
  - i. ceasing the service, which was deemed wholly unacceptable given over one million annual visits and the significant social and health impacts of the leisure offer;
  - ii. bringing the service fully in-house, which had been modelled but was assessed as significantly more expensive due to business rates, staff terms and pension liabilities, and would place a specialist commercial operation wholly within the Council’s structures;
  - iii. outsourcing to a national leisure operator, which had been tried previously and failed to align with Plymouth’s strategic objectives,

focusing on “facility management” rather than the broader health and community outcomes now sought;

- eee) Retaining PAL as a Teckal company within the Council’s family of companies allowed the Council to retain strategic control and influence over the business plan and health objectives, whilst benefitting from the tax, regulatory and commercial freedoms of a company model;
- fff) Whether protections existed for local community pools and facilities in the event that PAL did not meet income targets, and the reassurance that decisions on closing facilities were reserved matters for the Council as shareholder rather than decisions for the PAL Board alone;
- ggg) Examples such as Plympton Pool, which now operated profitably and Mount Wise Pools, which remaining free to local residents. This evidenced PAL’s commitment to maintaining a broad community offer, with no current intention to close facilities;
- hhh) Decisions on specific capital investment schemes would be subject to separate approval through the Council’s capital programme governance;
- iii) Financial modelling indicated that over the medium to long term, business growth would be sufficient to repay existing and new loans, reduce the management fee, and still generate surpluses that could be reinvested in facilities or released as savings to the Council;
- jjj) Recognition by officers that there was financial risk associated with the preferred option, balanced against the risks of alternative options such as “doing nothing”, not extending the contract, or withdrawing support, which could leave PAL vulnerable, threaten key assets and increase the likelihood of PAL defaulting on existing loans;
- kkk) The governance framework for PAL, including:
  - i. the presence of a public health consultant on the Board;
  - ii. the appointment of two experienced non-executive directors with substantial local authority leisure and commercial fitness sector backgrounds;
  - iii. the voluntary nature of Board roles;
  - iv. the exploration of additional mechanisms such as a finance sub-committee and enhanced performance reporting;
- lll) The perceived complexity of the Council’s relationship with PAL, and the implications of PAL being a Teckal company;
- mmm) Nervousness regarding the length of the proposed extension and the scale of the financial commitment, alongside strong support for the ambition to

provide high-quality, accessible leisure services and to maintain the Life Centre and other facilities as major assets for the city;

- nnn) The value of ongoing scrutiny in providing assurance, with members expressing a desire for regular, structured oversight of KPIs, financial performance, delivery against break-clause expectations and progress on loan repayment.

The Panel agreed:

- I. To review, comment and endorse option 4.5 (as set out in the report) to retain the services of PAL and in doing so:
  - i. To provide further working capital support to PAL, and to agree revised repayment terms for existing loans;
  - ii. To endorse an extension to the existing 10-year contract with PAL (current end of term March 2032), with a break-clause at the point where all working capital loans are estimated to be repaid, noting that the revised contract will contain a number of performance indicators and other provisions to mitigate the Council's financial risk and ensure the delivery of outcomes;
  - iii. Note that to underpin the growth in income required to repay working capital loans, PAL will bring forward a number of capital investment projects which will be subject to approval through the Council's Capital Programme procedures and governance;
2. To recommend that a Plymouth Active Leisure performance update be presented to the Housing and Community Services Scrutiny Panel prior to significant contractual milestones for the duration of the extended contract, in order to ensure robust monitoring of KPIs, financial and contract performance (including progress against loan repayments, management fee reductions and any break-clause triggers).

## 22. **Commemorations and Celebrations PCC Policy**

Chris Penberthy (Cabinet Member for Housing, Cooperative Development, and Communities), Caroline Marr (Senior Policy Advisor) and Glenda Favor-Ankersen (Head of Elections and Democratic Services) introduced the Commemorations and Celebrations Policy and discussed:

- a) Plymouth City Council had a long-established civic tradition of marking special and significant days each year through civic events, lighting Council-owned buildings and flying flags, as well as opening books of condolence and organising moments of silence;
- b) The Council's existing flags protocol dated back to 2016, had never been a published document and largely repeated central Government guidance, providing no clear, transparent process for officers to follow when requests

were made, and no indication for members of the public about how, where or when to make requests;

- c) In recent years, the Council had experienced an increase in ad-hoc requests from residents and communities to light buildings or fly a flag in connection with particular illnesses, conditions, or traumatic experiences, often made at very short notice, which was disruptive and inconsistent;
- d) The current informal position meant that requests were often made directly to Cabinet Members on the basis of personal acquaintance. The intention of the new Policy was to democratise the process so that residents could submit requests via a clear public route rather than through personal contacts;
- e) The Council owned a significant number of flagpoles across its corporate estate, sitting under different service areas, budgets, and management arrangements. The draft Policy was the first of two papers intended to support wider asset management work by providing consistency in how flagpoles were used, regardless of which part of the Council managed them;
- f) The Policy was built on two core principles:
  - i. Political neutrality – the Council, as a corporate body, would not use flags or lighting to express support for particular political parties or political causes;
  - ii. Inclusivity and fostering community cohesion – ensuring that commemorations and celebrations supported, rather than undermined, relationships between communities in the city;
- g) The Policy summarised key points from Government guidance and relevant planning legislation, including the Town and Country Planning Regulations 2007, and clearly set out which flags were on the Government’s ‘pre-approved’ list so that both officers and the public understood the planning constraints;
- h) The draft Policy established locally agreed criteria for requests to:
  - i. fly a guest flag;
  - ii. light a Council-owned building (predominantly Smeaton’s Tower at this stage);
  - iii. hold a civic moment of silence;
  - iv. open a book of condolence;
- i) The Policy explicitly recognised “exceptional circumstances” in which the Council might reasonably wish to act at shorter notice, for example, to celebrate Plymouth Argyle reaching a significant stage in a cup competition,

or to mark the achievements of Olympians. Discretion was reserved for flag-flying and lighting outside normal notice periods, so that “special” moments that mattered to the city could still be marked appropriately;

- j) The policy was designed to ensure a clear, accessible and transparent process (including an online request route) for members of the public to request the flying of guest flags, particularly outside the Guildhall, and the lighting of Smeaton’s Tower, as the current arrangements were not open or widely understood;
- k) Pre-decision scrutiny was being undertaken prior to Cabinet’s consideration to enable the draft to be discussed in public, and to enable feedback from Members and the wider community to be reflected in the final version.

In response to questions, the Panel discussed:

- l) The absence of the flag of St Andrew from the list of Government-approved flags in the draft documentation, and the need to confirm whether this was an omission in the draft or reflected the current Government list;
- m) Confirmation that the Equalities Calendar was accessible under the equalities section of the Council’s website, and that whilst the Council often marked those days in a variety of ways, inclusion of events on the calendar did not guarantee that a building would be lit or a flag flown, as each request would still need to be considered against the Policy’s criteria;
- n) Clarification that an annex to the report set out a detailed list of all flagpoles owned by the Council, specifying which flags would ordinarily be flown at which locations, and on which occasions, so that practice was consistent and easy to understand;
- o) Perceptions among some residents that they might no longer be allowed to fly a flag “in their back garden”. Reassurance was provided that:
  - i. the Policy conferred no additional powers, controls, resources or enforcement capability on the Council in respect of flags flown by residents or businesses on their own premises;
  - ii. people remained free to fly flags on their property, provided they complied with existing planning rules and national guidance, which had not changed;
- p) Planning records, which indicated that 111 planning applications had been received incorporating the word “flag”, predominantly related to applications for flags on business premises or temporary flags for events;
- q) The importance of distinguishing between:
  - i. the Council’s internal process for considering requests to use Council-owned assets (buildings, flagpoles and civic functions);

- ii. the wholly separate national planning regime that applied to flags and advertisements on private land and buildings;
- r) Suggestions from Members that the section of the Policy dealing with residents' "liberty to fly flags" should be strengthened, providing clear signposting so that householders wishing to fly their national flag on a domestic flagpole could easily find out how to do so safely, legally and considerately, without inadvertently breaching planning rules or causing neighbour disputes;
- s) Assurance from officers that, in light of public comments and this discussion, the final Policy and associated materials would:
- i. clearly state that planning advice would not be provided within the Policy itself;
  - ii. include prominent links, on both the introductory webpage and the online request form, to the national Planning Portal and to the Council's own planning guidance, so that residents seeking to fly flags on their own property could access the appropriate technical advice;
- t) The complexity of planning law around flags, including detailed exemptions and the consequent risk of the Council inadvertently giving incorrect advice if it tried to paraphrase planning regulations within the Policy;
- u) Potential tensions between the Policy's principles of ensuring that all communities felt represented and respected, and the principle of avoiding commemorations that could be seen as exclusive or inflammatory. It was explained that the Policy would enable officers the time and framework to consider the broader impact of a proposed commemoration and to avoid rushed or reactive decisions that might unintentionally cause harm, by:
- i. consulting relevant community groups;
  - ii. engaging with the Council's own community safety and equalities teams;
  - iii. liaising, where appropriate, with partners such as the police;
- v) Clarification that the Council could, and did take enforcement action against advertising and signage (such as over-sized billboards) which breached planning rules, and that the Policy would reaffirm the Council's right to take action where appropriate, including in respect of flags or markings placed on Council-owned assets without consent;
- w) Confirmation that decisions about flags on street lighting columns sat under a different Cabinet portfolio (Highways) and were outside the scope of this Policy, which focused on civic and corporate estate assets;

- x) Suggestions that, where feasible, the Council should explore coordinating lighting arrangements for Smeaton's Tower with the Tamar Bridge, given historic requests for both landmarks to be lit in the same colours for particular causes or celebrations;
- y) Acknowledgement that online feedback and social media comments about the draft Policy had been mixed, with some remarks being inflammatory but others raising helpful points of clarification. These comments would be reviewed alongside scrutiny feedback when refining the final draft;
- z) Recognition across the Panel that many residents' primary association with the Policy would, in practice, be the lighting of Smeaton's Tower, given its popularity and visibility, and that the proposed open and transparent process for considering lighting requests would therefore be particularly important.

**Action:** Officers to verify whether the flag of St Andrew is correctly included on the Government's list of flags that may be flown without express consent, and to amend the draft Policy and appendices as necessary to ensure accuracy;

**Action:** Officers to clarify, within the final Policy and supporting documents, the relationship between the Council's Equalities Calendar and the Commemorations and Celebrations Policy, making clear that inclusion on the Equalities Calendar does not in itself guarantee that a building will be lit or a flag flown, but that such days may be considered against the Policy's criteria;

**Action:** Officers to liaise with the Tamar Bridge and Torpoint Ferry undertaking to explore opportunities to coordinate lighting requests for Smeaton's Tower and the Tamar Bridge where appropriate, and to reflect any operational limitations or differences in public-facing information;

**Action:** Officers to strengthen the clarity and accessibility of public guidance on flag-flying and lighting on private property.

The Panel agreed:

- I. To review and provide feedback on the draft Policy.

## 23. **Public Toilets Strategy Review**

Councillor Chris Penberthy (Cabinet Member for Housing, Cooperative Development and Communities) introduced the Public Toilets in Plymouth Briefing Report and discussed:

- a) Councillor Penberthy had been asked to undertake two related pieces of work: to review the Council's public toilet strategy and to develop an asset management strategy, noting that public toilets formed part of the wider corporate estate;
- b) As work progressed, it had become clear that the most useful immediate product was not a detailed stand-alone public toilet strategy for the existing

estate, but a clear set of principles to guide decisions about all toilets owned by the Council that were open to the public, whether or not they were classified as “public toilets”;

- c) These principles would be used to inform future planning and development work, including the next Joint Local Plan (JLP), proposals for a new town in the city centre, and other development opportunities, by setting out what the Council meant in practical terms when it said new developments should provide appropriate public toilet facilities and where those should be located;
- d) The briefing note contained high-level information about the current estate but was focused on establishing the key principles that officers and Members could apply consistently when planning, managing and investing in the corporate estate, rather than prescribing detailed changes to individual toilets at this stage;
- e) Having a clear, agreed framework of principles would make it easier to plan maintenance, prioritise investment and advise Members transparently on options and trade-offs;
- f) That the same set of principles was intended to be used across three major areas of work: the Strategic Asset Management Plan, the preparation of the new Local Plan, and work on the “new town” proposals in the city centre, so that decisions about toilets were consistent across planning, regeneration and estate management;
- g) That public toilets were a non-statutory service, funded from the same capital budgets that were required for other critical assets such as sea defences, corporate buildings, operational depots, scheduled monuments, memorials, and other office buildings, and therefore needed to be considered alongside over 1,000 other corporate assets;
- h) The principles proposed included ensuring public toilet provision at key transport interchanges, in areas of high visitor and tourist footfall such as the waterfront and Barbican, and in heavily used green and blue spaces, in order to support the city’s economy, tourism offer and residents’ health and wellbeing;
- i) Footfall data had been mapped against Council-managed public toilets, toilets available to the public in Council buildings and toilets provided by partners’
- j) Where future development created new areas of demand, the principles were intended to support the Council in seeking contributions from developers (for example, securing toilet provision as part of new schemes) rather than relying solely on limited Council capital budgets;
- k) The briefing note emphasised the role of partnership working, including with statutory partners and with organisations whose existing toilets already served as de facto public provision, and that the Council did not need to duplicate such facilities;

- l) While there had been a historic focus on “what to close and how” when budgets were under pressure, Councillor Penberthy was proud that, to date, no public toilets had been closed during his tenure, and that the proposed principles (including a stronger emphasis on key transport hubs) had already resulted in locations such as the St. Budeaux toilets being removed from previous closure lists;
- m) This work was being taken forward as part of the wider Strategic Asset Management Plan, and the intention was to bring the emerging asset management strategy, including the public toilets element, back to scrutiny in stages for comment and review;

Ann Thorp (Facilities Manager, Soft Services) added:

- n) The approach to repairs and maintenance of public toilets in the past had been largely ad-hoc and had not always taken into account wider considerations such as future changes in the local area, other nearby publicly accessible toilets, or anticipated changes to how residents and visitors would use the city;
- o) By embedding the new principles into the Strategic Asset Management Plan, officers would be able to review Council-managed public toilets alongside other publicly accessible toilets (for example, in libraries, museums, leisure centres and partner-managed sites), with a focus on value for money, lifetime cost and fitness for purpose;
- p) Examples such as the former public toilets next to the Museum and Library (now effectively replaced by public access to toilets at The Box) illustrated how, in some locations, the Council could reduce the number of small standalone toilet buildings without reducing overall access to facilities, provided that alternative provision was well publicised and genuinely accessible;
- q) There was ongoing work with partners to collate and publish information on all toilets that were accessible to the public, whether Council-managed or partner-provided, on the Council’s website. The intention was for the “Public Toilets” section of the website to evolve into a comprehensive directory of “toilets that are publicly accessible”;
- r) Once partners had formally agreed to be included, officers would be able to progress improved physical signposting and other communications so that residents and visitors could find facilities quickly when needed.

In response to questions, the Panel discussed:

- a) Frustrations among Members and residents about public toilet condition and availability, and the perception that, despite previous reviews and discussions, there had been little visible improvement on the ground over many years;

- b) Reassurance that while the report focused on principles, those principles were explicitly aimed at supporting the case for keeping toilets open and improving them over time, rather than planning closures because the Council could not afford to maintain them;
- c) Capital budgets for toilets were not ring-fenced, but combined with the budget for the entire corporate estate, meaning that investment decisions had to balance needs across sea defences, operational depots, civic buildings, scheduled monuments, memorials and other Council assets as well as public toilets;
- d) Feedback from Members that a clearer, more transparent framework could help the public understand how individual toilets were assessed, including criteria, scoring, and how decisions were reached about refurbishment, replacement or closure;
- e) Clarification that by applying the principles, the Council could phase investment in a fair and transparent way, and could also identify opportunities to integrate toilets into larger capital schemes;
- f) The example of Central Park, where public toilets, a café and the Life Centre all sat in close proximity, raising questions about whether this remained the most efficient configuration for providing public toilets and whether a more integrated approach might better serve users and reduce costs;
- g) Recognition that some Councillors and members of the public felt uncomfortable walking into buildings such as The Box purely to use the toilet without making a purchase, and that any strategy relying on “community toilet” or partner-based provision would need to address these cultural and perception issues through clear communication and signposting;
- h) The role of key transport hubs in the new principles, with Members noting that this had already influenced operational decisions (for example, the retention of toilets at St Budeaux as a key transport interchange), and welcoming the shift away from closure-driven lists towards a more proactive approach to where toilets were most needed;
- i) The timetable for the Strategic Asset Management Plan, with Members seeking assurance that scrutiny would be involved before final decisions were taken. It was confirmed that specific asset groups would be brought to scrutiny in stages as principles and options were developed;
- j) The importance of partnership working and existing examples where partner toilets already provided effective public coverage, such as Derriford Hospital and the toilets provided at Tamar Bridge and by the Torpoint Ferry, and the opportunity to replicate that model elsewhere in the city to broaden the reach of a non-statutory service as far as possible.

**Action:** Officers to continue working with partners to compile and publish comprehensive information on all toilets that were publicly accessible in the city

(including partner-provided facilities) on the Council's website, and to explore improved physical signposting once partner participation had been confirmed.

The Panel agreed:

1. To note the Public Toilets Briefing Report;
2. To note that detailed proposals regarding individual public toilet sites would be brought back to scrutiny as part of the wider Strategic Asset Management Strategy, rather than through a separate, stand-alone public toilet strategy.

#### 24. **Central Park Ponds**

Councillor Tom Briars-Delve (Cabinet Member for Environment and Climate Change) introduced the Central Park Ponds Update Report and discussed:

- a) This was the third scrutiny update on the project within the year;
- b) The July 2025 report had included a bullet-pointed list of works scheduled for the summer, and each of those commitments had now been delivered;
- c) Soil movement from Barn Park Sports Pitch to Reservoir Field had been completed alongside levelling of the sports pitch, installation of pitch drainage, and levelling of Reservoir Field;
- d) Grass seeding across the affected areas had been undertaken and was now completed;
- e) Planting on the northern pond remained underway in accordance with the seasonal requirements for tree planting, with winter being the optimum planting period. Tree-planting works would continue over the coming month;
- f) Additional works beyond those originally listed had also been completed, including end-of-season maintenance at South Pond and improvements to fencing around Reservoir Field;
- g) The previous six months had been "incredibly productive" following earlier challenges, and officers were now providing the regular updates that scrutiny had previously requested.

In response to questions, the Panel discussed:

- h) Recognition of visible improvement on site, and welcomed confirmation of the completed phases of work;
- i) Recognition of residents concerns and frustrations. It was confirmed that the only remaining elements were tree planting, minor fencing adjustments and final asset checks, and that most delays related to protecting newly seeded ground. Temporary fencing remained in one section due to fresh grass seeding;

- j) Councillor Briars-Delve emphasised that removing the fencing prematurely would have resulted in trampling, mud, and the need for reseeded the following year;
- k) While no exact removal date could be given due to weather dependency, fencing would be removed as soon as the ground was stable enough to withstand footfall;
- l) Some fencing sections had partially fallen, giving the impression that fencing had been abandoned. It was confirmed that staff from the Green Communities Team, who were regularly on-site, would continue monitoring fencing with project team oversight during landscaping activity;
- m) Members were encouraged to report collapsed fencing as casework so it could be corrected immediately;
- n) Members sought reflections on learning from the project to inform future parks schemes. Councillor Briars-Delve highlighted the impact of climate change on rainfall intensity and frequency, referencing that August 2025 had seen the second-highest daily rainfall in Plymouth's recorded history;
- o) Sustainable urban drainage systems (SuDS) would need to feature more prominently in future projects across Council green spaces and in partnership schemes with organisations such as Plymouth Community Homes;
- p) Lessons from Central Park were already being applied to the Trefusis Park scheme in Lipson Vale, another SuDS-driven project affecting up to 150 properties, where improved communications, school visits, public engagement, monthly updates and contract management processes had directly drawn on Central Park experience;
- q) Members welcomed the positive progress at Trefusis Park and recognised the importance of resilience-based planning given predicted increases in rainfall.

**Action:** Officers to continue monitoring and maintaining temporary fencing and to respond promptly to reports of fallen sections.

The Panel agreed:

- I. To note the update on the Central Park Ponds Project.

## 25. **Work Programme**

Elliot Wearne-Gould (Democratic Advisor) introduced the Work Programme and discussed:

- a) The Panel's next meeting was scheduled for 11 February 2026;

- b) A draft theme had been identified covering three linked areas: antisocial behaviour, community cohesion and community safety;
- c) Members were invited to contribute further items to the work programme.

The Panel agreed to note the work programme.

26. **Action Log**

The Panel agreed to note the progress of the Tracking Decisions Log.