

Scrutiny Management Board

Wednesday 24 September 2025

PRESENT:

Councillor Coker, in the Chair.

Councillor Finn, Vice Chair.

Councillors Allison, Blight, Freeman, Gilmour, Holloway, Murphy, Ricketts and Steel.

Also in attendance: Councillor Penberthy (Cabinet Member for Housing, Cooperative Development and Communities), Councillor Mark Lowry (Cabinet Member for Finance), Ian Trisk-Grove (Service Director for Finance), Paul Stevens (Senior Performance Advisor) and Elliot Wearne-Gould (Democratic Advisor).

The meeting started at 5.00 pm and finished at 6.56 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.

14. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest made.

15. Minutes

The Board agreed the minutes of the meeting held on 23 July 2025 as a correct record.

16. Chair's Urgent Business

There were no items of Chair's Urgent Business.

17. Select Committee Review Plan

Elliot Wearne-Gould (Democratic Advisor) introduced the Select Committee Review Plan and discussed:

- a) The review stemmed from concerns raised at the 27 March 2025 meeting regarding the conduct of food delivery cyclists in the city centre and associated pedestrian safety issues;
- b) The Board had agreed four recommendations, including the establishment of a Select Committee to explore the matter further with input from city centre businesses, delivery riders, agencies and partners;

- c) Work had progressed since March to scope the review, including engagement with potential witnesses and experts, led by Councillor John Stevens (Chair of Scrutiny Management Board 2024/25);
- d) Supporting actions had been completed, including a letter to the Secretary of State for Transport, with members copied into the response;
- e) The draft Select Committee Plan was presented for approval, subject to amendments;
- f) The purpose of the Select Committee was to review evidence and respond to public concerns regarding pedestrian safety, particularly relating to food delivery riders, bike legality, and the impact on disabled and vulnerable groups;
- g) The review aimed to develop understanding across multi-agency partners and restore balance in the city centre;
- h) Proposed membership was based on the proportionality of the Scrutiny Management Board;
- i) The draft plan included a comprehensive briefing paper and identified stakeholders including members of the public, delivery riders, delivery agencies, city centre businesses, the City Centre Company, Devon and Cornwall Police, relevant council officers and cabinet members;
- j) A provisional date of 26 November 2025 was set for the Select Committee meeting, subject to availability of witnesses;
- k) Recommendations from the Select Committee would be made to Cabinet, with the option for further meetings if required.

In response to questions, the Panel discussed:

- a) Potential to expand the scope of the review to include concerns about illegal working practices among delivery riders, including account sharing and underage riders;
- b) Potential to expand the geographical scope of the review beyond the city centre to include other known hotspots such as Tavistock Road and other busy food delivery locations;
- c) A proposal to utilise a smaller, focused Select Committee of five or six members to ensure effective engagement;
- d) The expansion of Select Committee witnesses to include the Plymouth Cycling Club, Bikeability and delivery platforms such as Uber Eats and Deliveroo;

Action: Officers to update the Select Committee Review Plan following suggested amendments and circulate to members.

The Panel agreed:

1. To endorse the Select Committee Review Plan, subject to amendments discussed;
2. To delegate to the Chair and Vice Chair to determine the membership size of the Select Committee.

18. **Finance Monitoring Report Month Three**

Councillor Mark Lowry (Cabinet Member for Finance) and Ian Trisk-Grove (Service Director for Finance) introduced the Finance Monitoring Report, Month Three, and discussed:

- a) The report covered Quarter 1 (April–June 2025) and showed an adverse variance of £2.609 million against the approved revenue budget, reflecting emerging pressures across key services;
- b) The pressures were primarily in children’s services, special educational needs, homelessness, and adult social care, which together consumed approximately 85% of the core revenue budget;
- c) Children’s services faced a pressure of £418,000 due to an increase in independent sector placements, exceeding budget assumptions by two placements;
- d) An additional adverse variance of £1.557 million was attributed to unexpected survey requirements in facilities management services, linked to the council’s asset register and the need for comprehensive surveys of the corporate estate;
- e) The council had banked £4.7 million in savings to date, representing 43% of the £11 million savings target for the financial year;
- f) The capital programme had increased by £38.2 million in Quarter 1, primarily to fund upgrades to the Civic Centre, the National Marine Park, additional SEND placements, and housing projects;
- g) The majority of the additional capital funding was grant-based and did not form part of corporate borrowing.

In response to questions, the Panel discussed:

- a) Concerns around the transparency of asset disposals. Councillor Lowry explained the surplus property declaration process and offered to investigate specific cases if details were provided;

- b) Clarification that the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) backstop had been extended by two years, with further guidance expected in a forthcoming white paper towards the end of the year;
- c) Pressures in Customer and Corporate Services included the delayed opening of the Guildhall which had resulted in a loss of expected revenue income from weddings and events, as well as additional surveys and investment undertaken in the asset base;
- d) Vacancy savings targets in legal and finance had been determined to be unachievable due to service demand. Recruitment had been necessary to meet operational needs;
- e) Vacancy savings and agency staffing costs in children's services were clarified. The department was being restructured to reduce dependency on agency staff and improve continuity of care;
- f) Projects were underway to reduce external placements for children including property sourcing and recruitment of service managers, though progress had been slower than desired;
- g) Concerns about temporary accommodation pressures linked to the Renters Reform Bill. It was confirmed that there had been an increase in Section 21 evictions, likely due to market anticipation and fear of upcoming changes;
- h) Concerns regarding the Council's gross debt levels. It was explained that while headline figures appeared high, much of the debt was offset by grant-funding schemes and investments which did not show in the mandated reporting requirements. The Council operated within CIPFA guidelines, and utilised the advice of external advisors.

Action: Officers to provide a breakdown of Private Finance Initiative (PFI) and finance leases in future reporting to the Audit and Governance Committee;

Action: Officers to provide further details on vacancy levels and vacancy targets for Council departments;

Action: Officers to provide further information relating to the increase in Section 21 evictions and resulting trends in temporary accommodation pressures;

Action: To schedule further scrutiny of legal and finance department vacancies and staffing demand to the work programme following commencement of a business case.

The Panel agreed:

- I. To note the Finance Monitoring Report.

Change to the order of business

The Board agreed to bring forward item 8, Risk Management Report.

19. Risk Management Monitoring Report Q1 2025-26

Councillor Mark Lowry (Cabinet Member for Finance) introduced the Risk Monitoring Report and discussed:

- a) A new risk had been added to reflect the separation of adult social care and children's social care risks due to their significance;
- b) Overall, risks were stable.

In response to questions, the Panel discussed:

- a) The cost escalation of the Civic Centre redevelopment. Councillor Lowry confirmed the project was fully resourced and ready to proceed, with commitments from Homes England and the City College;

The Panel agreed:

- 1. To note the Risk Monitoring Report;
- 2. To add the Civic Centre redevelopment to the work programme for future scrutiny.

20. Corporate Plan Monitoring Report 2024-25 Q4

Councillor Chris Penberthy (Cabinet Member for Housing, Cooperative Development and Communities) introduced the Corporate Plan Performance Report and discussed:

- a) The current report format was based on an inherited structure that attempted to combine performance and corporate plan reporting, which was no longer fit for purpose;
- b) A new performance framework was being developed in collaboration with senior officers;
- c) The new framework would include balanced scorecards by directorate, long-term quantifiable metrics, and alignment with national requirements such as the forthcoming Local Government Outcomes Framework;
- d) The framework would support management decisions, political leadership, scrutiny, and public accountability;
- e) Automation and AI tools (e.g. Power BI) were being explored to improve data collection, reporting, and reduce manual workload;

- f) The framework would be piloted in housing and rolled out across other directorates, with varying levels of readiness.

Paul Stevens (Senior Performance Advisor) added:

- g) Power BI was being used to automate reporting and reduce reliance on spreadsheets;
- h) AI tools were being trialled to assist with narrative generation and data analysis, subject to human verification.

In response to questions, the Panel discussed:

- a) Questions were raised regarding the ambition and pace of implementation. It was confirmed that cultural change was in progress and that the new leadership team was supportive of the direction of travel;
- b) Concerns were expressed about the reliance on artificial intelligence and the potential for data to be disregarded due to pre-existing beliefs. The importance of focusing on outcomes and using data effectively was emphasised;
- c) Clarification was sought on the definition of affordable housing. It was explained that various models existed and that detailed breakdowns had been reported to the relevant scrutiny panel;
- d) A request was made for student housing figures to be reported separately in future updates. It was noted that housing completions were reported in accordance with national standards, which required the inclusion of student housing as per guidance from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG).

Action: Officers to provide a detailed breakdown of new housing figures by type of accommodation.

The Panel agreed:

- I. To note the Corporate Plan Performance Report.

21. **Leader's Forward Plan**

The Board agreed to note the Leader's Forward Plan.

22. **Update from Committee Chairs and Work Programmes**

Committee Chairs provided updates on their respective scrutiny panels and discussed:

- a) There had only been one scrutiny panel meeting since the last Board meeting;

- b) The Natural Infrastructure and Growth Scrutiny Committee had held a successful meeting themed around 'skills' and had undertaken a site-visit to the Plymouth Dockyard. A further tour of Tinside Lido was scheduled;
- c) The Health and Adult Social Care Scrutiny Panel had scheduled an item on 'outcomes' following readmission concerns. The Panel would also be scrutinising winter pressures planning;
- d) The Children, Young People and Families Panel would be scrutinising 'absences' at the next meeting, following concerns relating to absences at secondary SEN schools.

23. **Work Programme**

The Board were invited to add items to the work programme and discussed:

- a) Following conversations today, the Civic Centre Redevelopment would be added to the work programme;
- b) The next Board meeting had a substantial agenda. To enable scrutiny of other pertinent issues, several of the 'standing items' would be taken as 'read'.

The Board agreed to note the Work Programme.

24. **Action Log**

The Board agreed to note the progress of the action log.

25. **Exempt Business**

There were no items of exempt business.

26. **Part II Minutes**

The Board agreed the Part 2 Minutes of the meeting held on 23 July 2025 as a correct record.

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