

Cabinet

Monday 9 February 2026

PRESENT:

Councillor Evans OBE, in the Chair.

Councillor Laing, Vice Chair.

Councillors Aspinall, Briars-Delve, Cresswell, Lowry, Penberthy, Stephens and Taylor.

Apologies for absence: Councillors Haydon

The meeting started at 2.02 pm and finished at 4.41 pm.

Note: The full discussion can be viewed on the webcast of the City Council meeting at www.plymouth.gov.uk. At a future meeting, the Council 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.

86. **Declarations of Interest**

There was one declaration of interest made:

Minute	Councillor	Reason	Interest
93	Councillor Mary Aspinall	Family Member employed at the Life Centre.	Personal

87. **Minutes**

Cabinet agreed the minutes of the meeting held on 12 January 2026 as a correct record.

88. **Questions from the Public**

There were two questions from members of the public:

Question	With public toilet provision under review, can the council confirm whether the well-used toilets at Freedom Fields Park will remain open, and explain what public consultation has taken place with local residents and park users?
Response	<p>Thank you for your question.</p> <p>Councillor Aspinall has been speaking to me on behalf of local residents about the toilets in Freedom Fields Park for a number of months and I would like to thank her for her engagement with me.</p> <p>Your premise that public toilet provision is under review is incorrect.</p>

	<p>As I recently reported to the Housing and Communities Scrutiny Committee, the Council has a commitment to the continued provision of public toilets. At that meeting I made it clear that there are no plans to close any public toilets and we discussed the key principles for provision.</p> <p>Councillors Aspinall, Dann and Cuddihee are in agreement with me that the Freedom Fields Park toilets should remain open. As there are no changes proposed nor any plans to close these toilets, we have not undertaken any consultation.</p>
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Question	<p>With recent sea front storm damage should the Gormley statue be moved? Moving to Belvedere vicinity will allow better access for all and make it more prominent and protect it more, it's currently hidden, exposed, rusting and liable to be washed away.</p>
Response	<p>Thank you for your question.</p> <p>The pier was significantly strengthened in this area, with the statue's foundations drilled into bed rock. This was anticipating future weather conditions and was a significant investment at the time. This investment was match-funded with the support of Arts Council England funding for public art.</p> <p>There was a selection process and Sir Antony Gormley was selected as the artist. He chose the location.</p>

89. **Chair's Urgent Business**

There were no items of Chair's urgent business.

90. **Budget Scrutiny Recommendations**

Councillor Coker (Chair of Scrutiny Management Board) introduced the Budget Scrutiny Recommendations report and discussed:

- a) The Scrutiny Management Board held Budget Scrutiny sessions on 21, 22 and 28 January 2026 and undertook a detailed review of the Draft 2026/27 Budget, Cabinet Member risks and supporting financial information. The Board engaged with Cabinet Members and senior officers to assess the robustness of assumptions and risk management across portfolios;
- b) The Board recognised the significant financial pressures affecting local government nationally, noting that demand-led pressures continued to exceed available funding and that Plymouth's circumstances reflected challenges facing councils across the country;

- c) A challenge-based approach was adopted in which Cabinet Members provided written briefings identifying their top three budget risks within each portfolio. This approach enabled Scrutiny to focus on issues Cabinet Members themselves flagged as high priorities. This method had worked effectively and should continue in future years;
- d) Five structured scrutiny sessions were held across three days, arranged by Cabinet portfolio. In each session, Cabinet Members presented their briefings, officers provided technical and financial evidence, and Scrutiny Members questioned underlying assumptions and tested the strength of proposed mitigations;
- e) Scrutiny Members made 15 informal requests for further information during the sessions. Officers provided responses in time for the wash-up meeting on 28 January 2026, which enabled the Board to agree its final recommendations based on complete information;
- f) A total of 19 recommendations were produced, all of which were agreed unanimously by the Scrutiny Management Board. Councillor Coker emphasised that each recommendation related either to a challenge identified by Cabinet in their own briefings or to risks probed by Scrutiny during questioning;
- g) The recommendations covered a range of topics including children's social care, the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) deficit, agency staffing costs, transport and connectivity, partnership working and financial oversight, with a focus on supporting budget delivery and improving risk management;
- h) Many of the recommendations could be implemented through existing reporting and monitoring mechanisms;
- i) Councillor Coker recorded the Board's thanks to Cabinet Members for engaging fully with the scrutiny process and to officers for responding quickly to information requests.

Councillor Evans OBE (Leader of the Council) responded to the report and discussed:

- j) Appreciation was expressed to Councillor Coker and the Scrutiny Management Board for carrying out thorough cross-party scrutiny and for highlighting how effective scrutiny added value to the wider budget process;
- k) The Leader stated that the revised format for budget scrutiny in 2026/27 had strengthened the quality of the process. He noted that Scrutiny's request for Cabinet Members to identify their three key worries had helped portfolio holders focus their own thinking and promoted more efficient scrutiny of the relevant risks;
- l) The Leader observed that the clearer information flow between Cabinet and Scrutiny had made this year's scrutiny stronger than in previous years. He thanked Councillor Coker for initiating this improved approach;

- m) The Leader outlined the next steps, confirming that Cabinet would first note the Scrutiny report and would then consider a separate item on the agenda containing the Cabinet's formal responses to each of the 19 recommendations.

The Cabinet agreed:

- 1. To note the Budget Scrutiny Recommendations report of the Scrutiny Management Board arising from the Budget Scrutiny sessions held on 21, 22 and 28 January 2026;
- 2. To record its thanks to the Scrutiny Management Board, Cabinet Members and officers for their engagement in the 2026/27 Budget Scrutiny process.

91. **Cabinet Response to Budget Scrutiny Recommendations**

Councillor Evans OBE (Leader of the Council) introduced the Cabinet Response to Budget Scrutiny Recommendations report and discussed:

- a) The Cabinet had considered the 19 recommendations arising from the Scrutiny Management Board's Budget Scrutiny sessions held on 21, 22 and 28 January 2026;
- b) The Leader confirmed that the Cabinet was minded to accept the majority of recommendations, noting that only one presented a difficulty;
- c) The Leader invited Cabinet Members to comment on recommendations relevant to their portfolios;
- d) Recommendation 1: Fostering Recruitment Effectiveness was accepted;
- e) Recommendation 2: Children's Social Care Market Regulation Advocacy was accepted. Councillor Laing (Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Children's Social Care, Culture and Communications) welcomed the reference to exploring profit capping or windfall taxation on high-charging providers and highlighted that withdrawal of local authorities from the provider market over many years had resulted in councils being placed in a vulnerable purchaser position;
- f) Recommendation 3: DSG (Dedicated Schools Grant) Deficit was accepted. The Leader noted that Plymouth was not the only authority facing this issue and highlighted concerns about how DSG deficits might be treated in future local government reorganisation negotiations;
- g) Recommendation 4: SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) Sufficiency Strategy Review was accepted;
- h) Recommendation 5: EHCP (Educational Health and Care Plan) Language in Budget Documentation was accepted;
- i) Recommendation 6: Children's Homes Investment, Value for Money and Expansion Potential was accepted;

- j) Recommendation 7: Alternative Accommodation Models for Children in Care was rejected. Councillor Laing explained that the term alternative accommodation models was ambiguous and appeared to refer to repurposing office or municipal buildings. It was emphasised that the workstream was titled Family Homes for Plymouth Children, and that providing genuine family homes, not institutional or office-based accommodation, was essential. For this reason, the recommendation was rejected;
- k) Recommendation 8: Agency Spend Analysis was accepted;
- l) Recommendation 9: Railways and Integrated Transport Connectivity was accepted. Councillor Stephens noted that the Team Plymouth programme already included a transport strand and that work was supported by Peninsula Transport. A future briefing to the Scrutiny Management Board was welcomed;
- m) Recommendation 10: Early Scrutiny Engagement on Major Projects was accepted. Councillor Lowry stated that early scrutiny of large, highly visible projects, such as the Civic Centre, was beneficial, and welcomed engagement between Scrutiny and Cabinet;
- n) Recommendation 11: Corporate Asset Management Strategy was accepted. Councillor Penberthy clarified that the strategy would be high-level and principle-based. An accompanying action plan with timelines would follow the strategy, and Scrutiny would be engaged in the development of the action plan;
- o) Recommendation 12: NHS Integrated Care Funding Assurance was accepted. Councillor Penberthy explained that this related to fair shares funding, including allocations for community builders and disabled facilities grants, and emphasised that earlier certainty would improve planning. The Leader noted the uncertainty regarding the future configuration of ICBs and the risk of decisions being delayed by administrative issues;
- p) Recommendation 13: Customer Experience Strategy: Pre-Decision Scrutiny was accepted. Councillor Taylor expressed support for pre-decision scrutiny as part of the development of a large programme of work;
- q) Recommendation 14: Cabinet Member Risks and Mitigations was accepted. Councillor Lowry noted that risk registers were already produced regularly for Cabinet and Scrutiny. Additional detail would be provided to the Scrutiny Management Board;
- r) Recommendation 15: Further Risk Information for Budget Scrutiny was accepted. Councillor Lowry noted that risk registers were already produced regularly for Cabinet and Scrutiny. Additional detail would be provided to the Scrutiny Management Board;
- s) Recommendation 16: Food Waste Participation and Engagement Measures was 'partially accepted'. Councillor Briars-Delve explained that much of the proposed engagement activity, including door-to-door support and recycling officers, was already funded and in place as part of the Street Services restructure. Clarification was provided that while initial distribution of food-waste liners would occur,

providing ongoing free liners was not considered good value for money given alternative low-cost local availability. Ring-fencing savings for reinvestment was not deliverable at this stage, as participation levels and tonnage outcomes were not yet known;

- t) Recommendation 17: Flood Risk Management was accepted. Councillor Briars-Delve (Cabinet Member for Environment and Climate Change) clarified that extensive partnership engagement with South West Water, the Environment Agency and others was already in place. Examples included the multi-million-pound Trefusis Park scheme and the Phase 2 Integrated Urban Drainage Modelling programme. The Leader referenced anticipated growth in the city centre and the importance of mitigating increased surface-water runoff. More information would be shared with Scrutiny but much of the work was longstanding;
- u) Recommendation 18: Property Regeneration Fund Portfolio Oversight was accepted. Councillor Lowry welcomed further scrutiny involvement but noted that the portfolio contained significant commercial information. Therefore, elements would need to be considered in Part II settings to protect commercial sensitivity;
- v) Recommendation 19: Final Settlement Budget Impact reporting was accepted. The Section 151 Officer agreed to provide a written briefing to the Scrutiny Management Board upon receipt of the Final Local Government Finance Settlement. It was noted that the settlement was expected imminently, and while the provisional settlement had been received late, future years would benefit from the new three-year funding settlement structure.

Cabinet agreed:

1. To approve the responses to the Budget Scrutiny Recommendations;
2. To note its thanks to the Scrutiny Management Board for the Budget Scrutiny undertaken.

92. **Proposed Revenue and Capital Budget 2026/27**

Councillor Lowry (Cabinet Member for Finance) introduced the Proposed Revenue and Capital Budget 2026/27 report and discussed:

- a) Officers, including David Northey (Interim Service Director for Finance), Tracey Lee (Chief Executive) and Helen Slater (Assistant Head of Finance), had undertaken a significant amount of work to deliver the budget to this stage and further work would be required in the coming weeks ahead of Full Council consideration;
- b) The report set out both the revenue and capital budgets for 2026/27, including an indicative Council Tax level showing the proposed Plymouth City Council element, while confirmation of the Fire Authority precept was still awaited. Once received, this would be incorporated into the final Council Tax proposals for consideration at Full Council later in February;

- c) Budget engagement activity had been carried out with residents, the voluntary and community sector, businesses, and other stakeholders, and the report included the Capital Strategy, Treasury Management Strategy and Capital Receipts Strategy for 2026/27, together with a full schedule of proposed fees and charges and the Tamar Bridge and Torpoint Ferry budget;
- d) A three-year Local Government Finance Settlement had been secured, following sector lobbying, which provided greater financial certainty and enabled more effective medium-term planning of departmental budgets and service spending;
- e) Approximately £73 million of grants that had previously been awarded as one-off funding streams had now been consolidated into the Council's core funding, improving stability and predictability within the financial framework;
- f) The budget included additional funding for highways, including potholes, and for waste collection services to support the implementation of the new food waste collection service, as well as dedicated funding for ongoing maintenance of the Armada Way public realm scheme in response to public concerns about its long-term upkeep;
- g) An additional £25.7 million was proposed for demand-led statutory services, particularly adults' and children's social care, SEND and homelessness, reflecting continued exceptional pressure in these areas. The average annual cost per client aged 65 and over had increased for seven consecutive years, rising from around £15,000 in 2021/22 to approximately £23,000 in 2024/25, representing an increase of about 55% over that period;
- h) Homelessness pressures were highlighted, with the number of households in bed and breakfast accommodation increasing by around 15% since 2022/23, from 181 to 209 households;
- i) Home to school transport demand for children with SEND and other eligible pupils had risen by approximately 49% over five years, from 724 children to more than 1,000, and the average cost per child had increased by around 65%, from about £4,600 to £7,500 per year;
- j) Independent specialist placements for children's services had increased from 487 children to 636 over the last three years (an increase of 149) and the weekly cost of some children's care placements had risen from about £4,400 per child in 2021 to approximately £7,300 per child, equivalent to an annual cost of around £385,000 per child. This contributed to significant growth in the total children's services budget (excluding education) from around £42 million in 2021 to approximately £73 million in 2026/27;
- k) The Council could not simply accept the status quo in the face of these trends and therefore a transformation programme had been launched, as set out in Section 8.8

of the report, to address both cost and demand pressures while maintaining or improving service quality;

- l) The capital programme totalled around £320 million over the next five years, with planned capital expenditure of nearly £140 million in 2026/27 alone, representing a major programme of investment in the city's infrastructure, economy and communities;
- m) Key capital schemes included the completion of the Armada Way regeneration, commencement of the Civic Centre regeneration and associated City Centre Homes and Skills Campus, further investment in children's homes, major transport and employment schemes, leisure and recreation projects such as the National Marine Park, as well as flood protection, energy bills, nature recovery and play space improvements;
- n) Subject to Cabinet's agreement, the proposed revenue and capital budgets and associated strategies would be recommended to City Council for approval in February 2026;
- o) As the Final Local Government Finance Settlement had not been confirmed at the time of publication, an additional recommendation was included delegating authority to the Section 151 Officer, in consultation with the Leader, to reflect any technical amendments or changes arising from the final settlement in the budget submitted to Full Council.

In response to questions, the Cabinet discussed:

- p) The importance of the three-year settlement in enabling better forward planning, with the Section 151 Officer explaining that three of the five years in the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) now contained confirmed funding numbers rather than estimates, thereby providing greater stability for both Cabinet and senior management in addressing the scale of future financial challenges;
- q) While greater certainty was welcome, it also removed any residual assumption that further Government funding might plug the budget gap. The Council therefore needed to address its structural deficit over the medium term through a combination of demand management, transformation and cost reduction, particularly in high-pressure areas such as adults' and children's social care, homelessness and SEND;
- r) The transformation and prevention programmes, including work on Loving Homes for Plymouth Children, reablement in adult social care, expansion of temporary accommodation, and other initiatives already underway, which aimed to improve outcomes whilst reducing long-term costs. Further detailed reports on these programmes would be brought to Cabinet in March 2026;

- s) The Chief Executive's emphasis that every part of the Council would need to be examined, not only the biggest demand-led services, with particular focus on reducing placement costs across adults, children and homelessness, maximising income (including through the Property Regeneration Fund portfolio) and investing in early intervention and prevention to turn the curve on rising demand;
- t) The role of digital transformation and AI (Artificial Intelligence) in delivering efficiency and improving services, including the development of a cohort of digital and AI apprentices within the organisation and the need to invest in capacity and skills to enable change while frontline services remained stretched;
- u) The ongoing in-year financial controls, including restrictions to essential spend only, to minimise the drawdown from usable reserves in 2025/26 and protect the working balance. The Chief Executive stressed that drawing significantly on reserves was not sustainable and that the Council must watch every penny;
- v) The decision to utilise the Council's interest rate swap as a one-off budget measure, generating an estimated net benefit of around £10 million in 2026/27. The Section 151 Officer stressed this was a one-off measure and that reliance on one-off solutions could not continue. Any additional Government funding received through the Final Settlement should first be used to reduce this reliance;
- w) The Section 151 Officer's assessment of robustness and legality, noting that historic issues related to the capitalisation direction and outstanding accounts had been resolved, with five years of accounts now signed off. Table one relating to usable reserves showed that around one-third of usable reserves would be consumed if the Council continued to rely on one-off measures, and concluded that, subject to the transformation and cost-reduction programmes being delivered, the budget was robust and lawful;
- x) The Leader's reflection that the three-year settlement allowed the light of optimism to enter after many years of uncertainty, enabling the Council to plan for growth in population, housing and industry which, in turn, would positively affect the tax base and the medium-term financial position;
- y) The Leader's comments on the administration's growth strategy, including partnership work with Homes England and the dockyard expansion project, and the aim to rebuild an "active growth" approach where population and economic growth supported both social outcomes and the Council's revenue base;
- z) The Leader's emphasis that the theme of the budget was one of optimism, focused on creating a city of which residents could be proud, supported by projects such as Armada Way and other place-shaping investments;
- aa) The Council's renewed focus on the local environment and public realm, including the substantial additional investment in grounds maintenance and tree safety in recent

years, which had led to a reported reduction in grass-cutting complaints of around 70–80% compared with the previous year;

- bb) The decision to double the revenue budget for play maintenance so that equipment could be kept safe and enjoyable, noting the emerging multi-million pound play and public realm investment programme within the capital pipeline;
- cc) Confirmation of libraries as key community assets, with Cabinet Members and officers re-affirming the commitment not to close libraries but instead to modernise them through co-locating services, extending opening hours, utilising self-service technology and developing “one-stop shop” functions for wider council and partner services;
- dd) The development of a Future Libraries Plan that would repurpose library facilities as community hubs supporting health, wellbeing and access to council services, while recognising the strong cultural and emotional connection residents had with libraries;
- ee) Recognition of approximately £75 million of highways investment over the next five years (averaging around £15 million per year), which would support planned maintenance based on assessed need, reduce reactive works and allow residents and Members to have greater certainty about when particular roads would be addressed;
- ff) Recognition that while around 15,000 potholes and carriageway defects had been repaired over recent years, proactive, multi-year planning and modern repair techniques were essential to keep pace with usage, particularly given Plymouth’s role in providing around 116,000 jobs for the wider region and the heavy traffic volumes this generated;
- gg) Recognition that drainage responsibilities were shared with South West Water and the Environment Agency, and that effective flood risk management depended on multi-agency cooperation as well as local maintenance;
- hh) Observations that national funding formulas for highways, which often relied heavily on road length, tended not to favour urban authorities with relatively short but heavily-used road networks. Cabinet Members supported further lobbying to reform these formulas;
- ii) Confirmation that the Final Local Government Finance Settlement had been received during this meeting and appeared to include a positive adjustment to Revenue Support Grant reflecting issues previously raised by Plymouth, and a national one-off grant to address local authority High Needs DSG deficits as at the end of the current financial year, with further analysis required before the full impact for Plymouth could be confirmed;
- jj) Cabinet Members’ positive reaction to the initial settlement news, noting that while the decision to support DSG deficits was pragmatic given wider local government

reorganisation, Plymouth had contributed to the effective lobbying and engagement with Government;

- kk) Alongside the necessary focus on risk and pressure within the revenue budget, there was significant optimism embedded in the capital programme and pipeline, with around £140 million of capital investment planned in 2026/27, approximately 45% of which was funded by grants and additional external contributions taking the externally funded proportion to over half, and a further capital pipeline of around £50 million supported by future grants and developer funding;
- ll) The Leader summarised that the Council had received assurance from the Section 151 Officer regarding the robustness and legality of the budget, had resolved historic accounting issues with external auditors, and was now able to invest in capital projects that underpinned growth and delivered services that residents valued, while still meeting unavoidable statutory obligations for the most vulnerable;
- mm) The Leader concluded that although the Council faced continued financial challenge and a significant medium-term gap, the budget represented a serious, balanced response which combined realism about risks with a clear ambition to support growth, civic pride and improved outcomes for Plymouth residents.

Cabinet agreed to:

1. Note the financial risks;
2. Note the section from the Council's Section 151 Officer on the robustness of the budget estimates and the adequacy of the level of reserves;
3. Note that the Fire Precept would not be confirmed until after the Cabinet meeting and delegate to the Section 151 Officer to make final amendments to Council Tax Resolution prior to Full Council;
4. Recommend the following to City Council, subject to amendments by the Section 151 Officer in consultation with the Leader reflecting any final technical adjustments and changes upon receipt of the Final Local Government Finance Settlement;
 - i) The Revenue Budget 2026/27: £329.275m;
 - ii) The drawdown of a maximum of £3.618m of flexible capital receipts, as set out in the report;
 - iii) The Capital Budget 2026/27 £113.938m and five-year programme £319.725m;
 - iv) The Capital Financing Strategy 2026/27;
 - v) The Treasury Management Strategy 2026/27 (incorporating the Non-Treasury Management Strategy and the Minimum Revenue Provision Statement);

- vi) The Medium-Term Financial Plan for the period 2026/27 to 2030/31;
 - vii) The Tamar Bridge & Torpoint Ferry Joint Committee 2026/27 Revenue Budget and Capital Programme and the 2026/27 draft Business Plan, as referenced in Appendix 16, and the longer-term forecast to 2029/30 is noted;
5. Approve the partial reversal of up to £31m of the council's Interest Rate Swap to provide a net£9.7m one-off benefit to the council's revenue budget position in 2026/27, noting the overall financial impact and alternative options set out in Section 20 of the report;
 6. Approve Fees and Charges Setting 2026/27;
 7. Approve the Cabinet Savings Proposals 2026/27.

93. **Plymouth Active Leisure Contract Extension**

Councillor Taylor (Cabinet Member for Customer Experience for Customer Experience, Sport, Leisure and HR and OD) presented the report and highlighted the following key points:

- a) Since January 2026 she had spent considerable time engaging with Council officers and the team at Plymouth Active Leisure (PAL) to fully understand the service, future ambitions, and opportunities for development. These discussions had focused on driving improvements to health, confidence and wellbeing across the city;
- b) PAL had demonstrated significant progress since its establishment in 2022, despite challenges including the pandemic and key performance achievements included:
 - i. 29% income growth;
 - ii. 48% growth in fitness memberships;
 - iii. Over 49,000 unique users;
 - iv. 31% growth in swim school participation.
- c) PAL had strengthened its financial and operational position through new investments, including the upgraded gym at the Life Centre and improved facilities at Tinside, which had attracted wider audiences and increased income. The service was no longer solely about sport and leisure but had become integral to tackling inequalities, supporting long-term health conditions, working with children and families, delivering physio services in partnership with Derriford Hospital, and would soon support those on weight-management waiting lists;
- d) PAL played an important role as a venue for elite and community-level sport, hosting diving events, regional and county swimming championships, and acting as the home venue for Plymouth Raiders, while continuing to remain accessible for all residents. The Mount Wise pools was an example of social value, which allowed free access for children;
- e) Investment in the Life Centre continued to be essential for supporting Plymouth's sporting talent and ensuring facilities capable of developing future elite athletes. The

proposal to extend PAL's contract would provide long-term stability enabling capital investment, reducing the management fee to the Council, and supporting the development of business cases for income-generating improvements;

- f) The report included detailed KPIs, enhanced governance arrangements, and an annual report to Scrutiny to ensure accountability and focus on outcomes. PAL provided not only services but substantial social value, and they were praised for their brilliant board, strong leadership, and the team's commitment to delivering for Plymouth residents;

Rhys Jones, Chief Executive of PAL, added the following:

- g) PAL was deeply passionate about serving Plymouth, and the team was committed to delivering growth, health, wellbeing and further opportunities for communities. The staff were incredibly passionate about the organisation's future direction;

Professor Steve Madden (Director of Public Health) added:

- h) Leisure services as a traded service represented a significant opportunity for both the Council and residents. PAL consistently delivered beyond the value of the Council's financial contribution and emphasised the wider benefits to residents, both through health and wellbeing and the creation of memories and legacy;
- i) PAL had succeeded despite a difficult early period, demonstrating that strong performance and progress were achievable even during adversity;

The Leader commented that:

- j) There had been strong use of facilities such as the Central Park pool and the investment had proven worthwhile for the community;
- k) The proposal was not only about facilities but also about mindset and the importance of health and wellbeing. The financial commitments, although appearing significant, were proportionate to the value delivered to the people of Plymouth;

David Draffan (Service Director for Economic Development) added the following:

- l) The ambition of the plan and the governance improvements achieved through collaboration between the Board and Council officers were praised. The Life Centre attracted one million visitors per year, highlighting its scale and community importance;
- m) Outlined key financial strengths of the proposal, including:
 - i. £200 million investment over the contract term;
 - ii. Reduction of the management fee from £700,000 to £50,000;
 - iii. A significant surplus at the end of the term;
 - iv. Expanded capital and maintenance budgets;
 - v. £4.7 million in additional income through the plan.

The Leader further noted:

- n) That failure to proceed with the proposal would have significant consequences, and that the investment represented good value for money, not only in financial terms but in wellbeing, civic pride and the maintenance of high-quality facilities.

Cabinet agreed to:

1. Approve a cashflow loan of up to £975,000 to Plymouth Active Leisure (PAL);
2. Approve the reprofiling of two existing loans to PAL to increase the repayment term by three years, including a utility costs loan of £565,983 and a start-up loan of £365,000, totalling £930,983 plus accrued interest;
3. Approve an extension of 10 years to the existing contract with PAL to conclude in March 2042, including the provision of a break clause in 2035/36;
4. Agree to support feasibility studies and the submission of capital funding business cases through the Council's capital governance process for enhancements to facilities;
5. Note the following contract amendments: (a) the drafting of new Key Performance Indicators as set out in Appendix B; and (b) a requirement for an annual performance update to the Housing Scrutiny Panel;
6. Note the positive impact of the Agency Model, as approved by Cabinet on 10 March 2025, and the generation of VAT savings, which have been included in the PAL financial model.

94. **Re-procurement and Renewal of School Transport Contracts**

Sally Cresswell (Cabinet Member for Education, Skills and Apprenticeships) presented the report and highlighted the following key points:

- a) The report sought the re-procurement and renewal of school transport contracts, for future commissioning arrangements for home to school transport over the next eight years;
- b) The Council provided statutory transport for more than 1,000 children every school day, including pupils with special educational needs, children from low-income families and young people supported by social care;
- c) The existing Dynamic Purchasing System (DPS) was due to expire in January 2026 and was no longer permitted under the Procurement Act 2023, which meant a new, compliant route was required to ensure continuity of service for pupils and families;
- d) A full appraisal of procurement options had been undertaken, each assessed for operational practicality, value for money, compliance, market resilience and long-term sustainability;
- e) The recommended option was for the Council to adopt an internally managed open framework, which would build on existing strengths while offering a more efficient

and future-proofed solution. The model would maintain strong supplier competition, reduce administrative burdens, improve access for local operators and ensure legal compliance. The framework would support transparency, robust quality assurance and the flexibility to reopen to new providers throughout its eight-year lifespan;

- f) Although the re-procurement itself was not expected to generate savings, the open framework was the most cost-effective and administratively efficient option for procuring the £7.8–£8 million annual transport provision needed to support over 1,000 children on approximately 280 routes;
- g) Key risks, included market volatility and rising demand, had been identified and would be managed through strong governance, contract oversight and provider engagement. She noted that demand pressures had been a recurring theme in previous meetings;
- h) Environmental, legal and equality considerations had been fully reviewed, with safeguarding and emissions-reduction measures embedded where feasible. It was confirmed that the framework ensured the Council would continue to meet its statutory duties under the Education Act 1996;
- i) Cabinet approval was sought to implement the internally managed open framework for all home-to-school transport services, including social-care-commissioned transport, for the next eight years to ensure resilience, flexibility and legal compliance.

In response to questions raised it was reported that:

- j) Under the proposed Local Government Re-organisation the framework's flexibility would allow services to expand into new areas, including parts of the South Hams, if required;
- k) No amendments would be required to the City of Plymouth Act in relation to taxi operations, as procurement would continue from within Plymouth, meeting existing legislative requirements.

The Leader commented and:

- l) Thanked officers, noting that he had been advised of the significant work undertaken, particularly in relation to children's SEND-related transport, and expressed appreciation for the progress and commitment demonstrated. He added that the Council was very excited about where that's going to lead over the next few years;
- m) Reflected further on local government reorganisation, agreeing that aligning cross-border transport and SEND provision made sense and that a unified service would be well-placed to operate effectively under any new arrangements.

Cabinet agreed to:

- 1. Adopt an internally managed Open Framework as the procurement route for all contracted Home to School Transport services, including Social Care transport routes commissioned through the Home to School Transport team, for the next eight years.

95. **Finance Monitoring Report Month 9**

Councillor Lowry (Cabinet Member for Finance) presented the Month Nine Finance Monitoring Report and highlighted the following key points:

- a) The financial position at the end of Month 9 reflected data from approximately five and a half weeks prior, due to the one-month cycle required for officers to complete accounting processes and prepare monitoring reports. The reporting timetable remained on schedule and consistent with normal practice;
- b) The Council's financial position had improved since Month 8, with the forecast overspend now estimated at £4.8 million;
- c) In line with previous monitoring reports, the primary areas of budgetary pressure continued to be:
 - i. Adult Social Care, with an overspend of approximately £3.3 million; and
 - ii. Homelessness, with an overspend of approximately £600,000.
- d) The Council had around three months of the financial year remaining in which to mitigate pressures. It was confirmed that both officers and Cabinet were working intensively to deliver the Council's legal duty to balance the budget by year-end;
- e) The Council had always succeeded in balancing its budget in previous years, and there was no reason to believe this outcome would not be achieved again;
- f) Although a lower forecast overspend would have been preferable, the Council had a clear plan in place to manage pressures and continued to take robust measures to reduce spend where possible.

In response to questions raised it was reported that:

- g) The Council's gross budget was over £600 million and the overspend was less than 1%. While such figures appeared small relative to the whole budget, they nevertheless remained significant and required continued focus;
- h) The Council's position, being under 1% from the target set during last year's budget setting, represented a remarkable performance considering the extent of the pressures faced.

Cabinet agreed to:

1. Note the forecast revenue monitoring position at Month 9 is an adverse variance of £4.874m with further risks highlighted;
2. Note the overall Capital Budget 2025-2030 is revised to £319.725 as shown in Table 18, with reconciliation and detail of the movements in the quarter set out in Tables 18 and Table 21;

3. Note the performance against Prudential Indicators for Q3 2025/26, detailed in section 15.

96. **Local Area SEND Inspection Report Outcome**

Councillor Cresswell (Cabinet Member for Education, Skills and Apprenticeships) presented the report and highlighted the following key points:

- a) The Ofsted and CQC monitoring inspection letter had been published on the Council's website on 05 February 2026;
- b) The monitoring inspection, carried out in December 2025, was a significant moment for Plymouth as it assessed whether effective action had been taken in relation to the five priority areas identified in the 2023 Area SEND Inspection. Inspectors concluded that Plymouth had taken effective action in all priority areas;
- c) The positive outcome reflected the outstanding work of teams across education, health, social care, schools, partners, children, young people and families. It was noted feedback from the lead inspector, said 'Your children and young people shone'. This comment was described as uplifting and a source of pride;
- d) Inspectors recognised a marked cultural shift since the previous inspection, including:
 - i. stronger leadership;
 - ii. clearer governance;
 - iii. improved early identification;
 - iv. significantly reduced exclusions;
 - v. better multi-agency working for children with the most complex needs;
 - vi. improved support for families awaiting assessments; and
 - vii. strengthened oversight of vulnerable children.
- e) Partnership working was highlighted as central to the improvement journey. Inspectors praised the SEND Improvement Board for achieving strong buy-in from senior leaders across political parties, which was described as important and commendable;
- f) While the findings were very positive, the report made clear that further work was required. Waiting times for neurodevelopmental assessments and speech and language therapy remained too long, and not all families felt the benefits of improvements or clarity around available support;
- g) The next phase of improvement would include embedding consistency across schools and services, strengthening communication with families, reducing waiting times and ensuring that improvements were sustained and resilient;
- h) The publication demonstrated real progress but also set out the ongoing improvement journey required to ensure children and young people with SEND remained at the heart of all decision-making across the system.

David Haley (Director of Children's Services) addressed the Cabinet and:

- i) Stated that the progress recognised by Ofsted and CQC was heartening and represented a significant achievement for the entire local area SEND partnership. It was noted that achieving effective action in all five priority areas was substantial progress;
- j) Confirmed that inspectors recognised further areas for continued improvement, particularly sustaining cultural change and keeping children and young people at the centre of all work;
- k) Reported that a full re-inspection would take place within 12–18 months. Current governance arrangements would remain in place to ensure continued oversight, pace and assurance of improvement.

The Leader commented and:

- l) Highlighted that the work to deliver SEND improvement was substantial and system-wide, reflected in the fact that meetings were normally full with officers and partners. It was emphasised that the importance of strong managerial and political leadership working together was essential;
- m) Recalled that previous inspections had not always reflected the progress being made, and expressed relief that progress had been formally recognised. He stressed the importance of staying on the right road as changes to national SEND policy were expected imminently;
- n) Referenced discussions with national leaders, including Georgia Gould MP, regarding the SEND White Paper, and anticipated significant reforms. He stated his ambition for Plymouth was to get ahead of the reforms, not wait for them;
- o) Announced his intention to bring forward to the next Cabinet meeting firm proposals for a new SEND school in Plymouth, including a suggested location. He stated that while mainstream inclusion would remain essential, the city must also expand specialist provision due to increasing demand. He confirmed financial provision was available and ambition should match need.

Councillor Cresswell added that:

- p) The White Paper was expected to emphasise both mainstream inclusion and the necessity of specialist settings for children with high-level needs. She stressed that Plymouth must provide both effective mainstream inclusion and sufficient specialist places;
- q) She welcomed the Leader's proposal for a new SEND school and highlighted the city's innovative work on inclusion, belonging strategy and targeted approaches that had already been acknowledged by inspectors.

Councillor Aspinall (Cabinet Member for Health and Adult Social Care added:

- r) Members referred to the importance of transition planning and ongoing discussions with officers to support families at key educational transition points.

Cabinet agreed to:

1. Note the Local Area SEND Inspection Report and the significant progress recognised by Ofsted and CQC;
2. Receive at the next Cabinet meeting firm proposals for a new SEND school in Plymouth, including a recommended location and delivery approach.

97. **Leader's Announcements**

Councillor Evans OBE (Leader of the Council) made the following announcement on Local Government Reorganisation (LGR):

- a) The government had opened a public consultation on the future of local government in Devon, marking the formal start of a significant reorganisation process;
- b) Plymouth City Council and Exeter City Council had jointly submitted a proposal for four new unitary authorities across Devon;
- c) The aim was to simplify local government structures, bring decision-making closer to communities, and create councils with the scale and capability to tackle long-term challenges relating to housing, transport, economic development, and strategic planning;
- d) The proposal was not a merger between Plymouth and Exeter; instead, the two cities shared a common vision for what would be in Devon's best interests;
- e) The Leader emphasised that the proposal would allow Plymouth to strengthen its economic role, support growth, improve public services, and help meet challenging housing targets;
- f) The consultation closed on 26 March 2026, and public participation was vital;
- g) Statutory bodies—including police, fire, voluntary organisations, and others would also be formally consulted;
- h) A shared website had been created to explain the proposed options:
www.devonlgr.co.uk;
- i) The Leader encouraged residents to engage with the process and stressed that the proposal related to who provided services, not to community identities or boundary changes;
- j) The Leader explained that residents in neighbouring parishes would retain their parish and town councils and identities, but would benefit from high-quality unitary services such as waste collection and libraries;
- k) He emphasised that the proposals would end the two-tier system for areas outside Plymouth, creating clearer accountability and stronger capability to support future

prosperity;

- l) He concluded by urging residents to complete the consultation, stressing the once-in-a-generation opportunity to shape Plymouth's long-term future and by expressing thanks to the officers involved in submitting the proposal.

Tracey Lee (Chief Executive) added:

- m) The Council had prepared extensively ahead of the consultation launch and had now submitted its formal proposal;
- n) Government would consider consultation responses over spring 2026, with decisions expected from summer 2026;
- o) Devon was in the second national wave for LGR, with six earlier priority areas, which were already providing valuable learning;
- p) Work was underway across all Devon Councils on a decision-agnostic basis so that implementation could begin swiftly once government confirmed the new structure;
- q) Officers were already analysing learning from other counties and working closely with partners across Devon to prepare for next steps.

98. **Cabinet Member Updates**

Councillor Laing (Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Children's Social Care, Culture and Communications) gave the following update on The 2026 Fostering Summit;

- a) It brought together carers, staff, partners and the wider fostering community, providing an important space to reflect on progress, feedback and priorities, with lived experience playing a central role;
- b) Thanks were expressed for Dartmoor Zoo for hosting and supporting the event;
- c) Strong praise was received for improvements and support to foster carers, alongside constructive challenge on areas that required further development;
- d) Key achievements included:
 - i. Successful transitions of children from residential care into in-house fostering;
 - ii. Establishment of four Mockingbird constellations, strengthening peer support networks;
 - iii. Expansion of social events for carers and families;
 - iv. Positive feedback on the new financial support package and council tax refund for carers;

- v. For the first time, Plymouth now had more in-house foster carers than independent fostering agency carers;
- e) Themes raised by carers included training access, support for complex needs, and improved communication with partner agencies;
- f) A full report on actions and next steps would be submitted to the Corporate Parenting Board.

Other announcements included:

- g) Submission to the UK City of Culture 2029 competition, made jointly by Plymouth Culture and The Box after extensive engagement with more than 1,000 residents and stakeholders;
- h) Significant public interest in the Beryl Cook exhibition at The Box, with:
 - i. 25,975 tickets booked to date (exhibition free but ticketed);
 - ii. £14,000 raised in donations, with 12% of people visiting making a donation;
 - iii. National media coverage reaching 16 million people;
 - iv. 83% of visitors were first-time online bookers;
 - v. 842 catalogues had been sold;
 - vi. Visitors to the exhibition were from across the country;
- i) Opening of the Journeys with Mai exhibition in partnership with the National Portrait Gallery at The Box;
- j) Appointment of The Box as Museum in Residence at 10 Downing Street, with Plymouth artworks displayed throughout 2026;
- k) Preview openings of the refurbished Efford and Honicknowle Youth Centres, funded through significant capital investment;
 - i. New facilities included music rooms, AV (Audio Visual) suites, gaming spaces, and high-quality creative environments;
 - ii. Expressed pride at the transformation, emphasising Plymouth's commitment to delivering exceptional youth facilities.

Councillor Penberthy (Cabinet Member for Housing, Co-operative Development and Communities) made the following announcements regarding a recent Sports Ground Safety Authority (SGSA) audit of the Council's regulatory work at Home Park, covering football matches and major stadium concerts;

- l) The audit had assessed nine areas of governance, operational practice and safety management;
- m) Key strengths identified included:
 - i. Strong safety culture and leadership;
 - ii. Effective Safety Advisory Group governance;
 - iii. Robust safety certification processes;
 - iv. Proactive enforcement practices;
 - v. Strong professional expertise and training;
 - vi. Improved capacity and resilience within the service;
- n) The Council achieved a score of 95 out of 100, reflecting high confidence in its statutory safety performance;
- o) The work of officers Victoria Stubbs (Registered Building Inspector) and Rosie Starr (Sustainable Transport Manager) were specifically commended within the report and he added thanks to Will Tomkins (Environmental Health and Trading Standards Officer), Graham Hooper (Senior Intelligence and Licensing Officer), Katherine O'Connor (Head of Food Safety and Miscellaneous Licensing) and Helen Collingbourne (Digital and Graphics Planning Technician);
- p) Cross-department collaboration, involving Environmental Protection, Digital Services and Transport, was highlighted as integral.

He added the following with regards to the St Budeaux Toilets project:

- q) A solution had been identified for the replacement toilet block following complex challenges involving power supply, a damaged septic tank, antisocial behaviour and capital costs;
- r) A planning application had been submitted for a single-unit modular toilet, expanding provision beyond the current disabled-only access;
- s) Subject to planning approval, demolition and installation of new power/sewage connections would take place, followed by installation of the new unit later in the year;
- t) Expected timeframe for the utility works, dependent on National Grid, was approximately 12 weeks;
- u) Councillor Penberthy praised Councillor Haydon for her persistent advocacy on behalf of residents.

He then provided an update on behalf of Councillor Stephens (Cabinet Member for Strategic Planning and Transport) regarding the Royal Parade Transport Scheme:

- v) Severe weather had delayed resurfacing, though significant progress continued;
- w) All bus shelters had been installed, glazed, and had surrounding paving completed;
- x) Road-preparation works had progressed where weather permitted;
- y) Additional bus stops were now allocated in partnership with operators, with service improvements anticipated;
- z) Bus stops would open on Monday 23 February 2026, two months ahead of schedule, and within budget;
- aa) If resurfacing completed by 20 February 2026, the eastbound bus lane would reopen on the 21 February 2026;
- bb) The contractor's compound would be removed from Courtenay Street car park by 20 February 2026;
- cc) Public engagement teams would provide on-street information and leaflets for four weeks;
- dd) The temporary shelter at Derry's Cross would be relocated to Poole Farm to support youth activities;
- ee) Consideration was being given to retaining benches currently in storage for future use at bus/coach stops.

99. **LGA Update**

Councillor Evans OBE (Leader) introduced the update and highlighted:

- a) Attendance at the LGA (Local Government Reorganisation) Labour Group Conference and Leaders' Summit, which included an opportunity to speak directly with the Secretary of State for Local Government and Housing, Steve Reed;
- b) Discussions included:
 - i. Funding pressures on councils;
 - ii. The issue of cost-shunting between councils and the NHS, particularly around children's healthcare contributions where Plymouth's ICB had imposed an arbitrary 20% funding cap;

- iii. The need for clear national guidance for ICBs to ensure fairness and consistency;
- c) The Leader also raised concerns about LGR implementation, specifically the national policy that all authorities would become new authorities rather than some being designated continuing authorities;
- i. This distinction affected the transfer of staff (TUPE), organisational complexity and transition costs;
 - ii. The Secretary of State committed to examining the issue urgently;
- d) The Leader had written to Louise Gittins, Chair of the LGA, regarding proposed changes to LGA regional structures;
- i. Current proposals would form a vast South of England region from Cornwall to East Anglia, risking reduced service quality and increased travel inefficiencies.