

Torbay Town Plan 2025-2045 and the faith communities

This note responds to the draft local plan, 2025-2045, and specifically addresses the concerning lack of references to faith communities, their places of worship, and their community contributions in the context of the next 20 years in Torbay. It is a reply to the draft regulation 18 plan, specifically the PDF version.

Overall summary

This note is written from a Christian perspective and involves Christian participation, but we aim to work alongside other faith communities as well. While not always, the contributions of various faith groups often share similar traits, even if their doctrines differ. We believe these communities are characterised by, for example, support for marriage and family life, commitment to community and those in need within it, acts of self-sacrifice for the greater good of others, gathering regularly, mutual support and encouragement, and creating spaces of well-being for attendees. Regarding places of worship, we would add that they also serve as community centres for the surrounding areas, welcoming people who are not necessarily of the faith. These attributes support commitment, acts of service, community, and care are virtues that should be promoted and form the Foursquare components of “the landscape to thrive,” as outlined in the local plan. We assert that planning for the next 20 years without the active involvement of Torbay's faith communities will not, or may not, result in a thriving community. The essence of the town plan, especially as detailed in chapter 1, is at risk if it fails to involve, promote, and acknowledge the vital role of faith communities and their places of worship. Consequently, we argue that the current plan is woefully deficient, and its revision in summer 2026 must give much greater regard to faith communities, particularly places of worship, in shaping Torbay's development. We also suggest ways to foster co-operation and collaboration towards these goals.

Brief history

Torbay, through its three towns, has a quite varied history, with Brixham in particular focusing on the fishing industry. In this regard, the work of Christian missions with the fishing community over the years, leading up to the present day and continuing, has been vital. They have been there when fishermen haven't returned home, leaving families in need. They have supported the communities during tough economic times, enduring the ups and downs of commerce and weather. Even now, the Fishermen's Mission is located right in the centre of the industrial fishing market and remains very proactive.¹

¹ <https://www.fishermensmission.org.uk/>

In a more genteel and considerable contrast, although Torquay and then Paignton have relatively recent histories, there has been a notable presence such as Torre Abbey and St Michael's Chapel. More critically for the current landscape was the substantial growth during the Victorian era, evident in the distinctive villas as well as the numerous churches across Torquay and Paignton, many of which are still actively used. Some serve unique purposes, for example, for the Greek Orthodox community. There are also very vibrant large churches of various denominations, including church plants. Additionally, some smaller churches thrive in their own right. Now, nearly 150 years after their construction, these buildings occupy a significant place in the urban landscape of Torbay. They serve as the centre of community life for many Christians in the area. There is a Jewish community that once had a synagogue but now gravitates towards Exeter, though it remains a feature of Torbay life. There is also a small Islamic and Sikh community. Their relative sizes should not be overlooked, as other community groups of similar size often have a substantial impact on community and council policies. We believe even the smaller faith communities tend to have a greater level of involvement and commitment than their size might suggest. All of these groups display features which we will outline below, which are also vital for future town planning.

Furthermore, Torbay has contributed to Christian and religious life. For example, at St Matthias on Torbay's northern end, a funeral service shortly after the First World War is believed to be where the phrase, "there are no atheists in the trenches", was first used. On the southern end, at the vicarage of Brixham, now the Berry Head Hotel, was the Scottish Anglican cleric Henry Francis Lyte, who authored the world-famous hymn and anthem: "Abide with me". Torbay has indeed played its part. We believe it will continue to do so, provided it has the support and resources from initiatives like the new town plan.

References within the draft town plan

Some of us have read the 308 pages and noted that there is no reference to faith either generally or in the context of faith communities. Specifically, there is no mention of Christians in any way. There is one reference to worship in the context of a place of worship, and even then, 5.34, in the context of providing community facilities, mentions places of worship at the end of the list. This list includes higher priorities such as local shops, meeting places, sports venues, open spaces, cultural buildings, and public houses, with places of worship only appearing last. The fact that these other community facilities are said to enhance the sustainability of communities and residential environments shows, in our opinion, considerable irony, given that places of worship have such limited, narrow, and lesser mention within the town plan. The document further states that the town plan should

prevent the unnecessary loss of valued facilities and services. We do not see any real commitment to that principle in relation to places of worship and faith communities.

In stark contrast, references to well-being occur 18 times, thriving 8 times, and mental health twice. We support the importance of all these. Nothing in this note aims to diminish or criticise. However, we contend that a vital element for their realisation is the recognition and promotion of faith communities and places of worship.

We expand on this because we believe the town plan is fundamentally very good.

Strategic priority number 5 is about building better communities with homes, spaces, and opportunities that people deserve and, we would probably add, need. This outlines specific objectives, 1.52. Again, we fully endorse these objectives. They are very well considered, and we support them.

However, they omit some important elements, as noted here. Regarding the people priority, 2.1 and subsequent points, we again support efforts to improve well-being and reduce social isolation. Faith communities do extensive work for their own members and often reach out to broader groups, especially those who are isolated, lonely, elderly, or poor. Faith communities are essential actors in implementing the town plan; they do not seek these amendments for self-glory but want their role and contributions recognised within this framework. Of course, Chapter 5 is central to this element, and we believe it is excellent, as far as it goes. The five primary objectives outlined there are also fundamental to the work of faith communities, which makes the omission in this chapter quite striking. This is reflected in strategic policy SC1, starting at 5.12. We naturally support the notion that residential developments should enhance well-being and health, including spiritual health alongside physical and mental health. The absence of any mention of spirituality, in the broadest sense, within the bullet points of policy SC1 is particularly serious and concerning. How can good spiritual health be missing when healthy food options are listed? Spiritual health is not the same as mental health. When the plan expands, for example at 5.15, it overlooks the impact of faith on communities, such as the elderly, for whom faith can be a vital part of life in later years. It also neglects the work of faith organisations in assisting those in need, such as through food banks and similar initiatives. A healthier, thriving community in Torbay is, in part, materially supported by faith communities. Yet nothing of this is reflected in the town plan.

This is essential when considering 5.17. All building developments must focus on promoting healthier outcomes. For larger schemes, this should include providing places of worship, potentially shared among faith communities, for residents, possibly those who have moved

from afar, to facilitate their spiritual needs in these new developments. While we acknowledge the statutory minimum requirements, we hope that Torbay will exceed them with these admirable aims. Throughout the town plan and beyond, there must be greater recognition of the importance, encouragement, and opportunities for faith communities to have places of worship. We do not speak of this solely because of our faith, but because of the evidence.

In brief, we would be able to suggest detailed changes if given the opportunity, as outlined below, should you invite us to do so as residents and active participants in this area.

1. We would welcome the Local Plan, especially in areas that support the local community's well-being and recognise the importance of faith groups.
2. We would support Strategic Policy SS; the sixth bullet point should be strengthened to read "Support and encourage community action *and well-being*."
3. We support Strategic Policy HS, especially its reference to partnering with the community to find sustainable solutions, where the potential of faith communities could be transformative. Their role should be explicitly mentioned in the supporting justification for the policy.
4. We would support the Strategic Policy TCS. It should include clearer and more specific references to the importance of community and social facilities alongside the mix of commercial and residential uses, especially in clauses 3, 8, 9, and 10.
5. We support Strategic Policy SCS but request a reference to cultural and social facilities in clause 4, including a mention of the importance of faith communities and their facilities in the explanatory justification.
6. We support Policy SC5, but it should include social infrastructure in the list mentioned in its second sentence. The justified reasoning here references places of worship, which is welcomed. However, this appears to be the only such mention throughout the document, significantly underestimating the importance of places of worship in sustaining community well-being, inclusion, and cohesion across the Bay. The plan should incorporate several other such references.
7. We would support the Strategic Policy INS.
8. We support Policy IN1. Clause 5 could be strengthened by including a reference to community well-being among the broader contributions listed.

Benefits to a community of faith communities and places of worship

We set out here just some of the objective evidence. There is much more available.

An article in the British Medical Journal from 2019 highlights that places of worship, especially for faith-based Black, Asian, and ethnic minority communities, serve as vital points for people of similar faith and those in need within the UK to come together. This sense of community, gathering, and mutual support reflects core objectives of the town plan, yet is often not realised in practice. The article emphasises the role of faith community places of worship in promoting good health and health messages, recognising their importance in encouraging healthy lifestyles and health promotion among these communities. This aligns fully with the aims of the town plan.

Perhaps as a form of endorsement, the University of York in 2023 published research revealing the role faith institutions play in encouraging good health. Again, there was an understandable reference to specific communities, but it stated that faith institutions, places of worship, provide low-cost, effective, and sustainable solutions to help people adopt healthy habits.

In 2017, the National Library of Medicine of America published a paper on “religious communities and human flourishing”. They found that participation in religious services is associated with various aspects of human flourishing, which the town plan would refer to as thriving. This included happiness and life satisfaction, mental and physical health, meaning and purpose, character and virtue, and close social relationships—again identified in the town plan but without a foundation for their creation. Evidence for the effects of faith communities on these thriving outcomes comes from a robust longitudinal study detailed in the paper. Interestingly, these thriving communities were actually stronger for communal participation than for spiritual religious identity. While social support is an important mechanism, it accounts for only a small part of the associations. Numerous other mechanisms are at play as well. They suggest that it may be the confluence of faith values and practices, reinforced admittedly by social norms, which grants faith communities their powerful effects on many aspects of human thriving. Churches have been shown to contribute not only to spiritual and social capital but also to economic capital, whether through individual participation, use of buildings, or ‘soft power’ such as convening, advocacy, and partnerships. This must not be overlooked in the next few decades in Torbay. It is at risk if faith communities and places of worship are excluded from the town plan.

From America to Australia, there are many similarities to England and Torbay, as a study found that faith communities and places of worship serve as sources of social capital. People of faith tend to experience higher levels of social cohesion, are more likely to participate actively in their communities, and report higher well-being. Congregations help people bond together and also build bridges to those outside the congregation through traditional outreach efforts. This aligns perfectly with the town plan's goals, and it is essential to promote and support faith communities so they can work with other parts of society to foster a thriving community.

Churches in particular have been shown to contribute not only to spiritual and social capital but also to economic capital, whether through individual participation, use of buildings, or 'soft power' such as convening, advocacy, and partnerships.

There is much more we would like to express. Evidence of fostering community cohesion and support for vulnerable groups. Evidence of improved mental and physical health. Evidence of community involvement, prosocial behaviour, and volunteering, supporting those affected by substance abuse, domestic violence, and other issues, while filling gaps in central and local government service provisions for those in need. Evidence of increased resilience and purpose derived from having meaning in life, especially related to coping with crises, whether personal or community wide.

Conclusion

We do not claim that there has been a deliberate attempt to exclude faith communities, Christian or otherwise, from Torbay's future. However, the near-total omission, both generally and especially in the context of thriving communities and flourishing individuals, is astonishing, given that faith communities and places of worship already play such a vital role for both groups. We recognise that there may have been a desire to avoid offending some by referencing faith-based communities and spirituality. Nonetheless, this approach has overlooked a significant part of what is already happening. We believe the town plan cannot proceed as a true blueprint, landscape, or pathway for the next twenty years if it fails to recognise the vital role, contributions, and commitments of faith communities and places of worship. It should not be relegated to an afterthought in a single mention amid 308 pages, and even then, only after discussing the welfare benefits of local shops and pubs.

We recognise that the next stage of finalising the town plan will involve considerable work for the council, and we wish to support rather than add to the burden of protest. We would like to include a dedicated section with a few paragraphs about the vital role played by faith communities, emphasising their involvement alongside other groups for a thriving Torbay

and enhanced well-being of individuals. We also intend to mention faith communities and places of worship elsewhere in the document, showcasing their active contributions and benefits to both the community and individuals. Furthermore, we seek an acknowledgment of their civic role, which remains significant for some. We believe these changes reflect current practices in Torbay, and we hope and expect this will continue over the next 20 years. We are happy to provide a draft if it facilitates the process or to suggest potential amendments if preferred. We look forward to working with you in whatever way best suits including these points. Thank you.

Rev Nathan Kiyaga

Torbay United

On behalf of a coalition of leaders in the faith community within Torbay

2nd February 2026