

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE ENVIRONMENT POLICY DEVELOPMENT
GROUP HELD AT FOLLATON HOUSE, TOTNES ON
THURSDAY, 13 DECEMBER 2007**

MEMBERS

* Cllr R Rowe - Chairman

* Cllr M J Hicks - Vice-Chairman

* Cllr R J Carter

∅ Cllr S L Rankin

∅ Cllr P Coulson

* Cllr R J Vint

* Cllr D M O'Callaghan

* Cllr A Ward

* Denotes attendance

∅ Denotes apology for absence

Also in attendance and participating:

Cllrs K J Baldry, J I G Blackler, B E Carson, G J Fielden, P W Hitchins, M F Saltern
and R J Tucker

Officers in attendance:

All Agenda items: Strategic Director (Operations), Strategic Director (Resources),
Strategic Director (Community) and Head of Financial Services.

EPDG.8/07 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of the Environment Policy Development Group (EPDG) held on 31 October 2007 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

EPDG.9/07 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Members were invited to declare any interests in the items of business to be considered during the course of the meeting but none was made.

EPDG.10/07 BUDGET PROPOSALS 2008/2009

Consideration was given to a report which updated Members on the budget position facing the Council. The report also outlined bids for additional expenditure and options available to address the funding shortfall.

The report concluded that the preparation of annual budgets became more challenging every year, and this trend would not change over the foreseeable future with uncertainty existing over the future funding and structure of local government. Central government was imposing costly recycling targets and extending the concessionary bus fare scheme, without any guarantee of underwriting the cost, whilst at the same time awarding the Council low increases in revenue support grant and insisting on low single figure increases in Council Tax levels.

During discussion, particular reference was made to:-

- a) a paper tabled to the meeting. Officers presented to the Group a paper which provided an update on the provisional announcement from Government regarding the level of Revenue Support Grant (RSG) to be awarded to the Council over the next three years. The Group was informed that the Council had been awarded the absolute minimum increase of 1% for 2008/09, which was also the lowest increase for all of the Devon authorities. Furthermore, the Council had also been advised of its provisional RSG awards for 2009/10 and 2010/11. Over this three year period, the percentage increase in grant award amounted to 0.9%, which was considered to be extremely disappointing and would continue to create real budgetary pressures for the Council in the upcoming years. Officers confirmed that the final announcement on the amount of RSG to be received by the Council would be made in January 2008;
- b) the concessionary bus fares scheme. The Group was reminded that the scheme was to become nationwide from April 2008. Whilst a specific grant was to be introduced by Government to compensate for the extra costs arising, it would not relate directly to the actual additional costs. However, officers did advise that indications suggested that the Council was to receive the maximum amount of grant funding available;
- c) feedback from the consultation process. In response to a question, officers advised that the draft budget proposals (as outlined in the presented report) had been compiled whilst the consultation process was being undertaken in parallel. As a consequence, the draft budget proposals had not taken into account the consultation process. Therefore, the Group had an opportunity to make recommendations on the budget proposals, whilst reviewing the findings of the consultation exercise.

The Group proceeded to consider each proposed budget saving (Appendices E and F) and voted on each individually.

S1: Invite contributions from other partners in SHSP towards Community Development Officer

In expressing her view that the post was extremely valuable, a Member questioned the consequences for the post, should partners not contribute towards the funding. In response, officers advised that there would be budgetary implications should this be the case, which would ultimately be a Council decision on how it should be resolved.

Officers also stated that it was increasingly the trend for the Council to be requested to contribute in multi-agency arrangements for which it was a partner. This included the Devon Local Strategic Partnership, which was increasingly looking to its partners to make financial contributions. It was also suggested that in this instance, contributions from other public agencies could increase the sense of ownership amongst these stakeholders in the South Hams Strategic Partnership.

On the proviso that the required funding could be raised from partners, the Group unanimously supported this potential saving.

S2: Cease or Reduce Community Grant Funding

Some Members stated their strong objections to this potential saving which it was felt would be both unproductive and to the detriment of rural communities.

The Group unanimously objected to this potential saving.

S3: Cease support to Devon Racial Equality Council

A non-Group Member cited an example in which the Equality Council had provided valuable support in the process of finding sites for Gypsies and Travellers. Members felt that the benefits of supporting the Equality Council did not justify what amounted to a fairly small potential saving.

The Group unanimously objected to this potential saving.

S4: Cease support to Enterprise South Devon

A non-Group Member commented that during the development of the Ivybridge Library Resource Centre project, he had been unimpressed with the support provided by Enterprise South Devon. Furthermore, a non-Group Member also felt that the grant intervention of £75 could be funded by the start-up businesses themselves.

The Group unanimously supported this potential saving.

S5: Cease support to Ring and Ride

Members stated their objections to this potential saving and made reference to the Ring and Ride schemes both reducing congestion in towns and providing an essential service.

The Group unanimously objected to this potential saving.

S6: Restructure Public Convenience Cleaning Rounds

Members were assured that there would be no loss of service arising from this potential saving. The proposed restructure of cleaning rounds would result in an efficiency saving, whilst the standard of cleaning would be maintained to its current standard.

The Group supported this potential saving.

S7: Introduce Seasonal Opening for 24 Public Conveniences

From the list of public conveniences, some Members cited examples within their towns and parishes for which they could not support seasonal opening. In response, officers advised that the list had been compiled in light of usage levels and the location and accessibility of alternative toilets being considered.

Whilst expressing some reservations, the Group supported this potential saving.

S8: Grounds Maintenance – Change Planting from Bedding Plants to Shrubs

A Member expressed the view that the sites were currently over-maintained and it would also be environmentally beneficial to change to slow-growing shrubs.

The Group unanimously supported this potential saving.

S9: Remove Swimming Buoys from Torcross and move Lifeguards to Slapton where no Buoyed Area is required

Officers informed that they had been in consultation with Stokenham Parish Council and the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI) and it was understood that both supported these proposals as it was deemed safer to swim at Slapton without buoys. In response, some Members expressed concern that removal of the buoys could result in public safety issues, due to the numbers of jet skis and fishing vessels which were in operation at Torcross.

The Group unanimously objected to this potential saving.

S10: Remove Speed Limit Buoys at Jennycliff and Wembury

It was noted that the Parish Council objected to this proposal. The Group felt that similar issues were relevant to that of proposed saving S9 (above).

The Group unanimously objected to this potential saving.

S11: Review of Grounds Maintenance Arrangements for Land not Owned by SHDC

A local Member advised that both West Alvington Parish Council and the local primary school were very concerned about this proposed saving, which could result in a site which was used by the school not being maintained. In response, officers advised that the Public Space Strategy adopted by Council placed emphasis upon land owners taking responsibility for their sites to reduce the management of third party land by the Council or where it did occur, the Council's costs were funded. The Council could still undertake grounds maintenance work at a charge to parish councils (if they so wished) who in turn, could adjust their precepts accordingly.

The Group supported this potential saving.

S12: Reduce Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Project Funding

The Group advised of its strong objections to this proposed saving which attracted additional external funding (over £60,000 for 2006/07) and was closely linked to Council Priorities 2 (Economic Activity) and 3 (Distinctive Environment).

The Group unanimously objected to this proposed saving.

S13: Partnership Working and Restructuring of Legal Services

Officers advised that this proposed saving would not result in any loss of service.

The Group unanimously supported this potential saving.

Members were then invited to present any potential savings which could be incorporated into the budget consultation process. Some Members felt that the numbers of publications of the South Hams Matters magazine could be reduced. To further justify this proposed saving, these Members felt that the magazine was not widely read and was therefore a waste of money. At this point a motion was proposed and seconded whereby:

'The number of copies of South Hams Matters published be reduced to twice yearly and more cost effective methods of achieving the same consultation levels (e.g. through the publication being cost-neutral by selling more advertising space) be investigated.'

In contrast, some non-Group Members advised that the publication provided a cost effective means of meeting the Council's statutory duty to produce a range of information (7.8p per copy) and there had been a number of positive responses received on the publication. When questioned, officers believed that two correctly timed publications of South Hams Matters would enable the Council to meet its statutory information requirements, but would investigate further prior to the next Budget meeting.

When put to the vote, the Group supported the motion.

A Member also felt that there was scope for savings by undertaking an Energy Audit to assess heating and lighting levels; carrying out a Green Travel Plan; and through procuring energy efficient and more durable products. Officers responded by advising that a number of related actions were already incorporated into the Climate Change Strategy. Furthermore, such procurement issues were being addressed by the shared Procurement Officer post and energy usage was regularly monitored. For example, fuel costs were currently being reviewed as part of the restructure of the waste collection rounds. In acknowledging this, the Member requested that he receive cost figures on both the Council's internal energy usage and travel expenses.

The Group proceeded to consider Appendix G (supported by Appendix H) of the report, deliberating the priority status which the Group wished to place on each presented Bid.

B1: Two Planning Support Officers

Members highlighted both the pressure that the Development Control service was experiencing and the valued role within the service which these posts undertook.

The Group unanimously recommended that this Bid be classified as high priority.

B2: 0.5 Planning Support Officer

The Group unanimously recommended that this Bid be classified as low priority.

B3: Planning Officer Initially Funded from the Planning Delivery Grant until Self-Financing

The Group unanimously recommended that this Bid be classified as high priority.

B4: Planning Officer Funded from General Fund (Council Tax)

By virtue of the Chairman's Casting Vote, the Group recommended that this Bid be classified as low priority.

B5: Local Area Agreement Partnership

Whilst some Members felt that the Bid was rather vague in its description, it was confirmed that the Bid sought at this stage to provide a budget to provide some flexibility for the Council to react to evolving issues surrounding the Local Area Agreement.

A Member made reference to the need to be adequately represented in the negotiations of the Local Area Agreement 2008/11 in order to be able to influence the planning and delivery.

The Group recommended that the Bid be classified as medium priority.

B6: Housing - Choice Based Lettings

Members were informed that it had just been announced that the Devon Wide Bid for the provision of a Devon and Cornwall Choice Based Lettings Scheme had been successful, which was felt to further increase the importance of this Bid. It was hoped that greater detail and the financial implications arising from this announcement would be known imminently.

The Group unanimously recommended that this Bid be classified as high priority.

B7: Housing – Direct Lettings

The lead Executive Member for Housing provided the Group with some background detail to support the Bid. The Group noted that it was imposed upon the Council to reduce by 50% the use of temporary accommodation by 2010, which made support for this Bid of paramount importance. The Member also confirmed that the Exeter City Council 'EXtraLet' scheme had been considered to be a success.

The Group unanimously recommended that this Bid be classified as high priority.

B8: Carbon Management

Based upon the work undertaken by Teignbridge District Council, officers advised that research suggested that the savings generated from a Climate Change Officer post would not be as high as initially anticipated. As a consequence, officers could not give any assurances that any post created could be self-financing, as was originally envisaged. Nonetheless, some Members advised that it was their belief that there was scope and great potential for an officer post to be self-financing and requested that they receive a copy of the referred to report when completed. To emphasise the importance of Climate Change, some Members made reference to statutory Performance Indicators and an increasing recognition by government that local authorities should place climate change at the top of their corporate priorities.

In addition, and in light of a number of possible unknown elements arising from the Climate Change Bill, the Bid sought to create a reactive budget resource to be spent according to need.

The Group unanimously recommended that this Bid be classified as high priority.

(Meeting commenced at 2.00 pm and concluded at 4.05 pm).

Chairman