

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE ENVIRONMENT POLICY DEVELOPMENT
GROUP HELD AT FOLLATON HOUSE, TOTNES ON WEDNESDAY,
14 OCTOBER 2009**

MEMBERS

* Cllr R Rowe - Chairman

* Cllr R J Carter - Vice-Chairman

∅ Cllr P Coulson

* Cllr R J Vint

* Cllr D W May

* Cllr A Ward

∅ Cllr S L Rankin

* Denotes attendance

∅ Denotes apology for absence

Also in attendance and participating:

Cllrs H D Bastone, J H Baverstock, B E Carson, J D Hawkins, M J Hicks,
M J Howarth, P W Hitchins; and

Cllrs P Greening and B Lawrence (Stokenham Parish Council) and Mrs G Claydon
(Stokenham Parish Council Clerk)

Officers in attendance:

All agenda items: Strategic Director (Community) and Member Support Officer;
Item 5: (Minute EPDG.14/09 below refers) Strategic Director (Resources); Green
Spaces Operations Manager and Policy Implementation Manager.

EPDG.12/09 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of the Environment Policy Development Group (EPDG) held on 16 September 2009 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

EPDG.13/09 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 were made.

EPDG.14/09 12 MONTH REVIEW OF THE DEVOLVED SERVICES PILOT IN STOKENHAM

Introduction by Strategic Director (Community):

The Officer provided Members with a background to the pilot scheme and informed that it had been initiated as part of the wider Council agenda to increase community influence on services. The objectives of the scheme had been to assess whether devolvement of street and ground maintenance could improve the quality of the services provided at a reduced cost to all three tiers of local government.

He informed that in addition to making a recommendation on whether the pilot should be extended, Members were asked to consider the various options. The next phase would be to start a consultation phase with town and parish councils to determine the level of interest for devolvement. He stated that the pilot, if extended, would have to be time limited and feedback on the scheme would be required by June 2010 at the very latest.

Address by Chairman Stokenham Parish Council:

The Chairman informed the Group that for a number of years the parish council had aspired to take on more responsibilities in terms of street and ground maintenance and had received a lot of cooperation from South Hams District Council. As a result of this pilot scheme, the council had been able to respond quickly to local needs. The council had required two multi-skilled operatives to cover shifts and these individuals had proven to be very cooperative. As a consequence, this had led to improvements in both efficiencies and job satisfaction and had also provided useful feedback to lead Council officers.

The Chairman strongly recommended that the scheme be extended for a further twelve months to enable for the lessons learned to be built upon and the options in the presented report to be explored.

Address by Local Ward Member:

The local Ward Member spoke in support of the scheme and stated that prior to this pilot being established; he had received fourteen complaints with regard to street and ground maintenance (e.g. overgrown footpaths) in a twelve month period. In comparison, since the introduction of this scheme, he had not received any complaints and generally speaking he was happy with the standard of cleanliness around the parishes. Therefore, in his view, the pilot scheme had been very successful and in congratulating the efforts of the parish council, he recommended that it be extended for a further twelve months.

However, he noted that if the scheme was to be extended then there were some aspects that needed to be revisited, these being:-

- Communication – in terms of informing the residents when operatives were going to be in their area e.g. to clear buddle holes;
- Consultation – some parishes felt there should be more consultation and opportunity for involvement
- Costings – it was requested that the District Council provide a breakdown of costings per parish to enable each respective parish to know whether it was either spending or saving money.

Address by Policy Implementation Officer:

The Officer informed the Group that when questioned, three parish councils had submitted positive feedback on the pilot, noting improvements in service delivery. In contrast, one parish council was broadly negative stating that it had not experienced an improvement in service quality, with the exception of bin emptying and litter picking, had found the service to be less responsive, and was unhappy with the level of consultation and involvement, particularly at the outset of the project. Lastly, they felt that expenditure should be distributed between the parish councils for each one to have the discretion to spend according to local priorities.

During the discussion the following points were raised:-

The Green Spaces Operations Manager stated that there had been a phased change in quality as the grass and verges had been cut more often than had been requested. This was a positive outcome as residents liked their verges to look neat and this was a high priority across the district. However in caution, the officer added that this standard could not be replicated across the district within the current budget;

- a) A Member noted that the scheme was a resource intensive process and that it had been stated that some of the quality experienced by the residents of the scheme could not be replicated across the district. They went on to ask if the scheme was financially realistic. In reply, the local Ward Member expressed that the lessons that had been learned would enable further efficiencies to be incorporated, which he felt, would reduce the costs considerably. The Strategic Director (Resources) added that costing was a complex issue citing marginal costs, but advised that this should not be the only aspect on which the pilot scheme was judged and that qualitative benefits were also valid;
- b) It was felt that if the service was devolved in only some town and parish councils, this would affect the economies of scale. However, if the scheme was rolled out across the district, or at least reached a critical mass of clusters, then this would minimise any loss of economies of scale. It was therefore felt to be a matter for Members to judge the marginal costs in return for a better quality service that the pilot delivered. A further twelve months would provide the opportunity for Officers to devise further efficiencies to make the service more cost effective;
- c) Another Member was in favour of extending the scheme for twelve months but felt it was paramount that Members be supplied with as much relevant financial information as possible by June 2010;

- d) When considering economies of scale, it was asked if the scheme would work in the more densely populated areas of the South Hams. In reply, the Clerk informed the Group that critical mass was determined rather by factors such as: how many public toilets a parish had in its area, how many bins it had to empty, and how many operative hours it had at its disposal. Moreover, consideration also had to be given to the travelling times and distances between sites, which increased notably during the summer holidays. The Strategic Director (Resources) added that towns had the advantage of the close proximity of sites but conversely had an increased usage factor and therefore more cleaning, but on the whole he felt urban models would be more cost effective;
- e) It was queried whether towns and parishes could be provided with a 'menu' of services (e.g. grass cutting), in order that each could determine its own priority list. The Strategic Director (Resources) developed the suggestion expressing that if it was not possible to move to complete devolvement, then a core service could be provided with the additional provision of the menu option. However, he re-emphasised the financial constraints that would be faced by the Council over the next five years stating that the cost of any proposed option should be a key consideration and the challenge was to provide the best service across the district within the finances available. The Chairman of the Group acknowledged all the hard work that had been undertaken on the scheme, which had been greatly appreciated, but stated that finances would ultimately have to be a determining factor. Several Members expressed their support for the basic service with the 'menu' option approach;
- f) Concern was expressed that although the pilot had been very well managed, this may not be replicated with complete devolvement, thereby incurring potential variances in quality. Further concerns which could also lead to quality inconsistencies were also expressed about shifts and sickness, which may arise with smaller pools of staff and the resultant variances in quality if not managed to the same excellent standard as the Stokenham model;
- g) A Member raised a query about the transition costs and felt strongly that town and parish councils should be fully consulted before changes were made;
- h) A Member stated that it was imperative to keep a clean environment high on the list of Council Corporate Priorities (i.e. toilets being cleaned regularly, litter bins being emptied regularly and streets swept). Such services were considered to be a top priority for the residents of the South Hams.

It was then:-

RECOMMENDED

That the Executive be **RECOMMENDED:-**

1. That the Group has commented on the outcomes, recognises the improvements in quality and responsiveness as a result of the pilot scheme, but notes that managing the economies of scale will be critical to the success and viability of any future devolvement;
2. That the three options in the presented report be reconsidered in June 2010 after the consultation phase with DAPC has been completed, and when further feedback from the outcomes of the pilot scheme has been received; and
3. That the pilot scheme be extended for a further twelve month period, with feedback on the success of the extension provided to officers by 31 May 2010.

EPDG.15/09 CLIMATE CHANGE ACTION PLAN PROGRESS REPORT

The Strategic Director (Community) presented the report and reminded Members that in 2007, the Council had reviewed its priorities and had agreed that its priorities would remain the same, but that Climate Change would become a cross cutting theme, underpinning each of the priorities. The presented Action Plan was not, he said, a separate or new action plan, but a summary document of all the related plans and strategies which contributed to this activity and provided an up date on what had been achieved to date.

During the discussion, the following points were made:

- a) Some Members expressed extreme disappointment in the presented document, citing that it did not provide them with any meaningful information that could be interpreted, i.e. in terms of targets and progress against targets such as in carbon reduction or renewable energy. In addition, it did not provide a direction of travel and on the whole, did not help the authority to further its aims and objectives. In contrast, another Member stated that other councils had very clear targets for carbon reduction up to 2016.

A Member went on to say, that national requirements would become more and more stringent and that if the council did not make Climate Change one of its priorities, the authority would have much more ground to cover in terms of meeting those requirements in the future. In response, the Strategic Director (Community) emphasised that the Council had been actively engaged in efforts to reduce its carbon footprint, and cited examples such as: the way it used IT promoting a reduction in business travel and the purchase of more energy efficient refuse vehicles. Furthermore, the Group was informed that the delay in a decision on the Local Government Review had been an obstacle to setting longer term targets in the carbon reduction plan;

- b) It was asked if carbon reduction education could be included in the recycling education when officers visited schools;
- c) With regard to affordable housing, several Members commended the aspiration for proposed project seeking to achieve level 5 housing, but felt that insufficient effort was being made to make the transition from level 3 to 4, which was a more difficult transition than from level 4 to 5. It was expressed that if this could be achieved, then the Council would be making huge strides. In response, the Officer informed that the challenge was whether sufficient grants e.g. from the HCA could be secured, as the Council could potentially deliver higher coded schemes if it could attract adequate funding. He further stated that the two pilot level 4 schemes were currently ahead of national requirements, so that good local progress was being made. A Member highlighted that local housing associations would like to build more level 4 housing but that they could not charge more rent, so they were faced with a choice of providing less houses at level 4/5 or more houses at level 3 in relation to the funding available;
- d) A Member expressed the wish that more information on the housing condition survey was included in the presented report, as this had been an excellent piece of work;
- e) In terms of the Councils Procurement Strategy, it was asked if sufficient consideration had been given to reducing demand to purchase goods and services and whether items could be reused or recycled;
- f) It was asked whether the Council could look at generating energy to feed into the national grid (e.g. by using solar panels on the south facing aspect of Follaton House or upgrading the heating system).

It was then

RECOMMENDED

That the Executive be **RECOMMENDED** that the Group has considered the report and commented on it (as recorded above).

(Meeting commenced at 2.00 pm and concluded at 4.00 pm).

Chairman