

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE ENVIRONMENT POLICY DEVELOPMENT
GROUP HELD AT FOLLATON HOUSE, TOTNES ON THURSDAY,
15 DECEMBER 2005**

MEMBERS

* Cllr R W Hallett - Chairman

* Cllr A R Vale - Vice-Chairman

∅ Cllr H D Bastone

* Cllr J Brazil

* Cllr B E Carson

* Cllr M Stone

* Cllr A Ward

* Cllr J A Westacott

* Denotes attendance

∅ Denotes apology for absence

Also in attendance and participating:

Cllrs E T Mitchell, J W Squire, I P Steer and R J Tucker

EPDG.09/05 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of the Environment Policy Development Group (EPDG) held on 22 November 2005 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

EPDG.10/05 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.11/05 BUDGET PROPOSALS 2006/2007

Consideration was given to a report which provided Members with an updated forecast of the financial situation for 2006/07 and over the medium term. The report was divided into a number of categories identified as:

- consultation with the Town and Parish Councils, Business Forum, residents and Members of the Council;
- the latest assessment of the core funding gap faces by the Council;
- options to address the funding gap, including efficiency savings and an increase in council tax levels;
- additional resources required to address service pressures or to enhance provision;
- next steps – achieving a balanced budget.

The report made specific reference to the consultation exercise which had been undertaken with a random sample of around 300 residents on a range of budget issues using the SIMALTO modelling technique during the 2005/2006 budget consultation process. The report noted that it was not intended to undertake the SIMALTO consultation exercise with the residents each year as the information gained had been very detailed and was considered valid for approximately two to three years.

In addition, it was also noted that presentations had also been made to meetings of the Business Forum and Town and Parish Councils so that their views could be incorporated into the process. However, it was stipulated within the report that these views were of those who attended the meeting and therefore did not represent the views of all the town and parishes in the district.

Prior to discussion on the report, the Group received a presentation from the Head of Financial Services on the latest financial forecast following a further indication from the Government on the revised provisional level of Revenue Support Grant to be received by this Council since the Executive agenda had been published for its 8 December 2005 (minute E.92/05 refers).

Members were reminded that a final decision on the grant was not expected until January 2006, but that in the meantime the revised figure was £5.208m, incorporating an increase of £614,000 with £468,000 to go towards the cost of the new concessionary fare scheme, operable from April 2006, and £146,000 for inflationary and other factors (3.2%).

In terms of the budget process, this adjustment meant that the Council had to find efficiency savings of £300,000, which resulted in a revised funding gap, prior to taking into account any increase in council tax or options to close the gap, of £423,000.

The Head of Financial Services drew Members attention to Appendix D to the report, which identified areas for proposed efficiency savings for 2006/07. He stressed that this list, because of being founded on savings being achieved through efficiencies, did not represent a reduction in any service and that the public would not be aware of any deterioration in service provision.

The Group then considered Appendix F of the report, deliberating each bid individually. Where a bid was supported without comment, no reference is made below.

B3. Member Training and Development

It was noted that, currently there was no training budget for Members development and it was therefore anticipated that a structured programme would be commissioned. A Member noted the importance of Development Control training. Whilst in support of the proposal, the Group felt that Member appraisals were not necessary and that all Members performance were reviewed by their constituents.

The Group supported the recommended bid.

B4. Renewal of Litter Bins

A Member felt that this would be an opportune time to provide improved facilities. Furthermore, a Member felt there was potential to gain sponsorship funding from local businesses.

The Group supported the recommended bid.

B5. Environmental Health – new shared post, Contaminated Land Officer

Concern was expressed over the statutory nature of this proposal and the repercussions of the outcome. Furthermore, it was questioned as to whether it was possible for the post to be resourced from 'in house' using the knowledge of already established officers. In response, Members were reminded that this was a shared post using specialist skills with Mid Devon and North Devon. It was a statutory duty with the Comprehensive Performance Assessment requirements being the main driver.

The Group supported the recommendation, although they wished for their reservations to be noted.

B7. Change Management and Business Process Re-engineering

Members were informed that the proposed expenditure of £60,000 over two years was intended to acquire specialist skills to assist the Council to rationalise its activities and, essentially, to be able to achieve the efficiency savings identified in Appendix D to the report. It was noted that without the expertise of external specialists, the Council was unlikely to be able to deliver on the efficiencies identified. The initiative was, therefore, an example of 'spend to save'. A Member of the Group was concerned that this should be already happening and that to employ external specialists could result in no new information or use being gained to the Council.

The Group supported the recommendation.

B9. External Legal Advice

Following a query, it was noted that this was a specific fund for securing legal advice in relation to probity issues.

The Group supported the recommendation.

B10. Public Relations – additional support

A number of Members of the Group deemed it unnecessary for there to be additional support for Public Relations (PR). It was felt that this was not a priority and it might be perceived that the Council was more interested in its image. In response, it was noted that there was an increasing demand on the PR Office and as it was a small department additional support was required.

Following a vote, it was declared that the Group did not support the recommendation.

B14. Green Tourism, contribution from Economic Initiatives Reserve

During discussion, it was noted that, whilst the Group supported the recommendation, it was felt that the funding grant should decrease over the three year period. The following amendment was then **PROPOSED**, and **SECONDED** and on being put to the vote declared **CARRIED**:-

“That the contribution to the Green Tourism Initiative be £10,000 for the first year, reducing to £7,500 and £5,000 over the following two years.”

Possible 2007/08 Bids

Members were advised that bids B15 to B17 had been deferred until 2007/2008 because of the current financial pressures on the budget. In the meantime, however, an indication of the Group's views on each item was sought.

B15. Contribution to Economic Initiatives Reserve

The Group supported the recommendation in principle.

B16. Housing Register and Homelessness Software

Although there was concern over the amount of expenditure involved in this proposal, the Group supported the recommendation in principle.

B17. Tree Maintenance

Following discussion, the following amendment was **PROPOSED** and **SECONDED** and being put to the vote declared **CARRIED**:-

That the bid be bought forward for consideration as part of the 2006/2007 budget.

(Meeting commenced at 2.00 pm and concluded at 4.30 pm).

Chairman