

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF SCRUTINY
HELD AT FOLLATON HOUSE, TOTNES ON THURSDAY, 17 JANUARY 2008**

MEMBERS

* Cllr C M Pannell - Chairman

* Cllr K J Baldry - Vice-Chairman

* Cllr J H Baverstock

∅ Cllr P H Cook

∅ Cllr G J Fielden

* Cllr R D Gilbert

* Cllr J W Squire

* Cllr J A Westacott

* Denotes attendance

∅ Denotes apology for absence

Also in attendance at the invitation of the Chairman:

Cllrs N A Barnes, J Brazil, M J Hicks, P W Hitchins, D W May, M F Saltern
and R J Tucker

Officers in attendance for all items: Chief Executive, Strategic Director (Community),
Strategic Director (Resources), Strategic Director (Operations),
and Member Support Services Manager.
Item 6: Head of Financial Services.

SC.38/07 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of Scrutiny held on 19 December 2007 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

SC.39/07 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Members were invited to declare any interests in the items of business to be considered during the course of the meeting, these were recorded as follows:

Cllr J H Baverstock declared a personal interest in item 6: 'Budget Proposals 2008/2009' – potential budget saving 9 'to remove swimming buoys from Torcross' (minute SC.40/07 below refers) by virtue of being a swimmer and boat user in this area and remained in the meeting and took part in the discussion and vote thereon.

Cllr J A Westacott declared a personal interest in 6: 'Budget Proposals 2008/2009' – potential budget saving 5 'cease support to Ring and Ride' (minute SC.40/07 below refers) by virtue of her involvement with the Ring and Ride Service and took part in the discussion but abstained from the vote thereon.

SC.40/07 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 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.

Members were informed that an 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 averaged to 0.9%, which was considered to be extremely disappointing and would continue to create real budgetary pressures for the Council in the forthcoming years.

During discussion, particular reference was made to:-

- a) feedback from the consultation process. Officers informed Members that two evenings of consultation had been undertaken with the Business Forums and the Town and Parish Councils although there were no definite overriding themes raised. However, both events had concluded that expenditure could be reduced by the Council on communicating with the public. A Member expressed the view that communication was a two way operation and one way communication methods such as the South Hams Magazine should be self funding;
- b) efficiency savings. Members were informed that the Council continued to look at all possible efficiency savings and that Appendix E to the presented report demonstrated where savings had been delivered or were proposed to be made. As the Council had already made a number of efficiency savings in previous years, these savings were becoming increasingly more difficult;

- c) the contingency reserve of £100,000. A Member felt that in view of the financial situation of the authority, the Council could not afford to place £100,000 into a contingency reserve and that it was therefore essential that the agreed budget was met without the luxury of a financial safety net. A Member gave the opposing view stating that it was prudent to have a reserve fund and that Members were not being asked to spend but just to allocate funds should the need arise. To justify supplementing this reserve, officers informed Members that the forthcoming financial year had more uncertainties than previously. These included costs arising from the restructuring of refuse rounds, the new concessionary fares scheme and pressure on key income sources such as car parks and Dartmouth Ferry.

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

The Group unanimously supported this potential saving.

S2: Cease or Reduce Community Grant Funding

The Group unanimously supported this potential saving.

S3: Cease support to Devon Racial Equality Council

The Group unanimously supported this potential saving.

S4: Cease support to Enterprise South Devon

The Group unanimously voted in support of the potential saving.

S5: Cease support to Ring and Ride

A Member expressed the belief that the service provided a vital contribution to the community. A Member informed the Group that the service was not included in the concessionary fare scheme and was only for use by those that were unable to use normal public transport. A Member highlighted that Kingsbridge did not have such a scheme. In response, a Member informed the Group that when the Ring and Ride Scheme was established it was agreed that the scheme would not service areas that already had a community bus such as Kingsbridge. However there had recently been a need identified for such a facility in Kingsbridge.

The Group voted by three to two with one abstention in support of this potential saving.

S6: Restructure Public Convenience Cleaning Rounds

The Group unanimously voted in support of this potential saving.

S7: Introduce Seasonal Opening for 24 Public Conveniences

Members considered a letter from Dittisham Parish Council that was tabled at the meeting. Members were also informed that the Coleridge Association were against the proposed saving. A Member expressed their opposition to such a saving believing that the potential closures were a retrograde step and a danger to public health. A Member questioned whether the closures would result in staff being placed on a seasonal contract. In response, officers informed the Group that staff contracts could become annualised and require more hours to be worked during the summer months and that during the closure period, staff could be redeployed to fill posts within the Service that were currently filled by agency staff.

The Group voted by four to two against this potential saving.

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

The local ward Member for Kingsbridge (North) informed the Group that the town was entering the Britain in Bloom competition this year and found it regrettable that such a saving was being proposed, when the Town Council was proposing to invest in this area.

The Group voted by four to one, with one abstention in support of this potential saving.

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

A Member informed the Group that in discussion with the Salcombe Harbour Master two heavy anchorages could be sunk with a string of marker buoys placed between them, therefore stopping boats from approaching the beach. The Harbour Master believed that this method could be employed at half the cost of the current operation.

The Group unanimously voted to reduce the potential saving by half to £1,200, as outlined by the local Member.

S10: Remove Speed Limit Buoys at Jennycliff and Wembury

A local ward Member for Wembury expressed the belief that Jennycliff was within the Jurisdiction of Plymouth City Council and that the area concerned in this proposed saving was actually Bovisand. The Member also informed the Group that in previous years, Wembury Parish Council had contributed to the total cost of the buoys and suggested that they may be willing to do so again. In response, officers advised that Wembury Parish Council's contribution was in addition to the costs incurred by South Hams District Council. Members were also informed that there was no statutory responsibility to lay the buoys and no byelaw in place to enforce it, so in the event of an accident, the District Council could be liable.

As a compromise a Member proposed reducing the saving to £1,000, with the ownership and responsibility for the laying of buoys being transferred to the Parish Council. The Group voted by four to two in support of this proposal.

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

A Member expressed concern at the District Council transferring responsibility for areas of land to the Town and Parish Councils at a time when many had already submitted their precepts and therefore may not have budgeted for such unforeseen expenditure. A Group Member proposed that the saving be made subject to such arrangements not creating a situation of financial hardship to Town and Parish Councils in the first year. The Group voted unanimously in support to the potential saving as amended.

S12: Reduce Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Project Funding

The Group unanimously supported this potential saving.

S13: Partnership Working and Restructuring of Legal Services

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. A Member felt that the South Hams Matters magazine should be a self funding publication. Officers informed Members that the current revenue created by advertising went towards reducing the printing and distribution costs. It was suggested that the notices that were normally advertised through newspapers could be placed into the magazine, therefore creating a saving and assisting the magazine to become self-financing. The Group voted by five to one in support of the magazine to becoming self financing.

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

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

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

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

B5: Local Area Agreement Partnership

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

B6: Housing - Choice Based Lettings

Members were informed that it had 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.

The Group 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 equivalent scheme had been considered to be a success.

A Group Member questioned why the £30,000 was required for three years. Officers informed that the expenditure was required to enable the redirection of the service, which officers felt would take approximately three years.

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

B8: Carbon Management

A Member questioned whether there was an officer in place at Teignbridge. Members were informed that through the 2006/2007 budget process a new post could have been created between South Hams District Council and Teignbridge District Council, shortly after Teignbridge District Council underwent a restructuring and absorbed a climate change post within its existing provision.

Members were also advised that South Hams District Council wished to join and complete the Carbon Management Programme, and that the learning gained from Teignbridge District Council would be of great benefit.

A Member proposed that the Bid priority be raised to medium. By virtue of the Chairman's Casting Vote, the Group supported this proposal.

The Group proceeded to consider Appendix B of the report. During discussion, a Member questioned why there was such a high expenditure on Democratic Representation and Management. In response, Members were informed that the presented figure included all expenditure relating to the democratic process. Members were informed that a detailed breakdown of the composition of these figures could be found in 2007/08 Council Budget Book.

SC.41/07 **AGENDA ITEMS FOR FUTURE MEETINGS OF SCRUTINY**

Environment Agency

Whilst discussing the meeting with the Environment Agency Members were informed that the Pitt Report had been published and that the Environment Agency could discuss the implications and issues raised in this report.

Tone Leisure

Members agreed that the Chairman of Scrutiny should speak with the Chairman of the Audit Committee to discuss the meeting with Tone Leisure no longer being a joint meeting.

Standards Board

The Chairman informed the Group that she had spoken with the Deputy Monitoring Officer who confirmed that it would be reasonable to invite a representative from the Standards Board to attend a meeting in due course.

Post Office Closure Programme

Cllr Baverstock informed Members that as a representative of Postwatch he would like to address the Full Council in March regarding Post Office Closures. Members were informed that the Rural Services Newsletter which would be circulated with the Members Bulletin in the near future provided an insight into the closure process which had started in the North of England and made for some interesting reading.

(Meeting commenced at 10.00 am and concluded at 12.00 pm).

Chairman