

**MINUTES OF MEETING
OF THE
REGIONAL ASSEMBLY ENVIRONMENT GROUP
WEDNESDAY 5 FEBRUARY 2003**

PRESENT: Pat Hockey (Chair)	S. Gloucestershire Council
Malcom Hanney	Bath & North East Somerset Council
Noel Cartwright	West Devon BC
Nolan Clarke	Dartmoor National Park
Chanel Stevens	North Somerset Council
Mark Robins	SEP
Martin Ross	SEP
Chris Herries	SEP
Caroline Dudley	SEP
Gil Streets	Chair of Waste Group
John Lofts	Planning & Transport Group member
Kevin Brown	English Heritage
Louise Thornhill	Countryside Agency
Jeanette Ward	English Nature
Richard Cresswell	Environment Agency
Clare Gibson	SWRDA
Tim Render	GOSW
Sandra Fryer	Bristol City Council (Chair, Environment Support Group)
Clare Brooke	SWRA
Cheryl Cowlin	SWRA
Chris Mitchell	SWRA
Chris Elton	SWRA

Apologies: *Chester Long as Chair of Economic Policy Group; James Fortune as Chair of the Social Inclusion Group; Julian Johnson of Wiltshire County Council; Alun Thomas SEP; Viv Vines SEP sub.; and Stephen Pugsley of West Somerset District Council.*

1.0 Regional Environmental Strategy

This meeting was run as an extraordinary meeting, with the Regional Directors of the Statutory Environmental Bodies as guest speakers to discuss their organisations priorities for the region and their contribution to the Regional Environment Strategy.

2.0 The first presentation was given by Richard Cresswell, Regional Director of the Environment Agency. The main points made during the presentation were:

- It is important to maintain the environmental assets that we have;
- We need to find new ways to improve the environmental assets that we have.

- 2.1** The Environment Agency felt there are three key issues for the region: agriculture, waste and climate change. The main priorities for action proposed were improving understanding, changing lifestyles, engaging people and providing coordinating mechanisms.
- 3.0** The second presentation was given by Louise Thornhill, Regional Director of the Countryside Agency. The key points made during the presentation were that:
- We need to maintain the existing quality of the environment;
 - We need to improve the areas in which we are under performing.
- 3.1** The Countryside Agency's key issues for the region were; housing in rural areas, environmental crime, access and understanding and nationally important landscapes. Some important points raised were: that the environment should be an equal partner in sustainable development; that the environment is a key regional issue; that there needs to be a clear structure established for organisations working in the region within the environment sphere; and that there is a need to ensure quality of life indicators include environmental indicators.
- 4.0** The third presentation was by Jeanette Ward, Regional Director of English Nature. The key points made in this presentation were:
- That the South West is the richest and most diverse all of English regions and to maintain this requires investment;
 - An ecosystem approach should be taken to achieve sustainable development;
- 4.1** The key issues for English Nature were; the loss of quality habitats; land management; linking special sites; management of the coast; and climate change. The key priorities were to achieve biodiversity targets and a network of special sites. This requires practical action, emphasis on agriculture and land management and participation of environmentalists within the decision making process.
- 5.0** The fourth presentation was by Kevin Brown, Regional Director of English Heritage. The key points made in this presentation were:
- A high proportion of the protected historic landscape in the region is classified as at risk;
 - There is a lack of understanding and skills to support the conservation of the historic environment;
 - Access to the environment is important;
- 5.1** The priorities for English Heritage were: cultural tourism; improving understanding of the historic environment through research; developing and using historic landscape characterisation assessment; and restoring buildings for reuse. Their future regional priorities were: heritage lead regeneration; ongoing restoration; local distinctive design; coastal, marine and wetland protection and highlighting the value of the historic environment.

6.0 The final presentation was by Chris Elton, Director of Policy and Strategy at the SW Regional Assembly. Chris highlighted that the results of a recent public opinion survey commissioned by the SWRA, showed that the public recognise the significance of the environment in the region and that the SWRA therefore has a role in reflecting this. The main issues raised included:

- That we must recognise our environmental assets;
- We must have a clear strategy to maintain and enhance these assets;
- We must encourage regional partnership working;

6.1 The SWRA has a clear role in monitoring delivery of the Environment Strategy and brokering discussion over areas of conflict; evaluating the environmental implications of changing policy and ensuring the Integrated Regional Strategy and Regional Spatial Strategy have clear environmental components.

7.0 Questions were then put to the Regional Directors by members on the key ‘issues’ identified for the strategy.

7.1 Climate Change

Question - The climate change report launched recently by the Environment Minister highlights the need for mitigation and adaptation strategies to be developed for all sectors. How can we ensure that the findings of the study are integrated into a wide range of regional policies and strategies so that we are best placed as a region to deal with adaptations that may be required? What particular issues should the Assembly be focusing on in its policy and strategy development?

7.2 *Summary Response – Responding to climate change requires a two-pronged approach, i.e. mitigating the impacts of climate change (greenhouse gases) as well as adapting to the changes in climate that are already in train. We have to plan adaptation strategies, which are integrated and where possible, using the environment as a natural solution (for example through managed retreat of coastal defences or using traditional methods of construction which are better at adapting to changing climatic conditions). In addition, we must address the causes of climate change through energy, transport and planning policies. It is everyone’s responsibility; however, in many cases even key stakeholders have not taken action. Increasing understanding and awareness therefore have to be key priorities with a greater emphasis on education. The South West could provide real leadership in sustainability – for example through the purchasing policies of public bodies in the region and getting all local authorities to sign up to Future Foundations the sustainable construction charter for the SW.*

7.3 Resource Productivity

Question - How do we get ‘everyone’ to realise the true cost of inefficient resource use and waste generation in the region; and realise the benefit of maximising the efficiency of resource use and minimising waste? Are there key sectors in the South West that should be targeted to reduce their resource

use or waste production? Who should take the lead in this? What are the greatest barriers to achieving minimum waste and how can your organisations help?

7.4 *Summary Response* - We need to tackle all areas of waste, explain the reasons why we need to recycle and engage communities. We should empower communities to solve their own problems, for example through community composting. Having labels on packaging to say whether or not it is recyclable would be extremely useful. There could be a role for the Assembly & the region generally to lobby government to improve product labelling and the materials used in packaging. The main problem is that although it is wasteful to destroy things, it is generally more expensive to repair them (due to the VAT regime), particularly in the historic environment context.

7.5 **Agriculture**

Question - How can we best promote diversification of agriculture and support the building of supply chains within the region which help to promote locally produced goods?

7.6 *Summary Response* –The South West is a diverse region and therefore we need to look for different solutions to the problems we face. Diversification needs to be linked to community needs and examples of successful diversification schemes need to be shared. There are opportunities for making clever linkages and for innovative solutions. A proactive approach is needed; Whole farm plans would provide a solution for ensuring environmental concerns were taken into consideration; Partnerships and mechanisms for the sharing of innovative ways of using finance need to be established. Where possible we should aim to address the cause of the problem rather than dealing with the outcome, for example by changing agricultural practices to reduce diffuse pollution or soil erosion rather than treating water

7.7 *Question - Should there be a regional debate on GM crops and what role can the Assembly & statutory environmental bodies play in facilitating this?*

7.8 *Summary Response* – There would be benefit in having a regional debate. Tim Render GOSW, offered assistance in facilitating this debate.

ACTN Secretariat to discuss with GOSW how to take this forward and who should be invited to attend.

7.9 **Tourism**

Question - What pressures do tourists place on the region's built and natural environment & how do we ensure they don't kill the goose that lays the golden egg? How can the region put environmental considerations at the top of the tourism agenda? Should the South West aim to become a market leader in sustainable tourism and how can this be facilitated?

7.10 *Summary Response* – The region should aim to become a leader in sustainable tourism, building on the sustainable tourism initiative that is already underway and good practice that has been established, for example in South Hams. We should try to make sustainable tourism appeal to people, for example by providing information on how travel without a car once they arrive at their destination. We need to join things up. The season needs to be extended to deal with the volume of tourists, the tourist resource and infrastructure requires upgrading and innovative marketing initiatives are needed. Chris Mitchell commented that there are opportunities to address the transport issues through the SWARMMs implementation plan, and invited the environmental bodies to contribute to that process.

7.11 **Development and Planning**

A number of development and planning issues were raised throughout the meeting, it was therefore decided that due to time pressures this topic had already been sufficiently covered. However, a couple of comments were made in relation to the changes to the planning system.

7.12 Comments included:

- There is an issue surrounding RPG policy of focusing development in urban areas; How sustainable will this make rural communities without development? This policy also causes serious conflicts in terms of demand for land in urban areas.
- There is a need to reflect the needs of rural areas more effectively at a strategic planning level.
- There is an important shift towards engaging local communities in the new system through emerging community planning.
- Emphasis is shifting towards ‘characterisation’ rather than the protection of particular elements of the environment.
- This reflects a move towards a new way of working, looking at landscape character and quality of design and whether something is ‘good enough to approve’ rather than ‘bad enough to refuse.’
- Shouldn’t we be aiming to obtain private sector involvement in some of our discussions? How could we do this?

8.0 **Members then posed questions relating to broader elements of the strategy:**

8.1 **Links to people and prosperity;**

Question - We all recognise that the environment doesn’t exist in isolation, it is intrinsically linked to social progress and economic development the three ‘legs’ of sustainable development. What tensions do you feel have occurred and how have you overcome them?

8.2 *Summary Response* –Most people accept the actual principles of sustainable development, but tensions usually arise in trying to implement them. We need to demonstrate what sustainable development looks like in practice, and disseminating this widely to

encourage others. Tensions and conflicts can often lead to innovative solutions, the key is working together and looking more broadly for a new approach. We need to look for win, win solutions, by mainstreaming and joining up the three elements of sustainable development.

8.3 Delivery and Partnership working.

The objectives and actions in the Regional Environment Strategy will necessitate collective action by regional organisations. How can regional environmental bodies support the delivery of the Regional Environment Strategy?

8.4 Environment Agency:

- Share priorities widely;
- Share successes;

English Nature:

- Plan priorities with the SWRA;
- Take a proactive rather than reactive approach;
- Agree shared outcomes for the region and how to achieve them;
- Support the possible extension to the scrutiny role of the SWRA;
- Support the implementation of Strategic Environmental Assessment.

Countryside Agency:

- Share intelligence and information;
- Share solutions and best practice;
- Continue to seek high standards of partners;
- Supporting the empowerment of communities.

English Heritage:

- Provide a clear statement of issues and policies – welcome debate/scrutiny of the Historic Environment Strategy being developed;
- Provide intelligence and a baseline of the state of the historic environment;
- Provide expertise;
- Raise awareness.

SWRDA

- Continue to develop the Environment Driver.

GOSW

- DERFA is a partner of many of the forums dealing with these issues. Key elements of DEFRA's work that will input to the Environment Strategy are the Sustainable Food and Farming Strategy, Climate Change work Renewable Energy work. Tim Render also gave an assurance that there is a commitment to sustainability across all Government Departments.

- 8.5 The main conclusion was that we should all be leading by example.
- 8.6 The Chair thanked everyone for attending, particularly the guest speakers and the other guests. Members felt that this had been a very useful starting point for discussion, and would welcome the opportunity to continue dialogue with the statutory environmental bodies on these issues. The Regional Directors confirmed their willingness to participate in future discussions. In the meantime, the Secretariat confirmed that the outputs of this session would feed into the development of the draft Regional Environment Strategy, which will be considered at the next meeting.

9.0 Date of next meeting

The next meeting of the Group will at 10.30 on the 23rd April 2003. The venue for this meeting is Dennett House.