

Devon Rural Network Policy Steering Group Minutes

9.30am – 11.30am Taw Study, Larkbeare House, Exeter 20.03.07

Present

Prof Ian Mercer CBE (IM)	South West Forest, Vice DRN Chair	Helen Marchant (HM)	Natural England
Pete Tansey (PT)	Devon Renaissance	Martyn Warren (MW)	Rural Futures Unit
Philip Wagstaff (PW)	Churches Together in Devon	Greg Davis (GD)	CCD
Kevin Bacon (KB)	Environment Agency	Dennis Brewer (BD)	NFU
Sheena Asthana (SA)	Plymouth University	Jennifer Anderton (JA)	DRN
Charlie Plowden (CP)	East Devon DC	Martin Taylor (MT)	Devon Conservation Forum
Lynne Del Greco (LDG)	SWRDA	Cllr Humphrey Temperley (HT)	DCC

Apologies

Prof Michael Winter OBE	University of Exeter	Tom Langdon-Davis	Devon Towns Forum
Peter Walmsley	Private Sector	Chris Woodruff	East Devon AONB
Peter Harvey	Business Link	Sue Brownlow	SWRDA
Steve Pitcher	North Devon DC	Mary Talbot Rosevear	Small Farms Association
Richard White	Culm Group		
David Incoll	Devon CEX's group		

Agenda

1. Minutes of the Last Meeting

All agreed that the minutes were an accurate account of the last meeting. The minutes were signed off.

2. Matters to be brought forward at the Chairs Discretion.

IM circulated an updated paper on priority considerations for the DRN for 07/08 (attached to minutes). Firstly Ian explained that the original paper on priority considerations as seen at the MSG meeting on 7th Feb was discussed at the MAG and developed in to this document.

One of the main points for IM to investigate is where the DRN fit in to the Devon Strategic Partnership. The new structure diagram does not show the DRN but does show the Economic Partnership.

Action: IM to contact DSP to ask the question and to start a dialogue.

Recently JA had attended a Devon Renaissance working group and was questioned about the current name of the new rural strategy. The former strategy ran from 2003-2006 and the new one does not have a period of time stated. JA did explain that it is a rolling guide but agreed that the name may be misleading. The PSG agreed that the name should be changed to Devon Rural Strategy 2007 with a strap line for the action plan. Devon Renaissance working group members were also concerned about the apparent lack of consultation, it was explained that the PSG and DRN members have seen the ongoing work and have had a chance to comment at every opportunity.

PT explained that what Devon Renaissance need as with many other agencies, is the foresight of a strategy to help in planning and delivering of priorities in the future.

DB explained that Rural Renaissance should be dove tailing in to the new rural strategy. LDG agreed and said that the strategy should be what happens in the ground, the problems, issues etc.

PW said that the DRN need to reflect on delivery programmes across Devon and help smaller agencies to be recognised.

IM also highlighted the fact that the MAG members had each taken on a priority area, the idea is to help support and look after. The breakdown is as follows:

Ian Mercer – Environment & Climate Change
Phil Wagstaff – Community Self Confidence
David Incoll – Rural Housing
Tom Langdon-Davis – Rural Business & Productivity

This left accessibility as needing a champion, IM has approached Lynne Thornton – Rural Transport Partnership Manager who has agreed to join the MAG.

SA made the point that accessibility is a lot more than just transport to be mindful not to oversee the other areas including health.

3. Rural Policy Advisory/Leadership role

HT began the discussion around the rural advisory/leadership role, he used the example of Somerset County Council and how there is a designated group of people where you can go and get advice on rural issues, a rapid response. There does not seem to be any such service in Devon, nowhere to access high quality advice, it is not the job of the CCD or the RDA.

HT carried on to say he could see 2 options, 1. To buy the service from DRN or 2. To employ an officer at DCC for this role, but to ensure the service was available to all, the DRN would be one of the main sources of information for this person.

IM asked the question whether the DRN should have a member of staff concentrating on Rural Policy, though money would not allow this currently.

MW said that the university's (especially Plymouth/Exeter) have a role in this and could provide a great deal of the information needed, whether this would be through Jen for collation purposes would have to be decided as time constraints may be an issue.

CP went on to say that Somerset actually carried out a thorough audit of their countryside service and decided to reform in to a Rural Services section. The process was not easy and unsettling for staff along the way. This kind of role would be impractical for the DRN as the service could not be maintained, not enough staff of time.

PW brought up the point of how do we define policy? The answer that you receive is dependent on who or what you ask.

KB used the example of the recent problems that the Environment Agency have had in targeting resources and time to find out information, and as a result have developed a web resource (based on GIS) for all to have access to statistics and information about a given sector or area.

PT was concerned that such a role should not sit within DCC, LA's are very stretched already and cannot be expected to do everything, the role may be diluted or not supported.

CP went on to say that the advisory role would be needed 5 days a week, that Somerset proof all their work and it is one of the main functions of the rural service and could DCC copy or reflect on their model.

IM began to draw together some of the comments being made and it seemed that the consensus would be to support the idea of having a full time post to cover rural policy/stats.

Action: IM to draft a letter to send to Cllr Greenslade supporting the idea of a new rural policy post. Copy to Cllr Humphrey Temperley

SA raised a concern that such a job would be too much for one person as rural covers so much and in varying degrees of depth. Would there be a possibility of seconding staff from a Beacon rural authority?

HT agreed that the role would be very varied but one person would be better than none! HT thinks he could find the money to fund a position such as described above.

PT again made the point that perhaps such a person should not sit within the Local Authority as being a researcher and analytical brings a certain skills set that is not always appropriate to the work of Local Government. This type of role would sit far better with a university.

CP again reflected on Somerset's experience that they had had buy in from the political and senior manager level, and that the role of the DRN is to voice concerns.

The network provides a rural proofing facility which should be fundamental to the County Council.

SA suggested making better use of the Commission for Rural Communities who constantly research and provide responses to policy etc.

CP asked LDG whether, if there had been a rural specific group or facility at DCC this would have sped up the SERC process, LDG made the point that having local level information and knowledge is valuable and yes, the process may have been quicker.

IM made the final point that Rural Policy Advice is a function and to no longer debate leadership as this would emerge or not.

4. Devon Rural Strategy and Action Table – JA

JA briefly explained that the action table had been slightly reordered whilst she was on holiday; content had not changed just order of column and actions made clearer. JA thanked Sheena and Dennis for their contributions in finalising their specialist areas. (table attached)

The strategy is due to go to print by weds 28th March which would mean the launch and distribution at the DRN AGM on 11th April.

5. DRN staff

JA updated on the staffing situation, most members will have had an email from Sarah to say she was moving on. Sarah has been offered a post at South Hams District Council as Sustainable Tourism Officer, a great job for Sarah but a loss for the Network!

Heather Hillman went on maternity leave on Fri 16th March and Andrew Lightfoot has taken on the line management of Jen.

The post is in the process of being advertised (www.devonjobs.co.uk economy and regeneration section) interviews will take place on 1st May so it is hoped someone would be in post end of May/June.

Sue Smith would be representing DCC on the MAG during Heather's absence.

6. Short updates

DRN Budget – JA updated that funding had been secured from SWRDA, WDBC, TDC, SHDC, NDDC, EDDC, Dartmoor NP and Exmoor NP (offer letter from EDDC to be sent to Jen). MDDC and ToDC would be approached again in May after elections. Natural England are awaiting confirmation of their budget before contribution can be finalised.

Community Planning Database – JA updated that the DRN had been able to support the database through the DEFRA RSCP £2050 due to under spend. The project is being supported financially by the 4 Objective 2 areas, Teignbridge, East Devon and Mid Devon are so far not supporting.



DEFRA RSCP fund – the projects are currently submitting their end of year reports and claims, JA will be pulling together and end of year report for DEFRA. Funding offer letters for Year 2 have been sent out.

Action Groups – there was nothing to update about action groups. Reviews of the groups would begin once the strategy has been published.

DRN AGM 11th April – JA updated that the plans were coming along for the AGM and reminded PSG members to send back their booking forms,

Date and time of next meeting:

Monday 14th May – 2pm, Environment Agency, Exminster (map to be sent with agenda)