

24 June 2002

**EXMOOR NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY
DISTRICT AND PARISH CONSULTATIVE GROUP**

Notes of the meeting of the District and Parish Consultative Group held on Monday
24 June 2002 at 7.35 pm in the Committee Room, Exmoor House, Dulverton.

PRESENT

Mrs A Amory, Group Chairman	Exmoor National Park Authority
Mr M A Collins	Exmoor National Park Authority & Withypool and Hawkridge Parish Council
Mr J C Edwards	Exmoor National Park Authority
Mr M Gammon	Exmoor National Park Authority
Mr M H Knight	Exmoor National Park Authority & Combe Martin Parish Council
Mr M J Pile	Exmoor National Park Authority & Kentisbury Parish Council
Mr S J Pugsley	Exmoor National Park Authority & West Somerset District Council
Mr F Rawle	Exmoor National Park Authority, West Somerset District Council & Exton Parish Council
Mr R J Webber	Exmoor National Park Authority, West Somerset District Council & Cutcombe Parish Council
Mr E H Lethaby	Brendon and Countisbury Parish Council
Mr M Scott	Brompton Regis Parish Council
Mrs F Barringer-Capp	Carhampton Parish Council
Mr D Woodman	Challacombe Parish Meeting
Mr B Sully	Cutcombe Parish Council
Miss S Shepherd	East Anstey Parish Council
J H Henson	Luxborough Parish Council
D J Powell	Luxborough Parish Council
Mr D E Creasey	Monksilver Parish Council
Mr H Geen	North Devon District Council & North Molton Parish Council
Mr D Britnell	Porlock Parish Council
Mrs P D Williams	Withypool and Hawkridge Parish Council
Mrs M Norman	Wootton Courtenay Parish Council
Mrs C Turner	Wootton Courtenay Parish Council
Mr P Lacey	Somerset Association of Local Councils
Mr G Day	West Somerset District Council
Mr S Taylor	West Somerset District Council & Minehead Town Council

Apologies for absence were received from Mr R Morrison-Smith, Mr M Robins and

Mr M E Taylor (Exmoor National Park Authority), Mr E Nightingale (Exmoor National Park Authority, North Devon District Council & Lynton and Lynmouth Town Council), Mr B Symons (Brayford Parish Council), Dulverton Town Council, Mrs J Nicholson (Dunster Parish Council), Ms S Hibbert (Lynton and Lynmouth Town Council), Old Cleeve Parish Council and Mr T Davey (Withypool and Hawkridge Parish Council).

1. NOTES OF THE LAST MEETING

(1) Confirmation

The Notes of the meeting of the Consultative Group held on 26 November 2001 were agreed as a correct record.

(2) Matters Arising

(i) Note 5.10 – Farm Incomes

In response to comment from Mr Rawle that farm incomes were continuing to deteriorate at a rapid rate, the Chairman said that the Authority was pursuing various initiatives to try to improve the situation.

(ii) Note 6.9 – Council Tax for Second Homes

Mr Lacey said that the Deputy Prime Minister had issued a draft Local Government Bill and indicated there would be clauses to make provision for Council Tax to be levied on second homes. However, there had been no details on the proposal or timing.

2. PARISH MATTERS

(1) The Parish Councils (Model Code of Conduct) Order 2001 (including Part 3 - The Register of Members' Interests)

Cutcombe Parish Council had asked for this item as there “are a number of areas giving rise to problems, both practical and on matters of principle. In Cutcombe, we expect a number of Councillors to resign over the issue, giving rise to concerns for the future of grass-roots representation.” Copies of the Code had been circulated with the agenda.

Comments from representatives of a number of Parish Councils indicated that there was concern over the need for Parish Councils to adopt the Code of Conduct, for Councillors to have to sign an undertaking to follow the Code and for them to have to register their interests. Two or three Councillors in parishes refusing to sign up to the Code/register their interests was not uncommon, and a number had resigned over the issue. There was concern about the implications of securing candidates for next year's Parish Council elections and at least one Parish Council (Brompton Regis) was exploring the possibility of changing its status to Parish Meeting which would avoid the need to meet the requirements of the Code of Conduct. It seemed that the reluctance to adopt/sign/register was less where Parish/Town Councils had larger budgets. There was also concern that the process had not been explained properly to some Parish Councils.

Mr Lacey was asked what action he had taken to raise local concerns over the issue at the national level.

In response, Mr Lacey said that the reluctance to follow the requirements of the Code was patchy across Somerset and other counties, and the reasons for not doing so and for people resigning over the issue differed. He suggested that there was no need for anyone to resign; as where the Code was not adopted it would be automatically imposed and there was no legally enforceable requirement for the signing of an undertaking to follow the Code. A breach to the Code would occur where there had been a failure to complete the register of interests. Such cases would need to be referred to the Standards Board for investigation. Under the new Code, a failure to register interests was no longer a criminal offence, but the Standards Board had the power to disqualify councillors who did not register.

Mr Lacey said that there would be an opportunity for Parish Councils to make their views known to the Standards Board's Policy Officer at the National Association of Local Councils' AGM on 28 September 2002, which may also be attended by a Board Member. He also mentioned that he had raised with the fifty County Secretaries of other Local Council Associations the question of whether the registration of interests should be voluntary (including the ability to register some interests but not others), but there was no support for that position. The response was that the register should remain as set out in the Code of Conduct.

Mr Lacey also mentioned that DEFRA had published a consultation document on 'Conduct of Councillors – Local Investigation and Determination of Misconduct Allegations', which would allow Ethical Standards Officers at the Standards Board to refer matters that had been, or were, the subject of investigation to the monitoring officer of the relevant local authority. For Exmoor Parish Councils this would be the two District Councils. The Standards Board would ensure consistency in approach and outcomes. There was still the opportunity to comment on the document, and responses needed to be made by 1 July 2002.

In response to comment about possible political influence affecting the decisions of Parish Councillors and/or Parish Councils on the Code, there was a clear message from the meeting that there was no evidence for this.

(2) **Tree Overgrowth**

Porlock Parish Council had asked for discussion on "the question of tree overgrowth in valleys and the effect this has on dwellings – is there a policy for felling or thinning if light levels are affected?". Mr Britnell added that the topography of settlements in valleys in the Porlock area with steep embankments meant that little natural light filtered through, and this was made worse by excessive tree growth. In the light of several Tree Preservation Orders (TPOs) in the area, he asked for consideration to be given to the amount of shadowing that these trees could give rise to.

In response, Dr Wills, the Authority's Head of Conservation and Land Management, explained that, before TPOs were made, there was discussion with neighbouring property owners and they had the opportunity to raise objections. The Authority made very few TPOs, there were only about 50 in the National

Park. However, they were important in securing the protection of important trees. Many trees in wooded valleys were protected through Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) provisions, and English Nature's views and consent would be required before any were felled. Dr Wills did not believe that light restriction from trees was a general problem within the National Park.

3. **RURAL HOUSING ENABLER PROJECT**

Mrs Robinson, the Rural Housing Enabler, gave a presentation on her work to promote affordable housing on Exmoor and the rural areas of North Devon and West Somerset. Leaflets about the project and her role were tabled.

- **Aims of the Project**

To increase the provision of affordable housing for local needs where it was required in the rural communities, across the project area.

There was an ongoing diminution of housing stocks across the area and local people were unable to buy. Also, the Housing Registers held by the District Councils were not specific enough on need and many were not putting their names forward for inclusion.

- **Funding organisations**

Organisations across the project area had got together to support the appointment of the Rural Housing Enabler to promote and facilitate the development of affordable rural housing. Funding for the project had come from the Countryside Agency (which had contributed 50%), the National Park Authority and the District Councils (who had led on developing the project), Magna Housing Association, Hastoe, the Housing Corporation, North Devon Homes and Falcon Rural Housing. A Steering Group had been set up to guide the project.

- **Steps involved in the Project**

The process of providing rural housing would involve: -

- ✓ Working with the Community
- ✓ Assessing the housing need
- ✓ Finding potential buildings/sites
- ✓ Obtaining District Council support
- ✓ Involving the Housing Associations
- ✓ Obtaining planning permission
- ✓ Securing funding
- ✓ Providing homes

- **The Role of the Rural Housing Enabler**

- ✓ Providing advice to local communities on the process of securing affordable housing
- ✓ Working with the local community and Parish Councils to assess their local housing needs by assisting with the surveys and collating the results
- ✓ Helping to identify potential development resources (buildings/sites)
- ✓ Liaising with relevant organisations such as Local Housing and Planning Authorities and Housing Associations to explore development options to meet identified housing needs
- ✓ Acting as an 'honest broker' between all parties
- ✓ Increasing awareness of issues affecting rural housing and influencing future policy

- **The current position of the Project**

The project had commenced on 1 April this year and the Rural Housing Enabler's time had been spent on establishing it, making contacts and arranging publicity/interviews etc. By the end of May, contacts had been established with seven parishes within the National Park. Mrs Robinson looked forward to receiving further invitations to attend parish meetings and would also be seeking to contact more parishes.

- **Innovative solutions**

The recent Planning for Real events in the parishes and District Surveys had indicated the three main areas that needed to be focused upon: -

- Home ownership initiatives, including:
 - low cost home ownership
 - Shared ownership
 - Self build schemes
- Young first time buyers
- Re-using existing buildings

There was a need to develop awareness for innovative solutions.

- **Comments from Consultative Group members /Responses**

- ❖ Mr Lethaby suggested that the need to provide affordable housing would not have been necessary if Council houses had not been sold off. In response,

Mrs Robinson said that affordable housing was necessary because of low income levels and the high cost of house prices in the area. She added that some former Council houses may have had local occupancy ties attached to them.

- ❖ Mr Taylor said that it had been necessary for West Somerset District Council to transfer its housing stock to a housing association as it had faced severe problems in adequately maintaining the properties. He also questioned the demand for additional affordable housing and the need for an exceptions housing policy in the Local Plan, given travel to work considerations (the long distance of settlements on the moor to most urban employment centres) and opposition to affordable housing from builders and some communities.

In response, Mrs Robinson and Mr France said that there was a need (not a demand) for local affordable housing to be provided in the area. The revised draft Exmoor Local Plan went beyond an exceptions policy and would require all new build housing within the National Park to be for local needs housing, with no new speculative open market housing. The new policy would also result in the value of land being reduced, thereby bringing down the costs of providing new housing.

Mr Webber said that rural affordable housing was necessary to arrest the decline of local communities. Planning for Real had demonstrated that there was a need for housing and employment. Whilst the Rural Housing Project did not seek to solve employment issues, it was a part of the whole and the work to be undertaken through the project, surveys etc, would also show where employment was an issue and may assist in the drawing down of funding.

- ❖ In response to a question about eligibility to occupy affordable homes, Mrs Robinson explained that initially only people from the local parishes were to be considered, but it would be widened if no one could be found. However, it would not be wider than particular Districts or the National Park. Occupancy would be on the basis of a points system. Mrs Robinson also explained that affordable housing need not necessarily be rental, but could also be shared ownership.

4. **AN ECONOMIC STATEMENT FOR EXMOOR**

Mr France, the Head of Planning and Community, said that the draft Economic Statement for Exmoor, flagged up at the Consultative Group's last meeting, had now been published. The background to the preparation of the Statement had been falling farming incomes and visitor numbers and particularly the effects of last year's Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD) crisis. FMD had resulted in £16m being lost to the local economy, and the bulk of this had come from service sectors other than agriculture and tourism, but who nonetheless relied upon those two industries for their survival. The figures were agriculture (£2.5m), tourism (£3.5m) and £10m from the other service sectors. The results clearly showed that the rural economy of Exmoor was strongly interlinked with the economic value of the asset of the Exmoor landscape and the people who used it. Thankfully, the worst aspects of the FMD crisis were now over and activity was geared to reviving the local economy. The Statement was aimed at assisting the recovery process.

Whilst the National Park Authority did not have economic development as one of its responsibilities, the Statement was intended to be used by those authorities who were and

contribute to their strategies, and was already being used; for example, the Rural Development Agency's Rural Renaissance Programme and West Somerset District Council's community strategy through the Exmoor Coast and Countryside Partnership. In addition, a North Devon and Exmoor Regeneration Company was in the process of being set up, which would take forward a number of issues in the Statement.

The Statement also complemented proposals being developed through the 'Big Map' (see Note 5 below). Ideas for conserving and enhancing the environment of Exmoor would have an economic spin off.

The Statement gave an overview of the Exmoor economy, setting out a profile of the different sectors, their strengths and weaknesses and future trends and opportunities. The Statement identified an underselling of Exmoor, which would require attitude changes. A series of activities were proposed to help businesses develop.

The draft Statement would be completed within the subsequent two weeks and be published for formal consultation during July.

Mr Knight said that the communities of the National Park would be able to use the Statement as part of the community planning process, as it would be a source of practical factual information and could support grant applications.

5. **'THE BIG MAP'**

Dr Stone, the National Park Officer, said that the Authority was developing a series of ideas for practical projects to conserve and enhance the environment of the National Park. As indicated in Note 4 above, economic activity was likely to be a spin off from the projects. The Big Map attempted to bring information together in one place to see how ideas related to one another. The projects would be related to the environment, community facilities and the economy – on a series of maps. The maps would be used to support funding bids, assist consultation etc.

Dr Stone explained that the projects were essentially a wish list of ideas and were a starting point to try to get projects off the ground. The engagement of Exmoor people would be an important factor in the success of the strategy, and consultation would be an on going process. Officers from the Authority were available to talk to parishes about both the Big Map and the Economic Statement for Exmoor.

In response to individual comments, Dr Stone said: -

- The realignment of the coastal path at Porlock was still awaiting the signing of the Management Agreement for the Porlock Marsh area, which it was hoped would be soon.
- Farm Conservation Plans for specific farms would be endorsed by the Authority under a particular theme.

6. **OTHER BUSINESS – UPDATE ON RANGER AREAS**

Mrs Kent, Senior Ranger, said that, following the departure of the former Head Ranger, Mr Gurnett and the appointment of Mr Leach to that position, there had been some changes to the Ranger areas. Mr Leach no longer had his own patch.

All Parish Council clerks had been notified of the changes by letter and map, and Mrs Kent would forward additional copies, if they were required.

The following additions had been made to the parish areas Rangers were responsible for: -

Mr Webber - Cutcombe and Timberscombe added.

Mrs Kent – Winsford added and Tarr Steps included with Dulverton.

Ms Willcock – East and West Anstey added.

Mr Parish – in addition to being responsible for the entire length of the South West Coast Path, Brendon, Countisbury, Exford, Exmoor (including Pinkery), Oare, Withypool and Hawkridge had been added.

7. **REVIEW OF 2001/02 AND PROPOSED FUTURE PRIORITIES**

Dr Stone, the National Park Officer, gave a visual presentation which reviewed the Authority's activities in 2001/02 and looked forward to future priorities. The most significant points are referred to below: -

Highlights of the last 12 months

- The effects of Foot and Mouth Disease and the Authority's activities (see also Recreation Management below).
- The re-opening of all footpaths on Exmoor by the end of last year's summer season and the visit by Alun Michael, Minister for Rural Affairs. It was thought that a good rapport had been developed with him.
- The Authority had hosted the National Parks Conference in September and there had been positive feedback for it.
- The fire on North Hill last July which had taken four days to extinguish.

Achievements in 2001/02

- **Natural Environment**
 - ✓ Purchase of 34 Ha of woodland at Tarr Steps, which would result in their positive management and also secure future access.
 - ✓ Reintroduction of grazing at North Hill.

- ✓ Securing of heathland restoration at Hadborough/Haddon Hill which had begun.
 - ✓ An effective moorland burning programme had been achieved, with 13 of the 14 planned being completed.
 - ✓ A new native woodland created at Glenthorne (mostly Oak mix) – a private scheme, which the Authority and the Forestry Commission helped to develop.
 - ✓ The MIRE project – involving the blocking of ditches to re-establish blanket bog, which would affect river flows, preventing run off at the heads. It was hoped that reductions in flows may be achieved, thereby alleviating flooding problems further downstream. The project was being undertaken in conjunction with the Environment Agency, and there would be monitoring of the effects.
- **Cultural Heritage**
 - ✓ The ‘Field Archaeology of Exmoor’ guide had been published and was selling well.
 - ✓ The renovation and restoration of Simonsbath Sawmill was now well underway. There had been delay because of the need for various consents to be obtained (particularly for water use). The Heritage Lottery Fund had allocated a significant grant to the project.
 - ✓ Consolidation works had been undertaken to the winding house on the top of the Mineral Line Incline on Brendon.
- **Recreation Management**
 - ✓ Recreation Management had been most affected by the FMD crisis. The Authority had provided helplines, disinfection points and helped to organise the re-opening of rights of way etc. There had been some positive achievements.
 - ✓ The opening of new rights of way at Conygar Hill, Dunster had been achieved (previously only permissive routes had been available).
- **Promoting Understanding**
 - ✓ A wind turbine had been installed at Pinkery to supply renewable energy, providing most of the Educational Centre’s electricity needs. It had been positioned to minimise its impact from distant views. The diesel generator, which formally provided electricity, was now hardly ever used. Photovoltaic cells had also been installed on the roof to provide additional electricity. The scheme would be evaluated to determine its effectiveness. The cost of providing mains electricity for Pinkery would have been three or four times the cost of providing these renewable systems.
 - ✓ The National Park’s Visitor Centres had been given an effectiveness rating of 93%, which was the highest score for Visitor Centres in any of the National Parks.

- **Development Control**
 - ✓ Staff changes had reduced the number of planning applications actioned within 8 weeks in 2001/02, but the figure had now risen from 60% to 75/80%.
 - ✓ 461 searches had been processed, which was an indication of the buoyant housing market.
- **Forward Planning**
 - ✓ The National Park Management Plan, the Draft Deposit Local Plan and the Annual House Price Survey had been published,
 - ✓ A Rural Housing Enabler had been appointed.
- **Corporate and Democratic**
 - ✓ A new Standards Committee established.
 - ✓ Achieved an Investors in People Award.
 - ✓ Monitoring energy consumption.
 - ✓ Funding provided by the government for Implementing Electronic Government (IEG)
- **External Funding**
 - ✓ Excluding Objective 2, £1.32m had been secured from external funding sources. This money had all been spent on Exmoor and had contributed to the local economy.
- **Priorities for 2002/03**
 - Complete the Local Plan review
 - Complete the restoration of Simonsbath Sawmill
 - South West Coast Path at Porlock Bay (achieving a re-routing)
 - Tarr Steps visitor facilities and replacement toilets
 - CROW Act implementation - Access Forum and maps
 - Publish first 'State of the Park' report
 - Sustainable tourism initiative in partnership with the Countryside Agency
 - IEG ('Implementing Electronic Government')

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- Best Value (further reviews)
- Job evaluation for all NPA posts

- **Proposed priorities for 2003/04**

- CROW Act implementation – IT systems etc.
- Simonsbath Sawmill interpretation
- Renovation of Hoar Oak cottage to provide a camping barn facility
- Provision of new visitor facilities at County Gate
- Lynmouth Pavilion project
- New recreational routes – cycle routes: Exmoor circular and Quantock Hills link (Coleridge Way)
- Social inclusion initiatives
- Moorland restoration at Warren Farm and Haddon Hill.

8. **DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

Wednesday, 27 November 2002 at 10.30 am.

(The meeting closed at 9.25 pm)