

**MINUTES of a MEETING of the PLANNING, ENVIRONMENT & SUSTAINABILITY
POLICY DEVELOPMENT GROUP** held on 10 June 2025 at 5.30 pm

Present

Councillors

B Fish (Chair)
G Cochran (Vice-Chair), C Adcock,
G Czapiewski, C Harrower, B Holdman and
A Stirling

Apologies

Councillor

A Glover

Also Present

Councillors

C Connor, M Fletcher, S Keable and S Robinson

Also Present

Officers:

Richard Marsh (Director of Place & Economy), Paul Deal
(Head of Finance, Property & Climate Resilience), Jason
Ball (Climate and Sustainability Specialist) and Angie
Howell (Democratic Services Officer)

Councillors

Online

E Buczkowski, J Buczkowski, G Duchesne and M Farrell
and G Wescott

1 ELECTION OF CHAIR

RESOLVED that Cllr B Fish be elected Chair of the Planning, Environment and Sustainability Policy Development Group for the municipal year 2025/2026.

2 ELECTION OF VICE-CHAIR

RESOLVED that Cllr G Cochran be elected Vice-Chair of the Planning, Environment and Sustainability Policy Development Group for the municipal year 2025/2026.

3 START TIME OF MEETINGS

It was **AGREED** that the start time for meetings for the remainder of the municipal year continued to be at 5.30pm.

4 APOLOGIES AND SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

Cllr A Glover sent her apologies with Cllr B Holdman substituting.

5 PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

The following questions were received from the one member of the public attending the meeting:

Andrew Moore

Chair – I refer to items 11 and 14 on the agenda (relating to the Cabinet Member's Report and Items for the Next Meeting, which includes budget).

This is a 'Policy Development Group' and you are charged with 'in-depth analysis of policy', although I can't see much recent evidence of that. With a newly elected Chair, now halfway through your 4-year term, and with new information coming to light, I suggest it's time to (revisit and) challenge the Council's Climate Policy.

The Cabinet Member's Strategy has a broad-brush plan to save 45% of the tCO₂e under the Council's direct control; what about the rest? That's just 13% of the Council's Service Area. In 6 years, there has been a reduction against the average of those contributions of just 77 tCO₂e or ½ %, and at what cost to the public purse? Members; are you confident that the plan will deliver your goals for the Council, and that it is value for money against suggested climate impact costs?

Or is there really much point anyway? That Council Service Area is a tiny 1.8% of the 910k tCO₂e for the district's emissions: 99.75% is not controlled by the Council. The UK total is around 530 million tCO₂e, that's about 1% of the global figure, which is about 3% of total CO₂ entering the atmosphere. The Council's impact is trivial to the point of meaningless.

I challenge you to step back even further. Is the Net Zero objective even valid? Are we really in an 'emergency'? The climate is undeniably changing, but it always has. However, the suggested root cause is not as obvious as originally thought, model predictions are proving unreliable, possible impacts are often sensationalised, and our ability meaningfully to do much about it extremely doubtful. There are some very well-regarded academics and specialists now speaking out against the accepted narrative – some would say dogma. Public sentiment is also changing.

To even suggest this is a heresy to those charged with delivering action, often provoking simplistic reaction and unthinking dismissal. People don't like having their beliefs (and jobs) threatened. However, this Committee has a duty to put confirmation bias aside, dispassionately and openly look 'in depth' at policy and analyse its suitability, considering all currently available information. You cannot, surely, just turn up once a quarter for routine update meetings when it's clear that some fundamental questions should be asked. That would be a complete failure of your responsibilities.

So, my final question is this. Will this Policy Development Group undertake a thorough and prompt review of Mid Devon District Council's Climate Change Policy, independently challenging all aspects of the commonly accepted narrative against increasingly emergent counter opinions? And if not, why not?

The Chair stated that as the questions had not been received in advance, written responses would be provided within 10 working days and attached to the minutes.

6 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on 11 March 2025 were approved as a correct record of the meeting and **SIGNED** by the Chair.

7 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST UNDER THE CODE OF CONDUCT

Members were reminded of the need to declare any interests where appropriate.

No interests were declared under this item.

8 CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chair thanked the Group for electing him as Chair.

He reminded Members of the need to remain seated during agenda items that required a decision. If Members left the meeting room or made a drink they would be asked to abstain from voting on that item.

9 PERFORMANCE DASHBOARD Q4

The Committee were presented with the *Performance Dashboard for Quarter 4 2024/25. The following was highlighted within the report:-

- The purpose of the report was to give an at a glance understanding of how services were performing in terms of performance, finance and risk.
- Measures that were part of the Corporate Plan were listed in yellow text.
- The overall performance was presented in a pie chart and combined a RAG (Red, Amber, Green) rating to indicate if the performance was on track or not.
- The Planning, Environment and Sustainability PDG outturn was shown as amber due to a small overspend. This related to a mixture of increased staffing, mainly agency and costs across building control, enforcement and planning which was largely offset by underspends against the staffing establishments.
- Building control income was marginally lower than forecast and showing as amber largely due to the depressed housing market.
- The two indicators for capital projects were showing as red. This related to one project to install electrical vehicle charging points, which was in the final stages of being scoped.

Discussion took place regarding:-

- The position of recruiting permanent staff. It was explained that the Council was in a better position than neighbouring authorities. However it was incredibly difficult to recruit professionals with specific qualifications especially for planning enforcement and building control. There were very few competent and qualified building control surveyors. The Council would

continue to seek to address the issue and raise the challenges with Government bodies.

- The employment of apprentices. It was explained that the Council had a centralised apprenticeship programme and were engaging with colleges and local businesses. The Economic Development Team had facilitated a business forum where colleges were invited to talk to local businesses to address the skills gap as there were very few skilled trades which was presenting a challenge in terms of local contractors and suppliers particularly for house building.
- The slippage on capital projects with regard to electrical vehicle (EV) charging and where and when they would be installed. It was explained that initially the costs were part of the Council's budget to top up charging points within the Council's car parks over and above the Levi scheme run by Devon County Council. However the Council were looking to switch this to be community based and working with Town and Parish Councils where EV points could be provided in village halls etc and would be engaging with them to look at partnership proposals.

Note: * Performance Dashboard previously circulated.

10 **BLACKDOWN HILLS NATIONAL LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT PLAN**

The Group had before it a report * from the Director of Place and Economy considering the Blackdown Hills National Landscape Management Plan.

The following was highlighted within the report:-

- Part of Mid Devon District was situated in an area covered by the Blackdown Hills National Landscape formerly known as an area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.
- The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 required that Mid Devon District Council (MDDC) along with other relevant authorities produced a Management Plan for the Blackdown Hills National Landscape to be reviewed at intervals of not more than 5 years.
- The Blackdown Hills National Landscape Partnership had performed this duty on behalf of MDDC and the other relevant authorities which included Somerset Council and East Devon District Council. The Partnership was led by officers at Devon County Council with some involvement from officers of other local authorities.
- The Management Plan blended national and local priorities and sought to address them in a way that was right for the Blackdown Hills, the landscape, environment and communities to ensure the special character of the area was conserved and enhanced for future generations.
- This included a vision which set out four main themes, each with objectives, guiding principles, policies, targets and priority actions.
- A draft Management Plan was previously reported to the Planning Policy Advisory Group in July 2024 and Cabinet in October 2024 and was subject to an 8 week public consultation from January to March 2025.
- The Blackdown Hills National Landscape Partnership had now received confirmation from Natural England that the Management Plan met the statutory requirements and had broadly followed the guidance for preparing a

strategy for the management of the national landscape and that it represented good practice.

- Natural England commended the level of detail in the plan and recommended that some sections could be shortened or moved to an appendix annex. The Partnership had taken those comments into consideration and had agreed that a supporting summary document could be prepared to explain the content and purpose of the management.

Tim Youngs, Manager at Blackdown Hills National Landscape also highlighted the following:-

- The document, when complete would be web-based showing images and videos.
- The main sections included place, people, nature and climate.
- Places would include sustainable land use, farming, forestry, planning, infrastructure and the historic environment.
- Nature would include habitat restoration, connectivity, species conservation and ecological networks which would link to the Local Nature Recovery Strategy and the Devon and Nature Recovery Plans.
- Climate links to Mid Devon's Climate Plan and the Devon Carbon Plan which addressed climate change mitigation and adaptation through nature based solutions.
- Blackdown Hills was important for storing carbon and it currently stored 7 million tonnes of soil carbon. Working with landowners was a priority to ensure that carbon remained locked up.
- Many of those areas were really important for biodiversity.
- The Framework had 10 targets which fed from the Government's Environmental Improvement Plan and the Blackdown Hills was one of the protected landscapes charged with delivering ambitious targets.

Discussion took place regarding:-

- Whether the delegated authority to approve editorial changes would dramatically change the document. It was explained that those changes would be points of small technical detail to ensure consistency throughout. It would not affect the policies or the actions outlined.
- The low uptake with land managers adopting nature friendly farming and whether this was due to the lack of finance or that the land was not suitable? It was explained that the area was environmentally sensitive and there was a shortage of farm advisory input and that a trainee had been recruited to help fill the gap as there was more work to be done. A farm facilitation group had been set up with approximately 140 members which was farmer led. They were working at setting up workshops and training to raise awareness.
- Carbon storage and how to increase it by sharing information with farms to help them change the way they work.
- Whether any other areas could be promoted as a national landscape. It was explained that this was not a quick piece of work but something that could be aspired to.
- Flood prevention and the planting of trees to help absorb significant amounts of water and working with the farming community to ensure measures were being taken.

RECOMMENDED to the Cabinet that:-

1. The Blackdown Hills National Landscape Management Plan (Appendices 1, 2 and 3) is adopted.
2. That delegated authority be given to the Director of Place in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Planning and Economic Regeneration to approve any editorial changes made to the Blackdown Hills National Landscape Management Plan.

(Proposed by the Chair)

Reason for the decision

As set out in the report.

Note *Report previously circulated.

11 CABINET MEMBER FOR ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE CHANGE UPDATE

The Group had before it, and **NOTED** a report* from the Cabinet Member for Environment and Climate Change which was presented by the Climate and Sustainability Specialist.

The following was highlighted within the report:-

- A Biodiversity Action Plan was in place and goals were being implemented including an early stage review of Council land management and opportunities to enhance nature. “No Mow May” had just finished and work was being undertaken to maximise biodiversity opportunities.
- The Council were considering the potential to enhance the conservation status for key areas such as local nature reserves.
- The Planning Team were now recording the number of consents with enhancement and biodiversity net gain secured.
- The Devon wide Local Nature Recovery Strategy was being formulated which would have implications for strategic local planning and planning decisions. A Consultation would be carried out later this year. On-line resources would be available to help everyone play a role in nature recovery.
- A presentation on the Local Nature Recovery Strategy would be taking place at the next meeting of the Planning Policy Advisory Group on 8 July 2025 to view the draft recommendations. It was suggested that all Members attend.
- The Climate Change Strategy and Climate Action Plan had been launched at the end of 2024 and early progress on the Action Plan was very positive.
- An additional Project Manager was now in post to help deliver sustainability projects and had begun a feasibility report for solar power projects.
- The Council had recently responded to a consultation by the Local Government Association (LGA) asking whether there should be a statutory duty for climate change. A positive response had been sent to the LGA stating that the Council were keen for a statutory duty due but it must be supported by funding for climate related projects, partnership and programmes.
- Work was being undertaken with good community engagement around the Climate Change Strategy to cultivate partnership work opportunities with residents and businesses. The Council were also engaging with partners to

support climate adaptation, including nature based solutions to improve resilience to deliver some local workshops which were being run through the Blackdown Hills National Landscape Team.

- More expressions of interest for the Green Enterprise Grants had been submitted than in the last round for grants between £500 and £5,000 for small and medium sized enterprises.
- Grants would be funded by £30,000 from the Council's Climate Sustainability budget which would drive local investment and attract more funding to help reduce emissions.
- Further partnership initiatives were being looked at to bring in further grant funding to projects and partnerships across Devon and to help prepare for the launch of the first Mid Devon Climate Forum which would hopefully take place over the summer.
- The Net Zero Advisory Group would review its Terms of Reference this year.
- A table was provided to the Group which gave a simple overview of engagement across the themes of the Climate Change Strategy.
- Potential projects included working with farmers to enable soil protection and flood alleviation.
- Work continued with other groups to identify shared priorities and aimed to look at ways to support people and help them to develop their bids or help to work with others.

Discussion took place regarding:-

- Promoting the work being done and how people could get involved. It was explained that the Climate Forum being launched later this year would help to promote the important work being undertaken. However wider messaging would be ramped up especially on social media and closer work with Town and Parish Councils with perhaps a presentation at the State of District Debate. Also to work with Town and Parish Councils on the Emergency Action Plans.
- The projects that the Green Enterprise Grants embraced. It was explained that it was in the early stages of expressions of interest. No bids had yet been received however it ranged from replacing sets of lightbulbs to solar panels and efficiency of water and energy use.
- Whether there were annual targets of how to progress towards Net Zero. It was explained that targets were in the Corporate Plan and every year a Climate Action Plan would be reviewed.
- The potential to offer support and advice to Town and Parish Councils.
- Whether the Council worked with Devon County Council (DCC). It was explained that the Council did work alongside DCC as part of the Devon Climate Emergency Partnership to bring together and deliver the Devon Carbon Plan and climate adaptation. This work was undertaken alongside a whole range of other partners in how to develop energy systems needed for Devon and fit in with the Regional Energy Strategic Plan.
- Work with Exeter University looking at the landscape capacity for solar and offshore wind.

Note: * Report previously circulated.

12 PLANNING SUMMARY REPORT

The Group had before it, and **NOTED** a report* from the Director of Place and Economy summarising activity undertaken in relation to planning matters.

The report summarised the actions from the proceeding months in relation to planning matters. The following updates were included within the report:-

- (i) Development Management
- (ii) Building Control
- (iii) Conservation
- (iv) Planning Enforcement

Discussion took place regarding:-

- The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and whether developers would be encouraged to use solar panels and heat pumps. It was explained that the Council were awaiting further reiteration of the NPPF and once received this would give the Council a clearer mandate. Once it was published it would be applicable immediately.
- The problems recruiting Planning Enforcement Officers and the concerns of Town and Parish Councils regarding planning enforcement. It was explained that the Council had invested further funding into enforcement and had demonstrated a commitment to enforcement. There were 2 Planning Enforcement Officers (one of which was from an Agency) dealing with a significant amount of live enforcement cases. The post had been advertised several times with a significant market supplement however there had been no viable candidates. In the meantime the Council would continue to use Agency Staff.
- The review of Conservation Areas. It was explained there was a commitment from the Council to develop a forward plan of areas to be reviewed.

Note: * Report previously circulated.

13 WORK PROGRAMME

The Group had before it and **NOTED** the Work Programme * for the Planning, Environment and Sustainability Policy Development Group.

The Chair informed the Group that there may be a Special Meeting of the PDG in August and asked Members to inform the Clerk if they were away during that time.

Note: * Work Programme previously circulated.

14 IDENTIFICATION OF ITEMS FOR THE NEXT MEETING

The items already listed in the work programme for the next scheduled meeting were **NOTED**.

The Chair asked the Group whether the use of anaerobic digesters should be referred to the Scrutiny Committee.

It was explained that a Scrutiny Proposal Form would need to be submitted. However, this had been a topic at a previous Scrutiny Committee meeting. Clarity would need to be given regarding what was different this time and to outline the required achievements.

(The meeting ended at 7.35 pm)

CHAIR