

**SOUTH EAST ENGLAND REGIONAL ASSEMBLY ENVIRONMENT
AGENCY DIALOGUE**

Note of meeting on 7 December 2007 10.00 a.m.-2.30 p.m.

Red Kite House, Howbery Business Park, Wallingford, Oxfordshire, OX10 8BD

Present:

Regional Assembly

Cllr John Goddard (Chair)
Ian Hepburn

Cllr Geoff Hill
Cllr David Robertson

Oxford City Council
South East Forum for Sustainability/
Wildlife Trusts in the South East
Town and Parish Councils (SERCAF)
Oxfordshire County Council

Regional Assembly Officers

Paul Bevan
David Payne
Jorn Peters
Ameeta Rowland

Chief Executive
Planning Manager
Regional Planner
Policy Assistant

Environment Agency

Howard Davidson
Peter Midgley
Gillian Pratt

Regional Director, Southern
Regional Strategy Manager, Southern
Thames West Area Manager

Apologies:

Regional Assembly

Cllr Louise Bloom (Chair)
Edward Dawson
Cllr Liza McKinney
Mark Pearson

Eastleigh Borough Council
CPRE South East
Adur District Council
East Sussex Economic Partnership

Regional Assembly Officers

Nick Woolfenden

Head of Policy

Environment Agency

Robert Runcie
Dave Wardle

Regional Director, Thames
Regional Strategy Manager Thames

1. Welcome and Introductions

- 1.1 Cllr John Goddard welcomed everyone to the meeting and outlined the agenda for the day.

2. Water Framework Directive and River Basin Planning

- 2.1 The item was introduced with a presentation from the Environment Agency (EA). The presentation outlined the background to the Water Framework Directive (WFD) and River Basin Planning and looked at the implications for the South East. The broad aim of the WFD is to protect and improve the water environment. The EA is leading on the preparation of the River Basin Management Plans (RBMP) which are designed to address the requirements of the WFD. The EA highlighted the importance of joint working to achieve the objectives of the WFD and emphasised that the RBMP process is open and subject to continuous review.
- 2.2 As part of the development of the RBMPs a risk assessment of significant pressures in the River Basin Districts against WFD objectives is carried out. Two of the pressures assessed are pollution from phosphorus and pesticide use. The assessment so far has highlighted a number of areas in the region that are at risk of failing WFD objectives for example in the case of pollution from phosphorus. The meaning of 'at risk' was explored and the EA explained that the concept means at risk of not meeting certain scientifically defined technical standards: it does not mean at risk in a health sense. Clarification was sought by members on gaps in the assessments and technical standards more widely. The EA explained that technical standards are being refined through technical working groups in each country and will be harmonised across the EU. The final technical standards can be expected in the next 12-18 months. Members expressed concern about timing, as the RBMPs must be in place by December 2009. The EA explained that areas which are not considered at risk will not be investigated further, as the focus will be on higher risk areas, but gaps in assessment will be completed before the RBMPs are finalised.
- 2.3 A discussion then followed about the use of pesticides by bodies such as local authorities and Network Rail, as well as farmers, and the affect this has on ecology. Members felt that this highlighted a communication issue. Counties get many requests for weed spraying and may make decisions on pesticides that would affect compliance with the WFD. Communication with local authorities and other organisations was highlighted as a key part of the development of the RBMPs by the EA. They emphasised the need to raise awareness and encourage change of land management practices, particularly in agriculture, as funds for farmers depend on compliance with appropriate practices.
- 2.4 The remainder of the discussion focused on the RBMP process, influencing behaviour and compliance, the following points were raised:
 - The relationship between the WFD and other planning guidance was considered. The EA is working with Government to ensure that future Planning Policy Statements take WFD requirements into account. On a regional level the draft South East Plan does already refer to such

requirements. The cost of meeting WFD requirements was also raised. As the cost may be significant, the affordability of different measures will have to be considered.

- Members asked about the membership of the two River District Liaison Panels, which oversee and steer the development of the RBMPs in the South East. The EA explained that nationally guidance has been given on the make up of the Panels and that a range of stakeholders from different sectors are contributing to the development of the RBMPs. Local authorities represent one sector and have a representative on the River Basin District Liaison Panels. The EA 'Working Together' document sets out the engagement mechanisms and emphasised that members on the Panels should be networking and communicating within their sectors to raise awareness and share information. Members expressed concern that in the case of local authorities information was not being widely disseminated.
- Members highlighted the need for more awareness and involvement of stakeholders and the local population in the development of the RBMPs. It was felt that a better understanding of required standards and measures would help to influence people's behaviour. Members stressed the need for adequate public consultation as this is an important part of influencing behaviour change required to meet the objectives of the WFD. The EA explained that there will be engagement with local stakeholders at a catchment level and formal consultation with the general public in 2008. It was highlighted that raising interest so far has been difficult due to the procedural focus and high level strategic thinking.
- The issue of heavily modified stretches of water and the implications this has in meeting the objectives of the WFD was considered. The geomorphology in particular areas, such as the urban built environment, cannot be reversed. The EA explained that water bodies such as canals are likely to be classified as heavily modified and will therefore not be expected to change. However, for future waterfront developments a less engineered shoreline would be expected.
- The issue of enforcement and monitoring was raised. Monitoring arrangements for compliance with WFD requirements are under development, but prosecution and infraction procedures have not been addressed in detail.
- The potential conflict between meeting WFD requirements and housing growth was considered. The EA explained that the measures contributing to the achievement of the WFD requirements can be phased and do not all have to be achieved within the first planning cycle. However with some issues the impacts of growth have yet to be fully investigated. Ultimately, the long-term environmental consequences of continuing growth have to be addressed at a sufficiently early stage. The need to consider environmental capacity from the beginning when planning future housing growth was highlighted.

2.5 Members felt the discussion had been timely and reiterated the importance of communication in the development of the RBMPs with local authorities, stakeholders and regional bodies.

3. Changes to the Environment Agency Southern Region

- 3.1 The Environment Agency outlined the changes to the operating arrangements of the EA Southern Region. From 1 April 2008 the EA will be moving from three to two operating areas in the Southern Region. The two new Areas will be called 'Solent and South Downs' in the west and 'Kent and East Sussex' in the East. Overall the regional boundary will remain unchanged.
- 3.2 Nationally, the EA are making a number of changes to the way they regulate so that permitting services will be provided centrally. This will result in reduced staffing in some areas of work, such as permitting and regulating low risk customers, whilst increasing local resources in others. The EA explained that there will be a reduction in staff from 960 to 840 in the Southern region over the next three years and from 13,000 to 11,500 nationally.
- 3.3 Members highlighted that there is confusion between different areas called 'South East', including the South East England Regional Assembly region, the South East River Basin District and the EA area Thames South East.

4. Tour of Red Kite House

- 4.1 The Environment Agency gave a tour of Red Kite House to highlight the building's environmental features, such as natural ventilation and cooling and solar thermal panels.