

Comments on the meeting with the consultants.

A personal response by Mary Walden-Till.

Although impersonal reports have their place, a representative of an organisation also has a responsibility to report back 'as they see it'. This is that further report, a personal response.

The points I make below, where indicated, are matched to the numbered sections in [my report on the meeting](#). Please read this report before reading any further here.

There are all sorts of excuses and explanations which can be used to try to mitigate the impressions received during the meeting and indeed one of them, from Tom Buxton-Smith EDDC Engineering Projects Manager, has been reproduced on the [subgroup webpage](#) (30th July section).

It is important to realise that it was not just the non-engineer members of the subgroup who were caught off-guard in this meeting. We, the subgroup, are in a position where we are not constantly drip fed information but receive it in 'lumps' every so often, this means that we can suffer a level of shock when our expectations are not met.

From the beginning of this Pause study we had been working hard to ensure clear communication. We had bent our combined skills, engineers for technical language and the rest of us for ease of understanding on a lay-person level, to clear communication of our intentions.

We thought that the [Scope document](#) was as foolproof as possible, listing Aims, Objectives, and then at a lower level of priority Additional Considerations.

As our representative I bring a background in both design work, and 10 years of teaching Secondary School design subjects. I am therefore familiar with the concepts of writing briefs, fulfilling them, and working to constraints. I was convinced that the Scope we had all put together was clear.

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Comment referring to 1) in the report

From the beginning of the meeting it became apparent that I was wrong about the clarity of the Scope: the consultants had not understood our intent.

For me the things that were of the main importance in the Scope were in the Aims, which made up section A. Followed by those in Section B, the Objectives, which were meant to expand on the Aims and also clearly state important constraints to the design, such as cost. Finally, Section C, Additional Considerations, was well down the hierarchy.

Yet, from the moment the consultants showed their initial design we could see they were not working to the same priorities. They were considering things which weren't of particular importance to us and not addressing what we considered the fundamentals. It was obvious the design shown would use a very large volume of rock and so would be unaffordable, and thus not meet the costing given in the Objectives.

If it was unaffordable it was of no use to us at all. The whole reason for the pause was to try to find an alternative to the Preferred Option/Paused Option which would be both technically and financially viable.

Objective 4 of the Scope

4. Any new option must sit within the total project cost of £12m approximately as afforded by the conservative PF calculator

At first I had hopes that this graphic would be followed by one of a smaller design that would meet the Objective of affordability, but it was not.

The whole meeting was thus spent in discussion of something which was useless for our purposes. We did not ask for a 'Rolls Royce' solution and I felt that time spent on such a solution was wasted

time.

Someone-else in the group pointed out that the consultants had produced a solution which worked in a different way to the way we had asked them to concentrate on.

The Scope states the following in the Objectives section, and so this is what we had expected them to be working to :

Introduction

- *The existing coast protection scheme relies on retaining the 'design-beach' in front of the sea wall with recycling and occasional recharging.*
- *The Pause Study is to consider options that will reduce this net movement of beach material in order to create a more stable beach along the whole of the Sidmouth sea front and thereby reduce the need for long-term beach recycling and recharging.*

Objectives

1. Reduce the existing net movement of beach material from east to west in order to

create a more stable beach along the whole of Sidmouth sea front

3. As per aim 2, reduce the erosion rate at East Beach (by creating and maintaining a stable beach of appropriate size)

8. Bring Sidmouth Main Beach up to the design beach level on 1. Future recharge volumes and recycling levels should be based on trigger levels in HR Wallingford report and the 1996, 1998, 2002 and 2005 BMPs.

Despite these stated requirements, the initial design the consultants were showing us relied on the islands to reduce wave strength and height in order to prevent over-topping of the current defences, and to a level which would work if there was no beach at all.

This was, in fact, in direct opposition to what they had been asked to do; which was to design something to maintain a beach, which would then in turn be the protection the town needed.

It has been made clear in other parts of the Scope that Sidmouth needs its beach, and the safe swimming from Town Beach, for its economic survival. Therefore to envisage a situation where the beach had been allowed to disappear seemed odd.

It appeared to me that the consultants had allowed their ideas to become detached from the Scope we had set. The work looked to be a far more theoretical approach than we needed.

Perhaps a theoretical approach would be good if we had a long time to look at things, but as we only had 6 months in total, reduced to 5 months by the time the consultants were instructed to start work, I don't believe we have time for it. Especially when the results of these theoretical ruminations only appeared one month before the deadline for the end of the Pause study.

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Comment referring to 2) in the report

Nothing much more needs to be said about this except that: representatives of the town had little luck in persuading the consultants that what could be seen on the beach at Sidmouth did not uphold the information given on the Environment Agency website. And that, in that case, the EA information could not be relied on as a basis for design decisions.

We urged them to take into account what could be observed on the beach.

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Comment referring to 3) in the report

I was trying to play down the mismatch here. Both sides were in fact shocked during this exchange.

The consultants were explaining that, in looking at East Beach defences, the reinstatement of a safe swimming beach had been '*key*' to their thinking.

The subgroup had not anticipated this interpretation of the Scope document at all and repudiated the idea strongly.

On their parts the consultants were taken aback by the strength of feeling against bringing East Beach back into public use. They didn't seem to know that we have notices all over the place trying to keep people off it.

When I wrote '*The Scope document given to the consultants to guide their work had mentioned that, as a low level of priority, improved beaches would be a good thing if possible.*' It was because I was trying to find any way they might have misunderstood the Scope. All I could find was mention in the Additional Considerations section, containing 18 points in total, where there were the following three points:

- *Improve Port Royal end of town.*
- *Improve access to the beach at Port Royal end slipway (some funding is conditional on achieving this objective)*
- *Improve amenity value of beach and esplanade.*

These seemed a very unlikely set to have led them to the conclusion that East Beach was needed as a swimming beach, but it was all that was there.

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Comment referring to 4) in the report

There is little point in me trying to comment on technical discussions in this meeting as I always need to ask questions later to help me understand what was said.

However, I was one of the ones who was completely confused when we were told that tombolas weren't what we thought, that we didn't want them, and wouldn't get them.

In all our previous email and Zoom discussions the effects we see in the sand at low tide had been described by engineers on the subgroup, or in the Advisory Group, as tombolas. We had shared images of tombolas around the world, and especially in Norfolk, when we were at the stage of deciding if we should Pause and reassess. We all thought we knew what we were talking about and that we all used the term in the same way. We were wrong.

What emerged from this part of the discussion was that sometimes some engineers use the term as shorthand to cover many forms of accretion, and so sometimes they were not talking about literal tombola forms. Also we had been thinking that tombolas were to be desired when it is really any sort of accumulation shape we want.

This set the meeting back for a while as we took time to adjust our thinking to the changed concept, and asked questions to make sure we now understood how the word was being used. It would have been helpful if clear communication had been achieved right from the time when the concept of tombolas was introduced, before the Pause started. However this will always be a problem when specialists in any area are talking to non-specialists.

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Comment referring to 5) & 6) in the report None.

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Comment referring to 7) in the report

The cost of the 'Rolls Royce' option was explained, even though in my opinion the design should never have got as far as being costed. It was clear from the first it would not be affordable.

Members of the subgroup were very despondent by this stage as the whole tone from the consultants seemed to suggest we should give up and revert to the Preferred Option, now referred to as the Paused Option.

There didn't seem to be an understanding of how important the town felt it was to discover a solution which didn't impinge on the things it holds dear by having to have a splash wall on the Esplanade. They were blithely referring to the splash wall in the same tone of voice and manner of concern as any other aspect of the scheme.

It was against this background that the, almost despairing, question was asked about whether there was any chance they could come up with an affordable variant on what they had shown us. The tension eased slightly when they said yes.

However, it built again as the situation got muddled when the consultants appeared to be going back to discussing the PO. I was left uncertain as to exactly what they were talking about and I feel that there was so little firm information to hold on to that it became one of those situations where everyone interpreted it in a way which fit with their own wishes. I fear there is a huge muddle we will later have to untangle.

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Comment referring to 8) in the report

This was another place where it seemed the consultants were trying to achieve something we had not asked them to. But maybe it was a misunderstanding on my part. I understood them to be trying to avoid an initial recharge to save money and reduce environmental consequences. But perhaps they were trying to convey that a side effect of their design would be that a recharge would not be needed when it was first built, thus allowing the opportunity to see if beach material accumulated on its own.

However, I couldn't understand why we were discussing it at all when their initial idea could never be built because it would cost too much. If the design can't be built it matters little what side effects it might produce.

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Comment referring to 9) in the report

The subgroup were perturbed that the consultants couldn't answer the questions in this section, there were more questions than I have mentioned.

None of the questions were out of the blue, they were all based on things we had discussed at the [subgroup meeting on 26th July](#) in preparation for this meeting, and so they were all things we had expected them to be prepared to answer.

In view of the many times we had asked Tom if the consultants were aware of, or working on information from, 'this or that' resource we had assumed that they had more detailed knowledge than they appeared to have.

I am aware that different parts of the Royal HaskoningDHV team may have different knowledge and that the one who could have answered may not have been present, but with the forewarning we had given I would have hoped for more. This is simply a comment on the apparent lack of familiarity with previous BMP documentation which was shown in the meeting.

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Comment referring to 10) in the report

By the time we got to wrapping up the meeting I felt completely demoralised.

It seemed as if all the work we had done on writing the Scope had been a waste of effort. I didn't feel that any of the huge amount of work individual members of the subgroup have been putting in had made any difference at all. Our belief that there was a better option to be obtained, based on our local knowledge and personal expertise, seemed to have no impact.

My impression was that the consultants were simply working in isolation without being pulled back to the messy world of complex needs within the town.

In one way the consultants were happy to do the further work we wanted them to do, because that is how they earn their wages; but the overriding impression for me was that they thought it was a waste of time and energy to produce 'proof' that we should abandon the quest for an alternative, and just accept the unwanted option we had already.

This is contrary to the need felt by members of the subgroup to have such proof, so that the Advisory Group and EDDC can honestly say to the town that there is no option.

Of course, there is always the possibility that if the consultants do the work requested, and not just rely on their own experiences and expertise, they may find they are mistaken in their conclusions,

I did however feel that the whole meeting was a very negative experience.

It is, also of course, very possible to look on the bright side; to believe that the meeting solved misunderstandings and gave a starting point which will be refined to a splendid conclusion.

It may be that work will speed up from now on and we will actually get the information we need in order to make an informed choice between an Alternative Option and reverting to the Paused (or Preferred) Option; but it is 15th of August as I write this and the subgroup has not been informed of any new input from the consultants.