

TEXT OF EVENING HEARLD STORY – 18-8-06

£20K BONUS FOR RETIRING CHIEF

The outgoing boss of a Quango tasked with boosting the economy of Plymouth and the wider region netted a bonus of more than £20,000 last year. The performance payout to Geoffrey Wilkinson, former chief executive of the South West Regional Development Agency, who retired in April this year, came on top of an inflation-busting increase in his basic salary. His pay soared by nearly £10,000 from £114,750 to £124,204 last year - a hike of more than eight per cent. The current rate of inflation is 2.4 per cent. Along with pension entitlements, it took his total salary for the year to more than £170,000. The agency, which has one of its six offices based in the city, points out that the bonus was paid as it had met and in some cases exceeded all its government agreed targets, including creating jobs and securing private sector investment in the region. Providing an attractive salary was necessary to attract the best candidates to the important role, it said. The agency, which costs £20million-a-year to run, has been previously criticised over claims that it was ineffective.

According to the agency's annual report for 2005/06, the agency's four executive directors also received performance bonuses totalling nearly £30,000, taking the overall wage bill for the chief executive and directors to more than £630,000. The report also reveals that chairman of the RDA Juliet Williams received a total salary of nearly £96,000 for her three-days-per-week role, while deputy chairman Nicholas Buckland saw his salary increase by more than £6,000 last year to £24,458, for which he is contracted to carry out six days work a month for the agency.

A spokesman for the South West RDA said: "Every year the South West RDA agrees targets for its work with Government. This is to ensure that the agency carries out what it was set up to do, namely to ensure the long term economic success of the region.

"Following a robust assessment of our performance, involving Government Office and other RDA chairs, if the South West RDA is successful in meeting those targets, the chief executive is entitled to a bonus. As the Agency performed well in 2005-06, meeting all its targets and in some cases exceeding them, the chief executive was awarded a bonus of £20,212, paid retrospectively.

"A competitive salary and package in line with commercial rates is necessary to attract the highest quality candidates to carry out the important work of the South West RDA in improving the region's economy." Latest figures published by the DTI show that last year the agency met, or in some cases exceeded, its targets, including creating more than 6,000 new jobs in the region, and helping get nearly 2,000 people into work. It also created or attracted 198 new businesses to the region, and secured £217 million of investment to regenerate deprived areas. Nearly 100 hectares of Brownfield land was also regenerated.