

Scrutiny Climate and Place 26th April 2024 – Public Questions

Annexe A – Public Questions	
Name of person submitting	Questions
David Orr	<p>It is ironic that we are meeting today to discuss “Water Quality in Somerset” when this Council does not have a formal policy for that. A senior planner advised me I had made the common mistake of thinking that “nutrient neutrality” was about getting our world-renowned moors and levels into a good condition. She stated that “<i>Nutrient neutrality is a national approach to provide a solution to a legal requirement</i>”.</p> <p>Cornwall Council recognised that the “Competent Authority” planning role in nutrient neutrality was a community leadership role. Cornwall decided to make clean rivers and building social and affordable housing their top priorities. There have been no negative outcomes or legal threats, from their 2023 decision in Bodmin, to count sewage treatment works upgrades.</p> <p>In Somerset, we are using the Natural England nutrient neutrality guidance as “rules for the following of”, rather than emulating Cornwall in prioritising water quality and community benefits.</p> <p>Somerset has 18,000 held-up homes with insufficient numbers of social and affordable homes being built; with negative impacts on the 5-year land supply, which knocks out local development plans, encouraging some developers to make speculative planning applications.</p> <p>If nutrient neutrality is only actioned via the planning system, then the burden narrowly falls upon new homes, while existing homes, current and past agricultural practice and climate change impacts are ignored. Worse still, is that this outdated and unevidenced policy will not, I believe, get our precious levels and moors back into a favourable condition by 2030.</p> <p>For example, the Somerset phosphate calculator assumes that 100% of waste water from a new home finds its way, even after modernised wastewater treatment, on to the moors and levels, when scientific research shows it doesn’t. The calculator then adds another 20% to that 100%! Why can’t that 20% super-precautionary buffer now be removed from the calculator, to lower phosphate credit costs by 17%, with immediate effect?</p> <p>I am sceptical that the claims for Batch Reverse Osmosis and the grant funding will remove the 18,000 held-up homes backlog by 2030, as there is no financial case to demonstrate viability.</p> <p>Somerset needs a nutrient neutrality policy that is evidence-led, targeted at improving the condition of the moors and levels and supports the economic and social well-being of Somerset.</p> <p>I strongly urge this Scrutiny Committee to recommend that the Council conducts an urgent and independent review of the current nutrient neutrality policy and develops a formal policy for “Water Quality in Somerset”.</p>

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Response	Lead officer verbal response to be given at the meeting. Full written response to be distributed within 5 working days of the meeting
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