

Statement to Strategic Planning Committee 21st March 2024 by David Orr

After the “financial emergency”, held-up housing across large parts of Somerset due to nutrient neutrality, must be one of the single most pressing issues in Somerset. The economic and social impacts are profound.

Whilst this is a well-written paper, I am disappointed that so many P mitigation initiatives haven’t progressed with more urgency and are now at or near the implementation stage.

Summary of officer verbal reply

The Government confirmed the Nutrient Mitigation Funding on 19th December 2023 and £500k of the capital funding was received on 23rd February. This is an Interim Delivery Strategy in order to demonstrate committed spend to DLUHC to meet the requirements of the funding award. We anticipate receiving the balance of the funding (£9.1m) in the first quarter of 2024/25.

The paper hasn’t covered the key strategic issue of a catchment-wide nutrient neutrality policy, nor has the promised relevant legal instruction and advice been disclosed. Why not?

Summary of officer verbal reply

Please can Mr Orr clarify what he means by a catchment wide nutrient neutral policy and what legal advice he is seeking on this specific matter. Officer also indicated that they were happy to meet with him after the committee meeting to discuss these matters further.

Wessex Water are a key strategic partner. Why aren’t they here today to both contribute to policy discussion as subject matter experts and also, to take relevant questions?

Summary of officer verbal reply

This is an Interim Delivery Strategy, and we are already working closely with Wessex Water. If there are any questions raised today that require input from Wessex Water, representatives from Wessex Water have dialled in remotely to the committee meeting and are thus on hand to answer relevant questions.

Q1. For ongoing member assurance, will the council carried out nutrient neutrality performance benchmarking (number of P credits, cost of P credits, number of houses built etc) against other councils e.g. Wiltshire, Cornwall, Norfolk etc?

Summary of officer verbal reply

The monitoring and evaluation requirements of the Government funding are yet to be provided by DLUHC. Officers anticipate that performance benchmarking against other Council will be undertaken by DLUHC.

Q2. Wessex Water can increase P removal by increasing existing dosing of ferrous sulphate or by installing at a small treatment works a Package Treatment Plant. Should the Council use those methods as a baseline, to compare P credit generation

efficiency and net P credit costs to other new or technical solutions, like Reverse Osmosis? If newer technologies proved more expensive, can the bid funding be re-directed into these conventional but potentially less costly treatments?

Summary of officer verbal reply

We have discussed this as a potential measure with Wessex Water. Previously however our understanding is that Wessex Water are prohibited from taking additional funding for capital improvements outside of their agreed AMP. If the position changes we will of course explore this opportunity further. At the current time we are piloting the Reverse Batch Osmosis technology to understand the actual costs.

Q3. How many of each of social and affordable houses are currently held up?

Summary of officer verbal reply

We do not have specific figures to hand. Where sites meet certain thresholds there is an obligation to deliver affordable homes. There are a range of measures that hinder the ability to secure affordable housing, not just nutrient neutrality. For example, and economic viability and funding programmes.

Q4. How many homes does this P mitigation strategy aim to get built between now and 2030? Why isn't that key information of estimates of houses that can be built, in which District area and when included? This is the primary outcome of this strategy.

Summary of officer verbal reply

This is an Interim Delivery Strategy to meet the requirements of the Local Nutrient Mitigation Funding. This will be reviewed as the projects progress, and we have committed to report progress back to this committee within 6 months.

Q5. Getting back to a 5-year housing supply is a key community benefit to restore the primacy of local plans and bring order to speculative development. There is a table of the number of held-up houses by each former District area. Can you say whether releasing all of those held-up homes (via P mitigation) would restore a 5-year housing supply in each District area, or, if not, how far it would contribute?

Summary of officer verbal reply

5-year housing supply is impacted by a range of measures (not just nutrient neutrality) For example, measures associated with Housing Delivery Tests, windfall calculations, the age of the Local Plan allocation(s), build out rates on strategic sites. There are LPAs that are not impacted by nutrient neutrality that struggle to demonstrate a 5YHLS. The figures on 5YHLS are provided in the monitoring report to follow and is reviewed on an annual basis.

Q6. Reverse Osmosis is a well-established and longstanding technology used worldwide for desalination for drinking water. It is also used to extract lithium salts from old Cornish mines water. Salinity Solutions is an under-capitalised and risky start-up, who in a competitive bid process failed to secure a Cornish lithium extraction contract in 2023. Once the Reverse Osmosis 6-month trial completes, and presuming the P generation amounts and costs remain viable (they may not when transport and refining

costs are taken into account), will the Council move to a competitive bid process for Somerset-wide implementation for Reverse Osmosis?

Summary of officer verbal reply

The trial is seeking to test Reverse Batch Osmosis and not Reverse Osmosis, which we know is a proven technology but a costly one for P credit creation. Reverse Batch Osmosis is a more energy efficient technology and the pilot (funded from the Nutrient Mitigation Funding) will clarify the costs associated with using Reverse Batch Osmosis for P credit creation. The waiver covers the initial trial and should it demonstrate good value for money, the wider rollout of the technology.