

Scrutiny Climate and Place committee – Public Question Time

Monday 11th November 2024

Statement to Scrutiny Committee Climate & Place 11th November 2024 by Mr. David Orr

We elect administrations to be in charge of policy and to be able to effect policy change. The constitution states: “Officers can expect Members to give political leadership and direction and to seek to further their agreed policies and objectives with the understanding that Members have the right to take the final decision on issues based on advice”.

Nutrient neutrality is clearly a policy, as Dorset with Defra and Natural England have changed their policy, so that Phosphorus mitigation is no longer required in Dorset for Poole Harbour.

There is a nutrient baseline for Poole Harbour, so they know where they are and when to stop etc. There isn't a nutrient baseline for the Somerset Moors and Levels which, 4 years in, is subpar. I understand that the relevant officers were directed to seek with Natural England a cost to get a similar key baseline for Somerset. Where is the progress report for that vital work?

Defra with Ofwat instructed Wessex Water to treat sewage in Dorset settlements of 1,000 to 2,000, while Somerest is 2,000 only and is disadvantaged. What action have the relevant officers taken to lobby for equal and beneficial treatment for small settlements across Somerset, to level the nutrient playing field with Dorset?

Where is the progress report for the Salinity Solutions trial? That trial report was due by October and the funding deadline is next March. Many of us had genuine concerns that this technology would not generate economically viable Phosphorus credits. Should the final tender have been open and competitive whilst specifying batch processing as a requirement? I think it should.

I attended the Somerset Catchment Partnership last week and Lancaster University reported back on their Moors and Level nutrient research. It is clear that legacy and current agricultural impacts were about 50% of the problem, with most of the remaining 50% with Wessex Water, but their impacts declining steadily as lower regulatory limits are implemented. By 2030, the Wessex Water contributions will be very much lower. New home impacts weren't statistically relevant.

Finally, I think it is vital that the work of scrutiny committees is afforded the sort of respect that we see for Select Committees in Parliament. The officers were directed by this committee some months ago to draw up support for a Task and Finish Group, so

that further nutrient neutrality policy work could be undertaken. Why is there no report posted?

My abiding impression with regard to nutrient neutrality policy in this council, is that it is dominated by “groupthink” and there is an absurd amount of effort going into defending a damaging status quo policy, first formulated 4 years ago. Much has changed since then but the policy remains “as is”. Why?