

Full Council – 10 October 2024

Public Participation

Question 1 – submitted by Richard Thomas Chair, Sustainable Shaftesbury Advisory Committee

It's a truism that in present-day Britain it's not just the NHS that needs reform or it will die; government and local government, and even our system of democracy itself, is in that same perilous state. It was therefore heartening to see the attempt made recently by this Council to engage better with the people of Dorset through the 'A Big Conversation' roadshow process. But it was much less heartening when the actual process involved what I would define as the 'motherhood and apple pie' approach; choices being put to the public that no one in their right mind could possibly disagree with and hence produce a pre-determined result. Also at fault was the almost complete focus on the coastal strip communities as if nothing much mattered in Dorset north of Blandford and the absence of any cabinet members at the drop-ins. We now learn that town and parish councils are to be consulted on the Council's 5-year Plan priorities from 16 October with responses needed by 8 November. This is again too little too late. So while it's heartening to see the new administration start to improve on public engagement with the residents of Dorset over the Council's Plan for the next five years, it would be even more encouraging if the wider public could be told more precisely what is being proposed and when and to what eventual end so that they, too, can feel consulted and feed into their local councils. So my question is: Can the leader of the Council please tell us what the precise purpose of the 'Big Conversation' travelling show was if it is not now, as it appears, to involve the wider voting and taxpaying community of Dorset and when will they have their chance to comment on whatever it is Cabinet finally presents to Council on 5 December, and how? Given climate change and the degradation of nature is becoming ever more urgent with the catastrophic collapse of many ecosystems already taking place - so that we no longer have the luxury of 'business as usual' - will he now assure the people of Dorset that his leadership will ensure that climate and the nature crisis is at the top of this Council's agenda - and will he visit north Dorset shortly, including Shaftesbury, to say this to us in person?

Question 2 – submitted by Rebecca Saville

Oil has been produced at Wytch Farm since 1979, originally by the government owned British Gas Corporation before BP took over in 1984 and subsequently sold to Perenco in 2011. Perenco is a company that specialises in operating ageing facilities, operating as cheaply as possible to ensure such sites are still profitable. It is not subject to the same amount of scrutiny and oversight as larger fossil fuel

companies because Perenco is a family-owned business that is not subject to the reporting requirements of a public company.

In 2010 there was an oil leak from the Wytch Farm oil production unit which closed the plant down for several months. On the 26th of March 2023 a 'major incident' was declared when a large quantity of reservoir fluid was released into Poole Harbour. This was caused by a defective pipe at Ower Bay. This time there was sustained national media coverage about pollution in the protected area, thanks in part to campaigning by local environmental groups.

This area of Dorset is particularly reliant on income from tourism; a more serious pollution incident could have a significant detrimental effect on the local economy. According to an impact assessment commissioned by Dorset Council*, the March 2023 incident cost local businesses £570k. Perenco are planning to continue operating in Poole Harbour until their licence expires in 2037 and have provided reassurances that safety improvements have been implemented following the March 2023 incident.

What legal powers, responsibilities and influence does Dorset Council have regarding Wytch Farm and any associated works and what measures are Dorset Council taking to safeguard local residents and businesses to ensure that there is not another, potentially more serious, oil spill in Poole Harbour?

Question 3 – submitted by Maxine Fox

Increasingly mainstream media is reporting on the unsustainably high environmental footprint of technologies such as 5G and AI.

The hypocrisy of the government who, while demanding carbon reduction are also ruthlessly rolling out these energy and water hungry technologies is becoming ever clearer.

Today every sector of society - state, business and residential is busy generating trillions of pieces of data, all of which has to be stored electronically and in perpetuity. There will never be enough windfarms, solar parks and freshwater to meet this massively increasing need.

The industry tells us their technology will solve any problems. These platitudes echo what the chemical industry told farmers and what the plastic industry told consumers.

In truth, this harvesting and selling of this data is just another global industry, backed by government, both obsessed with short term profits and determined to ignore the increasing evidence of harm.

Companies investing in AI have seen their carbon footprints increase by as much as 50%. A web search using AI uses 4-5 times the energy of a conventional search.

More urgent is this technology's consumption of fresh water. By 2027 scientists predict that the equivalent of half the UK's total freshwater supply will be needed simply to cool data centres.

Lithium for batteries requires 500 000 gallons of freshwater to produce each cubic tonne. Globally the mining of rare metals is accelerating the process of desertification as well as soil and water pollution.

5G is 1000 times more powerful than 4G. It drains batteries very quickly, meaning more energy used to re-charge, shorter life spans and more resources to replace. Figures from Australia show less than 2% of lithium batteries are recycled, left instead to leach toxins into soil and water and causing fires where stored.

Data generation is an unsustainable madness and an environmental catastrophe. It is neither clean nor green. We must think about data creation the same way we think of carbon emissions and drastically reduce our use of wireless technologies and A.I.

Given this council's pledge, and duty, to reduce carbon emissions, mitigate climate change and protect nature, will this council be challenging the government on the incompatibility of data generating technologies and carbon reduction and instead advocate for the implementation of alternative, energy efficient, safe, future proofed technologies that protect life and our planet?