

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?

Response from Cllr Ryan Hope

The purpose of the Big Conversation public engagement was to share our proposed strategic priorities for Dorset Council to deliver over the next 5 years and seek feedback on these.

To be clear, this was public engagement, and not a statutory consultation.

The Big Conversation ran from 24 July to 15 September and involved 12 in-person events, 2 of which were held in North Dorset (Shaftesbury and Blandford), plus we ran engagement activity in all our libraries, online engagement and made arrangements for residents who are digitally excluded to take part.

We received a really positive and constructive response from residents across Dorset, and from many town and parish councils. There is a very high level of public support for our 4 proposed strategic priorities of Housing, Climate and Nature, Economic growth, and Communities for all. Residents' feedback is enabling us to shape the detail of our new Council Plan, and we will share more details of this publicly over coming weeks.

In addition to the main Big Conversation activity, and in response to requests from town and parish councils for further detail, we are sharing a draft of the new Council Plan with councils for 3 and a half weeks, prior to approval through Cabinet and Full Council. This means town and parish councils will have had two extensive opportunities to have their say on our plan.

I absolutely refute your claim that our focus is only on coastal communities. The issues of housing, economic growth, climate and nature, and communities affect all residents in all areas of Dorset, and we were able to engage with a broad cross-section of residents about this.

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?

* [Wytch Farm Impact Assessment \(phc.co.uk\)](http://phc.co.uk)

Response from Cllr Shane Bartlett

There are a number of regulators who have different responsibilities and powers for regulating Wytch Farm and these include the Council, the Environment Agency, the Health and Safety Executive and the North Sea Transition Authority (formerly the Oil and Gas Authority).

As the Minerals Planning Authority, the Council has granted planning permission for Wytch Farm which have conditions and obligations governing the operation and decommissioning of the oilfield. The Council also undertakes monitoring visits to check compliance with these conditions and obligations.

The conditions require any significant uncontrolled hydrocarbon or fluid release to be reported to the Council and for Perenco to take immediate steps to prevent further releases, minimise risks to the environment, clean up the pollution and take steps to prevent a further polluting release.

Legislation also requires the Council to develop and test offsite emergency response plans in respect of incidents relating to the Gathering Station site and the main pipeline that transports crude oil from the Gathering Station to Hampshire. These Regulations are however about preventing and mitigating the effects of incidents on people and the environment, rather than preventing the incidents themselves.

The Poole Harbour oil spill incident in March 2023 fell outside of these regulations, but Dorset Council responded alongside other partner organisations as a Category One responder under the Civil Contingencies legislation, and costs incurred were successfully recovered from Perenco.

As the operator, Perenco is required to maintain a number of plans and policies, ensuring that it has taken all measures necessary to prevent major accidents from happening. These are subject to examination and compliance by external regulators.

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?

Response from Cllr Nick Ireland

Balancing the benefits of technology with the undoubted environmental impacts is a global challenge.

Technology is a critical component of our world today. From communication and time management to manufacturing, shopping and healthcare, digital tools have an enormous impact on our lives. Adopting advanced technology will be key to modernising Dorset's economy, attracting high-value jobs and retaining skills within our economy

Let's look at the benefits of technology in one small aspect of society . . . education. Through technology, educators can better meet the learning needs of students, making education more accessible, inclusive and engaging. According to a local university, the benefits include:

- Flexibility in the way we study
- Personalised learning
- Choice in how we learn
- Instant access to resources and expertise
- Collaborative learning opportunities
- A global perspective

Dorset Council embraces and promotes the huge part technology and digital data plays in running essential services and providing economic and social opportunities to all. We are at the forefront of showing how tech can improve lives in environmentally responsible ways while driving the move away from the dirty and inefficient processes of the past.

Here are a few examples:

- Great digital connectivity is the foundation to digitising and modernising our public services.
- Our recent agri-tech trials showed how connected robots could weed wheat without polluting diesel tractors or harmful herbicides.
- Small, connected devices are helping keep vulnerable people safe in their own homes and helping them feel less isolated.
- We are leading a national project to radically reduce power consumption by the telecoms sector.

Data Centres are not going away but we do need to run them sustainably, by using green energy and cooling them in innovative ways, such as putting them in leisure centres where they can be used to heat the swimming pool. The Green Economy has the potential to transform the economy of Dorset over the next twenty years. Just one example is the proposed Celtic Sea offshore floating wind farms that will generate 4.5GW by 2035, rising to 16.5GW by 2045, and providing up to 26,000 well-paid jobs in the process across the South West.

A final observation. When the COVID-19 pandemic struck, it was technology and digital data that allowed councils and other public services across the UK to continue running the essential public services that we all depend on. It was technology that allowed people to maintain contact with their families and loved ones.

As a Council we have also benefitted from digital technological advancement