

COUNCILLOR QUESTIONS TO CABINET – 2 MARCH 2023

Question 1

From: Councillor Jeremy Milln, Central Ward

To: Cabinet Member, finance, corporate services and planning

The Cabinet Commission report recommends setting up a Phosphate trading scheme for the agricultural sector with a legally binding MoU. It claims that such trading schemes promote nutrient efficiency.

While it is being discussed in relation to Poole and a scheme was set up in 2017 in Holland specifically to manage dairy cattle manure, the UK has no experience of such a scheme for phosphates.

Commodifying pollutants, so the purchase of permission credits become a business cost to continue polluting, does not strongly incentivise change, at least not the rapid progress we need to make on phosphates (or indeed on emissions).

Given the novelty, complexity and risks associated with such a scheme would the Cabinet member agree that it would be better the Commission not progress this aspect, unless it can be demonstrated beyond doubt that it would be effective?

Response

Thank you Councillor Milln, the proposal before Cabinet is to move to the development of an outline business case, during the course of which the further assessments will be undertaken which would be necessary to answer your questions in more detail.

I agree with you - the right regulatory driver needs to be part of the solution.

In such a scheme, the EA could be asked to use the Environmental Permit Regulations to set a mandatory target and require all farms to report annually on their progress to report the leaching of phosphate. With criminal penalties if data is not reported or is falsified.

The link between changing inputs and managing down phosphates is subject to many variables and so a scheme allowing farmer's time to phase in the adjustments would aid transition and secure better buy-in by those impacted.

Such a scheme would represent an inter-farm trading approach during the managed reduction "glide path" phase to delivery of the end-state nutrient targets. Ultimately, all farms would be required to reach the end-state targets, or face prosecution and the imposition of a WPZ at the end of the scheme period - which in Poole's case is ten years - ensuring that trading is only an interim solution between farmers to a complex pan-catchment challenge. All farms will ultimately be required to reach end-state targets.

This is the regulated voluntary approach in operation for the Poole scheme and would be explored as an option during the business case development phase of a viable scheme for the Wye.

Supplementary question

I asked in my original question if the Cabinet member agrees that it would be better the Commission not progress Phosphate trading for the agricultural sector given the novelty, complexity and risks associated with such a scheme. In her response she says she agrees, then enthuses about voluntary 'inter-farm trading', managed as an 'interim solution'. There is no track record for agricultural P trading and the Poole scheme, which is for nitrates, is very different.

Given the fierce objections from FoUW, the Wye Salmon Association, CPRW, the Citizen Science Group and others, would the cabinet member now agree unambiguously that this should not be progressed?

From the joint statement from CPRW and FoUW (1st March 2023):

A phosphate trading scheme will not be sufficient to "restore the Wye to favourable conservation status", the headline aim of the Commission (see ToR). WE DO NOT HAVE 12 YEARS TO DO THIS. There is a high risk that ticking the partial phosphate-trading "solution" box, will actually prevent effective, timely, integrated effort to restore the Wye to favourable conservation status.

Response

I think it's far too early to be ruling anything out. This is a difficult problem where the options need to be considered properly, and my feeling is that it's appropriate that we continue to keep everything on the table including doing difficult things like getting agreement to voluntary phosphate reduction schemes alongside increased regulation and oversight. I wouldn't wish to rule anything out at this stage and so we're continuing to recommend that options are considered and reported back to the July council meeting on an improved view of which options are showing prospect for delivering certainty for our river.

Question 2

From: Councillor Nigel Shaw, Bromyard Bringsty Ward
To: Cabinet Member, Infrastructure and transport

Can I be provided, perhaps in the form of a table, with the amounts that the authority has spent on Beryl bikes, by year, with the source of the funding, and how many bikes were purchased and whether they are still in service?

Response

Summary Table of City Bike Share Spend

19/20	20/21	21/22	22/23
£69,067	£177,390	£88,188	£86,942
Grant: DfT Access Fund	Grant: DfT Access Fund & Towns Fund accelerated projects	Grant: DfT Access Fund	Directorate Revenue

200 pedal power bikes and 72 electric bikes are available to the public. The number of electric bikes is set to increase to 102 over the next few months.

Supplementary question

Thank you for the information provided, can you specifically identify how many pedal power bikes and electric bikes were purchased by each of the funds in each year? In particular how many were purchased against the Towns Fund accelerated projects and how much was expended from that fund?

Can the Cabinet member confirm that all of the bikes purchased are still available?

Response

The short answer is we don't own any bikes at the council, Beryl own the bikes. Our costs are associated with infrastructure put in as part of the deal. I've given him the detail on the spend, I can provide him a little bit more detail if you like it. In relation to bikes that are still available, I think in the entirety of the scheme we've lost two bikes - which is fantastic - one ended up in a tree on fire and one was thrown in the river right at the beginning and since then we have had the lowest level of vandalism in the entire country and world where Beryl have bikes including America and they praise Herefordians and they're very grateful that the phrase 'I'll Beryl it' has entered into our lexicon. Can I take this opportunity to thank the Conservative administration for bringing in the Beryl bikes, I think it was a fantastic scheme, we were very happy to continue and support it. When we have consultations even people who are very let's say road-minded are praiseworthy of Beryl and would like to see more bays so we're working very hard on that.

Question 3

From: Councillor Jennie Hewitt, Golden Valley North Ward

To: Cabinet Member, finance, corporate services and planning

Re proposed phosphate commission Scheme

Please can you describe in outline how this scheme will deal with the legacy phosphate issue in the Wye catchment?

Response

Phosphates can only usefully leave fields by uptake into livestock or uptake in crops, sometimes small amounts are windblown in soil too, otherwise Phosphates remains in situ or leach into water courses, so it is vital that legacy P is managed correctly.

At the Commission's suggestion, DEFRA have brought together Lancaster University, the Scottish Rural College, Rothampstead Research and the AHDB to better understand the evidence gaps and develop the tools needed to enable farmers to make better choices about the application of nutrients in the catchment. EA, NE, NRW and Welsh Government, together with Farm Herefordshire and the Council have participated in these discussions.

Two tools are under development - one of which better measures total phosphates in soils including legacy P, and the other measures leaching of phosphates from farms. Discussions have commenced as to whether these tools can be trialled on the Wye later this year when research reaches that phase.