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Rivers and Land Drainage - A Liberal Party Discussion Document

The following discussion document was created by Cllr Mike Potter after his contribution at the October 20205 Liberal Assembly.

"Without any formal qualifications, or employment in the field, I make no claims of being an expert, beyond 20 years of practical involvement and obsession with every aspect of flooding and all things watery. If you think this is a relatively simple, straightforward topic, think again.

It may be tempting to think that family, friends and personal wealth are the most important things in life. However, without our life support system of clean air, clean water and good nutritious food, which a millennia-long balance of nature has provided for us, nothing else is possible. But these are all in damaging decline under 'our' stewardship.

The vast majority of expert opinion, research and empirical evidence shows that we humans have created existential climate, biodiversity and nature crises, largely through our exploitation of fossil fuels, industrialisation and large population growth in the last circa 200 years. Although this has created much wealth and improvements in living standards for many, the chickens are now coming home to roost (although mainly in vast sheds and polluting our rivers). There are credible solutions that don't involve living in caves or abject poverty and misery but given the existing profitability of fossil fuel use and the capitalist system, there are hugely powerful forces in play to maintain the current status quo. Unfortunately, atmospheric carbon (see link below), and coincident global temperatures are rapidly rising to levels that are already having catastrophic impacts. More atmospheric heat globally means more energy in our weather systems locally, along with more moisture in the atmosphere. The result being ever increasing storm strengths, with greater rainfall intensity, alternating with longer droughts. It's possible to ignore the regular media reports of record-breaking temperatures, floods, storms, wind speeds, droughts and wildfires, but not recommended as it won't always be 'someone else's problem'. Land rendered unproductive often becomes uninhabitable. This invariably results in mass migration and often wars. Sound familiar?

For many centuries, farming and land management followed seasonal cycles of working with nature, largely person power and one or two horsepower, given the lack of alternatives. The development of ever more powerful and sophisticated machinery changed that to a largely agri-industrial landscape. An understandable need for a massive increase in Britain's food security around two world wars meant every possible acre was needed for agriculture, and therefore well drained, with maximum productivity. By necessity, this trumped the increased flood risk by modifying watercourses for efficient drainage (speeding the flow) and the critical importance of the balance of nature – we are only a small part of the whole food chain. Perhaps the best example is the knowledge that if Bees, and numerous other pollinators become extinct, our

food chain collapses, so we too become extinct. Such a focus can only work in the short-medium term, and the evidence of failure is now only too apparent.

The water provided for free by nature as an essential for pretty much all life (increasingly in the wrong quantities) is currently considered by 'us' as a commodity and asset to be used and abused. We massively pollute it with human and animal excrement and diffuse pollution from agriculture and industry, often destroying the life within and around it. Is it time to afford rivers and nature the legal rights we give to companies? Who would speak on their behalf? Register a company with Companies House and it immediately has legal rights, while critical life support systems that have been there for millennia are given scant protection, and even then, only if the political will and funding exist.

In planning terms, there are three key pillars which theoretically have equal weighting and importance: Economy; Social; Environmental. The same should apply to water management, with social largely represented by flood risk. But money invariably talks loudest. To give equal weighting requires compromises and an acceptance of the true importance of each pillar. Should we wait for social and environmental breakdown before accepting this and acting accordingly? For those of you with children and grandchildren, how long off will that be and how disastrous?

Feeding virtually every living organism on planet earth relies on the remarkably thin layer of soil (aka organic matter) covering most of its surface. Is intensive farming, reliant on fossil fuel-based fertilisers and constantly denuding those soils sustainable, even in the medium term? As an aside, virtually every other population in the animal kingdom is controlled by the availability of suitable food, water and liveable environment; when will ours start to be?

Michael Gove coined the term 'public money for public goods' in terms of farming subsidies but sadly didn't deliver. Shouldn't farmers receive some of that public money for the benefits of regenerative farming (increasing the ability of land to be productive and flood and drought resilient through natural means)? Likewise for loss of productive land to reduce flood risk, river pollution and sediment supply? Ditto for sustainable farming methods which can reverse our nature crisis? How long can we continue to farm with short-term financial gain as the primary aim?

So, what about the economics? The phrase "water is the next gold" has been used by various people, including investors and businessmen. When there's vastly too much, the cost of damage will dwarf investment in climate change mitigation. When there's too little, the laws of supply and demand will make it the next gold in value. Doesn't that mean we should value our water far more highly, use it sparingly and not waste it wantonly? Does that require more stringent planning rules and/or education? Store more for a non-rainy day? Water is not just stored in ponds and reservoirs, but in healthy soils (about 8 times more than in denuded dirt), in healthy, properly managed moorlands, in groundwater (just another reservoir, but largely invisible underground). If we reduce impermeable land (concrete, tarmac, roofs) and employ more suds, then stop over-compaction of farmland through ever heavier machinery and over-stocking of animals, water will run off less quickly. We could stop straightening, over-cleaning and over-managing our rivers too (Slowing the Flow). That would reduce both flood and drought risk, recharge groundwater more effectively and reduce the surface water that overwhelms combined sewers. Wouldn't that be beneficial in multiple ways?

So many awkward questions with complex answers. Far easier to count small boats and brown faces.

https://earth.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/co2-graph-083122_scaled_scrunched.jpg.webp

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