Motion for Time Limited Debate – Toxic polyfluoroalkyl substance (PFAS) pollution in Kent

Proposer: Mr Antony Hook
Seconder: Mr Ian Chittenden

Background – Provided by the Liberal Democrat Group

A major mapping project has revealed Polyfluoroalkyl Substances (PFAS) have been found at dangerous levels at thousands of different locations across the UK and Europe. Often known as 'Forever Chemicals', PFAS do not break down in the environment and can be harmful to human health. PFAS are a group of around 10,000 chemicals that have made their way into water, soils, and sediments from a wide range of consumer products, waste, and industrial processes.

Two PFAS have been linked to an array of health problems. Perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA) has been related to kidney and testicular cancer, thyroid disease, ulcerative colitis, high cholesterol, and pregnancy-induced hypertension. Perfluorooctanesulfonic acid (PFOS) has been associated with reproductive, developmental, liver, kidney, and thyroid disease.

The substances have been found at 17,000 sites across the UK and Europe. Of these, PFAS have been detected at high concentrations of more than 1,000 nanograms a litre of water at 640 sites, and about 10,000ng/l at 300 locations. At one manufacturing site in Zwijndrecht, Flanders, Belgium significant concentrations of PFAS mean that people living within 10 miles of the site have been told not to eat any eggs laid in their gardens and to avoid homegrown vegetables.

In the UK, data obtained from water companies and the Environment Agency by the study have shown that since 2006, around 120 samples of drinking water sources have been found to contain concentrations of PFOS or PFOA at above the 100ng/l level – the point at which the UK Drinking Water Inspectorate's (DWI) guidelines state water companies should take action to reduce it before supplying it to people's homes.

In Kent, PFAS pollution has been identified in urban and rural areas, as well as in the county's waterways.

Other countries have far lower limits for these chemicals. In the US, the Environmental Protection Agency has set a health advisory limit of 0.004ng/l of PFOA and 0.02ng/l in drinking water. In Denmark, the Environmental Protection Agency stipulates that drinking water must not contain more than 2ng/l for the sum for four PFASs. Chemist and PFAS expert Roger Klein said he believes the UK's "DWI limits are ridiculously high by current international standards… it is the lazy way out and it doesn't remove the PFAS, which remains a problem since they are highly persistent and bioaccumulative".

The Environment Agency had admitted PFOS is ubiquitous in the environment and that the presence of PFOS in rivers will mean many will not meet water quality standards until 2039. In the UK just PFOS and PFOA are regulated. The European Chemicals Agency says that about 4.4m tonnes of PFAS will end up in the environment over the next 30 years unless action is taken.

Note: The Forever Pollution Project is a cross border collaboration supported by the Arena for Journalism in Europe. The project was supported in the UK by Watershed Investigations and The Guardian.

Motion:

The County Council resolves;

a. to express its concern over PFAS pollution in Kent's soils, waterways, and sediments, as identified by the Forever Pollution Project.

b. To recommend to the Executive that:
   (i) work is undertaken within this authority to produce an urgent report on the extent of PFAS pollution and the associated risks in Kent, and for the findings to be presented to the Environment and Transport Cabinet Committee and this Council.
   (ii) a strategy on managing PFAS pollution in Kent based on the findings of the urgent report and engagement with external partners be explored.