Data & Facts: Where's The Nearest Lighthouse (What Can We Do?)

Given a general lack of transparency and availability of information from authorities and companies, one lever for your group to find information you need is to submit a **Freedom of Information** (FoI) request. FoI requests are a useful tool to obtain information of any kind from those in power, be they regulatory authorities, government departments, local and unitary authorities, or private companies. That said, FoI requests are not always effectively responded to, particularly if you miss any tricks on how to exercise your rights. FoI requests are a skill worth developing as a group.

- Fortunately, **What Do They Know** helps you avoid wipeout, offering existing case studies and template letters. Surf the constant tide of **previous cases** similar to your local situation. Find your clear horizon via their website, then share your information with others entering those waters after you via Dirty Water's Live Content channel on Telegram.
    - A case study on their website, for instance, refers to a resident who has put in a Freedom of Information request to the national regulatory body, Natural Resources Wales. Now, anyone searching the site for "leachate" will bring this request and similar example cases up. This invaluable resource means your local group will not have to be put off by having to reinvent the wheel and can avoid missing essential questions and exactly **how to ask** them in your **Freedom of Information request** .

- If your FoI request leaves you dissatisfied, you do have the right to take up your dispute with the **Information Commissioner**, or even approach legal firms who will support your **legal campaign**.

- Commissioning **independent scientific analysis or reports** from consultants becomes inevitable if you **seek redress** where the pollution issues your community faces are complex and require specialist expertise, e.g.: biology, chemistry, engineering, or any such combination. In order to hold local authorities, water companies or regulators accountable, your information needs to be credible and as accurate as possible; independent reports provide the weight you need.

    - This research and reporting work may either be a discreet project or potentially longer term systematised testing and analysis.
    - As such, it's helpful to know how feasible an option this is in terms of analysis and reporting costs. Some NGO and university laboratories will provide free services. (See the contacts spreadsheet, where we will build that list of experts).
    - Then potentially if there are legal implications, whether your group want to seek **legal counsel** is a further consideration and whether pro bono services are on offer, or whether a 'class action' is needed.
    - Diving into these currents means knowing **what questions to ask** your potential contractor. Most importantly, you need to avoid their **conflicts of interest** such as previous or on-going contract works provided for local authorities or water companies, for instance. Check if they have existing contracts, or have had in the past; this could mean that if you hire them, your data could be compromised by **pre-existing confidentiality and non-disclosure agreements**, limiting your available data and limiting the credibility of any subsequent reports. That risks your group not getting the information you need to hold bodies to account.
    - It is helpful if an independent contractor is to be commissioned to provide your local group with any scientific or engineering report, that you ask them in advance if they obtain any **more than 10% of their work from authorities or companies you seek to challenge**. If they do significant amounts of work for e.g. a water company, a local council, or a water regulator, that could mean they will have a conflict of interest. If they are legally constrained in working for your group because of pre-conditions of contracts previously held with those bodies you want to hold to account, then go elsewhere! **Greenpeace** labs and some **university engineering and chemistry departments** have been known to support local groups in their research. We'd love to hear of your experiences here.

- **Allies Ahoy!** Do you trust the information being provided by your identified engineer, environmental auditor, or other contractor? If not, talk to independent allies such as **Friends of the Earth**, who may have **historic documentation or community connections** to bring more information to light. If there is a local environmental umbrella group, this is also a good place to start to find any pre-existing, relevant information available.
    - More power to your paddleboarding elbow from Surfers Against Sewage here:

      Surfers Against Sewage 2022-23 **Water Quality Report**
        - SAS webpage about **Water Quality Testing**

- **Fundraising?** You will want to check any cost implications out before you fundraise for such an important fact-finding project. Let's not burn out on such an involved deep dive. If you haven't got the funds to source an independent report:
    - Might a crowd-funder help?
    - Get in touch with our **Fundraising Team**.
