



News Release

26 July 2021

Council leaders seek Government help on phosphates

The leaders of all four District Councils and the County Council in Somerset have called on the Government to urgently address water quality issues impacting national sites including the Somerset Levels and Moors, and to work with them to help unlock much needed housing development.

They have written to the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, and the Secretary of State for the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, saying the issue requires urgent attention if they and other affected authorities are going to be able to help address the national housing crisis.

The letter follows up on one sent in December 2020 which sought Government support following the Natural England advice concerning unacceptable levels of phosphates in the Somerset Levels and Moors RAMSAR site.

Natural England have advised the local authorities that they should undertake a Habitats Regulations Assessment (HRA) before determining planning applications that may give rise to additional phosphates in the Levels and Moors catchment.

This requirement to demonstrate that proposed developments will be phosphate neutral has prevented the determination of a significant number of affected planning applications across Somerset, including development sites that would deliver over 11,000 new homes. Future strategic housing sites and brownfield sites have also been delayed.

The letter warns that the phosphates issue has continuing implications for many affected local authorities to meet local housing needs, to maintain a five-year housing land supply and meet government targets for the delivery of homes.

It requests that the Government works proactively with the Somerset authorities to deliver a clear investment strategy to address water quality issues impacting the Somerset Levels and Moors Ramsar site.

The Somerset authorities have been working in partnership to address the issue using funding support provided by Homes England. In February 2021 all the Somerset authorities published a phosphate calculator which provides affected applicants with the necessary information to calculate the phosphate load arising from their development.

The authorities have also jointly commissioned consultants to support the delivery of a Somerset-wide Nutrient Strategy, expected to be completed in the Autumn.

However, the leaders say the existing national water quality issues will remain a barrier on housing delivery for several years and requires urgent attention.

They are asking the Government:

- For publication of the affected local authority areas, the quantum of housing development on hold as a result of Natural England's advice, and information as to whether water quality issues are affecting other areas in England.
- A commitment to influence further investment and upgrades in the waste water treatment works to address this national water quality issue.
- To work proactively with the Somerset authorities to deliver a clear investment strategy to address water quality issues impacting the Somerset Levels and Moors Ramsar site, to help unlock much needed housing development.
- To make capital funds available to assist the delivery of strategic scale nature-based solutions where the cost of delivery would otherwise negatively impact on much needed developer contributions for social and community infrastructure improvements (i.e. transport improvements and the provision of new education and health facilities) for which no alternative funding source is available.
- For confirmation that current infrastructure and affordable housing funding programmes in Somerset will not be placed at risk by the phosphates issue and that extensions to spend programmes will be permitted where necessary
- For confirmation that relevant Government regulators (OFWAT, Environment Agency and Natural England) will be addressing the major contributory polluters responsible for the discharge of nutrients into the water courses that feed into the protected sites in England.

ENDS

Editor's Note: More information on Phosphates on the Somerset Levels and Moors Ramsar Site can be found on our website - [Phosphates on the Somerset levels and moors \(somersetwestandtaunton.gov.uk\)](https://www.somersetwestandtaunton.gov.uk/phosphates-on-the-somerset-levels-and-moors)

A copy of the letter can be found [here](#)

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