



Ministry of Housing,
Communities &
Local Government

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Rt Hon Christopher Pincher MP
Minister of State for Housing

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Dear Cllr Smith-Roberts,

Thank you for your letter of 3 December to Rt Hon Robert Jenrick MP, regarding the effect phosphate pollution is having on local authorities in Somerset. I am replying as Minister of State for Housing. Please accept my sincerest apologies for the delay in responding to you.

Please be assured that I am aware of this issue and the challenges it poses to local planning authorities, and the effects of this on development and the local economy, not just in Somerset, but in other parts of the country as well. I am aware particularly of the potential effect of this issue on the Staplegrove Spine Road Housing Infrastructure Fund project. I am pleased to note that Homes England are providing some support funding to Somerset West and Taunton Council to explore the issue in relation to the project.

This problem has arisen from water pollution affecting the status of protected habitats sites. While responsibility for the condition of these sites lies with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), we will continue to work with them, Natural England and the Environment Agency to consider both the wider issues of underlying sources of pollution, and short term solutions to enable development to resume. I will soon be meeting with the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for DEFRA Rebecca Pow MP, who is the Minister responsible for the relevant policy.

In the meantime, local authorities, as 'competent authorities' will need to work with Natural England and other stakeholders to determine whether proposals would adversely affect the integrity of the habitats sites, and to secure any mitigation measures that may be necessary. I understand that this is challenging, but that the Somerset local authorities are working collaboratively to achieve this. My officials have recently convened a meeting with representatives of your local authorities, Natural England, Environment Agency, Ofwat and DEFRA, to assist with this process and to identify further ways in which we can provide support.

I note the concerns you raise about meeting the 5-year housing land supply under the current circumstances. However, it is important to keep the planning system moving to enable it to play its full part in the economic recovery to come. We will continue to monitor the situation by engaging with those local authorities who are facing challenges, to determine whether any changes are required.

I note that your letter has also been addressed to Rt Hon George Eustice MP. I am copying this letter to the Environment Secretary and asking that I am copied into his response to you too.

Thank you again for your letter. I hope you find this information helpful.

Yours sincerely,
Christopher Pincher

RT HON CHRISTOPHER PINCHER MP
