

Report to: Council



Date of Meeting 25 February 2026

Document classification: Part A Public Document

Exemption applied: None

Review date for release N/A

Motion on Notice – Recognising and Protecting the Rights of Rivers in East Devon

Report summary:

The constitution provides that members of Council may submit written notice of motions for debate at Council. A motion must be signed by the proposer and seconder and at least 3 members and submitted not later than 10 clear days before the date of the meeting.

Motions must be about matters for which the council has a responsibility, or which affect East Devon District Council and will be listed on the agenda in the order in which notice received.

Motions for which notice has been given will be listed on the agenda in the order in which notice was received unless the member giving notice states, in writing, that they propose to move it to a later meeting or withdraw it.

Is the proposed decision in accordance with:

Budget Yes No

Policy Framework Yes No

Recommendation:

That the Motion on Notice – Recognising and Protecting the Rights of Rivers in East Devon is debated and determined by Council.

Reason for recommendation:

The constitution makes provision for motions on notice to be debated and decided by Council.

Officer: Andrew Melhuish, Corporate Lead Democratic Services & Scrutiny
(andrew.melhuish@eastdevon.gov.uk)

Portfolio(s) (check which apply):

- Assets and Economy
- Communications and Democracy
- Council, Corporate and External Engagement
- Culture, Leisure, Sport and Tourism
- Environment - Nature and Climate
- Environment - Operational
- Finance
- Place, Infrastructure and Strategic Planning
- Sustainable Homes and Communities

Equalities impact Low Impact

The impact is low as this report is dealing with the submission of motions on notice. Any work undertaken following the consideration of the motion on notice would be subject to an equalities impact assessment being undertaken.

Climate change Low Impact

Risk: Low Risk; A risk assessment would need to be completed on any works or further investigations resulting from the motions of notice.

Links to background information N/A

Link to [Council Plan](#)

Priorities (check which apply)

- A supported and engaged community
- Carbon neutrality and ecological recovery
- Resilient economy that supports local business
- Financially secure and improving quality of services

Report in full

Motion 1: Recognising and Protecting the Rights of Rivers in East Devon

Proposed by: Cllr Paula Fernley

Seconded by: Cllr Jess Bailey

Supported by: Councillors Paul Arnott, Charlotte Fitzgerald, Geoff Jung, Steve Hunt, Marianne Rixson, Sarah Jackson, Paul Hayward, Alasdair Bruce, Joe Whibley, Tim Dumper, Ian Barlow, Olly Davey, Anne Hall, Fabian King, Duncan Mackinder, Steve Hunt, Richard Jefferies and Bethany Collins

This Council notes that:

East Devon is home to a network of rivers and streams — including the Axe, Coly, Otter, Sid, Exe, Clyst, Lym and their tributaries, which are central to the district's ecology, landscape character, cultural heritage and community wellbeing. These waterways support wildlife, livelihoods, recreation, food production and the local economy.

Across East Devon and nationally, rivers are under increasing pressure from sewage pollution, agricultural runoff, over-abstraction, habitat loss and climate change. These pressures threaten biodiversity, public health, climate resilience and the long-term sustainability of our river catchments.

This Council believes that:

To safeguard these natural assets for current and future generations, East Devon District Council should demonstrate leadership by recognising the intrinsic value, ecological importance of rivers and they have rights, drawing inspiration from the principles set out in the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Rivers, including:

- the right to flow naturally and seasonally;
- the right to perform essential ecological functions;
- the right to be free from pollution;
- the right to be sustained by, and sustain, healthy freshwater sources;
- the right to support native biodiversity and ecological integrity; and
- the right to recovery and regeneration from environmental harm.

Council therefore resolves to:

- 1. Acknowledge the intrinsic ecological value of all rivers and streams within the jurisdiction of East Devon District Council, and that they have rights, including the Axe, Coly, Otter, Sid, Exe, Clyst, Lym and their tributaries.**
- 2. Affirm the Council's commitment, through its planning and policy functions, to giving due weight to river protection, flood prevention, sustainable drainage (SuDS), nutrient neutrality, biodiversity net gain and green infrastructure, including through the emerging Local Plan and development management processes.**
- 3. Note that river protection and restoration principles have been embedded within the emerging Local Plan as far as current legislation allows, and that these considerations will continue to inform relevant planning decisions.**

4. Continue to work in partnership with relevant national and regional bodies, including the Environment Agency, Natural England, DEFRA, Ofwat and South West Water, to formally communicate concerns about river health and to encourage stronger protections, effective enforcement and catchment-based approaches. As well as asking our MPs to put pressure on Government.
 5. Recognise the value of citizen science and community-led river monitoring initiatives, and commit to signposting communities to appropriate regulatory bodies and partners where concerns about river quality arise.
 6. Encourage collaboration with community groups, NGO's, catchment partnerships and other stakeholders, where this aligns with existing Council priorities and resources, to share information, promote good practice and signpost relevant support.
 7. Promote public awareness and engagement, within existing resources, on the importance of rivers to East Devon's natural environment, climate resilience and cultural heritage.
 8. Request that the Environment Agency, working with local partners, publishes an annual "State of East Devon Rivers" report to improve transparency, understanding and accountability for river condition and management.
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Financial implications:

To be confirmed, subject to the outcome of the consideration on the Motion on Notice.

Legal implications:

The motions on notice have been submitted in accordance with the Part 4 of the Council's Constitution – Rules of Procedure 10.1 Notice: Except for motions which can be moved without notice under Rule 11, written notice of every motion, signed by at least 5 members, must be delivered to the Chief Executive not later than 10 clear days before the date of the meeting.