

Meeting: Somersetshire Coal Canal and Wansdyke Policy Approach and Option – Parish and Ward Councillor Meeting

Date and time: 27th November 2025, 6-7 p.m.

Attendees:

- Richard Daone, Planning Policy B&NES
- Jonathan Locke, Planning Policy B&NES
- Cllr Matt McCabe, Cabinet Member for Built Environment, Housing and Sustainable Development
- Cllr Fiona Gourley, Ward Cllr for Bathavon South
- Cllr Shaun Stephenson-McGall, Ward Cllr for Timsbury
- David Orme
- Paul Wontner
- Will Shepherd
- Malcolm Austwick
- David Collett
- Olga Shepherd

Meeting notes:

- **Somersetshire Coal Canal Policy Options Overview:** The planning policy team provided a comprehensive briefing to ward councillors and parish council representatives, on the proposed policy options for the Somersetshire Coal Canal, outlining the rationale, process, and implications of both protecting and enabling restoration of the canal.
 - **Local Plan Process Explanation:** The planning policy team explained the stages of the local plan process, including the recent closure of the options consultation, the preparation of the draft local plan, further public consultation on the draft local plan, and the examination process by the Planning Inspectorate.
 - **National Policy Context:** The planning policy team clarified that national policy requires the Council to set out a positive strategy for conserving and enhancing the historic environment, including the Somersetshire Coal Canal as a designated heritage asset, and that the proposed policies are being developed within this framework.
 - **Current and Proposed Policy Structure:** The planning policy team described the current policy (HE2) which protects the existing canal route from development and outlined the proposed policy options: one for protection of the heritage asset and another optional policy for restoration and improvement, including the introduction of safeguarding/protecting diverted routes where the original route has been lost to development.
 - **Policy Operation and Limitations:** The planning policy team emphasised that the purpose of both policy options is to protect both

the existing and diverted routes from development requiring planning permission. The policy option which would introduce diverted routes where the original route has been lost to development, would seek to protect the diverted routes from development that requires planning permission which would prejudice restoration, but would not itself grant planning permission for restoration works, nor confer compulsory purchase powers to the Canal Society.

- **Permitted Development Rights:** it was outlined that most household improvements, such as extensions, porches, garages, and driveways, would remain unaffected by the policy due to permitted development rights, and advised residents to seek certificates of lawful development for clarity.
- **Concerns and Objections from Parish Councils and Residents:**

Attendees raised significant concerns regarding the perceived inevitability of canal restoration, lack of feasibility studies, communication issues, and the potential impact on residents, with officers acknowledging these points and committing to further review and improved communication.

 - **Perceived Inevitability and Credibility:** It was articulated that the development of a policy option creates a sense of inevitability among residents, leading to anxiety about potential restoration. Concerns were raised as to whether the policy approach should encourage restoration through using terms such as 'seek restoration' in the policy language.
 - **Feasibility and Practicality Concerns:** Attendees questioned the absence of feasibility studies for the proposed diversions and restoration, highlighting engineering, water supply, and cost challenges, and asked why the Council is considering a policy for something that may not be viable.
 - **Impact on Existing Properties and Land Use:** Concerns were raised about the effect of diversions on properties, nature reserves, and cemeteries, with questions about the process for removing protection from original canal routes if diversions are implemented.
 - **Communication and Consultation Issues:** Multiple participants criticised the Council's communication with affected residents and parish councils, noting confusion and distress, and called for better engagement and clarity in future stages.
 - **Policy Language and Future Steps:** The planning policy team acknowledged the need to review the policy wording to avoid confusion, committed to considering the issues raised in all objections and comments, and outlined for the approach to further internal discussions, research, and follow-up meetings with stakeholders.
- **Policy Implications for Landowners and Development:** The planning policy team clarified for parish councillors and residents that the proposed

policy would not override landowner rights, would not prevent permitted development, and would require landowner consent for any restoration works, addressing specific questions about property rights and planning processes.

- **Permitted Development Safeguards:** The planning policy team explained that householders retain the right to undertake most extensions, outbuildings, and improvements under permitted development, and that the policy would not restrict these activities.
- **Requirement for Landowner Consent:** The planning policy team reiterated that the Canal Society cannot proceed with restoration on private land without the owner's agreement, and that there are no compulsory purchase powers associated with the policy.
- **Planning Application Process:** The planning policy team clarified that any restoration works would require a separate planning application, which would be subject to criteria including the protection of residential amenity, and that the policy does not guarantee approval for restoration.
- **Handling of Diverted and Original Routes:** The planning policy team addressed questions about what happens to the original canal route if a diversion is implemented, noting that the removal of protection from the original route is a possible option but not yet decided.
- **Comparisons with Other Local Plan Canal Restoration Policies:** The planning policy team referenced examples of local plans from other local authorities to illustrate that similar policy approaches exist elsewhere and to consider potential lessons for the Somerset Shire Coal Canal project. It was noted that other councils policies safeguarding both original and diverted canal routes, confirming that these have been found sound by inspectors
- **Next Steps and Ongoing Engagement:** The planning policy team outlined the Council's next steps, including reviewing consultation responses, further discussions with the Canal Society and stakeholders (including parish councils), additional research, and a commitment to improved communication with residents, with plans to circulate meeting notes and slides.
 - **Review of Consultation Feedback:** The Council will consider issues raised in all representations from the recent and previous consultations before making any decisions on the policy options.
 - **Further Stakeholder Dialogue:** The Council plans to continue discussions with the Canal Society, parish councils, and other stakeholders to address deliverability, policy approach and communication issues.