

Engaging with Neighbourhood Plans

Neighbourhood Planning is a great opportunity for local communities across Somerset to develop a shared vision for their area and shape future development such as new housing. A number of Neighbourhood Plans have now been successfully produced in Somerset, but many more local communities have yet to complete a Plan. Furthermore older plans will need to be revised at some stage if they are to stay relevant. This leaflet is designed to give some general information about how to engage with the process in Somerset, with nature in mind.

Content

- What are Neighbourhood Plans?
- Gather your evidence
- Putting wildlife at the heart of Neighbourhood Planning
- Case studies

What are Neighbourhood Plans?

Neighbourhood Plans are a type of planning document introduced by the Government in 2011. They allow local residents and businesses to shape their area by writing their own planning policies which reflect priorities developed through various community engagement and consultation events.

Neighbourhood Plans can deliver real benefits for a community and for local wildlife. Once successfully produced they become a formal part of the “development plan” for the area and are an important consideration in determining future planning applications. The Neighbourhood Plan’s policies cannot guarantee that a development proposal will be refused nor be granted permission, but the policies will carry significant weight. This means that decisions on planning applications will be determined with reference to the Local Plan, the Neighbourhood Plan and any other material considerations. Neighbourhood Plans are usually developed by Parish or Town Councils.

Neighbourhood Plan policies must relate to the development and use of land. They must also meet a number of “basic conditions” which include ensuring that their policies contribute to sustainable development and are in general conformity with both local planning policies adopted by the Local Planning Authority and national planning policies as set out in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF).



We need to create a **Nature Recovery Network** that extends into every part of our towns, cities and countryside, bringing wildlife and the benefits of a healthy natural world into every part of life. Currently only 10% of Somerset can be classified as being in good natural or semi-natural condition with species-rich natural habitats supporting abundant and diverse wildlife, enabling it to move, reproduce and thrive.

For nature to recover, we need to triple the amount of land managed for nature, creating an interconnected network across our entire county. Land of any size can contribute to the Nature Recovery Network – nature reserves, community spaces, gardens, farms, parks, churchyards and schools. This is why engaging with the planning process is so important.

We need to ensure Neighbourhood plans are developed with nature at their heart and developments take place sustainable, making space for nature to thrive. Local people must step forward to give nature a voice and ensure nature is placed at the heart of all decisions.



Gather your evidence.

Neighbourhood Planning has the potential to make a positive difference for wildlife by protecting and enhancing local green space for people and wildlife and by encouraging wildlife

friendly enhancements in new developments. If plans are completed for the hundreds of Parish and Town council areas across Somerset they will make a significant contribution to the Nature Recovery Network.

Neighbourhood Plans should be based on sound evidence and therefore a good starting point is to gather as much local knowledge about the wildlife in your area as possible.

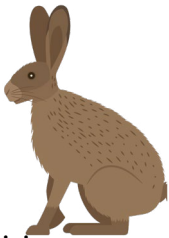
The Somerset Environmental Records Centre (SERC) is the central source for flora and fauna data within Somerset. SERC holds data about statutory and non-statutory sites, habitats and species across the county which is used to inform conservation strategy, development planning and for research purposes. Information held by SERC may not, however, provide a complete picture of your local wildlife due to land ownership and other constraints and bearing in mind that much of the information held by SERC is gathered by volunteers. It may therefore be necessary to commission further wildlife surveys using some of the budget available to communities to prepare Neighbourhood Plans.



Putting wildlife at the heart of Neighbourhood planning

Neighbourhood Plan policies can help to preserve and enhance local wildlife and the wider environment provided they are in conformity with the local planning authority’s Local Plan. The following list gives some examples of how Neighbourhood Plan policies can make a positive difference for the wildlife and environment in your area:

- Map out the wildlife habitats in your local area and show where new wildlife corridors, such as hedgerows, might be created to link existing habitats and thereby help to develop the Nature Recovery Network in Somerset.
- Protect and improve existing green space and water features for people and wildlife.
- Ensure that wildlife habitats and other green spaces (including Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems, SUDS) are an integral part of all new developments and that associated landscaping is wildlife friendly, using native species as far as possible.



- Include bat and bird box provision as a condition of new developments where appropriate. Also consider making “homes” and habitat for insects with “bug hotels” for example.
- Include tree planting of the right tree and in the right places. This might also include street trees where appropriate. Seek to protect existing mature trees and hedgerows which are important to local people and wildlife.
- Consider new water features such as ponds and wetland areas which might be linked to SUDS. Streams within existing culverts might be opened up and new culverting of streams resisted.
- Residential garden areas can be important for wildlife and can in certain circumstances be protected from inappropriate development when other considerations such as the character of a particular area are taken into account.
- For major housing proposals a green space infrastructure plan should be produced to ensure that wildlife friendly green spaces are properly considered. This might include wild play areas where children can safely explore their local natural environment thereby improving their physical and mental health.
- Street and other lighting can, if not sensitively handled, impact on dark sky aspirations to the detriment of both people and wildlife such as moths and bats. Policies can seek to address this issue by requiring lighting of the right sort to achieve a good balance between community safety needs and darker skies.
- A Neighbourhood Plan might also consider the future management (such as less frequent grass cutting to benefit wildflowers and insects) of new green space.

Parish and Town Councils can receive additional financial benefits from the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) once a Neighbourhood Plan has been produced and some of this funding might be used for future projects to benefit people and wildlife within the local area.



Examples of Somerset Neighbourhood Plans which have produced good wildlife policies are a good place to start for inspiration.

Martock Neighbourhood Plan was developed by a Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group comprised of members of the community and parish councillors, alongside regular community consultations through methods such as public exhibitions, farmers market stalls and articles.

The plan highlights the aims and objectives including; Protect and enhance our natural environment; Improve flood resilience; Support responsible change in the countryside. Importantly the plan recognises the special characteristics of the area and what local residents value about their home including the floodlands around the River Parrett, Local Nature Reserves and bat habitats and corridors throughout the village and agricultural landscapes.

Trull Neighbourhood Development Plan recognises the character of a distinctive rural parish in a rich agricultural landscape that residents value. Protection of green space had amongst the highest support during consultation with 95% of respondents supporting the provision of wildlife corridors.

The Plan aims to reflect this by including policies to: develop a network of high-quality green spaces and other environmental features; plant and protect trees and hedgerows; protect the best habitats and everything that depends on them; designate Local Green Spaces; improve flood management, for the benefit of the Parish, Taunton and all areas in the Tone catchment.

For further inspiration on how wildlife can be integral to the planning of new developments the Wildlife Trusts have published a report "*A wilder Recovery – How to build back smarter, stronger, greener*".

Understand how your council works: <https://www.gov.uk/understand-how-your-council-works/decision-making>

Gov.uk explains **the neighbourhood planning system**, including key stages and considerations required: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/neighbourhood-planning--2#what-is-neighbourhood-planning>

Somerset Environmental Records Centre (SERC) is the central source for flora and fauna data within Somerset: <http://www.somerc.com/>

Obtaining further advice

Locality is an organisation which exists to bring local people together to meet local needs by supporting them to create neighbourhood plans.

<https://locality.org.uk/>
Phone: 0345 458 8336
Email: info@locality.org.uk

Advice sheet compiled by Mark Pollock, planning advisor and volunteer

References

Planning, Housing and Development Somerset Wildlife Trust Position Statement

Somerset Levels and Moors Water Quality Position Statement

Jargon Buster

