



Planning for nature - How to comment on planning applications

Anyone who lives or works locally has a right to be involved in the planning process and express their views. Your council has a responsibility to make planning decisions in the best interests of the area, so your views are important and can affect the council's decision. If you are concerned about a development that may threaten wildlife, you will need to submit comments in writing. This leaflet is designed to give some general information in the context of Somerset and assumes the main reason for submitting a comment or objection is a concern for nature.

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Who to Contact

Somerset County Council deal with planning applications that relate to minerals (quarrying, peat extraction), waste and County Council developments such as schools, libraries and new roads.

District Councils (Local Planning Authorities) Mendip, Sedgemoor, South Somerset, Somerset West and Taunton, generally deal with other types of developments, including domestic extensions, residential and business developments, barn conversions, solar farms, etc.

Within Exmoor National Park all planning applications are determined by the National Park Authority. Planning policies are there to ensure both rural prosperity and the protection and enhancement of the special character of Exmoor.

You can view all submitted planning applications online or at the relevant local District Council office or County Hall.

Central government is currently considering creating a Unitary Authority for Somerset by combining the County Council and all the District Councils. It's not known yet exactly how this will change how Planning Applications are dealt with.



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 sustainably, 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.



Local Plans



District Councils are required to prepare Local Plans which are normally reviewed at 5 yearly intervals. These identify broad areas which can be developed for industry, retail and housing. Once an area has been identified for housing, for example, it is much more difficult to successfully oppose individual Planning Applications. Central Government is currently considering introducing

a system to speed up the planning process by designating areas for development which can then be built on without much further consultation.



How to submit your comments

Written comments can be submitted online, by email or by post.

Search for planning application by location online on the relevant Council web site. You can search by Planning Application number if you know it or by address or post code. The web site will show you more information about the proposal including site plans and drawings of the buildings as well as any comments made by other people.

Submit written comments by email quoting the application number and marked for the attention of the case officer, whose name can be found on the consultation letter, site notice or press advert.

Send letters to the Planning Department. Quote the application number and case officer name.

Comments must be received within the period stated in the letter, website or newspaper and site notice, so that your views can be taken into account. You should be aware that written comments are not treated as confidential.

Get your facts right and keep your cool

Before you begin ensure you do your research and have read the relevant planning application, do not rely on what someone else has told you or make assumptions.

Many Planning Application will include a Wildlife Survey, Ecological Survey or similar. This will identify any species of flora and fauna on the site and propose measures to mitigate the impact of the development and enhance it for wildlife. They will only identify wildlife that is on the site at the time of the survey. Often they will approach

Somerset Environmental Records Centre to see what other wildlife has been recorded there. If you see wildlife near you it is very useful to report it to SERC. Please also be aware that many fields are very intensively managed and although they may appear as attractive green spaces they may not actually support much wildlife.

When you make a comment it is important to focus on the relevant facts rather than personal feelings. An emotive letter that fails to outline material considerations or gets the facts wrong will not help your case. You should not assume the mention of a protected species alone will be enough to halt or alter a development, but you can use your local knowledge to highlight species and habitats of concern.

Your comment must be made on the basis of "material considerations". Material considerations can include conservation status of site, traffic or noise pollution, or impact on natural environment for example, loss of trees. Non-material consideration include loss of view, reputation of the developers or negative effect on the value of properties. You can't object just because you don't like what is being proposed, you must have valid reasons.



Write your letter

Put the application number and address of the application site at the top of your letter. You must also include your name and address for the objection to be valid. Remember that your comments will be made publicly available, you cannot submit comments anonymously.

Clearly state your reasons for objection or the amendments you are proposing. Remember these must be "material" considerations.

Reference or quote the Local Plan or Neighbourhood Plan - if there is one - , any relevant aspects of the National Planning Policy Framework (sections 8, 14 and 15 may be particularly useful) and any local biodiversity policies or plans. Planning applications are assessed against these documents so you should demonstrate if there are any conflicts. Keep it brief and to the point. Two sides of A4 is more than sufficient. You can include an appendix if you have evidence, diagrams or images you feel are necessary.

Keep track of the planning application by going back to the web site from time to time. Amendments may be made, there may be further consultations or you may wish to submit further comments on the basis of new information. The final decision will also be published there together with any special Planning Conditions.



Things to consider when writing your letter:

- Presence of or proximity to designated sites including SPA, SSSI, SAC, RAMSAR
- Presence of legally protected species such as badgers, dormice, great crested newts
- Adverse effects on conservation priority species, such as those listed on the NERC ACT 2006
- Direct loss or fragmentation of wildlife habitats including loss of antient and veteran specimens and UK BAP Priority Habitats.
- Impact on the landscape and character of an area
- Water quality most notably the effects of eutrophication caused by excessive phosphates (ref Water Quality Position Statement)
- Opportunities for creation, restoration and/or enhancement of wildlife habitats and corridors
- Opportunities for mitigation and adaptation for climate change



Involve your local community

Planning decision should be made in the best interests of the area so the views of local community's matter and every comment counts.

Raise awareness in your local area by leafletting, calling a meeting or spreading the word on social media. Post your letter publicly so people are clear about your concerns.

Encourage other people to write their own letter. Be aware that a petition may not be the most effective tool to illustrate your community's concern, as individually letters may be given greater weight as a better reflection of personal views.

Your Parish or Town Council are elected to represent the views of their community directly to the district and county councils on matters of local concern so you should ensure they are aware of your concerns.



Obtaining further advice

Somerset Wildlife Trust aim to respond to planning applications where we deem there is an unacceptable impact upon local wildlife. Please be aware we receive a large number of planning queries and have only limited capacity to respond. Unless the proposed development is of considerable concern we are not in a position to provide ongoing support to communities or individuals.

Planning enquiries: naturerecovery@somersetwildlife.org

CPRE Somerset, work to ensure that planning proposals registered with the local authority are in line with their vision for a thriving countryside. For advice and support contact 0845 269 4206 or admin@cpresomerset.org.uk

Somerset Environmental Records Centre (SERC) is the main reference centre for biological and geological information for the county. It holds data on wildlife sightings, types of environments and geological information for Somerset. Individuals and organisations can access this information through the data enquiries service. There may be a charge for some services.
<http://www.somerc.com/>

Further reading and references

Somerset County Council planning portal: <https://www.somerset.gov.uk/waste-planning-and-land/planning-applications-and-decisions/>

Mendip District Council planning: <https://www.mendip.gov.uk/planning>

Sedgemoor DC planning: <https://www.sedgemoor.gov.uk/planningonline>

Somerset West and Taunton DC planning: <https://www.somersetwestandtaunton.gov.uk/planning/>

South Somerset DC planning: <https://www.southsomerset.gov.uk/services/planning/>

National Planning Policy framework: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/national-planning-policy-framework>

Exmoor National Park planning: <https://www.exmoor-nationalpark.gov.uk/planning>

Wilder Planning - support the Wildlife Trust campaign for a more nature friendly approach to planning: <https://www.somersetwildlife.org/what-we-do/restore-somersets-nature/campaign-nature/wilder-planning>

Woodland Trust guide to objecting to planning permission: <https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/protecting-trees-and-woods/campaign-with-us/campaign-in-your-community/write-an-objection/>

Woodland Trust overview of the English planning system: <https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/media/1590/england-planning-system-overview.pdf>

Magic Map is a tool produced by DEFRA which shows features such as designations and conservation areas <https://magic.defra.gov.uk/MagicMap.aspx>

Advice sheet compiled by Simon Briggs, SWT Planning Advisor

References

Planning, Housing and Development Somerset
Wildlife Trust Position Statement

Somerset Levels and Moors Water Quality Position Statement

[Jargon Buster](#)