

Neighbourhood plans

The 2011 Localism Act grants powers to communities to put together a Neighbourhood Plan for their parish or neighbourhood. This gives communities the power to form and shape development in their area. Neighbourhood Plans must conform with Local Plans and the National Planning Policy Framework. Essentially, Neighbourhood Plans are developed by the local community, voted for in a local referendum and then 'made' by the Local Planning Authority. They normally last for five years before being reviewed.

Neighbourhood Plans are able to propose more development, but cannot reduce the amount of development in the area from that agreed in the Local Plan. They can guide where development such as new homes, shops, offices and open space is located, what it looks like and how it is achieved. They can require higher design standards for buildings and associated infrastructure. A Neighbourhood Plan may seek a higher proportion of affordable housing, or enable development to be directed to less valued sites instead of important wildlife sites or community land. They can also identify existing and potential new wildlife areas, hedgerows and wildlife corridors to link them.

Neighbourhood Plans have statutory status. This gives them more weight than some other local planning documents and makes them an important tool to help to protect local wildlife. Neighbourhood Plans provide an excellent opportunity to improve the local environment, including protecting and enhancing existing assets, such as local parks, nature reserves and other green spaces as well as creating new habitats.

Local Planning Authorities have a duty to support and are obliged by law to help people draw up their neighbourhood plans. The formal process for neighbourhood planning is set out in the Neighbourhood Planning (General) Regulations 2012 (<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2012/637/contents/made>).

What BBOWT does

- BBOWT receives requests for help writing and commenting on Neighbourhood Plans. We do not have the resources to respond to each of these individually.
- Neighbourhood plans will have a significant effect on wildlife and we encourage people to get involved with them.

What you can do

- Join your local neighbourhood planning group if there is one, or start one of your own. Groups can get tailored advice, support and grants to develop their neighbourhood plans. See <https://www.gov.uk/government/get-involved/take-part/make-a-neighbourhood-plan>. Support is available at <https://neighbourhoodplanning.org/>
- **To start with:**
 - Get natural environment and Green Infrastructure thinking embedded into your Neighbourhood Plan's vision and objectives from the outset. This is the starting point from which the rest of your plan will flow. It will inform your public consultation.

- Set up a Natural Environment Group within your Neighbourhood Planning team to focus on and make recommendations that benefit wildlife. Seek to maximise the benefits for the community from its local natural environment.
- Establish what you have by making an inventory of 'ecological assets' within and next to the area covered by the plan.
- Identify important features for wildlife and any existing green space, such as wildlife corridors, areas of habitat, trees and hedgerows that are valuable for wildlife and any areas where it would be good to see improvements to habitats. This will help to inform your plans and ensure that good intentions, such as tree planting, do not damage or destroy longstanding important habitats such as traditional species-rich grassland.
- Important sites may include local nature reserves and sites with statutory protection such as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) and Special Protection Areas (SPAs). Other sites include Local Wildlife Sites (LWS) that are designated for their importance for wildlife at county level; they are protected under the planning system but do not enjoy full legal protections. There may be other areas of semi-natural habitat that benefit your community.
- The wider countryside and urban gardens are vital for wildlife to thrive. A strip of green or a hedgerow can link valuable wildlife sites providing foraging, shelter and access for small mammals, birds, amphibians, reptiles and insects. Identify features that provide habitat or connectivity for wildlife outside allocated development sites. These could be hedgerows, parks, recreation grounds, allotments, churchyards, footpaths, cycleways, bridleways, road verges, ponds, restored former landfill sites, agricultural land managed under agri-environmental schemes, MOD land, flood meadows, Jubilee / wildflower meadows, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs), local nature reserves, watercourses, woodland, Conservation Target Areas / Biodiversity Opportunity Areas and so on. Managed appropriately, these places can provide space for nature to thrive and natural beauty for people to enjoy.
- Your plan should look at all the existing green space in your area and identify where green corridors for people and wildlife could be created to link open spaces. The following landscape features are considered the most valuable for wildlife
 - Unimproved pasture (grassland used for grazing)
 - Rough grassland / scrub / derelict land
 - Meadows
 - Wetlands - fens, marshes, reedbeds
 - Hedgerows and scrub
 - Native trees (especially with holes and rotten branches)
 - Rivers, streams, ditches
 - Lakes, ponds
 - Older buildings
 - Allotments
 - Churchyards
 - Disused quarries
 - Railway embankments, disused railway lines
 - Old roads, green lanes
 - Traditional orchards
- Review species records. These show the species using different sites and habitats. Some of these species are given legal protection under the planning system, or are priorities for nature conservation. Knowing where they are can indicate areas where development would be undesirable or where the focus should be on maintaining and enhancing their habitat. Many areas of semi-natural habitat are vital for biodiversity in general. With wildlife in decline

generally and once-common species such as sparrows and starlings being red-listed, these areas should be considered for retention in your Neighbourhood Plan.

- Your local Environmental Records Centre (<http://www.tverc.org/cms/> or <http://www.bucksmkerc.org.uk/>) should be able to provide information on local species, habitats and geology.
- Identify any gaps in your group's knowledge and consider involving experts to help. There may be gaps in information for some places. If so, a group of local volunteers could be used to do a survey of biodiversity in your area and produce a green infrastructure inventory / wildlife map covering your important sites and well as the existence and abundance of species. Migratory and hibernating species need to be surveyed at the appropriate time of year.
- **Develop your Green Infrastructure strategy**
 - Find one or two hooks to focus your thinking and proposals. Access and recreation are important for communities. You could focus on a locally relevant species or habitat. Strategic conservation priorities are identified in Biodiversity Opportunity Area / Conservation Target Area mapping. There might also be a Biodiversity Action Plan covering your area, which if adopted in to policy should be on your local authority's website.
 - Look at what is locally special that people will care about. This might be bats, swifts, barn owls, roman snails, orchids, butterflies, bees, other pollinators, hedgehogs, hedgerows, and so on.
 - Considering access for people and the needs of nature together in one place can create opportunities for engaging people with the environment. Don't be afraid to bring plans together in that way if you want to create new green spaces.
 - Look beyond your neighbourhood area to see what is important in the wider area. Share and exchange ideas with adjacent groups and other relevant local organisations, stakeholders and statutory bodies.
 - Think about how you will communicate the proposals to the wider community. The plans will ultimately be put to a local referendum so it is vital that people understand and support the proposals.
 - Consider resources needed to support the strategy in the longer term. Set objectives, a timescale, and measures of success.
- **Don't skip the details**
 - Incorporate your vision and aims as well as an evidence base into your Neighbourhood Plan.
 - Ensure the Neighbourhood Plan identifies and protects important wildlife habitats and species and enhances existing habitats, in line with Biodiversity Opportunity Area / Conservation Target Area mapping.
 - Identify key sites for specific types of development: housing, retail, employment, mixed-use. Clearly identify wildlife corridors within and between these sites, including areas of habitat, trees and hedgerows that are valuable. Include places where habitat improvements could be made.
 - Think about how people use the area and consider improving key public spaces and pedestrian / cycle links in ways that benefit wildlife or allocate specific sites for new community wildlife areas.
 - Local Planning Authorities are obliged by law to help people draw up Neighbourhood Plans. Contact the Planning Officer responsible at your Local Planning Authority at an early stage to ensure that opportunities for habitat creation and enhancement will be taken on board. Offer your suggestions on the sorts of habitats that would be beneficial. Seek advice about the best options for each specific proposal.
 - Make biodiversity net gain a requirement of all development.

- For examples of features to incorporate in your Neighbourhood Plan to protect and enhance wildlife and biodiversity, see the section on the BBOWT website on '[How to help wildlife where you live](#)'
- **Communication and engagement**
 - As part of your overall Neighbourhood Planning, create a communications plan to build awareness and support among local people using social and traditional media: local publications, notice boards, public meetings, face-to-face engagement with allotment societies, nature groups, etc.
 - Provide information panels to help residents understand the needs of wildlife and the environment.
 - Encourage people to submit recordings of all species and particularly protected species to your local environmental records centre. Records take time to be verified so don't delay submitting them.
 - Think about how the plan will be delivered. This will need constructive dialogue with key stakeholders, e.g. development managers in the Local Planning Authority, public agencies, landowners and developers.
 - Work with local farmers and other land managers to understand how enhancements within the built environment can align with the work they do to meet the needs of wildlife in the wider countryside.
 - Engage with local landowners at an early stage, especially for Local Wildlife Sites and where enhancements such as green corridors require their consent.
 - Collaborate with developers, parish and town councils so that the availability of green infrastructure grows in line with overall development plans.
- **Resources and funding**
 - Funding is available from the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government to provide support and grants to groups writing a Neighbourhood Plan. (<https://mycommunity.org.uk/2018/03/15/new-neighbourhood-planning-programme-changes-to-my-community-everything-you-need-to-know/>)
 - Local wildlife groups and volunteer organisations may be able to provide resources and expertise.
 - Local employers may be willing to provide additional resources or 'pro bono' support as part of their Corporate Social Responsibility Programme.