Do you know that you have an opportunity to persuade planners and decision makers to provide for wildlife where you live? As a charity we have limited resources meaning we cannot respond to every planning application we hear about. This is where you come in. We want to help and encourage people to take action to protect and enhance their local environment.

Your views are important to your local politicians. You have local knowledge and you are the people most affected by changes to your local environment. Do not underestimate the weight your voice can carry.

Your local politicians can be valuable allies when you are raising concerns about potential development of your area. However be aware that your local elected members do not have to act on your behalf. They are more likely to help if you can articulate your concerns in a clear, concise and considered way.

The following suggestions are simple to do by yourself, but if you are concerned about the impact of a development why not talk to other people in the area. You may find other like-minded people with whom you can work.

How can you influence your Local Council?

Your council has a statutory obligation to the conservation of biodiversity through section 40 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act 2006. They also have duties in maintaining the quality of your local environment. In order to do this they draw up various plans and strategies such as the Community Strategy and Local Plan. Councils have a responsibility to involve local communities in such plans.

Since coming into power in May 2012 the coalition government has placed a lot of emphasis on planning at the local level. They believe that local knowledge is key to addressing local needs. An important part of this approach are Neighbourhood Plans. These provide an opportunity for local people to influence how their community develops and how their local environment can be protected.

The structure of your local council will vary depending on where you live ranging from town, parish or district councils through to unitary authorities. However councillors are always voted in through local elections and effectively volunteer part time, whilst council officers hold full time employment and are hired through normal employment procedures.

Planning officers are mainly interested in planning arguments, but councillors will often give weight to wider views. Your goal is not only to convince the councillors that you have a case in planning terms, but to demonstrate the support your case has in the local community.

To find out more about your local government and who your local councillors are visit www.gov.uk. If you do not have access to the internet you can find information at your local library or by phoning your local council’s electoral service department.
How can you gain the support of your local councillor?

You can seek to secure the support of your local councillor by either writing to them or by attending one of their monthly surgeries. It is important when writing or meeting with your local councillor, to present as much clear information as possible to support your concerns.

What can your local councillor do for you?

You can seek to secure the support of your local councillor by either writing to them or by attending one of their monthly surgeries. It is essential when writing or meeting with your local councillor to present as much clear information as possible to support your concerns. It is the role of councillors to build links between councils and the community and to represent the community’s interest in council decision.

The Localism Act 2011 changed the law to allow councillors to express a view and meet with local people about an application without giving up their right to vote on planning committees. This means your councillor can become much more involved in planning issues than was allowed previously.

• Find out from your councillor about the committees that maybe relevant to your concerns. Ask them what is going to be discussed at the committee and find out if you can attend and view the discussions from the public gallery.
• You might like to offer to show your local councillor around the proposed development site and local area so that they can fully appreciate the issues.
• Talk to the case officer for the planning application. They will be writing the report put before the elected members at the planning committee.

Please note that the Localism Act does not negate the necessity for councillors to register an interest if the outcome of a decision could effect their own, their family or friends or their organisation’s wellbeing or financial position.

How do I involve my local MP?

Your MP is your representative in the House of Commons. Contacting them by letter, email or visiting one of their surgeries can aid you in gaining their support for your concerns. MPs can help provide pressure for action, in addition they can influence decisions and gain publicity for a cause.

You are most likely to get support from your MP if the site in question is of major importance and you have already raised the issue with your local authority. You can find out who your local MP is by telephoning the House of Commons public information service 020 7219 4272.

All MPs can be reached in writing at House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA.

How can I ensure my letter is effective?

The key tips to keeping your letter to a councillor or MP effective include:

• Keep it short; long letters are unlikely to be read in detail.
• Use your own language as this will help you to express your concerns clearly.
• Be polite and constructive in your letter and you are more likely to get a positive, helpful response.
• To build upon your correspondence with your MP and to show you appreciate their response, take the time to send an acknowledgement email or letter thanking them for their time.
• Use local examples and policies were relevant to demonstrate your concerns.

What can your MP do for you?

Once you have made contact with your local MP and they are willing to support your concerns they may be able to help in a variety of ways. They may...

• Write to government ministers to raise your concerns.
• Sign Early Day motions
• Raise issues during debates
• Table parliamentary questions
• Write a column in your local paper.