



## #TeamWilder Community Toolkit: Getting your voice heard

This resource contains lots of helpful information on how to get your voice heard and how to effect positive change in your local area.

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### 1. What do councils and Local Authorities do?

A “**Local Authority**” can mean any of the different types of council in the UK. You need to know who your council is and how to contact them, because they have information about parks, verges, community spaces, planning and more.

England has different systems in different places, and these often have different names. You might see “local authority” or “elected local government” to mean “council”.

Put your postcode in this website: <https://www.gov.uk/find-local-council>

It'll tell you what sort of council you live in. If there's more than one, it'll tell you who does what.

#### The top level of power will be one of these:

- a unitary authority, which might be a county but won't be split up into districts or boroughs. There are **4 unitary councils in Yorkshire** (North Yorkshire, East Riding of Yorkshire, Hull City, and City of York). Unitary means that the council does everything.
- a metropolitan district or a metropolitan borough - there are **9 metropolitan boroughs in Yorkshire** (Barnsley, Bradford, Calderdale, Doncaster, Kirklees, Leeds, Rotherham, Sheffield, and Wakefield).

There are around **1,094 parish and town councils in Yorkshire**, and two National Parks. In some places, there are Combined Authorities where two or more councils work together.

All you need to know is who does what, and the website <https://www.gov.uk/find-local-council> will tell you.



If you have two councils, the big county council will look after schools, social care, libraries, trading standards, big planning decisions and transport. The smaller districts, boroughs or city councils will look after rubbish and recycling, your council tax, housing, and local planning applications.

If you have one council, they'll deal with everything listed above.

The smaller parish, community and town councils can help with local issues. They look after allotments, bus shelters, community centres, play areas, and small grants for local groups. They help with planning but cannot make decisions about it. They can also issue fines for litter, graffiti, and dog offences.

There will be a part of your council called the **"local planning authority"**. They deal with planning applications for extensions on houses, building new houses, and changes to shops and businesses.

Your council publishes plans which tell everyone what the council want to do. There'll be a "local plan" which says which areas can have houses or shops or businesses, and which areas can't be built on. There will be other plans too, like for housing. You can find them on your council's website.

## 2. Responding to planning applications

**Yorkshire Wildlife Trust respond to over 700 planning applications a year and we often receive emails from groups asking how they can respond to local planning applications that affect wildlife.**

When someone applies for planning permission the application is publicised and a statutory consultation period of 21 days begins – an opportunity for **anyone** to share their thoughts and concerns on the application.

You can comment on the application online through the Council website, email the planning department of a Council or write a letter.

Use the application number on the letter from the Council or on the notice which you may have seen on the street. If you don't have this number, you can search by address on the planning section of your Council's website – this will also allow you to access documents for public viewing submitted along with the application.

### Here are a few things you can do to make your comment more effective:

- 1. Comment early:** The sooner you send your comments to the Local Council, the better. Local Councils are more likely to be able to talk to the applicant and discuss concerns raised by local people if you submit your comment early in the process.
- 2. Consider a Petition:** If there are others who share your opinion then a good idea is to organise a petition, which can carry more weight in the decision-making process.
- 3. Think carefully about the content:** You are more likely to have an impact if you keep your comments related to the 'Material Planning Considerations' of the application.
  - **Noise and disturbance** relating to the use of the finished development, not its construction, such as external lighting impacting bats or disturbance to breeding birds that you know are nearby.
  - Have **ecological surveys** been provided with possible impacts of the development and appropriate mitigation related to those impacts?



- The **design, layout and appearance** of a development: has green space for recreation within a housing development been provided, protection for veteran or significant trees or the use of bat or bird boxes to give wildlife a home been considered?
- Local **planning policies** often have a part referring to the 'natural environment' or 'ecology' and you should be able to find the policies related to the protection of wildlife in that particular authority.

**4. Contact your councillor:** If you are particularly concerned about an application or think it might impact your area more widely, consider contacting your local Councillor. They can comment on the application too and even ask that the application is taken to a planning committee for decision. Your Council's website should list who your Councillors are.

When you provide comments, your details will be added to a list of people to notify of changes or outcomes to the application, and you will receive an update when the application is determined.

So next time you see a notice on a lamppost or get a letter in the post about a proposed development in your area, you'll know how to respond and make a difference. Remember, wildlife doesn't have a voice, but you do.

Find out more on our website [www.ywt.org.uk/planning-and-policy](http://www.ywt.org.uk/planning-and-policy)

### 3. Speaking with councils, councillors, and people in authority

Most Local Authorities have a website which will list the departments and what each department does. The website will usually have the staff members or contacts that you need. However, if you can't find what or who you're looking for, you might have to ask their reception or admin desk. You can do this by phone or by email, whichever you are most comfortable with.

Most people use email these days but if you don't get a response, you could follow up a week later with a phone call.

#### Speaking to councils and councillors - confidence and communication skills:

There is one important thing to remember: they are people! Sometimes they don't have all the answers you need and sometimes they are very helpful. It is very normal to feel anxious about speaking to someone who is "official".

**Remember that everyone who works for the council is bound by confidentiality and the GDPR (privacy) rules like everyone else.** It is normal to be worried that they might pass information between departments, but this won't happen. If they are going to break a confidence, they must tell you what they are doing, and why they are doing it. You can speak privately to any member of the council. The only time anyone can pass on private information is if someone is at risk of harm.

#### Sending a good email:

If you are sending an email to someone at the council, stay polite, even if you feel very angry about something. Put the reason that you are emailing very clearly in the first paragraph. If you feel upset or angry, say so, and explain why.



### **For example:**

*I am emailing you about the way the local verges and hedges around my town have been cut back in the middle of summer. I'm very upset because this is when most of the birds are still nesting, and their habitats have now been destroyed.*

### **If you can add in some facts and evidence, that's even better:**

*As you might already know, we've lost 70% of our biodiversity since 1970, and this is getting worse.*

Keep it short and simple – you can always link to other studies and news articles that back you up.

### **Now you need to tell them what you want them to do. For example:**

*I would like to meet with you to discuss how we can avoid this mistake in the future. I'd like to know why you chose to trim the hedges at this time, and help you be aware of the regulations and guidance around hedge trimming seasons. I am happy to come into your office/speak online/have a phone call.*

Give them lots of options so they can choose what is best for them.

Why speak to them at all? Because there might be a reason why things have been done in a particular way. It's good for everyone to listen before they make up their minds. You can also get to know the people responsible, and this can help you influence them.

### **How to feel confident on the phone:**

- Prepare what you are going to say. You can have it written down. It is very useful to practise your first sentence out loud, too.
- Stand up while you are speaking on the phone. This helps you breathe more deeply and can help you to feel more confident.
- Don't worry if you feel anxious, this is normal! Many people dislike using the phone, especially with people they don't know. Accept that you feel nervous, and then decide if it's something you still want to do, or whether you can email them instead.
- If you must phone, do it first. If you have other things to do that day, do the thing you don't want to do before anything else. This stops it becoming something that worries you all day.
- Do not be afraid to say, "I'm sorry, I've got a bit tangled up. Let me start again." Take a deep breath and go back to the beginning of what you were saying.
- Try to be somewhere without distractions or a lot of noise.
- Have some nice reward waiting for you after the phone call! This might be anything from five minutes sitting in the garden, enjoying the flowers, to a bit of cake with a cup of tea. Whatever makes you smile.

**If phone calls are difficult for you, and you've done one anyway – WELL DONE!**

### **How to feel confident on a video call:**

- Wear clothes that make you feel good, including your footwear.
- Take your time to set up the space. Two minutes before the call is not the time to find out that the camera is too low.



- Minimise distractions and noise as much as possible.
- Write down what you want to say on notecards or paper.
- It can be very distracting to see your own face. You can turn this off and only concentrate on the other person's face – just like in real life. Many people find this helpful.
- Don't feel obliged to speak all the time. Allowing pauses in between people speaking is good because there can be a time delay too.
- Everyone messes up being on mute, even Chief Executives. So don't worry if it happens to you!

## 4. Contributing to your Local Plan

All Local Authorities in England must provide a Local Plan which sets out the strategy and policies to enable sustainable development in the area. They are used to help make decisions on planning applications and other planning-related matters. In effect, they are the local guide to what can be built where, shaping infrastructure, and determining the future pattern of development.

**Local Plans must be prepared in consultation with the community and there are set times in the process where local people can put their ideas across to their council. This an ideal opportunity to ensure wildlife and the natural environment are included in the development of the plan.**

Look out for information about consultation events and other opportunities to feed into your Local Plan or contact your Local Authority to find out when this will be happening in your part of Yorkshire.

## 5. How to contact your MP

**There is a member of parliament, or MP, for every area in the UK. Each area is called a 'constituency.' You can contact your MP by letter or by email.**

Find out who your MP is here: <https://members.parliament.uk/FindYourMP>

Put your postcode in the first box, and click the blue button, 'search.' The result will be your MP's name. Click on that and you will find their email address and their contact address for letters, it will also tell you what to call them.

They could have two contact addresses for letters. One is their 'parliamentary' address, which means the address in London. The other will be their 'constituency' address, which is their address in your local area. This might be an office or their home address. You can write to either address.

**This advice is the same for emails and for letters:**

- Make sure you include your home address so that they know you live in their area.
- Tell them who you are and why nature is important to you. You can make this very personal but keep it short. Try to write three or four sentences.

**In the next paragraph, tell them what you want them to do. Some ideas are:**

- You want them to support stronger laws.
- You want them to support a local cause.



- You want them to stand against something that is happening locally, for example, a road through a nature reserve.
- You want them to give you advice about a problem.
- You want them to come to an event.

**To speak directly to your MP, you can arrange a meeting. All MPs hold regular 'surgeries' which is when they are in your area and can speak to people.**

You will need to write a letter or email their office to find out when they will be free. Or you can telephone their office and speak to someone who works there.

When you ask for a meeting, explain what you want to talk about. You can take some notes with you if you are worried about forgetting what you want to say.

Don't worry if you're not an expert - be passionate about your cause. Remember to take a photo and put it on social media to encourage other people to get involved and support you.

**This resource is made possible by funding from the NLHF creating a legacy for The Queen's Platinum Jubilee and has been created with credit to The Wildlife Trusts.**

