

Dear All,

This response to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government's Planning Reform: Development and Nature Recovery Working Paper was written by a working group of volunteers from South Yorkshire Bat Group. This group included Local Authority Planning Ecologists and commercial Consultant Ecologists, all of whom are passionate about the delivery of effective conservation, including its integration as an integral component of development. As a group we have extensive professional experience of delivering and integrating practical measures for bat conservation within development at all scales, bat survey and licensing.

Our response to this document has been presented under the questions in the Working Paper, where relevant.

Do you consider this approach would be likely to provide tangible improvements to the developer experience while supporting nature recovery?

No.

The Government's planning reform proposal has sparked significant concern amongst our members. The key point outlined in the document, and reflected in statements made by government officials, is that environmental issues, and bats in particular, delay development and hinder economic growth. These claims are not backed up by evidence, and based upon our experience, this is very rarely the case. We do not agree that environmental protections are a barrier to growth. The ecology-related green economy can be understood through the concept of natural capital, and in 2022 the total asset value of ecosystem services in the UK was around £1.8 trillion ([UK natural capital accounts - Office for National Statistics](#)).

Developments are more frequently delayed by other survey types (i.e. traffic assessments, flood risk modelling etc.), or planning system bottlenecks, such as a lack of Planning Officers and/or Local Authority Planning Ecologists. Once consented, construction is then often held up by a lack of construction professionals (i.e. builders, roofers etc.) or commercial decisions by developers. Consequently, even if the submission and approval of ecological information were accelerated, it is unlikely to significantly speed up development delivery. This is in part evidenced in the TCPA paper (https://www.tcpa.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/TCPA-White-Paper-OUR-SHARED-FUTURE_160124.pdf) that highlights the gap between planning permissions granted, and developments delivered.

We would note that innovation in recent years has accelerated and improved bat survey and assessment. This includes the updating of the *Bat Conservation Trust - Bat Survey Guidelines*, with the 2023 iteration including measures to reduce the perceived burden of survey on the development process. An example is the ability to rule out further nocturnal survey of low suitability structures, where potential bat roost features can be fully inspected. Improvements to bat licensing, such as the introduction of the Earned Recognition licence, have also significantly reduced the bureaucracy of the application system. The new system halves the time required by Natural England to determine an application and adds much needed flexibility. Furthermore, rapid developments in technology (bat detectors, thermal cameras and automated review of data), is leading to improvements in quality and cost savings.

South Yorkshire Bat Group members have worked alongside Natural England on several innovative schemes aimed at improving outcomes for bats as well as reducing pre-development survey requirements. Two examples of such schemes include:

- The Sheffield Council Re-Roofing Scheme allowed for reduced survey in return for an increased commitment to mitigation. These commitments include installing replacement roost features and using bat-safe roofing felt. This is described fully in the new *Bats and Large-Scale Housing Maintenance Projects Guidance for England* (Bat Conservation Trust, 2024), itself an example of new guidance to improve outcomes and scale back survey requirements in a balanced and evidenced way (<https://www.bats.org.uk/news/2024/12/bats-and-large-scale-housing-maintenance-projects-guidance-launched>).
- The Anglian Water Strategic Pipeline Alliance used habitat suitability modelling to survey for bats across 500 km of new interconnecting drinking water pipelines. This delivered a robust baseline for bats with a much lower level of survey effort than other large linear infrastructure schemes such as HS2. The modelling was able to inform potential avoidance options, and cope well with route changes because it was able to predict suitability across a wide area. The survey approach is described in Slack G., Whittle M., & B. Ellis (2022) *Habitat Suitability Modelling for Bats*. In Practice 118. P46-50.

Which environmental obligations do you feel are most suited to this proposed model, and at what geographic scale?

Protected species need to be excluded from the proposed approach as a default, following the precautionary principle.

The government supported National Bat Monitoring Programme has shown that despite historic population declines, bat populations have generally remained stable or gradually increased since the programme's inception in 1996. However, due to historic population losses and the slow nature of bat population recovery this progress remains fragile.

The current legislation is largely fit for purpose and a process of evolution, and not revolution, is required. Alterations should be made iteratively, and based on scientific evidence. A policy decision that inadvertently disrupts current conservation efforts could easily reverse the gains made in recent years, undermining the conservation progress achieved so far.

The approach advocated in the Working Paper appears to overlook the mitigation hierarchy (Avoid, Mitigate, Compensate, Enhance). This approach is embedded in ecological best practice and integrated into environmental policies and guidelines. The method has evolved over the last 25 years through contributions from various sectors, becoming a robust system. Ecosystems are inherently dynamic and complex, meaning features, habitats and conditions can take years to develop. Some of these elements are very difficult to recreate (e.g. conditions to support a bat maternity roost) and can take significant time and cost to establish successfully. Therefore, any development should seek to identify, understand and, where possible, avoid or integrate these factors through site-level survey, rather than immediately resorting to compensation for their potential loss. Without this, on-site actions for nature conservation that could deliver disproportionate benefit, such as for habitat corridors and maternity bat roosts will be missed and instead disproportionate harm will result from their loss.

We therefore have deep concerns regarding the suitability of rolling out what would effectively be a District Level Licensing approach for bats. These arguments are summarised neatly in here: <https://www.wcl.org.uk/district-level-licensing-wont-work-for-bats.asp>. We will not repeat them in this document.

Unlike newts, bats are long-lived creatures that give birth to, at most, one young per year. Bat species form large multi-generational roosts, which are often critical to their reproductive success. Bat populations can be very dependent upon such roosts, which makes identifying and avoiding them during development essential for maintaining their local conservation status. Eliminating the need for avoidance altogether would pose a significant risk to bat populations.

It is notable that there are 18 bat species documented roosting in the UK - each with distinct behaviours and habitat needs. It is simply not possible to implement a one size fits all approach for bats. We consider a District Licensing approach completely inappropriate as a solution for all 18 bat species, which seems to be suggested in the working paper, when it is untested for any of them. The working paper lacks detail or reassurance about how this could possibly work in practice, to maintain and increase bat populations.

It is also unclear who would do the work required under this type of system and what expertise they would have. Would it increase the workload and responsibilities of already underfunded and under resourced public bodies such as Natural England?

We support a strategic approach to nature recovery, such as creating and expanding nature recovery corridors, and targeting actions where they will have the most impact and we are engaged with our Local Nature Recovery Strategy process. We also welcome the announcement of a new strategic Land Use Framework. We have created maps of habitat suitability for some species of bats in South Yorkshire to highlight key areas and aid strategic nature recovery decision making. However, even with the largest database of bat records in South Yorkshire we do not have sufficient data on all the species of bats in our area to know where all the species roost and forage, or the likelihood of success if only a strategic approach were applied, without any surveys. As our own knowledge increases, we remain confident that removing the requirement for survey would be inappropriate and would result in detrimental effects to bat populations.

Are there any other matters that you think we should be aware of if these proposals were to be taken forward, in particular to ensure they provide benefits for development and the environment as early as possible.

We would like to finish by saying we think the messaging from the government in relation to bats over the last month has been deeply misguided. Divisive and inflammatory language has been used and repeated by both the media and government officials. It risks alienating many nature- conscious voters and presents a false choice between bats and development. There are far more constructive ways to draw attention to the need for strategic change than by making a scapegoat of nature conservation in general and bats in particular.

Instead of implementing sweeping, unproven changes, we urge you instead, to sit down with representatives from the nature conservation community, including the Bat Conservation Trust and professional Bat Ecologists, who have the expertise to find balanced solutions. By working with policy makers, developers, and Local Planning Authorities, we can continue to build on

the excellent work we have cited earlier in our response to improve the current system and policies for all.

Let's improve the system, not dismantle the safety net.

Yours Sincerely,

Robert Bell

South Yorkshire Bat Group - Chair