



Community Biodiversity Toolkit

Appendix 1: Planning and Engagement

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Introduction

This appendix gives an overarching guide to **planning** and **community engagement** to help with delivering your environmental plans.

Community engagement

Engaging with your local community

The protection and enhancement of our local environment requires the interest and enthusiasm of your local community. Identify a group of engaged individuals to form the initial project team to help formulate your environmental plans.

If possible, aim to collaborate with existing active community groups in your local area. A list of local environment groups in South Somerset can be found at the end of this appendix under '*Further Information and links*', although it should be noted that this is not an exhaustive list!

We have provided some useful tips on engaging your local community in the table below.

Activity	Summary of Action
Share ideas on the scope of work	Share ideas on the scope of work you could carry out and set up an initial group to manage your plans. Consider asking your community for their views on what they would like to be done to conserve biodiversity in the area, bearing in mind that not all suggestions will be either achievable or desirable within a given habitat.
Inform the local community	<p>Inform the local community, whether individuals or local organisations, of the biodiversity value of your local area:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One way to achieve this is to have signage explaining the wildlife value of an area and why it's being managed in a particular way; • Alternatively, use parish social feeds, either online or via parish magazines to share environmental content and themes, for example No Mow May, Earth Day, Walk to School week, Plastic Free July and Organic September. <p>To help with understanding and identifying the biodiversity features in your local area, see section <i>Understanding your Local Biodiversity</i> below.</p>
Monitoring and Survey sessions	Look to run monitoring and surveying sessions to engage and interest the community, this is also known as ' <i>citizen science</i> '; if the community feels part of the solution they are more likely to do their bit to protect wildlife. See section <i>Surveying your Community Area</i> below for more details.



Activity	Summary of Action
Encourage others to consider biodiversity	Encourage others to consider biodiversity in their activities, for instance, encouraging allotment holders to use wildlife-friendly techniques such as growing vegetables organically and without the use of slug pellets, or asking landowners or housing associations in your communities to encourage wildflowers and areas of long grass as part of their land management practices. This could be sharing information via social feeds online or via newsletters, or through direct contact.
Appoint a Tree warden	Parishes may consider appointing a tree warden and/or a volunteer who could take some responsibility for implementing and monitoring any actions to improve biodiversity in the community, whether they are part of a Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) project or separate scheme.
Grants and funding	Town and parish councils could consider making grants or funds available to local projects that protect and enhance biodiversity, or signposting organisations to grant opportunities.
Get SuSsed	Finally, consider subscribing and sharing SSDCs environment e-newsletter, Get SuSsed, via your parish feeds to help spread the message; click here to sign up.

Case Study: Milborne Port Climate and Nature Action Group

The [Milborne Port Climate and Nature Action Group](#) is an example of a local community group, supported by the Parish Council, who are engaging with their local community around the climate and ecological emergency. The group was set up with the aim of protecting and enhancing local natural habitats and building a sustainable and flourishing local community in the area.

A regular monthly newsletter is circulated via their website. Several tree and hedgerow planting projects have been completed around the village and local surrounds, working in collaboration with both the Parish Council and local landowners.



Community engagement: volunteers from Milborne Port Climate and Nature Action Group



Parish Environment Champions

South Somerset District Council's **Parish Environment Champion** network is a growing group of local residents, passionate about the environment, who volunteer their time to share best practice, and support each other to deliver local eco projects in their community.

Consider working with your local Environment Champion as you formulate your environmental plans, or if you do not already have a nominated Environment Champion in your town or parish, look to volunteer yourself or identify someone else. For more information about how you can get involved, to network with others, and to see a map of where are Environment Champions are currently located, please visit our website [here](#), or [contact us](#).

Case Study: Chilthorne Green Steps

The community of Chilthorne Domer have set up the [Chilthorne Green Steps](#), a local Environmental Action Group. Working alongside their Parish Environment Champion, the group meets regularly, and offers an opportunity for locals who are interested in the environment to get together to discuss ideas and make them happen.

The group are supported by the Parish Council, and recent projects have included:

- Circulation of a regular [community e-newsletter \(Green Steps\)](#);
- Taking part in Somerset Wildlife Trust's [Wilder Churches](#) initiative, which encourages communities to get to know the wildlife in their local churchyard or burial ground (of any faith) and to increase the value of these special places for wildlife. The group have been observing and recording the biodiversity in the churchyard with the aim of protecting and enhancing what is there;
- They have erected compost bins for the community, which help to deal with the grass, hedge cuttings and dead floral tributes on the graves, which reduces the need for bonfires. In addition, the grass is being left un-cut in areas to encourage wildflowers and pollinators; and
- Several tree-planting projects are planned for the village and surrounding farms, working in collaboration with local landowners.



Chilthorne Green Steps e-newsletter, Example image from the Wilder Churches initiative



Understanding your local environment

Why is it important?

The landscape around you is already home to plants and animals that could be vital to the local ecosystem, so understanding what you already have is the first step to knowing how best to improve it. Even the smallest project in the right place, that improves things for local species and important habitats, could make a huge difference. If you connect that up with a wider network of environmental projects the benefits could expand right across South Somerset and beyond.

Opportunity: *“Gather key information on the environment to inform your plans; map habitats and areas of environmental interest, and identify key opportunities for enhancement (on parish land or collaborating on private land).”*

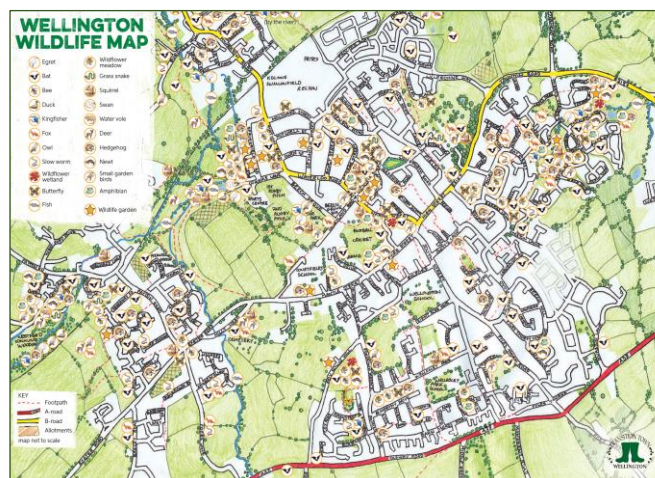
Our district is a large, rural area that enjoys a high quality natural environment representing a wide range of landscapes and habitats. This ranges from flower rich calcareous grassland to acid heathland, wet fen and grazing marshes that are rich in invertebrate and bird life, as well as hay meadows, bluebell woods, orchards and parklands with veteran trees, supporting rare insects and lichens. These habitats reflect the varied landscape and topography in the district, which in turn is underlain by an extensive and varied range of geological formations.

Some of these areas are considered particularly special and are legally protected (for example, Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), Special Areas of Conservation (SACs), Special Protection Areas (SPAs), Local Nature Reserves (LNRs) and Local Wildlife Sites (LWRs)), as well as being of regional, national and international importance (for example, the Somerset Levels and Moors SPA).

Hedgerows, woodland, rivers and streams are important linking elements of ‘*green and blue infrastructure*’ in your community that by enhancing them will help to build a ‘nature recovery network’ across our communities and region, creating wildlife corridors between isolated habitats, and boosting biodiversity.

There are, however many areas of the district that, due to modern land management practices, neglect, and pollution, have lost much of their rich biodiversity, with once common wild plant and animal species in rapid decline.

By highlighting existing habitats and areas of poor biodiversity in your community through a **Parish Environment Plan or Map**, you can concentrate on improving areas that will do the most good, whilst protecting existing important habitats. For more information on these, see Appendix 2: *Drawing up Plans and Objectives*.



Example of a Parish Wildlife Map from Wellington, Somerset



Surveying your community area

Being able to identify existing natural assets you want to conserve is key before you plan any future habitat creation. In this way, already valuable habitats, soils and water features can be protected, and efforts focussed into improving areas that are less biodiverse. Having baseline data will also help you to build evidence if you want to feed your environmental plans into your Neighbourhood Plan.

This section of the toolkit will help you to better understand what you should look to survey in your community, as well as the tools and resources that are freely available to assist you in this.

1. Desk-based Resources

The initial stage may consist of desktop mapping and research that will help you develop a strong understanding of what the local environment comprises:

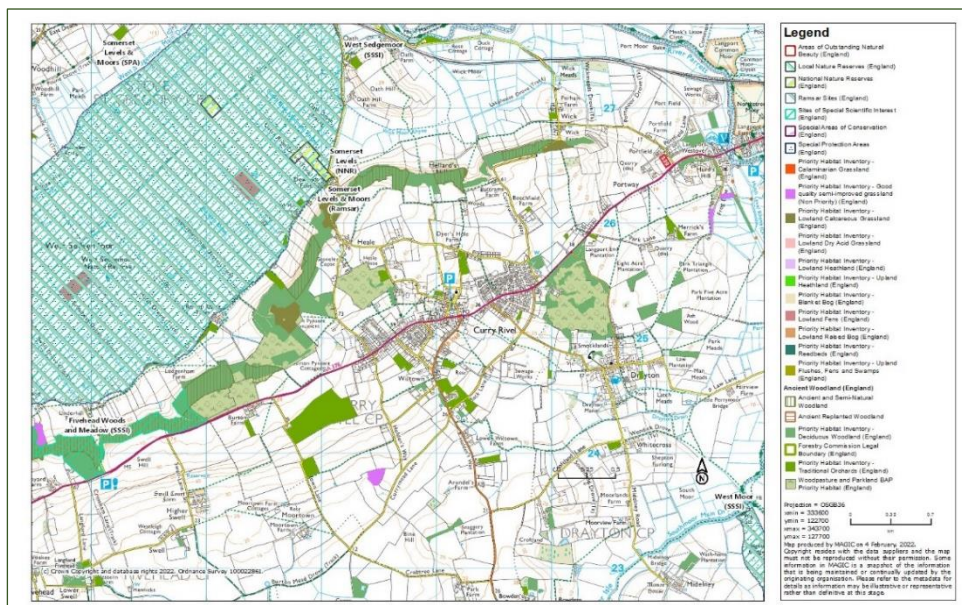
- What is important?
- What needs protecting and enhancing?
- Who owns what land?
- Where projects could be carried out?

This initial stage may identify surveys needed to bridge gaps in knowledge; environmental projects that can be delivered; and, how the community can be supported or funded to carry these out.

To help with understanding and identifying the natural environment features in your local area, we recommend using the following desk-based resources in the first instance:

Defra's Magic Map

[Magic Map](#) is a fantastic interactive mapping tool providing authoritative geographic information about the UK's natural environment, including mapping of statutory and non-statutory designations, for example Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), Local Nature Reserves (LNRs), areas with public access under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, and important habitat sites.



Magic Map showing ecological designations and features in Curry Rivel, South Somerset



Somerset Environmental Records Centre (SERC)

Every county has a local environmental records centre, which is run by different organisations. In Somerset, this is based in Taunton and is called the [Somerset Environment Records Centre](#) (SERC). You can review the existing site records held by [SERC](#), whom hold the most accurate maps of Local Wildlife Sites (LWS), along with other statutory and non-statutory-designated sites, as well as protected species records. You can request a map of both sites and protected species records from SERC but may have to pay a small fee for this service.

Parish Online

[Parish Online](#) is an easy to use online tool (*subscription service*) for helping local councils use digital maps to map, store and manage assets, produce neighbourhood plans and engage with the public. A number of local parishes in Somerset have been using the tool successfully, including:

- *Compton Dundon*, who have plotted assets including grass cutting areas and their management, footpaths and cycle paths (both existing and proposed), as well as reviewing planning applications to check them against environmental designations;
- *Glastonbury Town Council*, who used the mapping feature to highlight routes for guiding walkers and cyclists to the Avalon Marshes (The Bittern Trail);
- *Huish Episcopi*, who have mapped and manage their allotments through the tool; and
- *Long Sutton Parish Council*, who used the *Public Map* feature to inform residents of council plans to install a new shop and associated landscaping.

Wildlife Assessment Tool

Finally, this free [wildlife assessment tool](#) can be used by householders, small to medium-scale developers, and councils, to help understand the potential biodiversity risks or suitability of a site for a proposed development or environmental project.

2. Surveying and Monitoring

How to survey

A wide range of free resources are available on the internet, which will provide an assortment of information to support your plans. Online maps (see '*desk-based resources*' section) are a good place to start and will show you the existing features in your area.

Once the internet-based research is complete, you can conduct a biodiversity survey (or audit) to help further understand areas of interest in your local area. This could utilise:

- desk-based information;
- walking surveys on public land or from roads and public rights of way;
- '*citizen science*' projects such as a [bio-blitz](#) (whereby you enable local residents to complete ecological surveys themselves); and
- commissioning habitat and species surveys for sites identified as being of particular wildlife importance.

It is important to understand who owns the land you are looking to survey. Some will be in public ownership (for example, Somerset County Council, South Somerset District Council or town and



parish councils), you may have Common Land in your parish, but most will be in private ownership. You must therefore seek permission and involvement from local landowners before surveying areas of interest, as well as areas that might become opportunities for nature recovery projects.

Permission is important to survey wider areas. The Land Registry can help with finding out more on who owns what piece of land in your area. It is important to try to confirm who owns what and then get in touch with them to see how partnerships can be formed. Often there are grants available for environmental conservation, and by working together, applications are usually more successful.

Form an environmental group to help co-ordinate and carry out your activities. This could be linked to an existing organisation (e.g. Parish Council, Friends of group etc.) or why not create a new one!

Record, map and communicate

Being able to record, map and communicate what you find is also important. The following are good examples of free tools you can use:

- [Google Earth Pro](#) – to view areas, map features, measure areas, and import and export data;
- [Survey 1,2,3](#) – a phone-based app to record environmental information (*subscription service*);
- [QGIS](#) – a free web-based geographical information system (GIS) mapping tool;
- [Backcountry navigator](#) – an Android app for mapping features; and
- [Parish Online](#) – an easy to use online tool for helping local councils use digital maps to map, store and manage assets (*see section above*).

Records can be submitted online via:

- [iRecord](#) - the app iRecord is a national scheme for recording wildlife species;
- [iNaturalist](#) – the app iNaturalist is an online community for recording wildlife and connecting nature enthusiasts; records are transferred automatically into iRecord.

The best plans and results come from sharing ideas. You can hold online or face-to-face meetings, use survey tools, and promote initiatives and results on websites and in local parish magazines.



Environment Champions, undertaking habitat survey in South Somerset

Undertaking a biodiversity survey and mapping the results

One way of encouraging the local community to engage in activities that benefit local biodiversity is to encourage parishioners to take part in *citizen science* projects, either at a local or national level.



The [Parish Wildlife Map Toolkit](#) provides guidance on producing a local wildlife map but it is also a helpful introduction to participating in numerous wildlife surveys, either formal or casual. The National Biodiversity Network also provides a [useful guide to getting involved in surveys](#).

Survey records can be submitted on the app [iRecord](#) or [iNaturalist](#), both of which are national schemes for recording wildlife and habitat species. The records are collated and checked by experts before being made available to support research and decision-making at a local and national level. iRecord is run by the Biological Records Centre (BRC), a national organisation that works closely with the voluntary recording community. Records from both databases are then shared with your local environmental record centre (SERC for South Somerset), and can also be accessed by the relevant National Recording Schemes relevant to a species or habitat.

One of the main benefits of using iRecord or iNaturalist is that records can be viewed by experts who specialise in particular species groups; they are sometimes also able to provide expert advice on identification and give further guidance.

Case Study: Drayton Wildlife and Wellbeing Project

The Drayton Wildlife and Wellbeing project was set up in partnership with the Somerset Outdoor Learning Partnership ([Wilder Woods](#)), and supported by funding from the National Lottery Community Fund, to:

- engage local people through a shared interest in wildlife;
- collect data of benefit to Somerset Wildlife Trust (SWT) and others for wildlife conservation; and
- work with the local community to make a wildlife map.



A village launch event was held, with speakers from SWT, RSPB and a local wildlife enthusiast. Subsequent events have included a guided wildlife walk, as well as follow-up bird surveys and recording events, whereby members of the community have been recording wildlife seen in their gardens and the local area. The project team includes two local residents who are helping to collect the wider survey data (species and habitats) and upload it onto the [iNaturalist](#) app for SWT and SERC to access.

To assist with the creation of a community biodiversity map, a talk was arranged on local wildlife, which saw residents placing laminated bird figures onto a large copy of the village map, compiling what they'd seen and where.



Wildlife recording in South Somerset

The Somerset Environment Records Centre ([SERC](#)) holds the biological records for the county. Where there is interest in a particular group of species, for example, plants, birds, moths or bats, there are also [local interest groups](#) with which parishes or individuals could become involved. These include the Somerset Bat Group (part of Somerset Wildlife Trust), Somerset Moth Recorders and the Somerset Badger Group. County Recorders for these may be able to give advice on species that are more difficult to identify.

It should be noted that a casual recording session involving inexperienced volunteers may not have the same authority as a formal survey undertaken by a recognised specialist in a particular field. It can therefore be useful to invite someone with appropriate identification skills and experience to take part in any citizen science project such as local '[bio-blitz](#)' sessions. The presence of a local expert, or at least someone with enough experience to help focus participants' efforts, can bring added value to the community learning experience, and they can also provide advice.

Case Study: South Somerset District Council - Wildlife Surveys

South Somerset District Council's rangers undertake regular monitoring of the habitat management works they complete at our countryside sites. Carrying out wildlife surveys allows the team to monitor the populations of important key indicator species such as butterflies, birds and wildflowers.



SSDC rangers and volunteers undertaking wildlife surveys

The information recorded can show changes in population or distribution, which can help influence the habitat management works on site. The information also gets shared with SERC and feeds into national databases to monitor trends for species nationally.

Surveys for some species require a special licence from Natural England as they are protected by law, such as great crested newts, bats and dormice. The rangers hold the licences themselves or work with licensed surveyors to carry out these surveys so that the animals are not disturbed or harmed. Most surveys take place between March and June as this is the peak breeding period for much of our wildlife and so they are most active during this time. The surveys are carried out at different times of the day and evening, depending on when species are most active!



Somerset Environmental Records Centre (SERC)

[SERC](#) are looking for people to get involved with wildlife and habitat surveys across Somerset, either on your own, as part of a community group, or by joining an organised survey. There is an urgent need to monitor the wildlife value of our local habitats and assess how they can be managed.

You can do your bit at a time that suits you, in your garden or local neighbourhood, or take part as an organised group. To help with monitoring the wildlife value of your local area, here are some tips:

- **How**
 - Record things on a spreadsheet or notepad, or directly onto iRecord or iNaturalist. Alternatively, you could record straight into [SERC's wildlife database](#). Note down a few simple details of what was seen, where, when and by who. For an example of a grassland monitoring form, click [here](#). The internet is also a great resource to use!
 - If you need help with identification, the [Field Studies Council](#) (FSC) have produced a number of handy outdoor ID charts that can be used to help with identification;
 - Be precise, if the details are too vague SERC won't be able to make use of the record;
 - Provide any relevant information such as the type of record, number, sex, or stage.
- **Who** – Provide your name and contact details to help SERC distinguish between different recorders. If you are uploading records via iRecord or iNaturalist this information will already be added.
- **What** – Give the scientific name if you can, or the standard common name. If you don't know the species full name be as specific as possible about what you've seen, for example 'pipistrelle bat'.
- **Where** – Give a grid reference and a location name, otherwise provide a good description of the site you are surveying to help SERC assign an accurate grid reference;
- **When** – Ideally give a date, however the month and year, or a date range, is sufficient;
- **Submit** – you can submit details into the recording apps: iRecord or iNaturalist, or directly into the [Somerset Wildlife Database](#). Alternatively, you can submit a one-off record by email directly on records@somerc.com, attaching photos if you have any.

SERC are interested in receiving all records so don't assume that they already know everything in South Somerset. Records of rarities are useful and can aid conservation efforts, but equally important are records of widespread species. All records can be useful for plotting the distributions of species and grasslands both locally and nationally, and for detecting trends.



Summary and next steps

Once you have reviewed your local environment, the next step is to plan your actions.

Prioritise actions that will deliver the greatest benefits from the resources available that are achievable. You could perhaps focus your efforts on your greatest natural asset in your local area, be that a woodland, amenity recreational area or verge that would benefit from conservation management. Alternatively, you may decide to formalise your commitments within local plans, policies and action plans.

To help you decide, we have provided details of some of the measures you could take to support biodiversity in **Appendix 2 – Developing your plans**.

Further information and links

Surveying and recording your community resources

The following are examples of free resources that can be used to capture a range of information and inform surveys to verify details and record local features of interest:

- [MAGIC](#) – Defra’s interactive mapping tool showing all environmental designations.
- [Parish Online](#) – an easy to use online tool (*subscription service*) for helping Local Councils use digital maps to map, store and manage assets, and engage with the public.
- [Ordnance Survey Maps](#) – high quality free mapping.
- [Google Earth Pro](#) – aerial photography, including historic information for comparison of changes (*download for free*).
- [Google Maps](#) – provides an alternative to OS and allows for comparison to aerials.
- [National Biodiversity Network](#) – a list of wildlife surveys and recording schemes, as well as biodiversity records and opportunities to share data.
- [SERC](#) – Somerset Environment Records Centre: request species and habitat data for your area, as well as submit recorded data from your surveys.
- [iRecord](#) – survey records can be submitted to the iRecord App, a national scheme for recording wildlife species.
- [iNaturalist](#) – an online community for recording wildlife survey results wildlife and connecting nature enthusiasts; records are transferred automatically into iRecord.
- [Parish Wildlife Map Toolkit](#) - excellent guide to compiling a Parish wildlife map, as well as a helpful introduction to participating in numerous wildlife surveys.
- [List of UK priority species and habitats](#) – note this is a user-friendly, but not official resource, which may help you find information from an authoritative source.

Other organisations that may be able to provide advice, resources and background datasets (*often free of charge*) include:

- [Somerset County Council](#)
- [South Somerset District Council](#)



- [Environment Agency](#)
- [Natural England](#)
- [Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group \(South West\)](#)
- [Reimagining the Levels](#)
- [RSBP South Somerset](#)
- [Somerset Wildlife Trust](#)
- [Somerset Rivers Authority](#)
- [Somerset Environment Records Centre \(SERC\)](#)
- [Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society](#)
- [Somerset Climate Action Network](#)
- [Somerset Catchment Partnership](#)
- [West Country Rivers Trust](#)
- [Wessex Water](#)
- [Carymoor Environmental Trust](#)
- [Magdalen Environmental Trust](#)
- Local wildlife groups such as the [Somerset Bat Group](#), [Somerset Mammal Group](#) and Somerset Botany Group via the [Botanical Society of the British Isles](#).

Local community environment groups

The following is a list of active local environment groups in South Somerset, although it should be noted that this is not an exhaustive list:

- [Ash and Martock Nature Recovery](#)
- [Brue Crew](#)
- [Community Action to Transform the River Cale Habitat](#)
- [Chilthorne Green Steps](#)
- [Friends of Yeovil Country Park](#)
- [Friends of Ham Hill Country Park](#)
- [Green Ilminster](#);
- [Haselbury Plucknett Wildlife and Habitats Group](#)
- [Henstridge Heroes](#)
- [Milborne Port Climate Action](#)
- [One Planet Wincanton](#)
- [One Planet Bruton](#)
- [South Petherton Tree and Wildlife Group](#)
- [South Somerset XR](#)
- [Sustainable Yeovil](#)
- [Sustainable Chard](#)
- [Transition Langport](#)
- [Upcycle Chard, Crewkerne & Surrounding Villages](#)
- [Yeovil Rivers Community Trust](#)