# Concerns raised over development threatening endangered bat species near Monmouth



Natural Resources Wales has expressed significant concerns regarding a proposed development that could threaten a breeding site for the endangered Greater and Lesser Horseshoe bats near Monmouth, specifically at a greenfield site known as Leasbrook, situated off Dixton Road. The site has been earmarked for the construction of up to 270 homes as part of Monmouthshire County Council's replacement local development plan.

In October, councillors approved an initial draft of this development plan, which outlines land for new housing and employment opportunities. This draft is currently under consultation, with the council actively considering feedback from the public and various statutory organisations, including Natural Resources Wales. As a key part of the regulatory process, the environmental body has raised concerns regarding potential impacts on the Wye Valley and Forest of Dean Bat Special Area of Conservation (SAC), which encompasses the Newton Court Stable Blocks Bat Site of Special Scientific Interest. This site is crucial for the roosting of both Greater and Lesser Horseshoe bats.

Natural Resources Wales has urged the council to conduct further assessments of how the proposed development might affect the bat roosts in the stable block, which enjoys the highest level of protection. Craig O’Connor, Monmouthshire County Council’s interim chief officer responsible for the planning process, mentioned in a scrutiny committee meeting that they have engaged environmental consultants Aecom to provide additional work detailing the methodology for habitat assessments.

In a related procedural step, the council plans to sign a “statement of common ground” with Natural Resources Wales to ensure that the conservation body is satisfied with the development plan prior to its submission to the Welsh Government for final approval. This proposal will also require assessment by an inspector before it can be officially adopted by the council.

Prior to the submission of the updated draft, it must gain the approval of the full council. During this process, campaigner Jonty Pearce addressed councillors, highlighting the responsibility they hold in protecting the bat populations. Pearce noted his previous inquiries regarding the perceived “removal of bat protections” from the development plan during a council meeting in December, emphasising the precarious status of the Greater Horseshoe bats, which are deemed extinct in multiple European nations.

He further highlighted that these bats, which rely on cattle dung for sustenance during their summer feeding, are being put at risk by the potential development, which would eliminate grazing land equivalent to the size of 20 football pitches, disrupt established hedgerows, and introduce artificial lighting that could expose the bats to predation from owls. Pearce indicated that the council's rejection of protective wording recommended by Aecom indicated a troubling trend regarding the safeguarding of these species.

In response to these concerns, Mr O’Connor firmly stated that the council has neither the authority nor the intention to remove protections for the bats. Additionally, Kate Stinchcombe, the council’s ecologist, defended the decision to revise certain wording, explaining that it was aimed at ensuring guidance could be applied more broadly across the county, rather than being restricted solely to the Newton Court site. She clarified that the local development plan is required to align with national policies while serving as a distinct and clear document.

The ongoing discussions and assessments surrounding this development are poised to impact the future of the local ecosystem, particularly for the endangered species reliant on the habitats in the area.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://www.vwt.org.uk/projects/lesser-horseshoe-bat-species-action-plan-2022-2026> - This URL supports information about the conservation efforts and habitat needs of lesser horseshoe bats, which are relevant to the concerns raised about their habitats in development plans.
* <https://democracy.monmouthshire.gov.uk/documents/s40115/5.%20Appendix%205%20HRA%20of%20the%20Monmouthshire%20RLDP%20Deposit%20Plan.pdf> - This document provides details about the environmental assessments and development plans in Monmouthshire, which include considerations for bat habitats and SACs like the Wye Valley and Forest of Dean.
* <https://www.welshwildlife.org/en-us/wildlife-areas/protected-sites/special-areas-of-conservation-sacs> - While not directly listed, similar resources from Welsh Wildlife or Natural Resources Wales could support information about SACs like the Wye Valley and Forest of Dean, which are crucial for bat conservation.
* <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/conservation-of-habitats-and-species-regulations-2019> - This URL explains the legal framework for protecting habitats and species in the UK, relevant to how developments must be assessed for their impact on protected sites.
* <https://www.naturallymonmouthshire.co.uk/nature/habitats/bats/> - This resource or similar ones could provide information about the local ecosystem and bats in Monmouthshire, highlighting their importance and vulnerability.