

# **Development Planning Advice Service: Annual Report to Welsh Ministers 2023-2024**

1 July 2024

# Our performance

## Performance overview

During the reporting period 1<sup>st</sup> April 2023 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024, we received 7,964 planning application consultations including minor, major and Development of National Significance (DNS).

We responded to 7,982 consultations, with 7,910 of those submitted within statutory or an otherwise agreed deadline, which represents 99% of responses. 72 consultation responses were submitted outside statutory or other agreed deadlines.

Figures 1-5 below provide further detail on our performance according to consultation type.

The numerical difference between consultations received and substantive responses submitted reflects work in progress where prescribed deadlines fall across different reporting periods.

## Key issues and trends

### Trends

The number of consultations received involving major and minor development are broadly similar to the average for previous reporting period.

The number of applications associated with DNS are continuing to increase. Given the nature of such schemes, they usually involve significant level of resource commitment across a number of specialisms within Natural Resources Wales (NRW).

### Corporate Plan

During the reporting period, NRW published [our corporate plan to 2030 - Nature and People Thriving Together](#). The plan centres around 3 key wellbeing objectives:

- nature's recovery
- resilience to climate change
- minimising pollution

We believe that effective planning is a vital tool in tackling both the climate and nature emergencies; our planning service therefore has a key role to play in supporting delivery of our corporate plan objectives. The corporate plan also gives us a stronger advocacy role and we are considering this in terms of the topics we engage with in terms of national and local planning policy.

### Advice and Guidance

We have continued to provide advice to support the consideration of Development Consent Orders, Local Development Plans, and in response to proposed changes to

national and UK planning policies. We have also been developing an increasing focus on the wellbeing objectives in NRW's corporate plan in terms of advocacy and strategic advice (see above). We have also advised the Welsh Government on its consultation for:

- The infrastructure (Wales) Bill referred to the Climate Change, Environment and Infrastructure Committee for scrutiny (4 June -1 August 2023)
- Targeted Policy Changes to Planning Policy Wales on Net Benefit for Biodiversity and Ecosystems Resilience (9 March - 31 May 2023)

To support the Agricultural sector, we have published guidance on what information we would expect to support applications involving agricultural development: [Natural Resources Wales / What to provide with your planning application for an agricultural development](#). We hope this will provide greater certainty and help reduce delays in the planning process.

### Nutrient Sensitive Catchments

Development potentially affecting nutrient sensitive riverine Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) remains a focus. In January 2024 we published an assessment of other water quality attributes against targets in SAC rivers ([Compliance Assessment of Welsh River SACs Against Water Quality Targets \(cyfoethnaturiol.cymru\)](#)). The study included an assessment of ammonia which can have direct toxic effects on aquatic life or be a pollutant leading to nutrient enrichment. While most SAC catchments were found to be meeting ammonia targets, planning authorities will need to consider the effects of development on ammonia discharges to SAC rivers.

We continue to provide relevant guidance for planning authorities and expect to issue the next update to our standing advice in July 2024.

We have undertaken a review of environmental permits for larger wastewater treatment works in SAC river catchments and as a measure to restore SAC river water quality we have reduced the amount of nutrients that can be discharged. We have worked closely with Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water (DCWW) so that appropriate improvements for wastewater treatment works are included in their investment plan. The Review of Permits also enables DCWW to advise planning authorities as to whether there is capacity for new development to connect to some public sewers.

### Resources

Grant in Aid statutory services have been pressurised with the cost of living rises and budget restrictions in NRW meaning that we are carrying vacancies for long periods of time. In turn this has restricted our ability to provide Discretionary Advice with an increasing number of requests from developers being turned down. In recognition of the squeeze on our services we are seeking to change our planning service delivery model to increase the breadth of our standing advice so that developers and planning authorities have more "self-service" advice on lower risks issues and have early awareness of when and how to consider potential environmental effects. This is part of a wider review of how we deliver our role as an advisor and statutory consultee in the planning system so that

our level of service reflect our resource capacity. We will be discussing this further with Welsh Government officials as the work progresses.

As with the planning sector as a whole, recruitment to fill vacant posts during the year has continued to be challenging.

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