

Biodiversity Net Gain

General

The Environment Act 2021 introduced a requirement for development to deliver at least 10% increase in biodiversity. New housing, commercial and infrastructure developments are set to be “nature positive” from November 2023. “Small sites” (under 10 homes where the site is under one hectare, or on plots of 0.5 hectares where the number of homes is not known) will be subject to BNG from April 2024.

Biodiversity net gain (BNG) is an approach to development, and/or land management, that aims to leave the natural environment in a measurably better state than it was beforehand. Developers in England will be required to deliver 10% “Biodiversity Net Gain” when building new housing, industrial or commercial developments so there is a positive benefit for nature. This means they will have to assess the type of habitat affected and its condition before submitting plans to the local planning authority detailing how they will deliver a 10% benefit for nature.

Biodiversity net gain should be achieved on-site. If on-site retention, reduction, mitigation and onsite compensation are not possible, the developer may explore measures for the creation of compensatory biodiversity units on separate land to the application site. This is known as biodiversity offsetting.

Exemptions

Sites smaller than 25 sqm (or having less than 5 linear metres of habitat);
Householder applications;
Small scale self-build;

Biodiversity Metric

BNG is measured using the “Biodiversity Metric”. This tool should be used by a competent person, normally an ecologist. It uses changes in the extent and quality of habitats as a proxy for nature and compares the habitat found on a site before and after development. Four key factors underpin this comparison:

- HABITAT SIZE How large or small is the habitat?
- HABITAT CONDITION How well is the habitat functioning?
- HABITAT DISTINCTIVENESS Is the habitat of particular ecological importance?
- STRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE Is the habitat a local priority or located in a priority area for habitat creation/enhancement?

Relevance for Parish Councils and Neighbourhood Plans

BNG should be taken into account by the Parish Council when the Local Planning Authority consults on planning applications.

Identify sites owned by the PC to be put forward to the LPA for “offsetting”. This should include designation of “Local Nature Reserves”. Assess what’s on those sites and what could be done to improve biodiversity.

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Identify other locations: there is an opportunity for communities to identify areas suitable for biodiversity improvements.

Promote what's needed locally: assess the local context for nature conservation by examining emerging local Nature Recovery Strategies and Nature Recovery Networks, and existing biodiversity baseline, could be important groundwork for determining what's possible, needed and desirable. The biodiversity metric includes a 'strategic significance score' which captures this contribution.

Develop partnerships: PCs could foster the development of suitable partnerships between local nature conservation bodies and local landowners to create areas at scale for local habitat improvements, with economic benefits accruing to landowners who would then deliver the works required and manage sites with support.