

TECHNICAL INSIGHT

BIODIVERSITY AND PITCH IMPROVEMENT

Biodiversity net gain

Implementing biodiversity net gain in the UK depends on landscape designers and land managers' expertise. Here, we explore the current issues and how this initiative is being rolled out

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In October last year, the most comprehensive report on the UK's current biodiversity (the *State of Nature* report¹) published a shocking series of statistics: 16 per cent of species in the UK are threatened with extinction, the abundance of freshwater and terrestrial species has fallen by 19 per cent on average since 1970, flowering plants have decreased by 54 per cent since 1970... The list goes on, but the message is clear: nature in the UK is in dire need of life support.

This has been understood for years, with consistent calls for more attention to biodiversity and nature recovery coming from across industry and government. In 2010, an independent review of England's wildlife by Professor John Lawton² advised policymakers: "There is compelling evidence that England's collection of wildlife sites is generally too small and too isolated, leading to declines in many of England's characteristic species ... We need more space for nature."

Almost a decade later, in 2019, the UN's Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services found that the number of native species

on the planet was being lost at an unprecedented pace³, while another independent review in the UK in 2021 by Professor Sir Partha Dasgupta⁴, this time on the economics of biodiversity, showed how nature is embedded into our economy.

By 2022, after the UK Government had signed a framework at the UN Summit on Biodiversity, which committed the country to protecting 30 per cent of its land and sea for nature by 2030⁵, the conditions had been set for one of the most important pieces of legislation for nature recovery in this country to be drawn up and delivered.

WHAT IS BNG?

Under the Environment Act⁶, in February 2024, it became mandatory for all major development projects in England to achieve a net gain in biodiversity of 10 per cent. Commonly known as biodiversity net gain (BNG), it is described as an approach to development and/or land management that leaves the natural environment in a measurably better state than beforehand.

As of April 2024, the legislation now also applies to small sites, and from November 2025 will include all infrastructure projects.

Biodiversity value is measured using the government's statutory biodiversity metric⁷, in which habitat is used as a proxy for biodiversity. The existing biodiversity units are calculated according to habitat characteristics such as size, quality, location and type – whether grassland, hedgerow, lake, woodland or watercourse. The number of units a habitat contains is measured before development, and to meet requirements the development must increase the overall score by a

GOOD LANDSCAPES ARE PROVIDED THROUGH INTEGRATED, NATURE-BASED SOLUTIONS TO DEVELOPMENT

minimum of 10 per cent, either by enhancement or creation of habitat.

Natural England's 'mitigation hierarchy' approach to BNG strategy⁸ sets out the basic principles and prioritises the avoidance of habitat loss first and foremost, reducing biodiversity impact through site selection and layout. When avoidance isn't possible, it advises for mitigation through design and management. Compensation and offsetting (through credits and off-site enhancement) is a possibility, but should only be used as a last resort.

ROLE OF LANDSCAPE

In order to navigate this approach effectively, the implementation of BNG will be dependent on the skills and expertise of the UK's



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landscape professionals, from designers to land managers, which has made it a priority for the Landscape Institute in recent years. We believe that good landscapes are provided through integrated, nature-based solutions to development, and help biodiversity to thrive while delivering other benefits for people, places and nature.

Landscape architects will liaise closely with project ecologists to translate their recommendations for biodiversity enhancement into multifunctional designs, and provide solutions for short- and long-term opportunities for net gain on a given scheme.

Meanwhile, landscape planners will support landowners and developers at the feasibility and acquisition stages to advise on the constraints and opportunities of a given site in the context of BNG. Landscape and grounds managers must also be engaged throughout the development process to

Above: We need to "make more space for nature", according to an independent review in 2010

Inset: Protecting habitats for native species such as the marbled white butterfly is the cornerstone of BNG

Below left: Planting of native UK trees

maintain the long-term vision required for conservation covenants running for a minimum of 30 years, but ideally in perpetuity.

To help the wider industry to navigate the BNG rollout, developers of the statutory metric at Natural England hosted a series of webinars that give vital insights into the new metric. The message is that engagement and collaboration will be key to quality BNG delivery.

BNG is upheld and contingent on a wide array of planning and management process, from conservation covenants to habitat management and monitoring plans⁹. The combined result

is a long list of stakeholders – from consultants and landowners to local authorities and occupiers – and ensuring that BNG works in the long term will be dependent on each of these working closely and collaboratively.

To help aid this process, the Landscape Institute continues to contribute to industry groups, such as the CIRIA¹⁰ Community of Practice for Biodiversity to promote knowledge sharing, and Natural England's BNG Net Gain Assurance Partnership to help build capacity and skills in local government.

POWER TO IMPROVE

There is no doubt that BNG has the power to improve the quantity and quality of the UK's habitats. However, we can also ensure that the benefits of this new legislation reach far beyond nature recovery and the onus is on us to ensure landscape enhancements are achieved. By thinking about

the use of BNG strategically – alongside other social and environmental challenges such as public health and wellbeing, equal access to nature, climate resilience and carbon sequestration – we have the potential to realise a multitude of secondary benefits. And while 10 per cent biodiversity net gain is the target, we should be aiming for a lot more.

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