

BCP Council Biodiversity Net Gain Report: 2024 - 2025

Introduction

As part of the biodiversity duty requirements, the Environment Act requires local planning authorities to report on Biodiversity Net Gain.

Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) has been a statutory part of the planning process since February 2024. The legislative framework requires applicants to provide information to support planning applications about the habitats that exist onsite prior to development, and those that will be present once the site is complete.

The habitats within the site are each given a value which is calculated within a biodiversity metric. The size, type, condition and importance of the habitat all contribute to its final value, which is recorded as biodiversity units. There are three types of biodiversity units: area habitat units, hedgerow units and watercourse units. Each of these are calculated in separate modules of the biodiversity metric.

Local Planning authorities are required by the Environment Act 2021 to ensure that all applications for proposed development (with the exception of specific exemptions) secure a 10% net gain in biodiversity units. This net gain can be achieved onsite through enhancing existing or creating new habitats; or offsite through the purchase of biodiversity units from a habitat bank or the purchase of statutory credits from the government; or a combination of both onsite and offsite.

When deciding how to achieve the 10% net gain in biodiversity, applicants must look to deliver biodiversity units onsite where possible, through the creation of new or enhancement of existing habitats; and make up any remaining deficit with offsite biodiversity units.

The Environment Act requires the local planning authority to report on:

- actions carried out to meet BNG obligations
- details of BNG resulting, or expected to result, from biodiversity gain plans approved
- how it plans to meet BNG obligations in the next reporting period

Details of Biodiversity Gain Plans approved and BNG outcomes:

Biodiversity Gain Plans are not agreed until the developer submits an application to discharge the statutory biodiversity gain condition. To do this, the applicant must submit a Biodiversity Gain Plan supported by a completed metric, final habitat plans and details of offsite units or credits that have been purchased. The condition is required to be discharged before work can begin on site, and it is advisable for the Biodiversity Gain Plan to be submitted just before this happens.

In total 16 Biodiversity Gain Plans have been approved in the period from when BNG became mandatory (12th February 2024 for major applications and 2nd April 2024 for minor applications) until 31st October 2025.

None of the Biodiversity Gain Plans approved in that period have resulted in impacts on irreplaceable habitats.

A net gain has been achieved through a mix of onsite and offsite biodiversity units, but none of the approved Biodiversity Gain Plans have included the purchase of national statutory biodiversity credits.

How net gain has been achieved:

Of the 16 Biodiversity Gain Plans approved, the net gain has been achieved as set out below:

10% net achieved onsite	10% net gain through combination of onsite and offsite	10% net gain achieved offsite only
2	14	0

The total net change in biodiversity units for the 16 Gain Plans approved are:

Habitat unit type	Total net gain in habitat units	Percentage net gain
Area habitats	1.17	15.56%
Hedgerow habitats	0.17	55.80%

Onsite biodiversity units:

The overall change in onsite biodiversity units for the 16 Gain Plans

Habitat unit type	Total post development change in onsite habitat units	Overall percentage change in on site habitat
Area habitats	-1.27	-29.79%
Hedgerow habitats	-0.05	-17.19%

Offsite biodiversity units:

Number of offsite units purchased from habitat banks:

Habitat unit type	Number of units
Area habitat units purchased	2.44
Hedgerow habitat units purchased	0.22

Offsite unit Biodiversity Gain site locations:

The biodiversity metric includes a 'spatial risk multiplier' calculation which is applied where offsite units are purchased from outside the Local Planning Authority boundary and outside the National Character Area. These are areas that have been designated by Natural England and are defined as 'areas of distinct and recognisable character at the national scale'.

BCP is covered by two National Character Areas; Dorset Heathlands NCA and New Forest NCA.

The strategic risk multiplier acts as a penalty within the metric, which increases the number of units that are required to be purchased to achieve 10% dependent on where the Biodiversity Gain site is in relation to the application site.

For the approved Gain Plans, the offsite units required to achieve 10% net gain have been purchased from the following locations:

Units purchased within the local planning authority (LPA) boundary or within the National Character Area (NCA)	0.0%
Units purchased from a habitat bank outside LPA and NCA area but within a neighbouring LPA/NCA area	96.96%
Units purchased from a habitat bank outside LPA and NCA area and outside neighbouring LPA and NCA area	3.04%

Statutory Monitoring of onsite habitat:

At this stage, only 1 of the approved Gain Plans has included 'significant' habitat that require the local planning authority to monitor for 30 years. The legislation requires a detailed habitat management and monitoring plan (HMMP) to be submitted with the Gain Plan for any new habitats deemed to be 'significant' to explain how the habitat will be managed over 30 years and how it will reach the target condition stated in the metric. In this case, the applicant has entered into a Section 106 Agreement to cover the costs to the local planning authority of checking their monitoring reports throughout the 30 year period.

Actions BCP Council has carried out to meet BNG obligations

At BCP Council a BNG officer working group was set up comprising members of the Planning Policy Team and Green Spaces Team, to prepare for the implementation of BNG. Members of the group have been actively involved in the BNG Forum which has been set up by the Planning Advisory Service to support local planning authorities with the implementation of BNG, provide training sessions and regular forum meetings to share experiences.

Officers have used the knowledge gained to provide a number of detailed training sessions for staff within the planning teams, planning committee members, and other departments within the council.

A draft Biodiversity Net Gain Guidance document and Validation checklist for BNG have been prepared by members of the Planning Team which has recently been through consultation and will be taken to Cabinet with a recommendation to adopt in early 2026.

To help planning officers to understand how to assess biodiversity net gain information, the Planning Policy BNG lead officer and the Council's Ecologist run regular workshops with Development Management Officers to discuss specific application queries, as well as separate workshops with the Council's Tree Team to work through particular issues relating to trees and find suitable solutions that meet BNG requirements but also ensure the right trees are delivered in the right places within a site.

A specialist database known as 'Mycelia' is used to keep a record of biodiversity net gain information submitted. The software also has built in capabilities to check the supplied metric and identify any errors or areas of concern. It interprets the information on baseline (pre-development) and post development habitats and presents it in a user-friendly way, to help case officers to understand what changes in habitat are proposed.

Where the habitats to be created are considered to be 'significant', either in terms of the type of habitat, or in terms of the number of units delivered relative to the overall biodiversity value of a site, the applicant is required to enter into an agreement to monitor the habitats for a 30 year period and to provide regular reports on the progress of the habitat to its target condition and its continued maintenance.

Applicants are also required to pay monitoring fees to cover the costs to the local planning authority in carrying out its statutory duty of ensuring the habitats are delivered and the net gain is achieved through reviews of the submitted reports, site checks and enforcing the requirements. The local planning authority is required to keep a record of all of the sites where significant biodiversity habitats have been approved and to report to Government on their progress. Information about these habitats and the submitted information is stored within Mycelia which helps officers to keep track of progress and generates reminders when reports are due.

How BCP Council plans to meet BNG obligations in the next reporting period

It is expected that for the next reporting period a significantly higher number of Biodiversity Gain Plans will have been approved, and there will be greater levels of data on trends in biodiversity outcomes as a result of development. This will enable BCP Council to identify gains or losses in specific habitats as well as identify where offsite gains are being achieved.

The enforcement of the statutory condition is going to be essential to enable the local planning authority to carry out its statutory duty in relation to biodiversity net gain.

Robust mechanisms for achieving this will need to be explored to ensure that developers are complying with the legislation, although it is recognised that there may be resourcing implications for this. Further consideration of how best this can be addressed will be required.

It is likely that by the time of the next reporting period, some of the applications with significant gains will have been implemented and the habitats created. The use of the Mycelia software package will enable officers to track progress of those habitats and ensure up to date information is maintained.

The BNG Taskforce Group will continue to take an active role in the Planning Advisory Service BNG Forum, sharing knowledge and best practice ideas to ensure better outcomes for biodiversity and development.

Further detailed training will be provided to officers and members on BNG, and the guidance document and validation process will be regularly updated to take account of any changes to BNG legislation and national guidance. The workshops with Development Management and Tree Officers will continue to provide support and encourage consistency in approach to determining applications. Consideration will also be given about opportunities to provide support and help to the consultants submitting biodiversity net gain information.

Through the development of the new BCP local plan, consideration will be given to how policies can best support the council's biodiversity objectives and help to secure increased and better local biodiversity net gains. Officers will continue to explore and recognise opportunities for habitat sites within the BCP area, both council owned and privately owned, to provide a local supply of biodiversity units to enable development whilst also helping to deliver the wider biodiversity objectives set out in the local nature recovery strategy.