

Greater Manchester Biodiversity Net Gain Webinar Questions and Answers

Hosted on Wednesday 10th February 2021

Q. I run a conservation group for urban birds. I am concerned about the lack of inclusion for internal bird bricks in the net gain metric. Does the GMCA have a plan to ensure this simple biodiversity measure is included in new developments, to support building dependent species such as Swifts and House Sparrows? (sadly, the current guidance in NPPG doesn't seem to be leading to their implementation)

A. The key point is that species are not counted within the metric and cannot be classified as BNG. However, nesting and roosting boxes do provide an essential ecological function and biodiversity enhancement that complements any BNG scheme. (WSP/Balfour Beatty)

Q. Who defines when something becomes a nationally significant infrastructure project, and how is it defined?

A. They go through different consenting routes and are outside of the Town & Country Planning Act. (Natural England/WSP)

Q. Following Environment Bill/Act, If BNG is provided via financial contributions, will these be ring-fenced and mandatory (necessary for planning permission) or will they be in the same pot as affordable housing etc. and subject to viability appraisal?



A. The BNG element is mandatory so all developments (unless the Bill has specifically exempted that category) will need to demonstrate how they will deliver the minimum 10% BNG. (Natural England)

Q. If a developer has chosen to buy credits, do these operate at a national scale, does the LPA have any discretion and is there any adjustment in value to account for distance from the development site?

A. Credits are designed to be available for use where there is no opportunity to deliver BNG on-site and no availability to deliver off-site via a contract with a landowner. The LPA will be the body that approves the net gain plan so it will need to be satisfied that the on-site/market route is not possible. A lot of detail is still to be determined for credits. However, it is intended that they will be priced so that they do not undercut the market price of units. (Natural England)

Q. What can NGOs do now to make sure credits created as the activities of a habitat bank can be sold in the future when the legislation comes in?

A. Undertake an evidence a baseline calculation and let the LPA know that you are setting up a habitat bank. When the register goes live you should then also be able to indicate that you are looking to make units available to the market as a habitat bank. Also refer to current good practice principles as published by CIRIA/CIEEM/IEMA, there is also a process standard for Biodiversity Net Gain that the British Standards Institute will release this Spring (BS8683) which could be useful to refer to as well. (Natural England)

Q. Is there not a risk that the offsetting of biodiversity losses will result in local degradation of green space? In this way, it assumes that biodiversity lost in one place can be replaced with the same benefits elsewhere.

A. The metric includes multipliers designed to try and incentivize delivery locally to address this point. (Natural England)

Q. Do rarer species such as Willow Tits have a higher biodiversity value in relation to BNG?

A. The metric only considers habitat features, not species, so it will value the habitats used by Willow Tits but not the birds themselves. (Natural England)

Q. Will BNG requirements tie in with sustainable drainage and net zero drivers or compete with them in viability terms?

A. BNG will be mandatory. But well-designed SUDs schemes can contribute towards BNG as well and some habitats can and do provide carbon benefits. So, when thinking about delivering net gain (on or off site) consider how it could do so whilst delivering wider benefits, for example, if there are SUDs requirements incorporate a SUDS scheme that has value to wildlife (which will allow you to include it in the metric calculation). (Natural England)

Q. Re-applying the mitigation hierarchy, who decides whether loss of a habitat or area is avoidable? Development of some sites will result in loss of important habitats; does this mean that development on them cannot claim BNG

A. This is for the planning authority to decide whether to approve an application. BNG cannot be claimed for impacts on any irreplaceable habitats (which are already protected in planning). BNG can be delivered and claimed for any habitats, except for these irreplaceable ones. (Natural England)

Q. Are there any sites or species that can stop development or does BNG now surpass that?



A. As mentioned BNG does not change any existing legislation or requirements relating to the natural environment, for example, it does change existing protected species or site requirements and it does not cover Irreplaceable Habitats which retain their current protections. (Natural England)

Q. How can agricultural land managers prepare / develop off site units and put these to market?

A. Identify land parcels that they think might be appropriate, then undertake a baseline assessment using the metric and, having done this, consider how the land could be further enhanced or new habitats created and what these might generate by way of an uplift in the number of units generated from the site. The difference between the original baseline value and the potential uplift in the new or enhanced habitats could create is the number of units you could then make available to the market.

At present then either talk to developers, existing brokers or the LPA to see how you can make developers aware of the potential your land offers. Under the future mandatory regime there will be a national register of sites that you will be able to then register with. (Natural England)

Q. So integral bird boxes, for cavity nesting species (swifts, sparrows etc.) count for nothing in any net gain metric? If you build so they will come, and there is nowhere for them to breed, you are wasting your time as far as these species are concerned.

A. Interesting point - and equally, if you provide them places to breed but no sources of food then they will equally have problems raising young. We need both habitats and nesting places. (WSP)

Q. Are aquatic habitats, for example, rivers, included in the BNG calculations



A. Yes, includes all habitat types, including all river types. (Natural England)

Q. Does the calculation methodology allow for/require consideration of features within the area of influence directly affected by a development project (for example, street trees not in the red line boundary but affected by decisions made)?

A. No, it just applies to within the red line, but it does not change any existing requirements to consider wider impacts and good practice would be to consider these in the context of delivering your net gain strategy. (Natural England)

Q. Is BNG likely to become a GM policy requirement before it becomes mandatory through law?

A. Our ambition is to bring in a GM policy as soon as possible. Timescales of that are slightly uncertain following the withdrawal of Stockport from the Greater Manchester Spatial Framework. You can read more on next steps at the below link:

[Places for Everyone: A Proposed Joint Development Plan Document of Nine Greater Manchester Districts](#) (GMCA)

Q. Do we know why Stockport has withdrawn from the GM Draft Strategy - did this reference any policies for BNG? What was the reason for Stockport for leaving the GMBNG policy? Will they be producing their own policy to protect biodiversity?

A. You can access the reports from the relevant meeting of Stockport MBC under item four of the [Stockport Cabinet Meeting Notes from Friday 4 December](#). (GMCA)

Q. Could I ask what habitats being

secured for 30 years



means, as this doesn't seem to be much help in relation to any schemes involving tree planting i.e. time to grow and gain maximum benefits in relation to create sustainable biodiversity habitats and achieving carbon sequestration

A. Off-site it means that the habitats need to be secured using either a planning obligation or a conservation covenants for at least 30 years. For some habitats that take a long time to establish i.e. beyond 30 years, there is scope to secure two (or perhaps more) net gain agreements i.e. one 30 year agreement takes them to point A, then a follow-on agreement at the end of the first covers the biodiversity units generated as the habitat continues to mature. (Natural England)

Q. Further to the previous question: sparrows need vegetation or water nearby for foraging and shelter. Bats need a flight line of trees or hedges nearby, but swifts can nest in a concrete jungle - they can fly 10's of km for food.

A. I understand this but the breeding success will be increased if the food source is closer. (WSP)

Q. Are the net gain opportunities URBAN biodiversity concerning BUILDINGS being overlooked? I run a swift group, and integral swift bricks have been mentioned. This is such a simple and inexpensive way to get net gain in built up areas.

A. Swift boxes are fantastic things to be including in developments. However, be aware that the metric does not include any species features but instead focusses on the habitats these species need to forage in etc. The net gain plan that needs to be submitted alongside the metric with mandatory BNG is the ideal place to highlight any

additional beneficial things that have been included in the scheme, such as swift boxes.
(Natural England)

Q. Does irreplaceable also include species that cannot be mitigated for within development?

A. BNG does not change any existing requirements when it comes to protected species. (Natural England)

Q. How should gardens be treated within the metric? As no control of what happens within these areas is possible, should they be excluded?

A. Gardens are included in the metric but the metric assumes that a significant number will disappear and decked over etc. over time, so they are scored accordingly. They still generate biodiversity units, but account has been taken of the fact that, as you say, there is limited control over what happens to them. (Natural England)

Q. Does the Biodiversity Net Gain have to be within a certain radius of a development?

A. No, but the metric does include a multiplier designed to incentivize delivery locally. However, it does not preclude delivering further afield. 'Local' is defined in the metric as being either a) within the LPA boundary or b) within the wider Natural Character Area - this is to account for developments along an LPA boundary and the fact that some planning authorities are very small. (Natural England)

Q. How will BNG be secured through the planning application process-i.e. is it via conditions and/or legal agreements/obligations. Can we standardize this approach for consistency and efficiency?



A. Under the future mandatory net gain off-site BNG must be secured either through a planning obligation or a conservation covenant. (Natural England)

Q. The commitment of new habitats to be secured for a minimum of 30 years - how is this protected legally? If a landowner is keen to take back ownership of a site following construction and the developer is looking to make payments to ensure maintenance and successful establishment, is its best practice for this to last for a minimum of 30 years?

A. Yes, best practice would be to ensure that maintenance etc. contracts reflect the 30-year requirement. (Natural England)

Q. How is this linked/measured to wellbeing & health as a way to prove outputs? if you can't measure it you can't prove it, is there one matrix?

A. There is a link between creating better habitats and enhancing people's wellbeing. However more work needs to be undertaken to fully understand the links in policy and in practice, especially to make sure that BNG delivers benefits for biodiversity. This is an emerging area of research and do watch out for findings from a current study [Biodiversity Net Gain and People's Wellbeing | CIEEM](#) (Balfour Beatty)

Q. How can we use digital technology to help with monitoring and having open data to monitor BNG achievement on and off site and use of credits?

A. Really good question. There are quite a number of initiatives now under way looking into the use of remote sensing, machine learning etc., especially on sites where access can be challenging for safety or other reasons. (Natural England)

Q. Just wondered how detailed we would expect policies in Local Plans that allocate land for development to be in respect of BNG. There is a current issue



that plan making can be slowed up by the amount of detail, and the evidence to support it, that is required.

A. SPDs can be a vehicle to set out more detail. It is helpful to be able to specify what metric you want people to use, what level of net gain is expected, when the baseline should be set, how long you want net gain to be secured for, what monitoring/reporting is required etc. (Natural England)

Q. How confident are we that hard-pressed local authorities will have the expertise, time and resources to assess the validity and feasibility of a developer's net gain plan?

A. We are working with the Planning Advisory Service to provide support and advice to LPAs for this very reason. Government has also been discussing what support LPAs need. (Natural England)

Q. Does BNG apply to existing developments that have some planning permissions? For example, there is a site in GM that already has planning permission for some of the site but not the whole site

A. The mandatory net gain requirement is not retrospective so will only apply to schemes going to planning after it becomes a legal requirement (earliest later 2023). However, there may be existing local plan requirements that will need to be met. (Natural England)

Q. How can 10% net gain be required without policy or legislation justification?

A. If the developer is happy to do this, they may be willing to do without their being a local or national plan requirement, but that depends on their goodwill. Advice (strong) is to ensure the local plan refers to BNG and sets out detail as to what it means by this (maybe in a separate SPD) i.e. what metric to use, how much BNG etc.?



Q. What kind of prices do you expect BNG Credits to sell for in Greater Manchester, and across the country? How do you envisage the price being set?

A. Credit prices have not yet been determined; this is something Defra are looking at. (Natural England)

Q. Does the BNG process consider sites that do not have semi-natural habitats within the pre-development site, or is it accepted somewhere that these sites are delivering a gain if semi-natural habitats are being including in the final design

A. The Mitigation Hierarchy is important and must be followed for protected habitats. Irreplaceable habitats are not included in the BNG calculation. (WSP)

Q. It has been said previously that the Defra metric can be used as a tool for land managers, however irreplaceable habitats such as lowland meadows do not have a value as they cannot be measured - has there been any work to test its suitability for land managers? Is there any information available to show the ecological theory behind the metric (for academic use)?

A. There is information in the guidance for the current metric that can be found in the below document:

[The Biodiversity Metric 2.0](#)

We are in the process of updating this for the release of metric 3.0 this spring. (Natural England)

Q. Have you any idea when the 10% net gain in Manchester might become a requirement?



A. This will depend on the timeline of the successor to the GMSF. We have been working through the implications of Stockport's withdrawal - you can read about this in the [Association of Greater Manchester Authorities Report](#).

(GMCA)

Q. Following this response - integral swift bricks are the habitat for cavity nesting birds. Swifts are entirely building reliant for nest sites. So, providing nest bricks provides their nesting habitat.

A. The key point is that they are not counted within the metric and cannot be classified as BNG. However, nest and roosting boxes do provide an essential ecological function and biodiversity enhancement that complements any BNG scheme. (WSP/Balfour Beatty)

Q. Do the habitat types in the BNG metric include peat-based habitats and different types of these, for example, farmland on peat, drained peatland, re-wetted peatland?

A. Yes, peatland habitats are included in the metric. (Natural England)

Q. What's a conservation covenant?

A. They are being developed through the Environment Bill. They are voluntary long-term (potentially into perpetuity) agreements that landowners can choose to enter into. There will be more information on them after the Bill has achieved Royal Assent. (Natural England)

Q. Are nature-based solutions like green walls/roofs included in the metric? If so, are they comparable to a more traditional NBS or of lesser value?



A. Best practice would be for developments to consider BNG early in the design process as you say. This could well come down to the negotiation between the LPA and the developer. However, further guidance will be produced to help LPAs so this is a good point to have flagged. (Natural England)

Q. How is the baseline biodiversity measured? Are fungi, invertebrates and the not so visible calculated? The net gain seems to be dependent on the measurement tools. Who will be delivering this?

A. It is measured by using the biodiversity metric in conjunction with an ecological survey. The metric only considers habitat features, not species. (Natural England)

Q. If a developer has a site and agrees to maintain an area for BNGs, what mechanisms are there to stop adjusting the redline of that site so that this area is considered as offsite? The metric seems to incentivize this as a greater net gain is achieved by reducing the baseline score on site and then generating raw units off site.

A. The red line for BNG needs to reflect the actual red line of the development. (Natural England)

Q. Which organizations will be responsible for assessing that the net gain has been delivered at the time of development and sustained for 30 years? Who will fund that assessment and ongoing monitoring?

A. The contract price agreed for delivering the net gain outcomes should price in the monitoring and reporting costs. It is anticipated that reporting information would be made available to local record centers or planning authorities. (Natural England)

Q. How will unit price be determined for off-site habitat creation, full costs



met/additionality threshold? Will this create a competitive marketplace for units with potential to erode standards for habitat creation?

A. Offsite units should be priced to reflect their true costs. As you say there will likely be a healthy market that emerges but equally landowners selling units will be under a legal obligation to deliver on these which should ensure that standards are not eroded.

(Natural England)

Q. What would happen if at say, 10 years, it becomes clear net gain is not being delivered?

A. The onus is on the landowner to ensure that the net gain outcomes are delivered and there will be agreements in place designed to secure that. Obviously, there could be circumstances where, though no fault of anyone, the net gain cannot be delivered (Act of God type events). (Natural England)

Q. Priority habitats are likely to be the focus of the Local Nature Recovery and Landscape Change schemes within the new Environmental Land Management Scheme. How do you think BNG interact with that?

A. We are looking to provide guidance to help set out the relationship between ELM and BNG. (Natural England)

Q. If we are going to have to provide GIS layers is someone going to produce GIS standards for BNG?

A. Yes, there will be information about the GIS standards to use with metric 3.0.

(Natural England)

Q. Is there a key to the Local Nature Recovery Strategy map please?



A. We will publish this online shortly. You can find out more on the [Local Nature Recovery Strategy page on the Nature Greater Manchester website](#) and we'll send out further info in the follow-up email to this webinar. (GMCA)

Q. Monitoring generally is seen as a luxury within some authorities. Where is capacity going to come from and what level of resources is envisaged to be required? And is it planners, ecologists, landscape architects? And who funds?

A. The government has committed to funding new burdens introduced by the Environment Bill - including to implement BNG. We need further details from them on this but have been making representations to the Defra team looking at capacity and capabilities for planners and ecologists. (GMCA)

Q. When is the 3.0 metric being released?

A. This spring. (Natural England)

Q. As a Housing Association, can we improve land we own elsewhere, to meet Biodiversity Net Gain for our developments.

A. Yes, but you will also need to manage and maintain for the minimum 30 years. (Natural England)

Q. How can LPAs ensure that net gain is delivered through permitted development where conditions and planning obligations cannot be applied? E.g. highways schemes, flood management schemes etc.

A. Permitted development are not covered under the mandatory net gain approach as set out in the Environment Bill for the reasons you give. (Natural England)



Q. In lieu of the biodiversity metric 3.0 we are currently using the 2.0 metric. Is there guidance on what the updates will be to the metric and guidance on applying any recommended tweaks to our calculations to account for the forthcoming updates to the metric?

A. Yes, that will be published when we release the updated metric (3.0). (Natural England)

