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Guidance

Natural environment

Explains key issues in implementing policy to protect and enhance the natural environment, including local requirements.

From: **Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (/government/organisations/ministry-of-housing-communities-local-government)**, **Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (/government/organisations/department-for-levelling-up-housing-and-communities)** and **Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (2018 to 2021) (/government/organisations/ministry-of-housing-communities-and-local-government-2018-2021)**

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Contents

— Agricultural land, soil and brownfield land of environmental value

— Green infrastructure

— Biodiversity, geodiversity and ecosystems

— Landscape

— Local Nature Recovery Strategies

Agricultural land, soil and brownfield land of environmental value

How can planning take account of the quality of agricultural land?

The Agricultural Land Classification (https://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/6257050620264448) assesses the quality of farmland to enable informed choices to be made about its future use within the planning system.

There are five grades of agricultural land, with Grade 3 subdivided into 3a and 3b. The best and most versatile land is defined as Grades 1, 2 and 3a. Planning policies and decisions should take account of the economic and other benefits of the best and most versatile agricultural land.

In the circumstances set out in Schedule 4 paragraph (y) of the Development Management Procedure Order 2015, Natural England is a statutory consultee: a local planning authority must consult Natural England before granting planning permission for large-scale non-agricultural development on best and most versatile land that is not in accord with the development plan. Natural England has published guidance on development on agricultural land (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/agricultural-land-assess-proposals-for-development).

Paragraph: 001 Reference ID: 8-001-20190721

Revision date: 21 07 2019

How can planning safeguard soils?

Soil is an essential natural capital asset that provides important ecosystem services – for instance, as a growing medium for food, timber and other crops, as a store for carbon and water, as a reservoir of biodiversity and as a buffer against pollution.

Defra has published a Code of practice for the sustainable use of soils on construction sites (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/code-of-practice-for-the-sustainable-use-of-soils-on-construction-sites) which may be helpful when setting planning conditions for development sites. It provides advice on the use and protection of soil in construction projects, including the movement and management of soil resources.

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How can brownfield land of high environmental value be taken into account?

Some previously developed or ‘brownfield’ land is of high environmental value, providing habitats for protected or priority species and other environmental and amenity benefits. When allocating land for development or determining a planning application, the biodiversity or geodiversity value of the land and its environmental sensitivity will need to be taken into account so that any harm can be avoided, mitigated or compensated for in a way which is appropriate given the site’s identified value.

Not all brownfield sites of high environmental value are designated as sites of importance for biodiversity. Defra has published information on Open Mosaic Habitats (https://hub.jncc.gov.uk/assets/2728792c-c8c6-4b8c-9ccd-a908cb0f1432), a type of priority habitat that is of high ecological value which occurs on brownfield land. Natural England’s Open Mosaic Habitat Inventory (https://www.data.gov.uk/dataset/8509c11a-de20-42e8-9ce4-b47e0ba47481/open-mosaic-habitat-draft) can be used as the starting point for detailed assessments.

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Green infrastructure

What can green infrastructure include?

Green infrastructure can embrace a range of spaces and assets that provide environmental and wider benefits. It can, for example, include parks, playing fields, other areas of open space, woodland, allotments, private gardens, sustainable drainage features, green roofs and walls, street trees and ‘blue infrastructure’ such as streams, ponds, canals and other water bodies. References to green infrastructure in this guidance also apply to different types of blue infrastructure where appropriate.

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Why is green infrastructure important?

Green infrastructure is a natural capital asset that provides multiple benefits, at a range of scales. For communities, these benefits can include enhanced wellbeing, outdoor recreation and access, enhanced biodiversity and landscapes, food and energy production, urban cooling, and the management of flood risk. These benefits are also known as ecosystem services.

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What planning goals can green infrastructure help to achieve ?

Green infrastructure can help in:

- **Building a strong, competitive economy**
  Green infrastructure can drive economic growth and regeneration, helping to create high quality environments which are attractive to businesses and investors.
- **Achieving well-designed places**
  The built environment can be enhanced by features such as green roofs, street trees, proximity to woodland, public gardens and recreational and open spaces. More broadly, green infrastructure exists within a wider landscape context and can reinforce and enhance local landscape character, contributing to a sense of place and natural beauty.
- **Promoting healthy and safe communities**
  Green infrastructure can improve the wellbeing of a neighbourhood with opportunities for recreation, exercise, social interaction, experiencing and caring for nature, community food-growing and gardening, all of which can bring mental and physical health benefits. Outdoor Recreation Value (ORVal) is a useful online tool that can be used to quantify the recreational values provided by greenspace. Green infrastructure can help to reduce health inequalities in areas of socio-economic deprivation and meet the needs of families and an ageing population. It can also help to reduce air pollution and noise.
- **Mitigating climate change, flooding and coastal change**
  Green infrastructure can contribute to carbon storage, cooling and shading, opportunities for species migration to more suitable habitats and the protection of water quality (https://www.gov.uk/guidance/water-supply-wastewater-and-water-quality#water-quality) and other natural resources. It can also be an integral part of multifunctional sustainable drainage and natural flood risk management (https://www.gov.uk/guidance/flood-risk-and-coastal-change).
- **Conserving and enhancing the natural environment**
  High-quality networks of multifunctional green infrastructure contribute a range of benefits, including ecological connectivity, facilitating biodiversity net gain and nature recovery networks and opportunities for communities to undertake conservation work.

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How can a strategic approach be taken to green infrastructure?

Strategic policies can identify the location of existing and proposed green infrastructure networks and set out appropriate policies for their protection and enhancement. To inform these, and support their implementation, green infrastructure frameworks or strategies prepared at a district-wide scale (or wider) can be a useful tool. These need to be evidence-based and include assessments of the quality of current green infrastructure and any gaps in provision. Existing national and local strategies – for example on tree and woodland provision – can inform the approach to green infrastructure; and standards such as the Accessible Natural Greenspace Standard can be applied when assessing provision.

The green infrastructure strategy can inform other plan policies, infrastructure delivery requirements and Community Infrastructure Levy schedules. In view of their potential scope and use, authorities need to collaborate with neighbouring authorities and stakeholders such as Local Nature Partnerships, Health and Wellbeing Boards and Local Enterprise Partnerships when developing green infrastructure strategies.

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How can green infrastructure be considered in planning decisions?

Green infrastructure opportunities and requirements need to be considered at the earliest stages of development proposals, as an integral part of development and infrastructure provision, and taking into account existing natural assets and the most suitable locations and types of new provision.

Depending on individual circumstances, planning conditions, obligations, or the Community Infrastructure Levy may all be potential mechanisms for securing and funding green infrastructure.

Green infrastructure will require sustainable management and maintenance if it is to provide benefits and services in the long term. Arrangements for funding need to be identified as early as possible, and factored into the design and implementation, balancing the costs with the benefits. Local community engagement can assist with management and tailoring provision to local needs.

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Biodiversity, geodiversity and ecosystems

Is there a statutory basis for seeking to conserve and enhance biodiversity?

Section 40 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 (https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2006/16/section/40) places a duty on all public authorities in England and Wales to have regard, in the exercise of their functions, to the purpose of conserving and enhancing biodiversity. A key purpose of this duty is to embed consideration of biodiversity as an integral part of policy and decision making throughout the public sector, which should be seeking to make a significant contribution to the achievement of the commitments made by government in its Environmental Improvement Plan (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/environmental-improvement-plan).

Section 40, as amended by the Environment Act 2021, establishes a duty that all public authorities operating in England must, from time to time, consider what action they can take to further the general biodiversity objective (being the conservation and enhancement of biodiversity in England through the exercise of functions in relation to England). Where they consider there is action to be taken, the authority must determine policies and objectives that it considers appropriate for taking action to further the biodiversity objective and must take such action. In complying with this duty, all public authorities must “have regard” to any relevant Local Nature Recovery Strategy, species recovery strategy and protected site strategy. Local authorities (excluding parish councils) and local planning authorities have a duty under section 40A to report on the performance of this duty. There is general guidance on complying with the biodiversity duty (https://www.gov.uk/guidance/complying-with-the-biodiversity-duty) as well as specific guidance on how local planning authorities and other plan makers should “have regard” to any relevant Local Nature Recovery Strategies in relation to plan making and planning decisions.

Schedule 7A to the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 (https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2021/30/schedule/14/enacted) (Biodiversity Gain in England) and regulations made under Schedule 7A contain most of the statutory framework for mandatory biodiversity gain (referred to as ‘biodiversity net gain’). With some exceptions the grant of planning permission is subject to the condition that development may not commence until a biodiversity gain plan has been approved demonstrating how the objective of delivering at least a 10% gain in biodiversity value will be achieved for the development. Separate guidance for biodiversity net gain (https://www.gov.uk/guidance/biodiversity-net-gain) has been published.

Paragraph: 009 Reference ID: 8-009-20250219

Revision date: 19 02 2025 See previous version (https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20250116212901/https://www.gov.uk/guidance/natural-environment#biodiversity-geodiversity-and-ecosystems)

How can planning authorities plan for biodiversity and geodiversity?

Development plans and planning decisions have the potential to affect biodiversity or geodiversity outside as well as inside relevant designated areas.

When planning for biodiversity, local planning authorities must have regard to Local Nature Recovery Strategies, as these are prepared, because they will establish local priorities for biodiversity and other environmental benefits and identify locations where biodiversity enhancement would be particularly beneficial.

Information in Local Nature Recovery Strategies will enable development plans to better recognise the areas where habitat management, enhancement, restoration or creation would be particularly beneficial, including for strengthening ecological networks and delivery of wider environmental outcomes such as flood risk management, climate change mitigation or an improved water environment.

Local planning authorities and neighbourhood planning bodies should work collaboratively with the Local Nature Recovery Strategies responsible authority and other partners to prepare and agree the Local Nature Recovery Strategies for their area. This will help ensure alignment between Local Nature Recovery Strategies and relevant development plans and identify actionable opportunities for biodiversity enhancement.

Planning authorities also need to consider the opportunities that individual development proposals may provide to conserve and enhance biodiversity and geodiversity and contribute to habitat connectivity in the wider area.

Other useful information to consider is:

- the latest government environmental policies in the Environmental Improvement Plan (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/environmental-improvement-plan), including legally binding targets set under the Environment Act 2021;
- the potential effects of a development on the habitats or species on the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 section 41 list (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/habitats-and-species-of-principal-importance-in-england);
- the potential effect of a development on UK IUCN red data book species and BTO Birds of Conservation Concern;
- whether an ecological survey is appropriate; and

- opportunities to work strategically in order to streamline development decisions: for example, by establishing a ‘zone of influence’ around protected sites.

Paragraph: 010 Reference ID: 8-010-20250219

Revision date: 19 02 2025 See previous version (https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20250116212901/https://www.gov.uk/guidance/natural-environment#biodiversity-geodiversity-and-ecosystems)

What evidence needs to be taken into account in identifying and mapping local ecological networks?

Local Nature Recovery Strategies will map existing areas of particular importance for biodiversity and identify where creating or improving habitat would be particularly beneficial, including to build and strengthen local ecological networks.

Where Local Nature Recovery Strategies are not yet available relevant evidence for identifying and mapping local ecological networks can include:

- key natural systems and processes within the area that support the movement of species, including fluvial and coastal processes;
- the location and extent of internationally, nationally and locally designated sites and any functionally linked land;
- the distribution of protected species and habitats and species of principal importance in England (https://www.gov.uk/guidance/protected-species-how-to-review-planning-applications);
- areas of irreplaceable natural habitat or clusters of high nature value habitat (https://www.gov.uk/guidance/protected-sites-and-areas-how-to-review-planning-applications);
- habitats where specific land management practices are required for their conservation;
- landscape features which, due to their linear or continuous nature or potential to act as stepping stones, support migration, dispersal and gene flow, including any potential for new habitat corridors to link any isolated sites that hold nature conservation value, and therefore improve species distribution;
- areas identified by national or local partnerships with potential for habitat enhancement or restoration, including those necessary to help biodiversity adapt to climate change or which could assist with the habitat shifts and species migrations arising from climate change;
- audits of green infrastructure, such as open space within urban areas;

- information on the biodiversity and geodiversity value of previously developed land and the opportunities for incorporating this in developments; and
- areas of geological value which would benefit from enhancement and management.

Local Nature Partnerships and similar partnerships (including those responsible authorities preparing the Local Nature Recovery Strategies) working to conserve wildlife can be a useful source of information for identifying existing ecological networks.

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How do local ecological networks relate to the Nature Recovery Network?

As set out in the government's 25 Year Environment Plan, the Nature Recovery Network is an expanding and increasingly-connected network of wildlife-rich habitat across England. It comprises a core network of designated sites of importance for biodiversity and adjoining areas that function as stepping stones or wildlife corridors, areas identified for new habitat creation and up to 25 nature recovery areas for targeted action. Defra, Natural England and other government bodies are working with national and local partnerships to deliver the Network, which includes support for developing maps and advice to show where actions to improve and restore habitats would be most effective.

Local ecological networks can make a significant contribution to developing the Nature Recovery Network. Local ecological networks can be identified and mapped as a part of the plan-making process, with policies identifying appropriate levels of protection and opportunities to create, restore or enhance habitats or improve connectivity.

Paragraph: 012 Reference ID: 8-012-20190721

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How can plan-making bodies identify and safeguard Local Wildlife Sites and Local Geological Sites?

Locally designated 'Local Wildlife Sites' and 'Local Geological Sites' are areas of substantive nature conservation value and make an important contribution to ecological networks and nature's recovery. They can also

provide wider benefits including public access (where agreed), climate mitigation and helping to tackle air pollution. They can be in in rural, urban or coastal locations, can vary considerably in size, and may comprise a number of separate sites.

National planning policy expects plans to identify and map these sites, and to include policies that not only secure their protection from harm or loss but also help to enhance them and their connection to wider ecological networks.

Local planning authorities can take a lead in establishing and maintaining partnerships and systems to identify, manage, enhance and safeguard local sites. The positive engagement and co-operation of land owners and their representative bodies can contribute significantly to the success of these partnerships.

All local sites partnerships need to use clear and locally defined site selection criteria with measurable thresholds. For example, where a particular habitat is especially scarce, it may be appropriate to adopt a lower threshold for selection than would be appropriate for other natural areas so that a suitable range of sites is protected. Selection criteria need to be developed with reference to the standard criteria in the following question, with all sites that meet the relevant criteria (informed by detailed ecological surveys and expertise) then being selected.

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What are the Standard Criteria for Local Wildlife Sites?

Standard Criteria	Detail
Size or extent	Larger sites are important for supporting viable populations of species, but smaller sites can be important as part of a larger habitat resource dispersed across the landscape. Smaller sites can be particularly valuable in areas lacking natural greenspace.
Diversity	Sites should seek to reflect the diversity of wildlife, habitats, geological or geomorphological features that characterise the area.
Naturalness	The degree to which a site supports natural features, including rock exposures revealing underlying geology, or demonstrates active or past natural processes

Standard Criteria	Detail
Rare or exceptional feature	Sites should comprise habitats or geological or geomorphological features that are rare or exceptional in the area. The local loss of a rare species or habitat may result directly in the reduction in its wider geographical range. Geological sites are often unique, formed in environments and processes that no longer exist, and their loss removes part of our understanding of the geological history of an area.
Fragility	Some habitats and geological features are more sensitive to change and are at greater risk of being lost or damaged due to the direct or indirect impacts of climate change, human activities or other influences
Typicalness	Areas that exemplify a type of habitat, geological feature, or a population of a species, that is characteristic of the natural components of the landscape in which they are found.
Recorded history and cultural associations	Sites with links to land-use, industrial and cultural history, historic events, literary or other associations in art, and the history of natural environment research can reveal environmental change over time, changes in the use of natural resources or changes in perception of the natural environment.
Connectivity within the landscape	Species may require habitat comprised of dispersed areas which are accessible and part of a functional network. Individual sites (both wildlife and geological) need to be considered in terms of the contribution they make to wider ecological networks.
Value for appreciation of nature and for learning	Sites can provide opportunities for local educational use, enabling people of all ages to learn about, better understand, experience and enjoy local wildlife and geology. Sites with less intrinsic interest may be of nature conservation value for the opportunities they provide for the appreciation of nature. Sites may also provide opportunities for ecological or geological research.

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Revision date: 21 07 2019

How can information on ecology be gathered and kept up to date?

A Local Record Centre can be an effective mechanism for facilitating access to environmental information which may be held across many public and voluntary organisations. Such centres provide a one-stop information source, often serving a specific county or grouping of local authorities. Their main function is to collate, manage and disseminate biodiversity information but they may also hold other types of environmental data and can also advise on evidence gathering. The local planning authority can provide contact details if it supports a Local Record Centre.

The Multi-Agency Geographic Information for the Countryside (MAGIC) website (https://magic.defra.gov.uk/MagicMap.aspx) also provides a range of geographical information on the natural environment from across government.

Paragraph: 015 Reference ID: 8-015-20190721

Revision date: 21 07 2019

How can protected and priority species be considered in planning?

Planning authorities need to consider the potential impacts of development on protected and priority species, and the scope to avoid or mitigate any impacts when considering site allocations or planning applications. Guidance on the law affecting Habitats Sites, protected species and SSSIs (https://www.gov.uk/guidance/construction-near-protected-areas-and-wildlife).

Natural England has issued standing advice on protected species. A protected species mitigation licence from Natural England may be required before any work can start.

Natural England is working with local partners to develop strategic mitigation approaches to address the impacts of development on certain protected species such as great crested newts.

Paragraph: 016 Reference ID: 8-016-20190721

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How can developments incorporate features which support priority or threatened species?

The National Planning Policy Framework expects development proposals to bolster wildlife by incorporating features which support priority or threatened species such as swifts, bats and hedgehogs.

The use of swift bricks is particularly important in this context because swifts rely on urban cavities for nesting, and the national loss of suitable nesting sites through building renovation has been part of the reason for the species' decline. Developments should include integrated nest boxes (commonly known as swift bricks) where possible, with the general aim across a development of a minimum of one nest box per unit. Nest boxes can provide important habitat for other species as well as swifts, such as starlings and sparrows.

Extensive guidance is available on wildlife friendly features, including the National Design Guide (https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/602cef1d8fa8f5038595091b/National_design_guide.pdf) and National Model Design Code (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-model-design-code) which illustrate how well-designed places can support rich and varied biodiversity by facilitating habitats and routes for wildlife. More specific support for the selection and installation of swift bricks can be found in the British Industry Standard BS 42021:2022 (https://knowledge.bsigroup.com/products/integral-nest-boxes-selection-and-installation-for-new-developments-specification-1) the Future Homes Hub Homes for Nature Guidance (https://www.futurehomes.org.uk/homes-for-nature), and the RSPB's Guide to Nestboxes (https://www.rspb.org.uk/helping-nature/what-you-can-do/activities/all-about-nest-boxes).

Paragraph: 017 Reference ID: 8-017-20250609

How can ecosystems services be taken into account in planning?

Guidance on ecosystems services (https://www.gov.uk/guidance/ecosystems-services) (the benefits people obtain from ecosystems, such as food, water, flood and disease control and recreation) and using an ecosystems approach is available. This guidance can, where appropriate, inform plan-making and decision-making on planning applications.

Paragraph: 018 Reference ID: 8-018-20190721

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How can biodiversity and geodiversity be taken into account in preparing a planning application?

Information on biodiversity and geodiversity impacts and opportunities needs to inform all stages of development (including site selection and design, pre-application consultation (https://www.gov.uk/guidance/consultation-and-pre-decision-matters) and the application itself). An ecological survey will be necessary in advance of a planning application if the type and location of development could have a significant impact on biodiversity and existing

information is lacking or inadequate. Pre-application discussions can help to scope whether this is the case and, if so, the survey work required.

Prior to the submission of a planning application, applicants are encouraged to consider whether the development would be subject to mandatory biodiversity net gain, as required in Schedule 7A of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 (https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2021/30/schedule/14/enacted). Applicants are encouraged to consider the requirement to meet the biodiversity net gain early in the development process and factor it into site selection and design. Where appropriate, they should discuss the biodiversity net gain requirements for their development upfront with the relevant local planning authority utilising any pre-application advice services offered by them.

Where development would be subject to the biodiversity gain condition, the application must be accompanied by minimum information – further guidance is set out in the planning practice guidance for biodiversity net gain (https://www.gov.uk/guidance/biodiversity-net-gain#para11).

Even where an Environmental Impact Assessment (https://www.gov.uk/guidance/environmental-impact-assessment) is not needed, it might still be appropriate to undertake an ecological survey, for example, where protected species may be present or where biodiverse habitats may be lost.

As with other supporting information, local planning authorities should require ecological surveys only where clearly justified. Assessments should be proportionate to the nature and scale of development proposed and the likely impact on biodiversity. Further guidance on information requirements is set out in making an application (https://www.gov.uk/guidance/making-an-application).

Planning conditions (https://www.gov.uk/guidance/use-of-planning-conditions), legal agreements (https://www.gov.uk/guidance/planning-obligations) or undertakings may be appropriate in order to provide for monitoring and/or biodiversity management plans where these are needed.

Paragraph: 019 Reference ID: 8-019-20240214

Revision date: 14 02 2024 See previous version (https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20240102212154/https://www.gov.uk/guidance/natural-environment#biodiversity-geodiversity-and-ecosystems)

What questions are important in applying policy to avoid, mitigate or compensate for significant harm to biodiversity?

The following questions are relevant when applying the ‘mitigation hierarchy’ at paragraph 186 of the National Planning Policy Framework

(https://www.gov.uk/guidance/national-planning-policy-framework/15-conserving-and-enhancing-the-natural-environment#para186):

Information

- Where an Environmental Impact Assessment has been undertaken, what evidence on ecological effects has already been provided in the Environmental Report and is this sufficient without having to undertake more work?
- In cases where biodiversity may be affected, is any further information needed to meet statutory obligations and/or policy obligations (including Ramsar Sites and Local Wildlife Sites) as signposted in guidance published by Defra/Natural England (https://www.gov.uk/guidance/construction-near-protected-areas-and-wildlife).
- Is the significance of the effects clear?
- Is relevant internal or external expertise available?

Avoidance
Can significant harm to wildlife species and habitats be avoided; for example by locating on an alternative site with less harmful impacts?

Mitigation
Where significant harm cannot be wholly or partially avoided, can it be minimised by design or by the use of effective mitigation measures that can be secured by, for example, conditions or planning obligations?

Compensation
Where, despite mitigation, there would still be significant residual harm, as a last resort, can this be properly compensated for by measures to provide for an equivalent or greater value of biodiversity?

Where a development cannot satisfy the requirements of the 'mitigation hierarchy', planning permission should be refused as indicated in paragraph 186 of the National Planning Policy Framework (https://www.gov.uk/guidance/national-planning-policy-framework/15-conserving-and-enhancing-the-natural-environment#para186).

The statutory framework for Biodiversity Net Gain includes a biodiversity gain hierarchy . This is different to this mitigation hierarchy set out in paragraph 186. Further guidance about the biodiversity gain hierarchy can be found in the guidance for biodiversity net gain (https://www.gov.uk/guidance/biodiversity-net-gain#para19).

Paragraph: 020 Reference ID: 8-020-20240214

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Net gain

What is net gain?

Net gain in planning describes an approach to development that leaves the natural environment in a measurably better state than it was beforehand. Net gain is an umbrella term for both biodiversity net gain and wider environmental net gain.

Biodiversity net gain (https://www.gov.uk/guidance/biodiversity-net-gain) is a requirement which was introduced in the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 by the Environment Act 2021. Where it applies developers must demonstrate how a development will deliver at least a 10% increase in biodiversity. It may help local authorities to meet their duty to conserve and enhance biodiversity under section 40 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006.

Wider environmental net gain has the aim to reduce pressure on and achieve overall improvements in natural capital, ecosystem services and the benefits they deliver. For example, habitat improvements can provide a range of benefits such as improvements to soil, water and air quality, flood risk management and opportunities for recreation.

When planning strategically for the enhancement of natural capital, planning authorities can draw upon evidence on natural capital assets, the supply and demand of ecosystem services flowing from them, and existing and future risks and opportunities for these services.

Natural England has developed the Environmental Benefits from Nature tool, which is designed to work alongside Biodiversity metric to provide developers, planners and other interested parties with a means of enabling wider benefits for people and nature from biodiversity net gain.

Paragraph: 021 Reference ID: 8-021-20240214

Revision date: 14 02 2024 See previous version (https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20240102212154/https://www.gov.uk/guidance/natural-environment#biodiversity-geodiversity-and-ecosystems)

How can local plans encourage net gains in biodiversity?

Plans, and particularly those containing strategic policies, can be used to set out a suitable approach to net gain net gains in biodiversity, how they will be achieved, and which areas present the best opportunities to deliver gains. In addition to Local Nature Recovery Strategies, the following may provide evidence: natural capital plans; local biodiversity opportunity or ecological network maps; local green infrastructure strategies; strategic flood risk assessments; water cycle studies; air quality management plans; river basin management plans; and strategic protected species licensing

areas. Consideration may also be given to local sites including where communities could benefit from improved access to nature.

Local Nature Recovery Strategies can set out at a strategic level where there are opportunities to deliver offsite net gains in biodiversity for the purpose of discharging the biodiversity net gain condition in the case of individual planning permissions.

Paragraph: 022 Reference ID: 8-022-20240214

Revision date: 14 02 2024 See previous version (https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20240102212154/https://www.gov.uk/guidance/natural-environment#biodiversity-geodiversity-and-ecosystems)

Paragraphs 022, 023, 024, 025, 026, 027 and 028 deleted - see separate guidance on biodiversity net gain (https://www.gov.uk/guidance/biodiversity-net-gain).

Revision date: 12 02 2024 See previous version (https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20240102212154/https://www.gov.uk/guidance/natural-environment#biodiversity-geodiversity-and-ecosystems)

Trees and woodland

What are the considerations when planning for trees within settlements?

Well-placed and well-chosen trees on streets and in urban spaces can provide a range of benefits: encouraging walking and enhanced physical and mental health; contributing to local environmental character and distinctiveness; providing habitats for wildlife; reducing noise and excessive heat; and supporting sustainable drainage. Changing climate, in particular hotter summers and more frequent periods of dry weather, and unknown pests and diseases, will place new pressures on green infrastructure in the long-term, so trees of the right species and age profile are essential.

The interaction of trees and tree roots with built infrastructure, transport networks, buildings and utility services is complex and requires detailed inter-disciplinary co-operation, with expert arboricultural or forestry advice. The selection of street trees needs to consider which species will best suit the highway environment in the long term, including associated infrastructure and utilities.

Paragraph: 029 Reference ID: 8-029-20190721

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What are the National Forest and Community Forests, and how should development be approached there?

The National Forest and the Community Forests are designed to bring the benefits of multi-purpose trees, woodland and forestry close to where people live. Within these areas developments are expected to include appropriate green infrastructure, in accordance with the National Forest Strategy or an approved Community Forest Plan. Planning policies and decisions need to consider the extent and type of woodland planting necessary to ensure that the new development will contribute to the creation and emerging character of the Forests.

The National Forest Company Guide for developers and planners will be available, after revision, to download from The National Forestry Company website.

Paragraph: 030 Reference ID: 8-030-20190721

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How can I find out whether an area contains ancient woodland?
A starting point is to look at the relevant ancient woodland inventory. These inventories comprise digitised maps of sites that are thought to have been continuously wooded since 1600 AD. The national ancient woodland inventory (https://naturalengland-defra.opendata.arcgis.com/datasets/a14064ca50e242c4a92d020764a6d9df_0/explore?location=52.860583%2C-2.004678%2C7.64) is published and updated by Natural England.

Paragraph: 031 Reference ID: 8-031-20190721

Revision date: 21 07 2019

How can I find out whether a site contains ancient or veteran trees?
Ancient trees are trees in the ancient stage of their life. Veteran trees may not be very old but exhibit decay features such as branch death or hollowing. Trees become ancient or veteran because of their age, size or condition. Not all of these three characteristics are needed to make a tree ancient or veteran as the characteristics will vary from species to species. Further guidance on ancient and veteran trees is set out in the Forestry Commission and Natural England standing advice (https://www.gov.uk/guidance/ancient-woodland-and-veteran-trees-protection-surveys-licences).

The Ancient Tree Inventory (https://ati.woodlandtrust.org.uk/) can help identify ancient and veteran trees, although not all known ancient and veteran trees are included. Local Records Centres and other organisations with an interest in trees may also be able to advise on the location of known ancient or veteran trees. Tree surveys and site assessments may be needed to identify the ancient and veteran trees on a site and inform planning decisions.

Paragraph: 032 Reference ID: 8-032-20190721

Revision date: 21 07 2019

How can local planning authorities assess the potential impact of development proposals on ancient woodland and ancient or veteran trees?

Local planning authorities need to consider both the direct and indirect impacts on ancient woodland and ancient or veteran trees when assessing development proposals and the scope for avoiding or mitigating adverse impacts. Their existing condition is not something that ought to affect the local planning authority's consideration of such proposals (and it should be borne in mind that woodland condition can usually be improved with good management).

When assessing whether 'wholly exceptional reasons' exist that may justify a loss or deterioration of ancient woodland, ancient trees or veteran trees, it will not be appropriate to take any compensation measures into account. These should be considered only once the existence of 'wholly exceptional circumstances' has been ascertained.

Further guidance is set out in the Forestry Commission and Natural England standing advice (https://www.gov.uk/guidance/ancient-woodland-and-veteran-trees-protection-surveys-licences).

Paragraph: 033 Reference ID: 8-033-20190721

Revision date: 21 07 2019

What compensation can be provided if development resulting in loss or harm is, exceptionally, permitted?

Where development that results in the loss or deterioration of ancient woodland, ancient or veteran trees is exceptionally permitted in line with the Framework, a suitable compensation strategy should be secured and implemented via planning conditions or obligations. Compensation measures need to be decided on a case by case basis and be appropriate to the scale, nature and impacts of the development, but it is desirable for them to be provided as close to the development site as possible. Appropriate compensation might include:

- Planting new native woodland or wood pasture
- Restoring or improving other nearby ancient woodland
- Improving connections between the ancient woodland and other woodlands or habitats
- Planting individual trees that could become ancient or veteran trees in future

Paragraph: 034 Reference ID: 8-034-20190721

Revision date: 21 07 2019

Do the Forestry Commission and Natural England need to be consulted where development proposals affect ancient woodland?
The Forestry Commission (https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/forestry-commission) is a non-statutory consultee for development proposals that contain or are likely to affect ancient woodland (as defined and recorded in Natural England's ancient woodland inventory), including proposals where any part of the development site is within 500 metres of the boundary of an ancient woodland, and where the development would involve erecting new buildings, or extending the footprint of existing buildings.

Natural England is a statutory consultee for proposals which may affect a Site of Special Scientific Interest. The Forestry Commission and Natural England have prepared standing advice (https://www.gov.uk/guidance/ancient-woodland-and-veteran-trees-protection-surveys-licences) to provide assistance to local planning authorities in considering proposals which affect ancient woodland or ancient and veteran trees. This is a material consideration in appropriate circumstances.

Paragraph: 035 Reference ID: 8-035-20190721

Revision date: 21 07 2019

Landscape

How can planning policies conserve and enhance landscapes?

The National Planning Policy Framework is clear that plans should recognise the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside, and that strategic policies should provide for the conservation and enhancement of landscapes. This can include nationally and locally-designated landscapes but also the wider countryside.

Where landscapes have a particular local value, it is important for policies to identify their special characteristics and be supported by proportionate evidence. Policies may set out criteria against which proposals for development affecting these areas will be assessed. Plans can also include policies to avoid adverse impacts on landscapes and to set out necessary mitigation measures, such as appropriate design principles and visual screening, where necessary. The cumulative impacts of development on the landscape need to be considered carefully.

Paragraph: 036 Reference ID: 8-036-20190721

Revision date: 21 07 2019

How can the character of landscapes be assessed?

Where appropriate, landscape character assessments can be prepared to complement Natural England's National Character Area profiles. Natural England provides guidance on undertaking these assessments (https://www.gov.uk/guidance/landscape-and-seascape-character-assessments).

To help assess the type and scale of development that might be able to be accommodated without compromising landscape character, a Landscape Sensitivity and Capacity Assessment can also be completed.

To demonstrate the likely effects of a proposed development on the landscape, a Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (LVIA) can be used.

For protected landscapes (National Parks, the Broads and National Landscapes) the relevant management plan will contain further information on the area's natural beauty, special qualities and key characteristics.

Paragraph: 037 Reference ID: 8-037-20190721

Revision date: 21 07 2019

How can I find out about National Parks, the Broads and National Landscapes (areas of outstanding natural beauty)?

Information about the National Parks and Broads and the government's priorities for these protected landscapes is in the National Parks circular: English National Parks and the Broads: UK government vision and circular 2010 (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/english-national-parks-and-the-broads-uk-government-vision-and-circular-2010). Natural England has published information on National Landscapes (https://www.gov.uk/guidance/areas-of-outstanding-natural-beauty-aonbs-designation-and-management).

Paragraph: 038 Reference ID: 8-038-20190721

Revision date: 21 07 2019

What are the statutory duties of local planning authorities in relation to National Parks, the Broads and National Landscapes?

Section 11A(2) of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 (https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Geo6/12-13-14/97/section/11A), section 17A of the Norfolk and Suffolk Broads Act 1988 (https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1988/4/section/17A) and section 85 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000

(https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2000/37/section/85) (as amended by section 245 of the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023) require that 'in exercising or performing any functions in relation to, or so as to affect, land' in National Parks and National Landscapes, relevant authorities 'must seek to further' the purposes for which these areas are designated. Guidance on the operation can be found in Defra guidance on this duty (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-protected-landscapes-duty).

This duty is particularly important to the delivery of the statutory purposes of protected landscapes. It applies to all local planning authorities, not just National Park authorities, and is relevant in considering development proposals that are situated outside National Park or National Landscape boundaries, but which might have an impact on their setting or protection.

Paragraph: 039 Reference ID: 8-039-20250129

Revision date: 29 01 2025 See previous version (https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20250116212901/https://www.gov.uk/guidance/natural-environment#landscape)

Do planning policies and decisions need to take account of management plans for National Parks, the Broads and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty?

Management plans for National Parks, the Broads and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty do not form part of the statutory development plan, but they help to set out the strategic context for development. They provide evidence of the value and special qualities of these areas, provide a basis for cross-organisational work to support the purposes of their designation and show how management activities contribute to their protection, enhancement and enjoyment. They may contain information which is relevant when preparing plan policies, or which is a material consideration when assessing planning applications.

Paragraph: 040 Reference ID: 8-040-20190721

Revision date: 21 07 2019

How should development within National Parks, the Broads and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty be approached?

The National Planning Policy Framework makes clear that the scale and extent of development in these areas should be limited, in view of the importance of conserving and enhancing their landscapes and scenic beauty. Its policies for protecting these areas may mean that it is not possible to meet objectively assessed needs for development in full through the plan-making process, and they are unlikely to be suitable areas for

accommodating unmet needs from adjoining (non-designated) areas. Effective joint working between planning authorities covering designated and adjoining areas, through the preparation and maintenance of statements of common ground, is particularly important in helping to identify how housing and other needs can best be accommodated.

All development in National Parks, the Broads and Areas of Outstanding Beauty will need to be located and designed in a way that reflects their status as landscapes of the highest quality. Where applications for major development come forward, paragraph 172 of the Framework (https://www.gov.uk/guidance/national-planning-policy-framework/15-conserving-and-enhancing-the-natural-environment#para172) sets out a number of particular considerations that should apply when deciding whether permission should be granted.

Paragraph: 041 Reference ID: 8-041-20190721

Revision date: 21 07 2019

How should development within the setting of National Parks, the Broads and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty be dealt with?

Land within the setting of these areas often makes an important contribution to maintaining their natural beauty, and where poorly located or designed development can do significant harm. This is especially the case where long views from or to the designated landscape are identified as important, or where the landscape character of land within and adjoining the designated area is complementary. Development within the settings of these areas will therefore need sensitive handling that takes these potential impacts into account.

Paragraph: 042 Reference ID: 8-042-20190721

Revision date: 21 07 2019

What are Heritage Coasts and where can I find out about them?

Heritage Coasts are stretches of our most beautiful, undeveloped coastline which are managed to conserve their natural beauty and, where appropriate, to improve access for visitors. Most of the defined Heritage Coast is covered (on land) by either Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty or National Park designations. Planning policies and decisions should be assessed against paragraph 173 (https://www.gov.uk/guidance/national-planning-policy-framework/15-conserving-and-enhancing-the-natural-environment#para173) (and footnote 55 (https://www.gov.uk/guidance/national-planning-policy-framework/15-conserving-and-enhancing-the-natural-environment#fn:55)) of the National Planning Policy Framework. Natural

England has published advice on Heritage Coasts (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/heritage-coasts-protecting-undeveloped-coast). The Marine Management Organisation produces guidance on marine planning (https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/marine-planning-in-england) which may also be relevant to protecting Heritage Coasts.

Paragraph: 043 Reference ID: 8-043-20190721

Revision date: 21 07 2019

Local Nature Recovery Strategies

What are Local Nature Recovery Strategies?

Local Nature Recovery Strategies are a system of spatial strategies for nature and environmental improvement required by law under the Environment Act 2021. Each strategy must:

- agree priorities for nature's recovery;
- map the most valuable existing areas for nature; and
- map specific proposals for creating or improving habitat for nature and wider environmental goals.

Section 40 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act (as amended by the Environment Act 2021) places a duty on all public authorities who operate in England to consider how they can conserve and enhance biodiversity. In complying with this duty all public authorities must "have regard" to any relevant Local Nature Recovery Strategy.

Preparation of each Local Nature Recovery Strategy is led by an appointed "responsible authority" who will also periodically review and update their strategy. The strategies have been created to help target action to meet the government's commitments to nature recovery including legally-binding targets set under the Environment Act 2021.

Defra have produced statutory guidance on what a Local Nature Recovery Strategy should include (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/local-nature-recovery-strategy-what-to-include).

Defra have also published Local Nature Recovery Strategy areas and responsible authorities (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/local-nature-recovery-strategies-areas-and-responsible-authorities).

Responsible authorities must follow the Local Nature Recovery Strategy regulations when preparing their strategy: The Environment (Local Nature

Recovery Strategies) (Procedure) Regulations 2023 (https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2023/341/made).

Paragraph: 044 Reference ID: 8-044-20250219

Revision date: 19 02 2025

What is the role of local planning authorities in preparing Local Nature Recovery Strategies?

All local planning authorities have important roles to play in preparing the Local Nature Recovery Strategies for their area. Preparation of each Local Nature Recovery Strategy is led by a local authority who the Defra Secretary of State has appointed as the “responsible authority”. Local planning authorities, who are not responsible authorities, are automatically “supporting authorities”.

Regulation 4 of the Environment (Local Nature Recovery Strategies) (Procedure) Regulations 2023 (https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2023/341/regulation/4/made) requires responsible authorities to involve supporting authorities in the preparation of the strategy for their area. This includes requiring that responsible authorities seek agreement from their supporting authorities, before consulting on or publishing their strategy. Responsible authorities are detailed in Local Nature Recovery Strategies: areas and responsible authorities (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/local-nature-recovery-strategies-areas-and-responsible-authorities).

Paragraph: 045 Reference ID: 8-045-20250219

Revision date: 19 02 2025

How should local planning authorities have regard to Local Nature Recovery Strategies in plan making?

Local Nature Recovery Strategies are intended to support local planning authorities in preparing local plans that conserve and enhance biodiversity and the natural environment, and local planning authorities have a legal duty to have regard to the relevant strategy for their area. Local planning authorities should consider the priorities set out in the relevant Local Nature Recovery Strategy when determining how their local plan should contribute to and enhance the local and natural environment.

Paragraph 192(a) of the National Planning Policy Framework (https://www.gov.uk/guidance/national-planning-policy-framework/15-conserving-and-enhancing-the-natural-environment) states that plans should identify, map and safeguard areas identified by national and local partnerships for habitat

management, enhancement, restoration or creation. Local Nature Recovery Strategies are prepared through local partnerships (involving all local planning authorities) established under a national legislative framework and will identify and map proposed areas for habitat management, enhancement, restoration and creation for biodiversity and the wider natural environment.

Local planning authorities should be aware of those areas mapped and identified in the relevant Local Nature Recovery Strategy and the measures proposed in them and consider how these should be reflected in their local plan. In doing so, they should consider what safeguarding would be appropriate to enable the proposed actions to be delivered, noting the potential to target stronger safeguarding in areas the local planning authority considers to be of greater importance. This will enable local planning authorities to support the best opportunities to create or improve habitat to conserve and enhance biodiversity, including where this may enable development in other location.

Relevant Local Nature Recovery Strategies can also inform the preparation of Neighbourhood Plans and Spatial Development Strategies.

Paragraph: 046 Reference ID: 8-046-20250219

Revision date: 19 02 2025

How should local planning authorities have regard to Local Nature Recovery Strategies in planning decision making?

The Local Nature Recovery Strategy is an evidence base which contains information that may be a ‘material consideration’ in the planning system, especially where development plan documents for an area pre-date Local Nature Recovery Strategy publication. It is for the decision-maker to determine what is a relevant material consideration based on the individual circumstances of the case.

In cases where there is a draft Local Nature Recovery Strategy that has been consulted upon but not yet finalised and published, the draft strategy may contain useful evidential information that can support appropriate decision making.

Paragraph: 047 Reference ID: 8-047-20250219

Revision date: 19 02 2025

What is the relationship between Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRSs) and Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG)?

Local Nature Recovery Strategies will identify areas where habitat creation, restoration or enhancement would be most beneficial for nature recovery and wider environmental outcomes. They can play a critical role in supporting offsite gains to be delivered in a way that maximises biodiversity benefits, when these are required to achieve a development's biodiversity gain objective. This can help to support bigger and more joined-up areas in which our wildlife can thrive.

Local Nature Recovery Strategies are designed to promote the delivery of offsite biodiversity gain in the right places, where offsite provision is needed to meet the biodiversity gain condition for a development and it cannot be met in full through onsite habitat enhancements. Local planning authorities have an important role in preparing the Local Nature Recovery Strategy for their area to help identify suitable offsite biodiversity gain sites.

The Local Nature Recovery Strategy can be used as a key source of information e.g. regarding strategic approaches to off-site biodiversity net gain delivery and connections to existing habitat, when local planning authorities are carrying out their functions in respect of Biodiversity Net Gain. As part of this the biodiversity hierarchy will need to be considered; the Biodiversity Net Gain planning practice guidance (https://www.gov.uk/guidance/biodiversity-net-gain) sets out further information on this.

Paragraph: 048 Reference ID: 8-048-20250219

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