

Meeting Cabinet
Portfolio Area Environment and Regeneration
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STEVENAGE BIODIVERSITY DUTY MONITORING REPORT

KEY DECISION

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1 PURPOSE

- 1.1 To provide Members with the Council's first Stevenage Borough Biodiversity Duty report as required by the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 (as amended by the Environment Act 2021).
- 1.2 This report provides Members with information on how Biodiversity Net Gain has been monitored within the Borough as well the actions and strategies in place to enhance the environment. This is a statutory report for information only and does not require a decision.

2 RECOMMENDATIONS

That Cabinet:

- 2.1 Note the information within the Biodiversity Duty Report, set out in Appendix A.

3 BACKGROUND

What is biodiversity?

- 3.1 Biodiversity refers to the variety of all living things on Earth — including plants, animals, fungi, and microorganisms — as well as the ecosystems they form and the natural processes that support life. Healthy biodiversity underpins clean air, fertile soils, pollination, climate regulation, and the overall resilience of the natural environment. When biodiversity is rich and thriving, nature is better able to adapt to pressures such as climate change, pollution, and development.

What is Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG)?

- 3.2 Biodiversity Net Gain is a planning approach that ensures development leaves nature in a measurably better state than before. Under BNG, developers must assess the existing biodiversity value of a site and then deliver at least a 10% improvement through habitat creation, enhancement, or long-term management. This makes BNG a practical tool for reversing nature loss, supporting local ecological priorities, and integrating high-quality green spaces into new development.
- 3.3 Biodiversity is important within the borough and the Council is committed to enhancing the quality of the environment as well as biodiversity. The “Making Stevenage Even Better” Corporate Plan [BD1] shows within its main objectives how important biodiversity and the environment are, because it sets the strategic direction that biodiversity actions must support. The plan’s focus on regeneration, high quality neighbourhoods, environmental stewardship, and climate resilience provides a strategic framework for enhancing habitats, improving green infrastructure, and embedding biodiversity considerations across all services.
- 3.4 Delivery of the biodiversity duty directly supports the Council’s ambitions for a cleaner, greener, healthier and more sustainable Stevenage.
- 3.5 Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) was introduced to the planning system to ensure habitats for wildlife and the natural environment are left in a measurably better state than they were before the development. In England, BNG is now mandatory under Schedule 7A of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 (as inserted by Schedule 14 of the Environment Act 2021 (<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2021/30/schedule/14/enacted>)).
- 3.6 Under the new legislation, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2021/30/schedule/14/enacted> developments must now deliver a BNG of 10%. Before this, the Council’s “The Impact of Development on Biodiversity SPD” was in place to deliver 10% BNG. It provided a transparent and auditable mechanism for assessing the impact of applications on biodiversity and meeting the requirements of the National Policy Planning Framework (NPPF) to achieve measurable net gains to biodiversity through development. It also provided policy guidance on protecting ecology and biodiversity, further than what was prescribed in the NPPF, Planning Policy Guidance and local guidance. Following BNG becoming mandatory, the SPD has been revoked (9 October 2024) [BD2].
- 3.7 Mandatory BNG came in to force for major developments on 12 February 2024 and minor developments on 2 April 2024. For the purposes of BNG, biodiversity value is measured in standardised biodiversity units.
- 3.8 The Biodiversity Duty is a legal requirement placed on public authorities in England under Section 40 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act

2006, strengthened by the Environment Act 2021. Its purpose is to make sure public bodies actively help nature recover rather than unintentionally contribute to its decline. It will also report quantitative data from the BNG metrics submitted through planning applications.

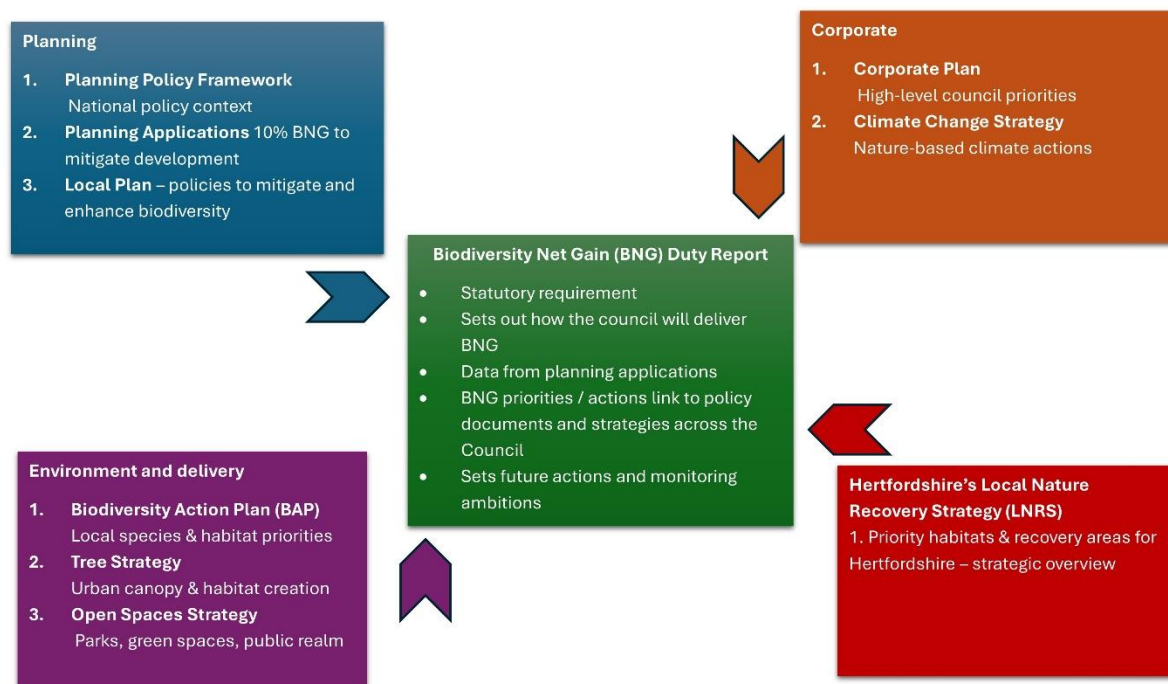
- 3.9 Local authorities are expected to publish a Biodiversity Report at least once every 5 years from the publication of the first duty report. Public authorities, including councils, planning authorities, and other bodies that manage land or make decisions affecting the natural environment are responsible to produce a report.
- 3.10 The Duty Report shows the breakdown of biodiversity mitigation from development as well as the actions and strategies in place to strengthen our natural environment. The reporting period for the Council's first Duty Report is from 12 February 2024 to 1 January 2026.
- 3.11 The Council will look to collect data annually by calendar year thereafter. This will feed into other monitoring documents such as the Council's Authority Monitoring Report (AMR) to ensure effective monitoring is in place to protect and enhance the environment.

4 REASONS FOR RECOMMENDED COURSE OF ACTION AND OTHER OPTIONS

Recommendation 2.1: That Cabinet note the information within the Biodiversity Duty Report, set out in Appendix A.

Purpose of Biodiversity Duty Report

- 4.1 The report demonstrates compliance with the Biodiversity Duty (section 40) and the new Biodiversity Duty Reporting Requirements (section 102) from the Environment Act 2021. The report shows how the authority has considered biodiversity in its decisions, policies, land management, and planning work. This provides transparency to residents, partners, and government about local nature recovery efforts. The report follows a format set by DEFRA for the reporting of information.
- 4.2 The report will include actions taken to conserve or enhance biodiversity, for example, habitat improvements or land management changes. It will also consider how biodiversity was considered in planning decisions, strategies, and internal policies, in particular the Local Plan Partial Update [BD3] and Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) [BD4]. It will also show links to national strategies such as Local Nature Recovery Strategies and Biodiversity Net Gain requirements.
- 4.3 It will also consider future plans and objectives for improving biodiversity, as well as quantitative information on proportion of habitats created through BNG within the reporting period. The data tables within the report were also created by DEFRA as a template for local planning authority statutory reporting. This information is acquired from the Habitat and Wildlife Management Plans agreed through planning applications.
- 4.4 BNG reporting will help authorities contribute to national biodiversity targets and provide measurable, numerical evidence of what they are doing for biodiversity.
- 4.5 The diagram below shows how the Biodiversity Duty Report sits within policies, strategies and departmental services.



Actions considered by the Council

4.6 Stevenage Borough Council has taken a series of coordinated actions to implement the statutory requirements of Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) and embed biodiversity considerations into the planning process. These actions include:

- Integrating BNG requirements into the Council's Development Management procedures, ensuring all qualifying applications are assessed against the mandatory 10% net gain threshold.
- Training planning officers and validation teams on the DEFRA Biodiversity Metric, biodiversity gain plans, and long-term habitat management obligations.
- Updating local planning guidance and signposting developers to national BNG requirements, including the need for 30-year habitat management and monitoring secured through planning obligations or conservation covenants.
- Establishing internal processes for reviewing biodiversity gain plans, including ecological input where required, and ensuring compliance before planning permission is granted.
- Beginning the integration of BNG monitoring into the Council's wider Climate Action Plan [BD5], particularly under Action BI8, which focuses on implementing and monitoring BNG delivery.

How biodiversity was considered in the planning process

4.7 Biodiversity was embedded into the planning process through a combination of policy, assessment, and long-term management requirements:

- All relevant planning applications are required to submit a Biodiversity Gain Plan, demonstrating how the proposal meets or exceeds the 10% net gain requirement using the DEFRA Metric [BD6].
- Applications were assessed for opportunities to retain and enhance existing habitats, prioritising on site improvements wherever feasible.

- Where on site delivery was not possible, applicants are directed to identify suitable off site habitat creation within Stevenage or the wider ecological network.
- Biodiversity considerations are aligned with the Council's Biodiversity Action Plan: A Wilder Stevenage 2024–2028 [BD4] and Local Plan, ensuring that development contributes to local habitat priorities such as grassland, woodland, hedgerows, and wetlands.
- Long term ecological management was secured through planning conditions or obligations, ensuring habitats are maintained for at least 30 years, as required by the Environment Act.

Strategies considered and future plans

- 4.8 Stevenage Borough Council has considered several strategic approaches to strengthen BNG delivery and ensure long term ecological enhancement across the borough:
- Aligning BNG implementation with the Wilder Stevenage 2024–2028 strategy, focusing on priority habitats and landscape scale ecological connectivity.
 - Exploring opportunities for a local habitat bank to support off site BNG delivery and provide consistent, high quality ecological outcomes.
 - Developing a structured BNG monitoring framework, including annual reporting, site inspections, and digital tracking of habitat condition over the 30-year management period.
 - Strengthening partnerships with Hertfordshire ecological networks, local wildlife organisations, and community groups to support habitat creation and stewardship.
 - Aligning with the Hertfordshire Local Nature Recovery Strategy, and;
 - Continuing officer training and capacity building to ensure the Council remains aligned with evolving national BNG guidance and best practice.

Results over the reporting period

- 4.9 The Council achieved several significant biodiversity improvements during the reporting period. This included adopting both the Green Spaces Strategy and the Tree and Woodland Strategy, each with measures to enhance habitats, increase ecological resilience, and support long-term nature recovery.
- 4.10 Over the course of the reporting period (12 February 2024 for major developments and 2 April 2024 for minor developments, to the 1 January 2026), Stevenage Borough Council received 10 BNG-qualifying planning applications. This resulted in the approval and securing of 5 Habitat Management Plans, each committing to a minimum 30-year period of habitat creation, enhancement, and monitoring.
- 4.11 Out of the 5 approved gain plans, 4 include both on- and off- site habitat enhancements and 1 has on-site enhancements only. There were no applications that secured biodiversity uplift through statutory credits.
- 4.12 In summary, out of a total of 1.11 units gained from development gain plans between 12 February 2024 and 1 January 2026, 1.03 were bought from outside the Stevenage local authority boundary and 0.08 were created within the boundary.

- 4.13 Off-site gain sites for developments within Stevenage are located in North Yorkshire, Lincolnshire and Surrey.
- 4.14 The reasons for the imbalance in the number of units created within and without the borough council boundaries are due to the location of gain sites (habitat banks). Gain sites are areas of land where new habitats – like meadows, woodlands, hedgerows, and ponds – are strategically added and managed for the long term (initially 30 years) to create greater biodiversity. This area can be divided into habitat units. These units can then be sold to developers to compensate for habitats lost because of the development.
- 4.15 Biodiversity Net Gain monetises nature in very specific terms dependent on habitat type, size, distinctiveness, condition, location and whether it is included in the Local Nature Recovery Strategy. Gain site habitat unit pricing then depends on the market values and the availability of the habitat. The most expensive to buy at present are watercourse units at an average of £203,861 per unit. The least expensive is Other Neutral Grassland at an average of £24,098 per unit. These costs reflect the cost to create, maintain and monitor the habitat over 30 years. The greater the number of gain sites coming online will probably lead to the reduction in these prices. General opinion at present is that supply will outstrip demand. Local gain sites would have an advantage within the metric for local developments, but they would still have to price competitively to ensure this advantage is not undercut from gain sites elsewhere.
- 4.16 Section 6 of the Duty Report also highlights the achievements within the Borough. A small snapshot of success include:
- New species-rich meadows were established at Fairlands Southfield and St Nicholas Park;
 - Tree-planting initiatives progressed with the creation of three micro-woodlands at St Nicks, Hampson, and Shephalbury Park;
 - Strengthened monitoring, reporting, and delivery of the Biodiversity Action Plan with adoption of the Kausal software platform which enables a clearer oversight of progress and improved data management, and;
 - The annual butterfly survey—delivered by Green Space Volunteers—recorded the highest counts to date, demonstrating both a thriving monitoring network and encouraging signs for local species populations.

5 IMPLICATIONS

Financial Implications

- 5.1 Any potential future duty reports will be produced within allocated resources.
- 5.2 The implementation of Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) has several financial implications for the Council, both in terms of new statutory responsibilities and potential income generation.

a. Revenue Costs

- 5.3 The introduction of mandatory BNG requirements will increase demand on the Council's planning and environmental services. Additional specialist capacity is required to assess biodiversity metrics, review BNG plans, and undertake long-term monitoring and enforcement. This is expected to result in:

- Additional staffing costs for ecological and monitoring expertise;
- Training and upskilling of existing officers;
- Investment in digital systems to record, track, and report BNG delivery;

These costs will be met initially from existing service budgets and BNG grants.

b. Income Generation

- 5.4 The Council will be able to recover certain costs through statutory BNG fees, including:

- Application fees associated with BNG assessments;
- Monitoring fees for the 30-year delivery period;
- Grants from Central Government.

c. Long-Term Liabilities

- 5.5 BNG creates legally binding obligations for habitat delivery and monitoring over a 30-year period. The Council must ensure adequate resourcing for:

- Ongoing ecological monitoring;
- Remedial works where habitats fail to achieve required outcomes;

These liabilities will be incorporated into the Council's long-term financial planning.

d. Financial Risks

- 5.6 Key financial risks include:

- Uncertainty in the emerging BNG market and unit values;
- Potential mismatch between statutory fee income and actual service costs;
- Inflationary pressures on habitat creation and maintenance;
- Risk of non-compliance by developers, leading to enforcement costs;

These risks will be managed through regular monitoring.

Planning and Legal Implications

- 5.7 The Stevenage Biodiversity Duty Report has been prepared in accordance with Schedule 7A of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 (as inserted by Schedule 14 of the Environment Act 2021) and Section 40 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act 2006.

Risk Implications

- 5.8 The risk to not producing the Biodiversity Duty Report is not demonstrating compliance with the Environment Act 2021. DEFRA has stated it intends to reference these reports in future reviews of the Act's implementation and if not published, it will be a visible gap in compliance.

Environmental Implications

- 5.9 The proposals outlined in this report have been assessed for their potential environmental impact in line with Stevenage Borough Council's sustainability objectives and the commitments set out in the Climate Change Strategy. No significant adverse environmental impacts have been identified at this stage.
- 5.10 Mitigation measures will be incorporated into the delivery plan where necessary to ensure compliance with statutory environmental obligations and to protect local ecosystems.

Climate Change Implications

- 5.11 The Biodiversity Duty report includes the Local Plan Partial Update policies relating to tackling climate change in the borough. This has been informed by internal consultation by officers with officers in the Climate Change team, to ensure the relevant policies created and updates incorporated.

Equalities and Diversity Implications

- 5.12 There are no significant equalities and diversity risks associated with producing a Biodiversity Duty Report.

Community Safety Implications

- 5.13 There are no significant community safety implications associated with producing a Biodiversity Duty Report.

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

- BD1 Making Stevenage Even Better: Corporate Plan 2024–2027 (April 2024)
<https://www.stevenage.gov.uk/documents/corporate-plan/appendix-a-making-stevenage-even-better-2024-2027.pdf>
- BD2 Meeting of the Stevenage Borough Council Cabinet: Item 4: Public Consultation on revised supplementary planning documents and proposed revocation of The Impact of Development on Biodiversity Supplementary Planning Document (October 2024)
<https://democracy.stevenage.gov.uk/documents/s37392/4%20Final%20Cabinet%20Report%20-%20SPDs%20270924%20Planning%20Policy.pdf>
- BD3 Partial Update of the Stevenage Borough Local Plan 2011 – 2031: Schedule of Changes from Adopted Local Plan to Submission Version – Changes since Adoption of Local Plan in May 2019 (August 2025) <https://www.hwa.uk.com/site/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/CD3-Schedule-of-Changes-Adopted-Local-Plan-to-Partial-Update-Submission.pdf>
- BD4 Stevenage Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP): A Wilder Stevenage 2024–2028)
<https://www.stevenage.gov.uk/documents/environment/biodiversity-action-plan-a-wilder-stevenage-2024-2028.pdf>
- BD5 Stevenage Climate Change Strategy (September 2020)
<https://www.stevenage.gov.uk/documents/about-the-council/climate-change-strategy/climate-change-strategy-september-2020.pdf>
- BD6 Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), Biodiversity Metric for Biodiversity Net Gain (July 2021) <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/biodiversity-metric-calculate-the-biodiversity-net-gain-of-a-project-or-development>

APPENDICES

- A Stevenage Borough Council Biodiversity Duty Report (February 2026)