



Information Governance Team

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Dear Sir/Madam

Environmental Information Regulations 2004 (EIR) Request ID: FOI350228774

Thank you for your request for information relating to biodiversity net gain.

You have requested the following information:

1. When is the Local Planning Authority planning to introduce Biodiversity Net Gain as a mandatory requirement for all small development projects in the LPA's jurisdiction? Please provide a specific date and a short definition of what the LPA classes as a 'small development project'.

Coventry City has been operating a requirement for net gain for a number of years; Warwickshire County Council has developed a Biodiversity Impact Assessment metric* which is well-established and recognised by developers and ecological consultants. The metric evaluates the biodiversity value of habitats before and after development. Any loss of biodiversity requires a financial contribution to offsite projects. The Warwickshire Biodiversity Impact Assessment Calculator is accessible using the link below:

<https://www.warwickshire.gov.uk/obligations-service-area/biodiversity/1>

The metric, in common with others, is not appropriate for very small developments or urban habitats, the minimum area is 0.01ha (100m²). There is no accepted definition of “small development”, the planning definition of major/minor development is not appropriate. The current practice is to seek some mitigation for any development which involves the loss of habitat/biodiversity including small areas of garden. Where appropriate the council has agreed procedures for funding the planting and maintenance of trees on nearby open space allowing flexibility and gains to be provided at minimal cost.

2. If a specific date has not yet been decided, does your Local Planning Authority intend to introduce a requirement for planning applications to include localised Biodiversity Net Gain plans for small development project within the 24 months following the passing of the Environment Bill? (Please define ‘Biodiversity Gain Plan’ as any document that is analogous to the type of document specified in the Environment Bill).

The value of small, urban habitat islands in maintaining and enhancing biodiversity is well-established. Such brownfield sites are often priority sites for development and are generally undervalued when assessed ecologically. Though easily lost such areas are equally easy to re-create. The Council is currently developing a biodiversity Supplementary Planning Document which is expected to be adopted next year (April 2022). The plan will be included details of how net gain should be achieved for small development projects. The myriad issues relating to how to assess net gain are appreciated, success will be achieved if biodiversity is enhanced overall rather than for each and every individual scheme.

Separately, the Council also has targets for creating features such as “tiny forests” and bee-friendly highway verges which contribute to wider networks of small urban biodiversity sites

3. Is there any material that sets out what criteria a Biodiversity Gain Plan needs to meet in order to be accepted by the authority for a small development project? If such material exists please can it be attached to your response. If such material does not exist, please provide a brief description of what criteria a Biodiversity Gain Plan needs to meet within your LPA. (Again, please define ‘Biodiversity Gain Plan’ as any document that is analogous to the type of document specified in the Environment Bill).

Any such material will be part of the Biodiversity SPD mentioned above. The Authority does make use of the Warwickshire BIA for small developments and is assessing the more recently released DEFRA version for small sites.

Any development would need to submit a Preliminary Ecological Appraisal (Extended Phase 2) with information on habitats and information on proposed landscaping within the site and similarly equivalent information for any offsite. The data is used to generate a value for gain/loss in a metric. Given the practicality of defining a 10% gain in biodiversity and the existing academic evidence that a significantly larger gain is required any agreement will seek significant enhancement features. Within an urban context and for small sites “like for like” replacement may not be required and the potential gains through biodiverse roofs/walls and SuDS given more weight. Increasingly there is greater emphasis on longer term monitoring of any offset sites rather than extensive surveys before development. Offset projects will have a minimum 30-year term and monitoring will help with current uncertainty regarding lack of resources for practical management or enforcement.

In practice the authority has identified a number of biodiversity offset sites distributed around Coventry where purchasing biodiversity credits will be possible. It is not anticipated that there will be a significant number of independently developed schemes with biodiversity gain plans.

Coventry City Council is engaged with WWT and Finance Earth exploring the options for developing different models for providing offset projects which would allow small developments to obtain biodiversity credit with greater ease.

4. Who is the official at your Local Planning Authority that is tasked with ensuring that Biodiversity Net Gain is implemented for the LPA?

The current Coventry City Council Ecology Officer is Simon Newell who has responsibility that biodiversity net gain is achieved. The authority supports the Warwickshire Wildlife Trust Habitat Biodiversity Audit team based with the Warwickshire County Council Ecology Team. This provides data on habitats and sites within the city which allows for monitoring changes in biodiversity. We are moving towards much greater use of remote sensing data. Reports are provided to Councillors regarding biodiversity, though this area does require further development.

5. Does the LPA's approach to Net Gain require all 'Biodiversity Gain Plans' to be produced by an accredited ecologist?

As stated above the details of implementation of Biodiversity Net Gain are still in development. However, assuming "accredited ecologist" refers to CIEEM (Chartered or Full membership) then there will not be any future requirement that any net gain plan must be produced by an accredited ecologist as such. Locally future projects may be developed on behalf of developers by external partners such as the local wildlife trust or Warwickshire County Council Ecology Service both of which include staff with relevant skills but who may not be CIEEM members. Similarly, local universities with significant estates and extensive development are expected to submit biodiversity plans with significant input from staff. The Council would also welcome any net gain plan developed by a local community group working with a developer. Any plan would be fully assessed internally before it would be agreed.

It should be noted that membership of CIEEM does not provide any confidence regarding the quality of any submitted biodiversity net gain plan.

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If you are unhappy with the outcome of our review, you can write to the Information Commissioner, who can be contacted at: Information Commissioner's Office, Wycliffe House, Water Lane, Wilmslow, Cheshire, SK9 5AF or email icocasework@ico.org.uk.

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Yours faithfully

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