

Monitoring and evaluation

Quality assurance

A transparent net gain policy would enable local people and organisations to see what environmental outcomes are required and hold developers, LPAs and land managers to account. To provide confidence that biodiversity net gain is achieved, we intend to introduce monitoring of the quality of delivery on the ground and measures to help ensure that outcomes are achieved. We intend to engage further with stakeholders in due course but this could include quality assurance measures such as:

- Supporting the use of biodiversity net gain best practice principles²⁹ and standards that industry and professional bodies are developing.
- Exploring the potential, and benefits of, accreditation in delivering net gain policy. In an earlier section (“Assessment of habitat type and condition”) we discuss the advantages of a simplified and more standardised habitat assessment process. There is currently no requirement for those who complete habitat surveys to be professionally qualified, and we could explore, working with professional bodies such as CIEEM and IEMA³⁰ who provide membership and chartered schemes for ecologists, the future potential for accreditation. This could help to increase confidence in the assessment process and avoid the risk of habitats being undervalued; it should not increase delay, survey or reporting costs for industry. An accreditation scheme for those providing habitat enhancement and compensation could also be considered, in view of the challenges outlined in the section “Provision of compensatory habitats”.
- In the future, there could be the potential for meeting survey requirements for certain habitats or types of developments through the use of area-wide surveying and improved satellite or remote sensing habitat mapping; these methods would need development and evaluation before they were widely implemented to ensure that such approaches are robust and would not result in misidentification or loss of distinctive habitats.
- Establishing whether additional means for insurance or recourse are needed in case post-development habitat is cleared, degraded or ineffectively managed or if the same habitat compensation is used to offset several developments.

This could also include monitoring the delivery of net gain by:

- Ensuring that data about habitat losses and gains could be easily collected and accessed at local and national scales. Consistent use of the Defra metric would ensure that data on anticipated biodiversity losses and gains is available in a standardised format, and we will consider how we could streamline collection of data from local authorities with a digital process and data standards for open access by stakeholders.

²⁹ <https://www.cieem.net/biodiversity-net-gain-principles-and-guidance-for-uk-construction-and-developments>

³⁰ The Chartered Institute for Ecology and Environmental Management and the Institute of Environmental Management and Assessment.

- Assessing post-construction development and compensation sites, potentially through random sampling, to ensure they are making progress to deliver the amount, type and condition of habitat expected.

43. Are there any issues or measures, other than those outlined, that we should take into account when considering how to monitor biodiversity net gain?

44. Should local authorities be required to provide information about habitat losses and gains?

45. What technological or other innovative mechanisms could facilitate the delivery and monitoring of biodiversity net gain?

Evaluation

The success of a net gain policy should, in part, be measured by whether new developments in our communities make more thoughtful use of habitats and embrace sustainability in their design. If successful, we should see new and improved spaces for nature appearing in our landscapes, and more abundant and diverse wildlife using them.

Any net gain approach we propose will, however, not be perfect and we would need to review the approach to ensure that it is delivering for the environment and for development. These reviews would be restricted in scope, but should be able to refine, update and adapt the approach (including responses to scientific and technological changes) and potentially alter tariff rates (to reflect changes in land prices which might change costs of habitat creation). Any such changes to the approach should be supported by evidence of changes both in habitat distribution and behaviour in designing habitats as part of development. Reviews should not be used to arbitrarily strengthen or weaken requirements. We propose that such updates should be accompanied by engagement with key environmental, LPA and industry stakeholders to help government to ensure that the right opportunities for improvement and streamlining are identified.

Any final net gain policy will be delivered as part of the wider delivery of the 25 Year Environment Plan, and there is a clear opportunity to link the evaluation of achievement of net gain at a national level with national metrics being developed by Defra for the Environment Plan. The use of a single biodiversity metric for biodiversity net gain should allow for easy collection and sampling of data, and we will explore what level of data collection at a national level would be adequate to provide insights into environmental outcomes.