

BIODIVERSITY & NET GAIN STRATEGY PROGRESS UPDATE REPORT 2024

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1. Introduction

Biodiversity is important. It provides ecosystem services that are essential for human well-being. These services include the provision of food, clean water, air purification, climate regulation, and natural resources. Without these services, our economies and societies would struggle to function. Biodiversity is important for the resilience of these ecosystems, as it allows them to adapt to changing conditions and maintain their functioning over time.

However, biodiversity is under threat from a range of human activities, including habitat destruction, pollution, overexploitation of natural resources, and climate change. The rate of species extinction is currently estimated to be 100-1,000 times higher than the natural rate, and up to one million species are at risk of extinction in the coming decades. If too many species are lost from an ecosystem, then those ecosystems cease to function.

This loss of biodiversity has significant implications for our own well-being, not only do we risk a reduction in the provision of ecosystem services, but it also has wider implications for the functioning of the Earth system, as biodiversity loss can lead to feedback that exacerbates climate change and other environmental problems.

The UK is one of the world's nature-depleted countries, ranking bottom 10% globally, and ranks last of the G7 nations for biodiversity losses. Protecting biodiversity is therefore a crucial priority, and one that requires urgent action. We need to take immediate steps to address the drivers of biodiversity loss, and to protect and restore biodiversity through a range of conservation and restoration measures.

The Biodiversity and Net Gain (B&NG) Strategy was written to set out a framework that will help fulfil the enhanced Biodiversity Duties that were implemented by the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) in the Environment Act (2021), as well as to address the current biodiversity emergency. The Act requires public authorities to have regard to conservation and enhancement of biodiversity when carrying out their functions. Wirral Council therefore has a legal duty to consider biodiversity when making decisions or taking actions that could affect the natural environment. This means biodiversity needs to be a consideration in anything we do.

2. Overview of progress 2023 - 2024

Since the publication of the B&NG Strategy, a lot of great work and initiatives have taken place to help conserve and enhance biodiversity on the Wirral.

Biodiversity has now become a consideration in the Climate Impact Assessment Tool that is being developed for Wirral council major projects, a Biodiversity Literacy Training course for all council officers and members has been developed to be rolled out before the end of the year, and a resident-focused Biodiversity Toolkit has been developed to

encourage nature-positive behaviours amongst our residents, to be launched as a seasonal campaign in 2025.

The previous version of the Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) was over 20 years old, and therefore identified as one of the key objectives in the Strategy. To be able to develop a new BAP, the Wirral Biodiversity Form has been revived, with some 21 different stakeholders ready to work together and develop a new BAP for Wirral. This will follow the work that is being done by the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority (LCR) on the Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) for our region. Wirral has been working closely with the LCR and their partners to map opportunities and identify priorities for nature recovery. The aim for the new BAP is to develop an action plan that can deliver some of the opportunities and priorities identified in the LNRS.

To lead on the delivery of the strategy, a new post, Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) Coordinator, was created to sit within the Climate Emergency Team. The BNG Coordinator chairs the internal corporate BNG Team, consisting of colleagues in Development management / Planning, Legal, and Neighbourhood Services. Future meetings will include colleagues from Regeneration and Assets to provide a robust and cross-cutting approach to deliver the statutory BNG requirements to achieve a 10% net gain in biodiversity for all development, including council regeneration schemes.

The key objectives from the B&NG Strategy are:

- **Objective 1** – to establish a biodiversity action plan which outlines deliverable measures to support priority habitat and species targets in line with the city region local nature recovery strategy and forthcoming protected site and species strategies.
- **Objective 2** – the delivery of mandatory 10% biodiversity net gain through the planning process in accordance with prevailing legislation, policy, and guidance
- **Objective 3** – to promote awareness of biodiversity, supporting and encouraging positive action from communities, businesses, and organisations in Wirral.
- **Objective 4** – embed the biodiversity objective in all that we do in Wirral Council
- **Objective 5** – to maximise the potential from the council's estate to support biodiversity whilst balancing their multifunctional needs.
- **Objective 6** – to identify and harness the wealth of local knowledge and expertise to identify opportunities and solutions to local biodiversity issues.

It is recognised that the data needed to monitor the progress of the strategy is not fully available for all Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) from the Performance Monitoring Framework that were identified in the B&NG Strategy. Existing systems are being investigated, as well as new, to capture the data better that is required to monitor the progress for future strategy updates, and to inform decisions and actions.

A large part of the KPIs from the B&NG Strategy form part of the Environment & Climate Emergency Action Plan, and available through the Power BI dashboard. For the ease of this progress update, KPIs have been grouped by theme and their individual updates. In the Framework for each section, it will identify to which objectives it contributes to in the strategy.

PERFORMANCE MONITORING FRAMEWORK

Biodiversity Action Plan

Strategy Objective 1 and Objective 6

1. ***The establishment of a Biodiversity Action Working Group including local stakeholders, representatives, and experts.***

The Biodiversity Action Working Group has been revived as the Wirral Biodiversity Forum, and currently over 21 people from across 13 different local groups and organisations have shown an enthusiastic response to take part in the process of writing a new BAP. The first meeting has been scheduled to take place in autumn 2024 for initial introductions between all stakeholders, followed by the first working meetings to take place early 2025, ahead of the final approval of the LNRS.

2. ***The development of a Biodiversity Action plan within 12 months of the Biodiversity & Net Gain Strategy being agreed and published.***

The Liverpool City Region Combined Authority (LCRCA) is the Responsible Authority for the development of the LNRS for the region. Representatives of the council have a seat in both the Technical Advisory Panel and the Advisory Board. The Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (DEFRA) has set a deadline for approval of the LNRS by the local councils to take place in July 2025. The BAP work will start in Spring 2025, once the final version of the LNRS is published for the final consultation, after which there are no large changes anticipated in the LNRS. The LNRS is a strategic document which identifies opportunities for nature recovery and will be a strong basis to develop a BAP for Wirral. By delaying the development of the BAP to align with the publication of the LNRS, a much stronger BAP can be developed for Wirral that is deliverable and based on scientific input from the LNRS. It is planned that a first version of the new BAP will be drafted by no later than March 2026.

3. ***The number of new wildlife habitats created or enhanced, such as woodlands, meadows, or wetlands.***

Pollinator wildflower meadows

Parks & Countryside have been allocated a £300,000 grant from the Wirral Council's Neighbourhoods Investment Fund for 2024-25, for their Pollinator Project. This project aims to convert current rewilding areas to wildflower meadows which would serve as pollinator areas. During summer 2024, botanical and ecological surveys were undertaken on approximately 30 rewilding sites, to identify rare and important species to inform the management of the future wildflower meadows. It is anticipated that works to create the meadows will commence February – March 2025 to create a total of 73,000m² of wildflower meadows by March 2025.

Council-owned BNG habitat banks

In 2024 the council instructed Cheshire Wildlife Trust to undertake BNG assessments of a shortlist of potential BNG Habitat Bank sites. These areas have been surveyed using the UK Habitats Methodology (UK Habs), and soil

sampling has also taken place as part of these works. The BNG assessment report is currently being prepared by Cheshire Wildlife Trust, with a workshop planned with council officers to discuss options for enhancements and creation of new habitats on these sites. These areas would benefit from enhancement or newly created habitats to improve the biodiversity value. The establishment of BNG Habitat Banks is ongoing work that will also continue in future years. By creating our own habitat banks, the council can secure the income generated by the sale of Biodiversity Units from these habitat banks to fund the management and maintenance of these sites for a minimum of 30 years. These will also be a vital part in the delivery of our regeneration schemes.

Natural Flood Management Award

This year Wirral Council and Cheshire Wildlife Trust have successfully bid for £430k of Natural Flood Management (NFM) funding for council-owned land known as the Hoylake Carrs. This is a 60-hectare piece of tenanted agricultural land. The funding is administered by DEFRA and the Environment Agency. The funding aims to deliver a project that uses natural processes to reduce the risk of flooding, with the primary goal to create an enhanced wetland on the site. This will have multiple benefits, the envisioned wetland Nature Reserve will deliver downstream flood risk reduction, carbon sequestration, and habitat creation for wintering waders and wildfowl. This will create an area of high biodiversity value. The final decision on the grant is expected by the end of 2024 and the capital work is then expected to take place from September 2025 for 3 years.

Tree planting

The Tree Team continued to deliver the Wirral's Tree, Hedgerow and Woodland Strategy, with 16,164 new trees planted in the 2023-24 season, and an additional 2,517 trees planted to replace those lost in previous planting seasons. Since 2020, a total of 85,280 trees have been planted, which includes both new plantings and replacements for trees that have failed. When considering the number of new trees planted and those the council has removed, the net gain is 80,594 since 2020.

Biodiversity Net Gain Strategy objective 2

4. ***The number of planning applications subject to biodiversity net gain requirements. (data includes information available until 15 October 2024)***
Since the legislation came into force for major (12 February 2024) and minor (2 April 2024) applications, a total of 16 applications have been subject to the BNG requirements. Development Management holds a regular Agents Forum, which was previously only aimed at householder applications. This has now been extended to minor applications, and training was provided at the October Agents Forum on Biodiversity Net Gain for those attending.
5. ***The total net gain of biodiversity in Wirral (total BNG Unit uplift vs. baseline for all development projects).***

This information is not yet available, as there has not yet been an application determined with the BNG condition attached at the time of writing.

6. *The total net gain of biodiversity for Wirral Council regeneration projects.*

There has not yet been a regeneration project delivered with the BNG condition attached to delivery 10% net gain.

7. *The total number and type of net gain units created in Wirral.*

There has not yet been an application determined with the BNG condition attached at the time of writing.

8. *Developing and maintaining a record of on-site and off-site net gain delivery.*

Existing systems are being investigated, as well as new, to capture this data, as this is also requirement to monitor for our Biodiversity Reporting Duties to DEFRA.

9. *The number of registered, validated biodiversity net gain offsetting sites in Wirral.*

There has not yet been a habitat bank registered in Wirral.

Engagement & Investment

Strategy objective 3

10. *The number of people engaged in biodiversity conservation activities, such as volunteering, education, or awareness-raising.*

Since the publication of the strategy, a large number of people, both within the council as well as externally, have been involved in biodiversity activities. These have been split below into council staff, volunteers, and residents & schools.

Council staff

- In the 2023-24 tree planting season, there were 6 council staff tree planting sessions, with around 70 members of staff helping over the course of the season.
- The Biodiversity Net Gain Coordinator in the Climate Emergency Team has provided training on Biodiversity Net Gain for members and different services, such as Regeneration, Forward Planning, Planning Case Officers, Corporate Property Board and the Managers Network.

Volunteers

- Volunteering groups that were involved in tree planting involved 190 volunteers, across 13 community planting events and 5 school planting sessions.
- Since October 2023, almost 100 people have signed up to become Tree Wardens as part of the Wirral Tree Warden Network run by the Tree Management team.

- There are currently 33 'Friends groups' supporting Parks and Countryside areas and providing volunteer support.

Residents & Schools

- A work-placement student within the Climate Emergency Team wrote a seasonal resident-focused biodiversity toolkit, to be launched by the end of 2024. This aim of this toolkit is to encourage residents to take positive action for biodiversity through different seasonal activities they can participate in. This will be a year-long campaign throughout 2025.
- The Eco-schools programme has had an incredible impact report published on their last schoolyear. The below figure shows the approximate impact of all eco-schools combined in Wirral.



- There are currently 80 schools actively taking part in the eco school programme. Each school has one or two coordinators, with the eco programme being part of all school years. Approximately 80 teachers attend training sessions over the year to deliver the eco school curriculum in their schools.
- Sixty-six schools have been Green Flag accredited, of which 13 with Merit and 22 with Distinction.
- There are 35 schools that took part in the Hedgehog Friendly Campus this schoolyear. This entailed a whole school approach to evidence they made impactful changes for hedgehogs.

- Nationally 41 schools achieved a Hedgehog Friendly Schools award, of which 25 were Wirral Schools. Four of those schools achieved Bronze, seven schools achieved Silver and 14 schools achieved Gold.
- The Wirral Wide Eco Council had three Nature days at Bidston Golf Club, with local community biodiversity partners. This provided sessions on amphibians, bats, owls, bees, hedgehogs, insects, wildflowers, and trees.
- Nineteen schools were successful in a £10k nature grant bid to increase biodiversity in their school grounds, with a focus on grey to green.

11. The level of investment in biodiversity conservation measures, including resources allocated to ongoing management.

This information is provided in terms of the budgets and investments from Parks & Countryside, the Tree Management Team, and the Climate Emergency Team.

Parks & Countryside

- There are currently 16 FTE Ranger posts employed by Wirral Council in Parks & Countryside, their duties involve direct conservation with a range of residents on biodiversity activities, such as volunteering, education or awareness raising.
- The total level of investment in Parks & Countryside for biodiversity conservation measures, including resources allocated to ongoing management, was just under £700,000.

Tree Management Team

- The Council employs five permanent staff within the Tree team comprising a senior manager, two tree officers and two tree inspectors.
- There is an annual tree maintenance budget of £248,249 for Parks and Countryside tree works and £410,400 for Highways tree works.
- Over £165,000 has been secured through the Mersey Forest for the planting and establishment of eight woodlands in the first four planting seasons (2020-21, 2021-22, 2022-23 and 2023-24).
- A grant of £249,630 was secured in 2020 as part of Round 1 of the Urban Tree Challenge Fund (UTCF) to plant street and parkland trees and a further £367,645 was then secured through the governments Round 3 of the UTCF.
- Over £40k from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) and Levelling Up Parks Fund has also been invested since the Tree & Hedgerow strategy was adopted in street and parkland tree planting.
- In 2022, a total of £85,857.40 was secured through the DEFRA Woodland Creation Acceleration Fund for the recruitment of a Trees and Woodland Community Officer for two years.
- In 2023 the council was awarded £37,885 from the Coronation Living Heritage Fund to plant five micro woodlands and three orchards to celebrate the King's Coronation.

Climate Emergency Team

- In November 2023 the council employed a Biodiversity Net Gain Coordinator as part of the Climate Emergency Team to deliver the B&NG Strategy.
- The council received Section 31 Grant Funding from DEFRA for '23-'24 to help deliver the mandatory 10% BNG, which as a Band 1 authority (authorities with 500 or fewer applications that fall within the scope of BNG) was set at £26,807. This has been used to pay the Merseyside Environmental Advisory Service (MEAS) to conduct a BNG Baseline assessment of different council-owned sites, with completed metrics and GIS data. MEAS also chairs a monthly LCR-wide BNG Planning Policy Managers meeting where experiences and knowledge is shared in relation to BNG.
- The Section 31 Grant Funding for 2024-25 was also set at £26,807 and has been allocated to commission Cheshire Wildlife Trust for the delivery of BNG Baseline Assessments to inform any decisions on council-owned Habitat Banks to meet our own BNG requirements. The funding has also been used to pay for new software, Mycelia by Verna, to assist Planning Case Officers and the Biodiversity Net Gain Coordinator with validating, assessing, and determining planning applications on BNG grounds. This software has been invaluable to help with assessing the BNG requirements, which would otherwise would have been extremely resource intensive. The software has also rolled out monitoring functionality to be able to help the council with the 30-year monitoring requirement in the legislation.
- In 2024 the council awarded £86,000 in Green Grants to 25 community groups and CICs towards projects that provide green infrastructure and food growing initiatives. These included many projects to protect and enhance our green spaces and improve biodiversity. These ranged from turning a derelict site into a community led garden, to creating a small community orchard, pollinator flowerbed and others. There will be a report in March 2025 with the final outcomes of these projects.

12. The number of partnerships established or collaborations with stakeholders to support biodiversity conservation and enhancement.

- The Wirral Biodiversity Forum (WBF) has been revived, and local groups, experts and partners have been invited to take part in the WBF to advice on the development of the Wirral BAP. There are currently 19 members from across 13 different groups and organisations that have positively responded to taking part in the WBF.
- Internally a new working group was established, the BNG Team, which currently consists of AD – Climate Change & Environment, AD - Chief Planner, Local Plan Lead, Development Management Manager, Principal Forward Planning Officer, Senior Planning Lawyer, Modernisation Officer, Climate Emergency Team Manager, and the Biodiversity Net Gain Coordinator, who chairs the meetings. These meetings have been vital to streamline workstreams, develop internal policies, and continue to identify

areas where improvement or further work is required to deliver biodiversity net gain in Wirral.

Embedding biodiversity in everything we do

Strategy objective 3 and objective 4

13. Biodiversity Impact Assessments (BIA) – develop and implement BIA into decision-making process in Wirral

The Climate Emergency Team has developed a Climate Impact Assessment (CIA) based on best practice from other Local Authorities. The CIA tool has been trialled with the project management team and incorporated into the project template for capital funding bids. This Climate Impact Assessment has biodiversity included as one of the 6 considerations within the assessment. The tool is utilised at the first stage of the project so any negative impacts can be mitigated or positive gains for biodiversity can be integrated during planning and delivery phases.

14. Biodiversity Champions – appointing BCs within relevant departments

This will be reviewed by mid-2025, after there is a better understanding of staff awareness and understanding of biodiversity following the Biodiversity Literacy training course. This will then be reviewed where there is a need for Biodiversity Champions and what their roles would entail.

Biodiversity Literacy

Strategy objective 4

15. Develop Biodiversity Literacy Course which will provide an overview on biodiversity and provide practical guidance on incorporating biodiversity considerations into everyday tasks.

A Biodiversity Literacy Course has been written a work placement student from Liverpool John Moores University, together with the Biodiversity Net Gain Coordinator. This training course will be available on Flo for all council officers and members. This course will launch on Flo in November.

16. % of Council officers completing the 'Biodiversity Literacy' course.

The course will launch in November, and this will be reported in the next progress update.

17. The level of awareness and understanding of biodiversity issues among council officers and elected members (questionnaire pre and post biodiversity literacy course and/or similar workshop/training).

This will be reported in the next progress update of the strategy. A questionnaire is prepared as part of the Biodiversity Literacy Training online to measure the level of awareness and understanding of biodiversity pre- and post-training.

Designated Sites

Strategy objective 5

18. Proportion of designated sites in unfavourable and favourable condition (declining and recovering).

Out of the 12 Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) on the Wirral, Wirral owns or partly owns and manages 8 sites. The SSSIs are split up in 'units' and 'features' which are assessed for their condition by Natural England.

19. The area of designated sites taken from unfavourable condition to recovering or favourable condition.

There has been no change in the condition assessment of any of the SSSIs since the publication of the BN&G Strategy in 2023.

20. The area of land brought into effective conservation management in the reporting period, including the proportion of sites that meet conservation targets (e.g., priority habitats & species etc.).

There is currently no data on this, but as the BAP develops and clear targets are set and measurable, these will be reported on in future update reports of the strategy.

21. The proportion of local authority land managed to conserve and enhance biodiversity.

There is ongoing work being undertaken to address the needs for a land asset management system, and a Green Estate Review. This will address the different types of 'need' the council has for land, and how much land is or is not available. This covers the need for playing pitches, pollinator sites, tree planting sites, biodiversity net gain habitat banks, and others. This is a large task, and initial steps have been undertaken to assess how much council land is currently being managed for wildlife and biodiversity using a GIS based system. A methodology to monitor this metric has not yet been agreed, however, the next update of the strategy will provide more information.

Carbon

Strategy objective 5

22. *The amount of carbon sequestered or stored by biodiversity-enhancing activities, such as tree planting.*

Reliable figures for the carbon sequestered and stored through new planting schemes are not yet available. Baseline data, including tree numbers, survival rates, and average growth at new planting sites, is currently being monitored to ensure accurate calculation of carbon sequestration in the future.

PRIORITIES FOR 2024-2025

Outlined below is a summary of the priority projects and work that will be the focus of attention for the coming year:

- Launch the Biodiversity Literacy Training for all Council officers and members in November 2024.
- A resident-focused seasonal Biodiversity Toolkit to encourage nature-positive behaviours will be launched at the end of 2024. This will include in-person workshops with partners to deliver practical tips for biodiversity.
- The first meeting of the Wirral Biodiversity Forum to take place autumn 2024, followed by the first working meeting around March 2025 to kick off the development of the new Wirral Biodiversity Action Plan.
- The development of the Pollinator Sites funded by the Neighbourhoods Investment Fund by Park & Countryside by March 2025.
- Continue the development of the Natural Flood Management project at Hoylake Carrs to create a new wetland Nature Reserve together with Cheshire Wildlife Trust.
- The approval of the final version of the Local Nature Recovery Strategy by July 2025.
- An ongoing strong internal BNG workgroup with cross-service working relationships to address the mandatory BNG requirements.
- Development of an internal approach to establish BNG Habitat Banks both on council-owned land as well as privately-owned land.
- Continue work on the Green Estate Review to address the competing demand for land within the Council.