

Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG): Exploring local authorities' responses to mandatory policy

Ewan Shipley (University of Bristol)
in partnership with Map Impact

University of Bristol



Map Impact



This study examined the extent to which Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) is being implemented, considering the fragmented readiness, guidance, resources, and uncertainty surrounding monitoring and compliance.

We outline the responses of local authorities across England to the new BNG legislation and assess whether they view it as an effective method of environmental protection through stakeholder interviews.

Background



The **MSc Society, Politics, and Climate Change** course at the University of Bristol aims to examine sociological and political approaches to urgent environmental issues, investigating the root causes and consequences of the climate crisis. The core modules cover topics such as international relations, societal change, disasters, consumption patterns, and social movements.

A component of the course is the Applied Research Project, allowing students to collaborate with an organization to apply their learning in a practical setting, replacing the traditional dissertation. As part of this research, Ewan Shipley investigated how national policies address critical environmental issues, such as biodiversity loss.

Map Impact's objective of providing pioneering environmental data services led to the exploration of research opportunities with the University of Bristol. Ewan chose the research project to align with his interests and course requirements.

Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG)

Development that leaves biodiversity in a better state than before

Developers must make sure that the natural environment is in a better state after any construction project. They must check how much biodiversity is in an area before they start building. Then they need to improve the biodiversity by at least 10% after they finish. This could mean creating new habitats, fixing up old ones, or making them better. The aim is to protect nature, help animals, and support broader environmental goals, like the Nature Recovery Network (NRN). This rule helps make sure that we can grow our economy while also taking care of the environment.

Research Methodology



Research Methodology



The research has focused on how local authorities across England are responding to the new legislation, and whether they think it is an appropriate method of environmental protection. It also seeks to explore the potential challenges which may inhibit the effectiveness of BNG, as critics have highlighted concerns surrounding regulation and monitoring.

The project used qualitative research methods to collect and analyse data. We chose participants based on their job roles and places of work. This method worked well because our research focused on local authorities. We interviewed people online using Microsoft Teams and recorded and edited the interviews using the software's transcription feature.

We used a semi-structured approach to interviewing, asking a set of pre-determined questions but also exploring unexpected topics. Afterward, we used thematic analysis to identify common themes from the interviews and group the data into shared topics to form the basis of this project summary.

Key Themes Explored in Interviews

Existing Experience: Pilot BNG schemes have led to different degrees of readiness across local authorities.

Access to Data: Fragmented data resources mean some regions have limited access to fulfil BNG.

Enhancing Council Land: A level of frustration regarding the ability use council land for commercial habitat banks.

Lack of Resources: Some local authorities are constrained by financial and technical shortcomings.

Economic Opportunities: Considerations of how the BNG market will manifest monetary opportunities.

Inadequate Guidance: The launch of mandatory BNG was fraught with incomplete guidance for local authority compliance.

Uncertainty: Lack of cohesion around what the future holds in terms of monitoring and compliance.

Discrepancies between Local Authorities: Certain areas have prioritised nature recovery and are hence better equipped for BNG.

Overall Support: An openness for embracing nature recovery despite BNG's supposed shortcomings.

Progress, Challenges and Opportunities





Some participants were confident due to their experience, while others were concerned about the lack of resources for local authorities to enforce BNG.

"It hasn't just sort of appeared on our radar this year [...] we've been applying BNG for quite some time, albeit without specific adopted policy"

Mark Saunders, North Devon Council

"Local authorities don't have the enforcement inspection teams to go out and check. We don't do it now, we won't do it tomorrow, we won't do it the year after"

Simon Newell, Coventry City Council

"At the moment, the resources within local authorities at a planning officer level and particularly enforcement officer level... to undertake their normal day-to-day enforcement activities, let alone the additional responsibilities that will be placed on them from having to monitor BNG created habitat..."

I see that being a real struggle. That is a challenge."

Oliver Meek, Leicestershire County Council



Some participants found it challenging to comment on the effectiveness of BNG because the policy is so new.

"when you look over 30-year time scales it will change a lot no matter what we do now - 30 years is a long time, and it won't look like we expected it to by that point."

Mike Barry, Hart District Council

"I do wonder if for those developments you might get 10 or 5 years down the line and there starts to be a bit of a loss of interest in terms of the management and maintenance of those habitats."

Oliver Meek, Leicestershire County Council

"there's a recognition that BNG has just started for most people - there are exceptions to this - but for most people it's new to them. So there's inevitably going to be a period of people trying their best, but not necessarily doing things perfectly"

Nick White, Natural England



It was evident that local authorities had varying levels of experience, with some feeling that their regions were better equipped for BNG than others.

"The challenge for them (local authorities) was adapting what they'd been doing locally to this new national scheme and there are some for whom the national approach is quite different to what they were doing previously."

Nick White, Natural England

"I'm very lucky to have a very biodiversity positive council as a whole, but others might say that's just not a priority for us."

Mike Barry, Hart District Council

"So, it's obviously quite a shock being mandatory (BNG). So even though we support BNG, it's been quite a transition for us."

Amy Stanley, Chester and Cheshire West Council



Some emphasised the financial benefits of BNG for stakeholders, while others expressed frustration with using council land for BNG Habitat Bank sites.

"Most authorities I think would like to float some of their own estate as potential BNG sites, but the way the legislation is set up makes it very, very difficult to do that."

Mark Saunders, North Devon Council

"one of the things that's been quite fascinating to observe is that an entire mini ecosystem - a kind of tech ecosystem - has sprung up around BNG as well"

Nick White, Natural England

"I do wonder around whether the financial side of things will drive certain types of habitat not other types to be created. That will be driven by finances rather than benefits to biodiversity."

Oliver Meek, Leicestershire County Council



Despite initial contentions, most participants viewed BNG as a positive step for biodiversity in the built environment sector as a whole.

"I think it's really significant as a paradigm shift [...] it's getting people to think about nature in a way they never did and it's putting nature in the front of a conversation rather than the end of a conversation."

Nick White, Natural England

"I see it in the long term as something that should be a landmark piece of legislation that reverses the decline in habitats and species across the UK."

Oliver Meek, Leicestershire County Council

"Under any circumstances, BNG is better than what we had before. If it's applied properly then yes it could be an effective way of protecting and enhancing biodiversity, but it's only a first step."

Simon Newell, Coventry City Council



The current access to data resources needed to effectively monitor BNG across England is inadequate.

"we could use habitat data or the habitat classification from satellite imagery on a large-scale basis to see if that's verifiable without actually going out on site and having to get down on your hands and knees and check."

Mark Saunders, North Devon Council

"And then if you want another problem, obviously, we can't monitor. We don't have good information about the state of our biodiversity today."

Simon Newell, Coventry City Council

"satellite data would help in consideration of potential sites to purchase"

Mark Saunders, North Devon Council

"We won't have good information about the state of biodiversity in 10 years' time, so how are we going to assess whether we've made a 10% difference?"

Simon Newell, Coventry City Council



New Funding Streams: There are investment opportunities for conservation-focused businesses, including green bonds, biodiversity credits, and corporate sustainability initiatives.

Improved Biodiversity Monitoring Technology: Utilising advanced technologies such as satellite monitoring, machine learning, and drones for better assessment of biodiversity changes and tracking.

Collaboration & Partnerships: Opportunities for public-private partnerships and collaboration between developers, conservationists, and government to achieve ambitious biodiversity targets.

Carbon Offsetting & Climate Resilience: Linking BNG to carbon offset schemes and enhancing ecosystems' ability to support climate change resilience.

References



References



Interviewees

We are grateful to all contributors. Their openness and transparency greatly helped this research. Interviewees included:

Mark Saunders, Sustainability Officer, North Devon Council

Simon Newell, Ecology and Biodiversity Manager, Coventry City Council

Oliver Meek, Team Manager (Planning), Leicestershire County Council

Nick White, Principal Advisor (Net Gain), Natural England

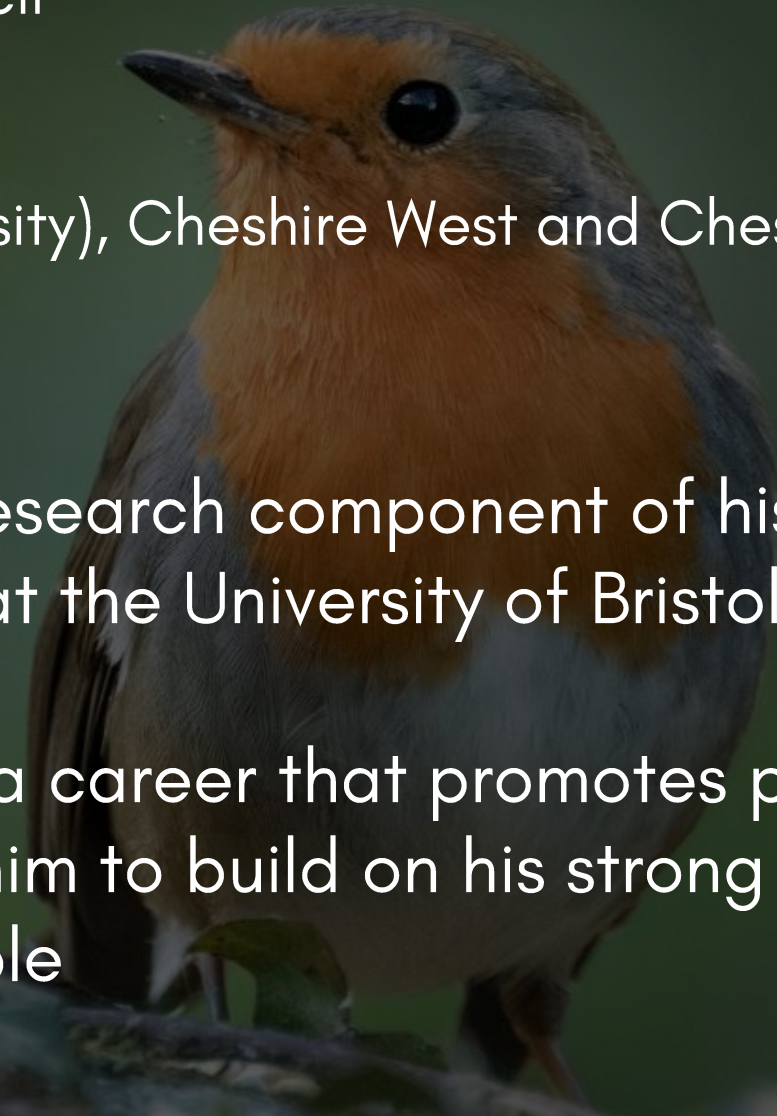
Mike Barry, Biodiversity Officer, Hart District Council

Amy Stanley, Natural Environment Officer (Ecosystems and Biodiversity), Cheshire West and Chester Council

Research Intern

Ewan Shipley collaborated with Map Impact to fulfil the research component of his now completed MSc in Society, Politics, and Climate Change at the University of Bristol.

He is very interested in sustainability and wants to pursue a career that promotes positive change related to environmental issues. This project has allowed him to build on his strong research skills and experience in engaging with different groups of people





Map Impact

Helping nature count

mapimpact.io

info@mapimpact.io