

Changes to the NPPG Natural Environment Section, July 2019

Briefing Note

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Introduction

The Natural Environment guidance section of the National Planning Practice Guidance (NPPG) was updated on 21st July 2019, replacing the previous version released 21st January 2016. The new guidance reflects the new policy framework in the National Planning Policy Framework 2019 (NPPF). The NPPG is a 'material consideration' in planning decisions, providing the Government's interpretation of NPPF policy.

The NPPG Natural Environment Guidance most closely relates to Section 15 of the NPPF 2019 'Conserving and enhancing the natural environment', however as the natural environment is such a pervasive matter, the guidance has a strong bearing on achieving all planning aims and contributes to;

- **Building a strong, competitive economy**
- **Achieving well-designed places**
- **Promoting healthy and safe communities**
- **Mitigating climate change, flooding and coastal change**
- **Conserving and enhancing the natural environment**

The Guidance explains key issues in implementing policy to protect and enhance the natural environment, and is therefore pertinent to planning applications of all scales.

The updated guidance provides information on 4 areas, broadly similar in topic to the previous guidance:

1. Agricultural land, soil and brownfield land of environmental value
2. Green infrastructure
3. Biodiversity, geodiversity and ecosystems
4. Landscape

This Briefing focuses on the changes made to '**Green Infrastructure**' and '**Biodiversity Geodiversity and Ecosystems**' guidance, where the key changes and new emphases are found:

Green Infrastructure

Green Infrastructure is conceptualised as a '**natural capital asset**' that provides a wide range of natural benefits termed '**ecosystem services**', and the new emphasis focuses on assessing the valuing of these.

Reference is specifically made to the role of '**blue infrastructure**' within this definition. Guidance on ecosystems services (the benefits people obtain from ecosystems, such as food, water, flood and disease control and recreation) and using an ecosystems approach is available. Encouraging biodiversity information should inform all stages of development including site selection and pre-application.

- **Green Infrastructure Strategies** are now identified as a key means of informing planning policies and the NPPG advocates collaborative working across authority boundaries and with stakeholders to develop these at the strategic level. Applications will need to pay close attention to these strategies as they will indicate infrastructure delivery requirements, and be relevant to CIL schedules.
- **How can green infrastructure be considered in planning decisions?** The NPPG has removed the previous opening clause of 'where appropriate...' and now details the need for Green Infrastructure (GI) opportunities and requirements to be considered 'at the earliest stages of development proposals', and a clear demonstration of this early engagement will be beneficial to applicants. Mechanisms for securing GI through the planning system include planning condition, obligation, or CIL.
- Importantly, a consideration of how the long term sustainable management and maintenance of the GI provided through developments should be arranged, and local community engagement is encouraged as a productive approach to this matter.

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Biodiversity, geodiversity and ecosystems

Section 40 of the *Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006* remains the statutory basis under which local authorities must aim to conserve biodiversity through their policies and decision making. The Government is committed to achieving the goals in the 25 Year Environment Plan. The two key elements of change to this topic are (i) the addition of ‘**geodiversity**’ considerations, and (ii) confirmation of the statutory basis for delivering **net gains in biodiversity** when possible:

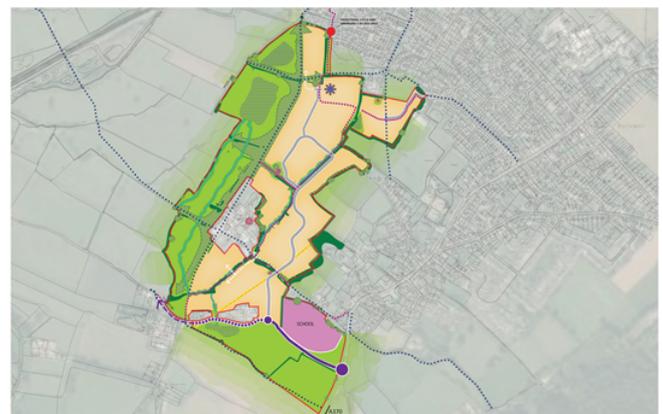
- With reference to the **determination of applications**, the NPPG explains how local authorities need to consider opportunities that individual development proposals may provide to conserve and enhance biodiversity and geodiversity, and contribute to habitat connectivity in the wider area. Additional considerations have been added to the NPPG in this regard, in which applications should demonstrate;
 - **opportunities to restore or enhance local ecological networks, including those that contribute to the wider Nature Recovery Network (this network of sites is still be finalised and adopted via Local Plans);**
 - **how to secure net gains for biodiversity as part of GI provision; and**
 - **opportunities to work strategically in order to streamline development decisions: for example, by establishing a ‘zone of influence’ around protected sites.**

- **Biodiversity Net Gain** - ‘Net gain in planning describes an approach to development that leaves the natural environment in a measurably better state than it was beforehand’, and will be related to policies on open space, health, green infrastructure, Green Belt and landscape.

Planning conditions, obligations or unilateral undertakings may be used to achieve net gains and may be used to require measurable increases in biodiversity. Measures an applicant can propose: creating new habitats, enhancing existing habitats, providing green roofs, green walls, street trees or sustainable drainage systems.

Genuine and demonstrable gains for biodiversity are required. Tools such as the Defra biodiversity metric can be used to calculate whether a biodiversity net gain outcome is expected to be achieved. It enables calculation of losses and gains by assessing habitat based on:

- **distinctiveness:** whether the type of habitat is of high, medium or low value to wildlife.
- **condition:** whether the habitat is a good example of its type.
- **extent:** the area that the habitat occupies.



Grove Farm, Backwell
Strategic site promotion



Planning authorities need to make sure that any evidence and rationale supplied by applicants are supported by the appropriate scientific expertise and local wildlife knowledge, and that the lasting value of net gain is taken into account in the determination of planning applications.

Concluding remarks

The impact of development on climate change and pressures on the natural environment is now awake in the public and corporate consciousness. It is vitally important that the industry is able to take responsibility and respond to these issues with commitment, sensitivity and creativity. DLP Planning is committed to producing Sustainable Development and are able to ensure that decision makers are clear on the benefits that schemes are able to demonstrate in relation to contributing the to delivery of Green Infrastructure Strategies, providing solutions to and demonstrating evidenced biodiversity net gain.