



South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse – Guidance to Developers and Ecological Consultants on the use of Biodiversity Metrics

Introduction:

This guidance should be followed by ecological consultants who are working on development projects within South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse. The guidance has been developed to ensure that there is a consistency in the evidence provided by developers and their ecological advisors to support planning applications.

Developers and their ecological advisors should use DEFRA's [Biodiversity Metric 3.0](#) or the [Small Sites Metric](#), where applicable. Other metrics are available, but within South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse we currently only accept the DEFRA metrics.

The aim of the guidance is to help speed up the consideration of development proposals and ensure consistency in the way biodiversity impacts are assessed between developments. This guidance is **not** aimed at those who have not used a biodiversity metric before. Basic guidance can be found in the DEFRA metric supporting user guide and technical supplement.

Background:

The Vale of White Horse was the first authority in the UK to agree a biodiversity offsetting scheme in 2013. Since this time both South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse have refined their approach to biodiversity offsetting and the use of biodiversity metrics. The Councils now require the submission of biodiversity metric assessments for all major applications and minor developments where biodiversity losses are likely.

In South Oxfordshire, Policy ENV3 of the South Oxfordshire Local Plan 2035 requires developments to attain a net gain in biodiversity if possible but as a minimum to avoid a net loss. Core Policy 46 of the Vale of White Horse Local Plan Part 1 also requires development proposals to attain a net gain in biodiversity if possible, but as a minimum to avoid a net loss. The Councils assess whether development proposals can comply with these policies using a biodiversity metric.

Underpinning these policies is the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). Paragraph 174(d) requires planning decisions to provide net gains in biodiversity. Paragraph 179(b) requires plans to identify and pursue opportunities for securing measurable net gains for biodiversity. Paragraph 180(a) advises that if significant biodiversity losses cannot be avoided, mitigated or compensated for then permission should be refused.



The Councils will apply the mitigation hierarchy when assessing the ecological impacts of development. Only when all other options have been exhausted, and any legal obligations have been dealt with, will we consider using biodiversity offsetting as a method of dealing with residual biodiversity impacts. Biodiversity offsetting will not normally be used to compensate for harm to priority habitats, other than under exceptional circumstances¹.

Where net losses are predicted through a biodiversity metric and it is not possible to provide mitigation on site, or compensation on land owned by the applicant, the Councils will consider the use of biodiversity offsetting. Biodiversity offsetting will be used to enable the provision of offsite compensation to ensure a net gain is achieved by the development.

Evidence Requirements:

For any development requiring assessment using a biodiversity metric, applicants will be expected to provide the following evidence:

- 1) **A Biodiversity Impact Plan.** This can be taken from the phase 1 habitat survey. It should clearly show the areas covered by each habitat type and the area in hectares of each habitat type. An example is provided in Figure 1. It is important to note the DEFRA metric uses UKHab classifications. Phase 1 habitat information can be translated to UKHab in the 'technical data' tab under the main menu of the DEFRA metric.
- 2) **A Proposed Habitats Plan.** This can be taken from the site layout plan, illustrative masterplan, green infrastructure plan or landscape plans (if available). The plan should clearly show what habitat types are proposed, it should be colour coded so that each habitat type is easily identifiable and the area of each habitat type should be quantified in hectares. Other proposed ecological enhancements should also be shown on this plan. An example is provided in Figure 2.
- 3) **Biodiversity Metric Calculations.** The calculations should relate directly to the Biodiversity Impact Plan and the Proposed Habitats Plan. Full details of the calculations in the biodiversity metric should be submitted and not just the results. Justification for the choice of habitat types and condition should be provided in the comments column. Any changes to functionality of the metric, such as the pre-populated distinctiveness categories, should also be clearly identified and justified in the comments column.

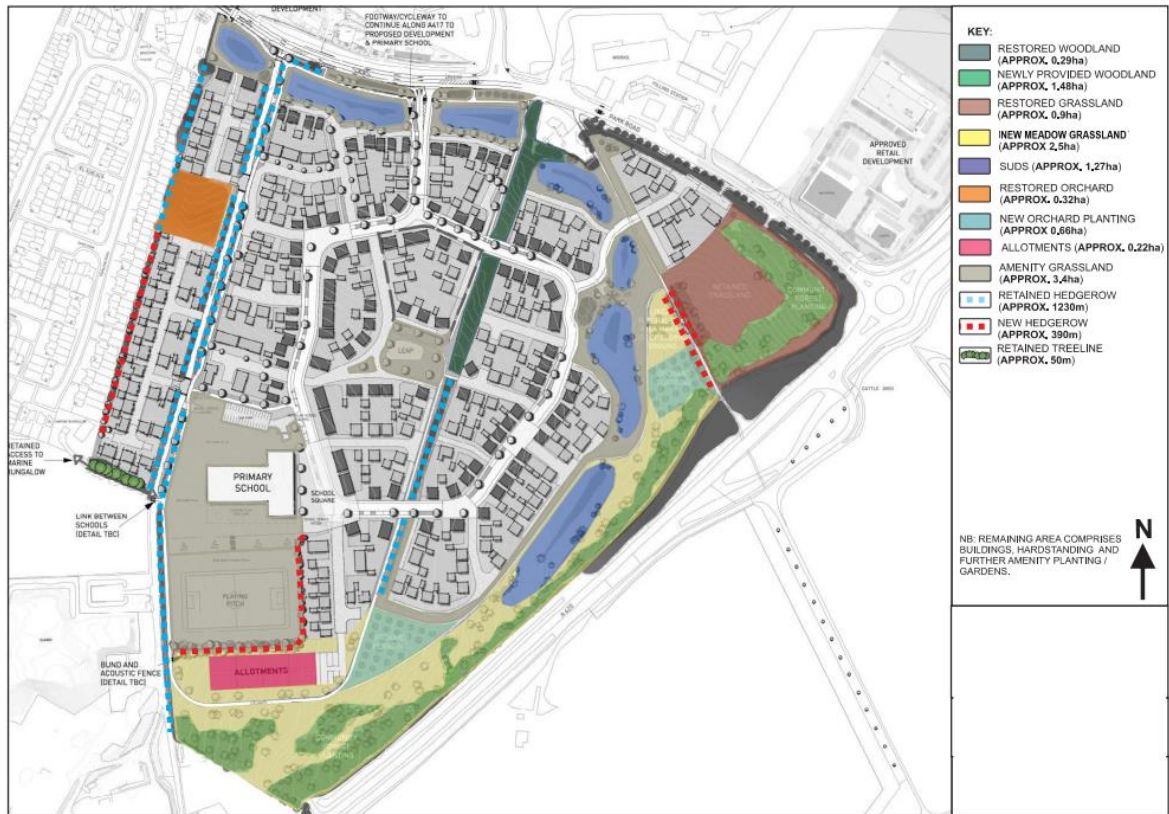
¹ This could include nationally significant infrastructure projects, projects where the site has been allocated in the relevant local plan, or where compensatory habitat can readily be provided (e.g. hedgerows or traditional orchards).



Figure 1: Example of a Biodiversity Impact Plan.



Figure 2: Example of a Proposed Habitats Plan.





Outline Applications:

Outline applications often do not have a fixed layout but usually include some form of parameter plan or illustrative masterplan which can be used to inform the proposed habitats plan.

At outline stage we are trying to determine if, in principle, the proposed development has the ability to comply with relevant national and local development plan biodiversity policies, or whether there are issues which need to be addressed. It is understood that landscape plans for outline applications are often not developed in any detail until the reserved matters stage. However, you will need to work with the developer to determine what areas may be available for ecological enhancements and agree a basic package of enhancements which could realistically be delivered within the site framework. It is also important that other land uses within the development are considered at this stage (e.g. the requirement for allotments, pitches, play areas etc.) which will have implications for land use budgets.

Biodiversity Metric Calculations:

Existing Habitats:

The biodiversity metric should relate directly to the information presented in the Biodiversity Impact Plan using the same habitats descriptions and areas. Habitat descriptions should be chosen that most closely fit the habitats on site. In some cases this will require an element of professional judgement. Each entry in the biodiversity metric should include further information in the comments section to explain the choice of habitat category (where required). If the quality or status of the habitats are in any way unclear (due to time of year of surveys or the need for further phase 2 surveys) then the precautionary principle should be applied, and the habitats classified accordingly.

Proposed Habitats:

The key issue here is to be realistic about what habitats will be practical to create and maintain on the site once the development is complete. The following matters must be considered when deciding what habitats could be practical to deliver on site:

- The former land use, i.e. arable land is likely to be high in nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium (with consequent high levels of soil fertility).
- The cost and difficulty of maintenance. It is difficult and expensive to maintain certain types of habitat (meadows in particular) and this often leads to the failure of landscaping schemes.
- Viability (cost) of maintaining small areas or contrived habitat parcels.
- The location of proposed habitats. It is unrealistic to include small areas of wildflower grassland within an urban or sub-urban environment when they are subject to significant levels of disturbance and enrichment from dog fouling etc.



Site Clearance Prior to Baseline Assessment:

If vegetation clearance or other land management works have taken place on a site, prior to the ecological baseline being established, and those works:

- reduced the biodiversity value of the site; and
- were undertaken to facilitate the development of the site

the local planning authority will expect that the pre-clearance habitats be used for the metric assessment baseline. This may require previous surveys or photography to be relied upon to inform the baseline assessment.

Recommendations for Habitats:

We recommend that in most situations only relatively simple, low maintenance habitats are targeted. This way it is far more likely that the proposed habitats are delivered and managed properly to achieve the intended biodiversity value.

There are several simple and robust habitat types available which are relatively easy to create and maintain in the longer term, which will still deliver good biodiversity value with relatively low maintenance requirements. The choice of habitat types will depend on the soils, drainage and aspect on the site, and will still need to be informed by professional judgement.

Examples of habitat types likely to be deliverable on most development sites:

- Plantation woodland
- Ponds (depending on geology and drainage)
- Scrub
- Hedgerows
- Medium distinctiveness grasslands can be established and managed on some sites, but this is very dependent on the availability of appropriate management skills, the size of area and the likely levels of disturbance. Using a simple species mix including robust species such as oxeye daisy, black knapweed, sorrel, yarrow etc is most likely to result in success.
- Scattered trees

Target Condition:

The target condition for the habitats to be created or restored should in most cases be moderate. It is very unlikely that grassland habitats, in particular in suburban environments, would reach anything more than moderate condition.

We will **not accept** schemes which target **high distinctiveness habitats** such as lowland meadows, chalk grasslands etc., unless there is a very sound justification and a strong chance of success in the long term. This is only likely to be possible where there are existing good quality habitats which can be improved with appropriate management or where soil conditions are appropriate (e.g. chalky sites). Even if the conditions are suitable, we would only accept these habitats if appropriate management expertise is demonstrably available to the developers.



Different Types of Unit Output:

DEFRA's Biodiversity Metric 3.0 provides outputs for three different types of units: habitats, hedgerows and river. These units are discrete and separate from one another and cannot be combined or exchanged (e.g. 3 habitat units cannot be traded for 1 river unit, or vice versa). Net gains in hedgerow units cannot be used to justify shortfalls in habitat units. If you consider that a bespoke approach may be more appropriate for a particular site, please contact the Countryside Team to agree an approach.

Other Biodiversity Enhancements:

We will give due weight to other enhancements (species enhancements etc) which are not accounted for in the metric. We recommend that these are discussed with the Councils' Countryside Team before submission to agree the approach.

What Happens When the Metric Concludes a Net Loss?

In most cases, where the habitats that are widespread and of relatively low value, this is not a problem. The Council will seek compensation for the losses to achieve a net gain overall (and policy compliance) through biodiversity offsetting. There are a several options for addressing residual biodiversity impacts of developments:

- 1) **Re-design the proposed scheme to avoid a net loss of biodiversity:** In some circumstances it may be possible to re-design the scheme to avoid a net loss of biodiversity. Any re-design would need to take account of the guidance provided above.
- 2) **Provision of compensation on land owned or controlled by the applicant:** If the applicant owns or controls land that could be used to provide biodiversity enhancements sufficient to achieve a net gain, then this can be used to offset any residual losses caused by the development. In this case the offset site would also need to be subject to ecological surveys and metric assessment to demonstrate that the land can deliver the required number of units to achieve a net gain overall. The offset site would then be linked to the application through a planning obligation in a Section 106 agreement.
- 3) **Offsetting is secured by planning condition:** A planning condition can be used to ensure that the developer enters into an offsetting agreement with an offsetting provider (a third-party organisation who will create and manage habitats). To discharge the condition the developer would need to provide evidence in the form of an offset certificate from an offsetting provider to demonstrate that they have secured the required number of units. This is often the simplest and most effective way of securing the necessary offsetting requirement and the method preferred by the Councils.
- 4) **Offsetting secured through a s.106 agreement:** In some circumstances developers prefer to enter into s.106 agreements to secure the offset. This is



sometimes used on the larger schemes where there are more significant offset requirements that would need to be delivered in a phased way over a number of years. In this way the offset provision can be timed to coincide with the impacts on multi-phase schemes.

Who are the Offset Providers?

There are currently two organisations who can provide biodiversity offsetting in Oxfordshire.

Trust for Oxfordshire's Environment (TOE):

TOE is a registered charity who can match Offset Funding to suitable projects that deliver the required level of biodiversity offset. TOE has a strong network of contacts in the County including all the environmental NGO's and many private landowners who can deliver offsets on their land.

[TOE Biodiversity Net Gain](#)

The Environment Bank:

The Environment Bank is a private company set up specifically to deliver biodiversity offsetting throughout the Country. The Environment Bank has a good network of contacts throughout the County.

[The Environment Bank](#)

Who Else Can Help?

The Councils' Countryside Team can help and offer specific ecological pre-application advice to help ensure that developments comply with the relevant biodiversity policies and minimise delays during the application process.