



Interim

Strategic Significance & Spatial Risk Guidance for Biodiversity Net Gain in Buckinghamshire Council's Local Planning Authority Area

Interim Guidance

February 2023

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Glossary of Acronyms

BAP	Biodiversity Action Plan
BCT	Bat Conservation Trust
BOA	Biodiversity Opportunity Areas
BMERC	Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Environmental Records Centre
BNG	Biodiversity Net Gain
BRIG	Biodiversity and Reporting Information Group
EPS	European Protected Species
JNCC	Joint Nature Conservancy Council
LLFA	Lead Local Flood Authority
LNRS	Local Nature Recovery Strategy
LPA	Local Planning Authority
NCA	National Character Area
NEP	Natural Environment Partnership for Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes
NRN	Nature Recovery Network
PAS	Planning Advisory Service
PAT	Pilot Area Team (in relation to the draft LNRS)
SPD	Supplementary Planning Document
WFD	Water Framework Directive

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Report Version Control

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Executive Summary

This document provides interim guidance on how Buckinghamshire Council as a Local Planning Authority (LPA) has decided to define Strategic Significance and Spatial Risk in the context of delivering Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) within its authority area, hereafter referred to as ‘Buckinghamshire’ (this does not include the area within the ceremonial county of Buckinghamshire covered by Milton Keynes City Council). This guidance should be used in conjunction with the latest Defra / Natural England Biodiversity Metric. It aims to help planning applicants and potential BNG offset providers fill out the Strategic Significance and Spatial Risk elements of all three components of the Defra / Natural England Biodiversity Metric (Area habitats, Hedgerows and Lines of Trees, and Rivers and streams). Some background and theory is provided in Sections 1 to 3 & 5, with a Buckinghamshire approach provided in Sections 4 and 6. A list of useful external mapping links that will require consideration to make decisions on both Strategic Significance and Spatial Risk within Buckinghamshire are provided in Section 8. Theoretical scenarios are provided in Section 10 to help the user to apply the guidance appropriately. This guidance will be reviewed periodically and eventually will be replaced by the final version of the Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) for Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes. The new LNRS will provide the ultimate signposting for decisions on Strategic Significance in Buckinghamshire in the future.

Strategic Significance is defined differently for Area and Hedgerows and Lines of Trees Habitat Categories from the Rivers and Streams component of the Defra/Natural England Metric. Below are two tables that summarise how these are to be defined in Buckinghamshire on an interim basis.

Strategic Significance	Definition in Buckinghamshire
<p>High Strategic Significance</p> <p><i>This decision must be justified to the LPA in writing.</i></p>	<p>This category can only be applied when habitat enhancement or creation comprises priority habitat (see Figure 7) that falls within the description or target of a specific BOA and is located specifically within that BOA (see Figure 6).</p>
<p>Medium Strategic Significance</p> <p><i>This decision must be justified to the LPA in writing</i></p>	<p>Habitats that are enhanced or created for BNG either on-site or off-site are considered ‘ecologically desirable’ if the location and type of habitat produced is justified by a professional ecologist.</p>
<p>Low Strategic Significance</p> <p><i>This is the default category</i></p>	<p>Any other habitat parcel that cannot be assigned medium or high the Strategic Significance</p>

Interim definition of Strategic Significance for Area and Hedgerows and Lines of Trees Habitat categories in Buckinghamshire

Information about and an interactive map providing the boundary of the BOAs is provided here: <https://bucks.mknep.co.uk/biodiversity-opportunity-areas/>
<https://bucks.mknep.co.uk/biodiversity-opportunity-areas-map/>
 The Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes BAP can be accessed here: <https://bucks.mknep.co.uk/forward-to-2030/>

Strategic Significance	Definition in Buckinghamshire
<p>High Strategic Significance</p> <p><i>Default for all River and Stream Restoration</i></p>	<p>All rivers in Buckinghamshire both those shown on the Priority Rivers map as well as all other rivers / watercourses that are not canals, ditches or culverts should fit into this category. (i.e. those considered to be of high or very high distinctiveness)</p>
<p>Low Strategic Significance</p> <p><i>Default for all Ditch creation /restoration and culverts unless otherwise agreed with the LPA</i></p>	<p>Any canal or ditch unless there is adequate ecological judgement as to why a these should be upgraded (this should be agreed with the LPA). Culverts should also be considered as low strategic significance.</p>

Interim definition of Strategic Significance for Rivers, Streams, Canals, Ditches and Culverts in Buckinghamshire

Spatial Risk for Area and Hedgerow and Line of Trees metric components is determined as the entire of Buckinghamshire Council’s Local Planning Authority area, as per the guidance within the Buckinghamshire Council Supplementary Planning Document (SPD).

Spatial Risk for the **Rivers and Streams** component of the Defra / Natural England Metric is defined based on the Environment Agency maps for waterbodies and catchments. Details of which can be found on the Environment Agency Catchment Data Explorer: <https://environment.data.gov.uk/catchment-planning>.

It should be noted should a planning applicant wish to deliver BNG on a site outside of Buckinghamshire, they should discuss this with Buckinghamshire Council at the earliest opportunity.

1. Introduction and Background

This interim guidance has been produced to support Buckinghamshire Council's 'Biodiversity Net Gain – Supplementary Planning Document' (SPD) which was adopted on 19th July 2022.

This guidance is referred to in paragraph 3.2.3 of the SPD as follows (emphasis added):

*'An assessment of biodiversity net gain Impact Assessment using the Biodiversity Metric must be submitted as a spreadsheet with the planning application so that it can be assessed. It is expected that **the council's guidance regarding strategic significance on biodiversity is used.** Applicants should contact the council or its website for guidance on local nature priorities for the assessment of the land parcels and their strategic significance to biodiversity'* (Buckinghamshire Council 2021).

Buckinghamshire Council and the Natural Environment Partnership for Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes (NEP) along with other local partners across the county will be producing the full Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) for the whole of Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes in the next two years. In 2020 to 2021, Buckinghamshire Council was one of the pilot local authorities to test the concept of a LNRS and some of the methodology that could be used ahead of all Responsible Authorities developing their own specific LNRSs.

The Buckinghamshire pilot LNRS assessed the methodology ahead of the required production of LNRSs across England under the Environment Act. This work was a collaboration across the county with several external organisations that formed part of the Pilot Area Team (PAT) for advising and inputting into the draft LNRS which was published in 2021. The draft LNRS provides a summary of the process and provides Defra with '*lessons learned from testing their draft process for completing a LNRS. It does not represent a finalised version of a Local Nature Recovery Strategy for Buckinghamshire and has not been through any political sign off process within Buckinghamshire Council*'. The draft reports help illustrate '*what a LNRS for Buckinghamshire might look like*' (Buckinghamshire Council 2021) but given the above, **the draft LNRS report should not be referred to in relation to the justification for Strategic Significance or Spatial Risk in Buckinghamshire.**

The Environment Act 2021 has a specific duty to 'have regard' to the relevant LNRS. It is anticipated that **once complete, the Buckinghamshire LNRS will be used to help determine where best to target areas for Biodiversity Net Gain in Buckinghamshire.** This LNRS for Buckinghamshire will reflect local nature conservation priorities in the context of an entire England-wide Nature Recovery Network (NRN). Hence the final LNRS will be used '*to determine the 'strategic significance' score that is part of the Biodiversity Metric scoring approach*' (Planning Advisory Service PAS, 2022). **Buckinghamshire Council has produced this interim guidance on Strategic Significance ahead of the publication of the full LNRS.**

In 2020, Buckinghamshire Council and the Natural Environment Partnership for Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes (NEP) commissioned Warwickshire County Council to map opportunities for nature's recovery in Buckinghamshire. This involved some mapping work and discussions with NEP partners throughout 2020 to early 2022. A mapping report was produced in December 2020 that illustrated how this work linked with the now superseded National Biodiversity Metric 2.0 (Warwickshire County Council 2020). Since this report was produced, the Biodiversity Metric has been revised two times and a third revision is due imminently at the time of writing. These changes have revised how Strategic Significance is considered in the metric. Hence, whilst some of the conclusions and suggestions made by experts in the NEP (as illustrated in Map 11 in the BAP's Appendix 2) have been considered and incorporated into this interim guidance note, these maps will not be used directly for determining Strategic Significance in this interim guidance note ahead of the publication of the full LNRS.

This guidance document also re-iterates how Spatial Risk in Buckinghamshire will be applied as outlined in paragraph 3.4.4 of the SPD.

2. Aim of the Guidance

This guidance aims to:

- Support professional ecologists, working on behalf of planning applicants and planning consultants, to complete the Strategic Significance and Spatial Risk sections of the Defra / Natural England Biodiversity Metric that forms part of the submission of a planning application;
- Support landowners, BNG offset providers and their ecological advisors that are looking to potentially put their land forward for the off-site BNG that may be required through the planning process;
- Provide the guidance signposted in paragraph 3.2.3 of the Buckinghamshire BNG SPD; and
- Provide interim guidance on how Buckinghamshire Council will define Strategic Significance and Spatial Risk in Buckinghamshire ahead of the completion of the full LNRS.

This document will be reviewed periodically between now and the completion of the full LNRS for Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes.

3. Defining Strategic Significance

In simple terms, Strategic Significance is the consideration of **how a specific parcel of habitat sits within its landscape context**. It is a **landscape scale approach to ensure that biodiversity net gain is incentivised so that the right habitat is located in the right place within the landscape**. This theory of the requirement for '*more, bigger, better and joined*' habitat in

England is now widely referred to as the ‘Lawton Principles’ highlighted in Sir John Lawton’s key *‘Making Space for Nature’* review in 2010 (Lawton 2010). The Lawton Review comprised an ecological evidence base, still influencing government policy today and was included in the Government’s 2018 25-year plan which stated the need for the planning system to provide Biodiversity Net Gain (HM Government 2018).

The details of how Strategic Significance is defined in the context of Biodiversity Net Gain is provided in the current Defra / Natural England Biodiversity Metric. Here Strategic Significance comprises one of the three components that are used to determine the **quality of a habitat both on-site and off-site of a planning application site** (see Figure 1 from Metric 3.1 below, Natural England 2022a).

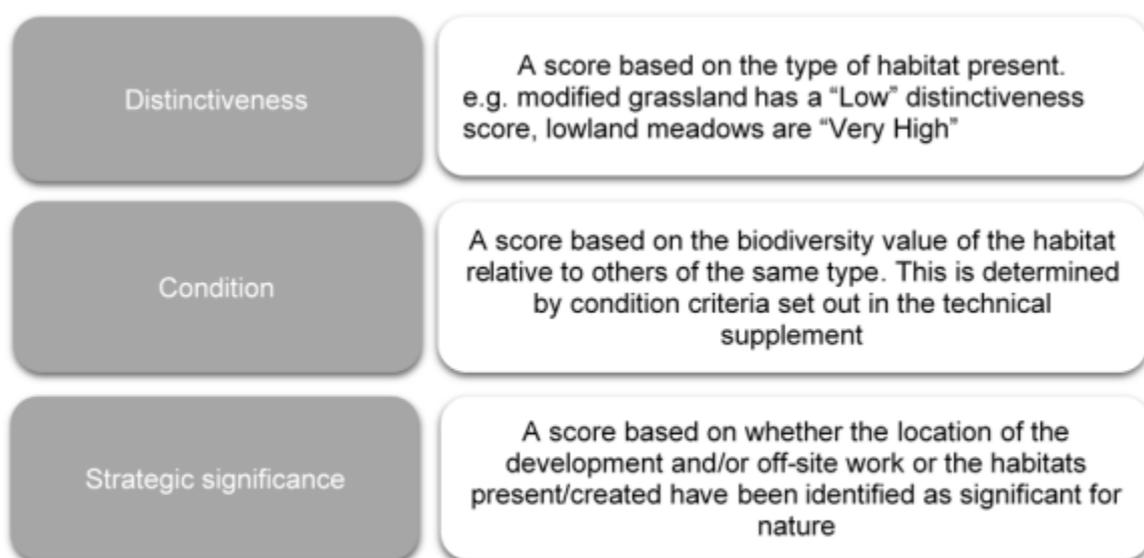


FIGURE 2-1 Quality components of biodiversity metric 3.1

Figure 1: Quality components of Biodiversity Metric 3.1. (Source: Biodiversity Metric 3.1 User Guide Natural England 2022a)

In the Biodiversity Metric 3.1:

- **Distinctiveness** values are predetermined **and cannot be changed**;
- **Condition** values are usually determined by an **ecological survey following** standardised condition assessments (Natural England, 2022b); and
- **Strategic Significance is determined with reference to local policies and in consultation with the LPA, in this case Buckinghamshire Council.**

The Defra / Natural England Biodiversity Metric comprises three separate *‘broad categories of habitat and biodiversity units for which scores are calculated differently’* (Natural England, 2022a):

- 1) Area habitats (**Green** in the metric)
- 2) Hedgerows and lines of trees (**Brown** in the Metric); and
- 3) Rivers and streams (**Blue** in the Metric).

Each of these components provide three types of biodiversity units that cannot be summed, traded or converted (Natural England 2022a). Strategic Significance is defined **separately** for ‘**Area habitats**’ and ‘**Hedgerows and Lines of Trees**’ from the ‘**Rivers and Streams**’ component of the metric.

Biodiversity Metric 3.1 highlights that **each parcel of habitat which has a specific condition** (i.e. every line of the Biodiversity Metric Excel spreadsheet) **will require a separate assessment for an appropriate Strategic Significance score**. This is **required for both on-site and off-site Biodiversity Net Gain**.

Strategic Significance can be defined using either **spatial resources** (such as strategic nature conservation priority mapping) and/or **descriptive resources** (e.g. current BAP priorities).

The Biodiversity Metric User Guide 3.1 highlights that a variety of published local strategies and objectives can be used to ‘*for targeting biodiversity and nature improvement, such as Local Nature Recovery Strategies, local biodiversity plans, National Character Areas objectives, Local Planning Authority Local Ecological Networks, Shoreline Management Plans, estuary strategies and green infrastructure strategies*’ (Natural England 2022a).

Strategic Significance for Area and Linear Habitats

The Biodiversity Metric 3.1 provides for three categories of Strategic Significance for Area habitats and Hedgerows and lines of trees: **High, Medium or Low**. In the Biodiversity Metric 3.1 User Guidance these categories are defined as follows.

TABLE 5-4: Strategic significance categories and scores

Category	Score
High strategic significance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High potential - area/action formally identified within a local plan, strategy or policy. 	1.15
Medium strategic significance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good potential - location ecologically desirable but area/action not identified in local plan, strategy or policy. 	1.1
Low strategic significance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low potential - area/action not identified in any local plan, strategy or policy; or • No local strategy in place. 	1

Figure 2: Strategic Significance categories and scores for Area and Linear Habitats components of Biodiversity Metric 3.1. (Source: Biodiversity Metric 3.1 User Guide Natural England 2022a)

Strategic significance			
Score	Strategic significance	Strategic significance	Strategic Significance multiplier
	Location ecologically desirable but not in local strategy	Medium strategic significance	1.1
	Formally identified in local strategy		
	Location ecologically desirable but not in local strategy		
	Area/compensation not in local strategy/ no local strategy		

Figure 3: Screen shot of Strategic Significance options available for the Biodiversity Metric 3.1 for Area and Linear Habitats.

Paragraphs 5.20 to 5.24 in the Metric 3.1 User Guide (Natural England 2022a) provides some further clarification on how to define Strategic Significance in relation to Area habitats and Hedgerows and lines of trees.

Where:

- **High Strategic Significance** can be considered ‘if the habitat location is defined in local plans, strategies or policies’
- **Medium Strategic Significance** can be considered ‘where professional judgement is applied, and the location is deemed ecologically desirable for a particular habitat type’. Where professional judgement is applied **this decision should be justified and evidence provided.**
- **Low Strategic Significance** is the default category should be applied ‘in the absence of any locally or nationally relevant strategic document indication areas of significance for biodiversity, or a robust ecological justification for a medium score, a low strategic significance score should be used by default in all pre- and post-intervention calculations.’ A low score ‘does not penalise a proposal’ as the x1 multiplier just results in no change to the biodiversity unit score.

REMEMBER: If you wish to apply a Strategic Significance above the Default of ‘low’ to any parcel of habitat you must justify your reasoning for LPA approval in either or both the BNG Report and ‘Assessor Comments’ section of the metric (see Figure 9).

Strategic Significance for Rivers and Streams

The calculation tool for the Rivers and Streams biodiversity units includes the assessment of both ‘*main rivers*’ and ‘*ordinary water courses*’ as well as ‘*ditches*’. Ditches are defined in Metric 3.1 as ‘*artificially created linear water-conveyancing features that are less than 4m wide and likely to retain water for more than 4 months of the year*’ (Natural England 2022a).

The Biodiversity Metric 3.1 provides for just two categories of Strategic Significance when considering biodiversity units for the Rivers and Streams: **High** or **Low**

These are defined as below:

TABLE 9-5: Strategic significance multipliers for rivers and streams

Strategic Significance	Description of multiplier	Strategic multiplier
High	Delivery of river restoration actions within: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local Plans; • Local Nature Recovery Strategies; • River Basin Management Plan; • Catchment Plans; • Catchment Planning System; or • Priority Habitats for Restoration⁵⁴ 	1.15
Low	Low potential / action not identified in any plan.	1

Figure 4: Strategic Significance categories and scores for the Rivers and Stream section of the Biodiversity Metric 3.1. (Source: Biodiversity Metric 3.1 User Guide Natural England 2022a)

4. Defining Strategic Significance in Buckinghamshire

Introduction and Background

Buckinghamshire Council has decided on its interim approach to Strategic Significance in Buckinghamshire in collaboration with the Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Natural Environment Partnership (NEP).

It has been agreed **that both spatial and descriptive resources will be used to determine Strategic Significance in this interim period.**

The key document to be used is the Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) for Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes: ‘*Forward 2030: (Biodiversity Action Plan) More, Bigger, Better and More*

Joined-up across Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes' produced in 2021 by the NEP available here: <https://bucksmknep.co.uk/forward-to-2030/>

Chapter 5 of the BAP outlines current work in Buckinghamshire on prioritising areas for biodiversity improvement across both Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes. The BAP provides guidance on how to prioritise action for biodiversity until the forthcoming Local Nature Recovery Strategy is finalised and in place. A key paragraph from the BAP around where biodiversity enhancement / creation is provided in Figure 5 below.

Where to prioritise action for biodiversity

5.9 In producing the BAP, the NEP concluded that the following should act as a spatial guide to prioritising action (restoring, improving, reconnecting, creating, etc) for biodiversity, until such time as final Local Nature Recovery Strategies are in place:

- 1) **Highest priority:** Priority Habitat (new or improved) within BOAs
- 2) **Next highest priority:** Other habitats within BOAs
- 3) **Medium priority:** Creation of other habitats outside BOAs, but informed by other available NEP work (see below and Appendix 2)
- 4) **Lower priority but still helpful:** Action outside these areas, anywhere else.

Figure 5: Where to prioritise action for Biodiversity in Buckinghamshire. Source: NEP (2020) Forward to 2020: Biodiversity Action Plan

Biodiversity Opportunity Areas (BOAs)

Biodiversity Opportunity Areas (BOAs) are the most important areas for biodiversity in Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes. BOAs within Buckinghamshire were created via a detailed assessment process across the entire of the South East of England in 2009 by the then South East of England Biodiversity Forum (South East Biodiversity Forum 2009). This process *'took account of existing concentrations of UK BAP habitat (priority habitats), important areas for UK BAP and other rare species, land with potential for habitat restoration and several other factors (including geology, topography and hydrology)'* (NEP 2022).

26 BOAs fall within the remit of Buckinghamshire. Each BOA is mapped (as provided in Figure 6 below) and has a description of the priority habitats and targets for each area. *'Recent research in 2020 by BMERC showed that of the c 5000 ha of priority habitat across Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes, around 78% lies in the BOAs'* (NEP 2021).

The BAP therefore considers that conservation effort should be *'focused on, but not exclusive to, Biodiversity Opportunity Areas and priority water catchments – both in improving and creating priority habitats but also other habitats within BOAs'* (NEP 2020). The NEP hold information on the Buckinghamshire BOAs. This can be accessed here:

- General information on BOAs: <https://bucksmknep.co.uk/biodiversity-opportunity-areas/>
- Detailed interactive map, showing the boundary of each BOA and description is provided here <https://bucksmknep.co.uk/biodiversity-opportunity-areas-map/>

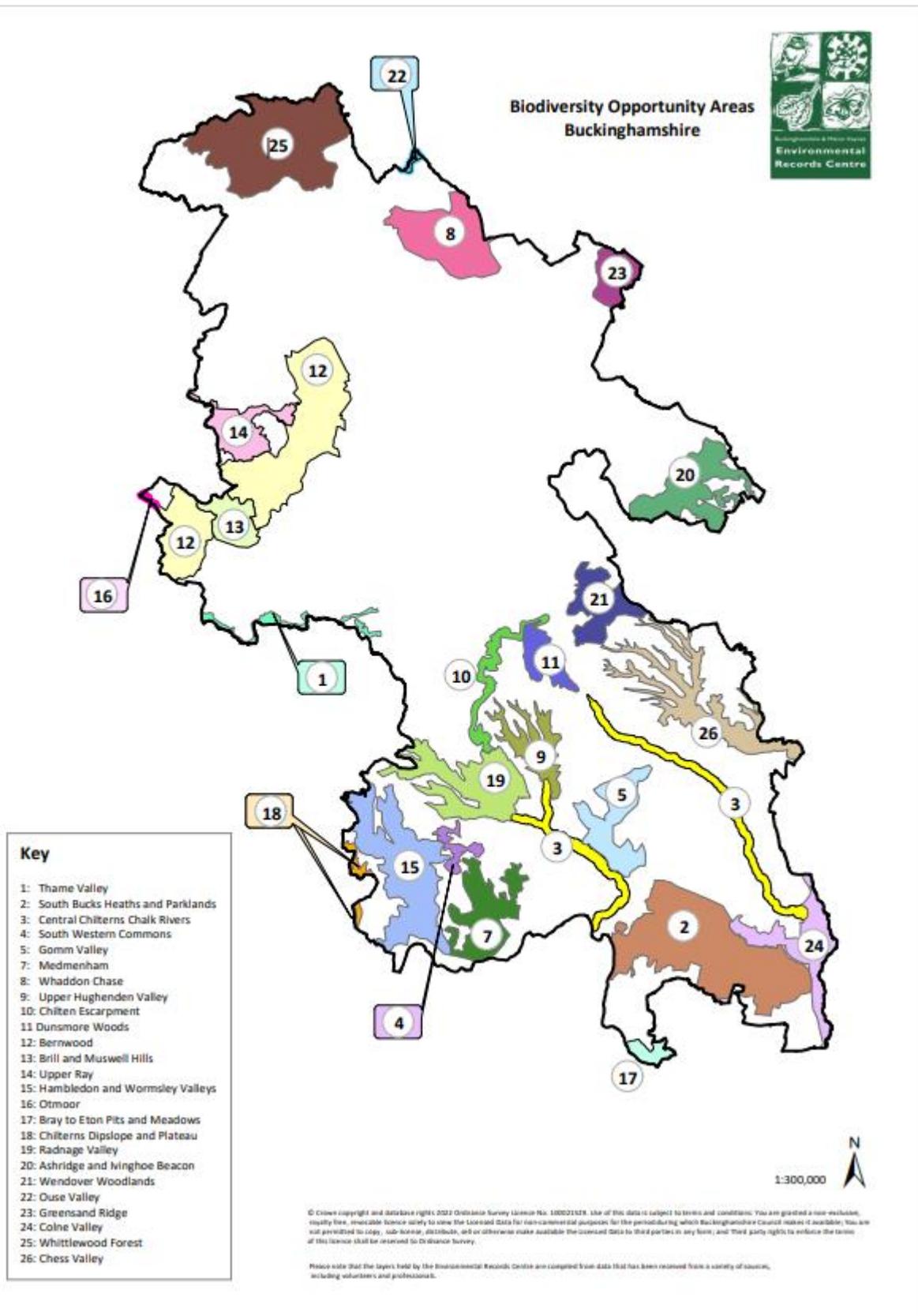


Figure 6: Biodiversity Opportunity Areas (BOAs) in Buckinghamshire (Credit: BMERC)

Table 1: BAP 2030 Priority Habitat Targets¹¹

Broad Habitat Type	Priority Habitat	2010 / current habitat area (hectares)	2030 Target for priority habitat creation and restoration (hectares) (and % increase on existing habitat in brackets)	
Woodland	Native woodland:	1682 ha	Native woodland altogether: 400 (14%)	Per year: 40
	i) Lowland Mixed Deciduous Woodland			
	ii) Lowland Beech and Yew Woodland	1191 ha		
	iii) Wet Woodland	33 ha		
	Wood-Pasture and Parkland	536 ha	100 ha (19%)	10
	Traditional Orchards	361 ha	50 ha (14%)	5
Grassland	Lowland Dry Acid Grassland	317 ha	50 ha (16%)	5
	Lowland Calcareous Grassland	344 ha	100 (29%)	10
	Lowland Meadows	382 ha	125 ha (33%)	12.5
	Coastal and Floodplain Grazing Marsh	337 ha	200 ha (59%)	20
Heathlands	Lowland Heathland	77 ha	20 ha (26%)	2
Fen, Marsh and Swamp	Lowland Fens	67 ha	5 (7%)	0.5
	Purple Moor Grass and Rush Pastures	18 ha	5 (28%)	0.5
	Reedbed	25 ha	15 (60%)	1.5
Standing open waters and canals	Eutrophic Standing Waters (lakes, pools and man-made waters)	tbc	Aim to collate info to assess extent and condition; aim to improve	
	Ponds (assuming average size of 0.05 ha; and up to 2 ha)	tbc	Aim to assess number/extent; aim to improve; possible target: create 500 ponds	
	Canals (6 across Bucks & MK)	tbc	Aim to collate information and measure improved ecological status ¹²	
	Rivers and streams (including chalk rivers)	WFD (ecological) status	Improved WFD ecological status: at least half at "good" ecological status and all chalk streams by 2030 ¹³	
Boundary and Linear Features	Hedgerows (at least 2m wide)	unknown	100km and under better management	10km
Other	Open Mosaic Habitats on Previously Developed Land	unknown	Aim to measure extent; and aim for overall 20% increase	
TOTAL	All UK BAP priority habitats (excluding unknowns, WFD status habitats, hedgerows and ponds)	5,374 ha (2.9% of land area) ¹⁴	1,070 ha (20%) (0.5% of land area)	100

Notes to Table 1:

- i. Current habitat area from BMERC 2012 Core and Local Output Indicators for Biodiversity report, and bespoke updates
- ii. Broad habitat types and priority habitat categories are taken from JNCC guidance

¹¹ BRIG, 2011. UK Biodiversity Action Plan; Priority Habitat Descriptions. JNCC. Available here: data.jncc.gov.uk/data/2728792c-c8c6-4b8c-9ccd-a908cb0f1432/UKBAP-PriorityHabitatDescriptions-Rev-2011.pdf.

¹² Canals: currently, there are 6 designated WFD canal waterbodies in Bucks and 1 in MK; in Bucks, 2 are good and 3 are moderate ecological status per Environment Agency 2019 data.

¹³ Water Framework Directive ecological quality assessments to be used as a general river habitat status indication; although this does not necessarily indicate the status of BAP species dependent on those habitats, or about riparian/semi-aquatic species. Ideally, a separate focus on key species is needed; or River Corridor Surveys, River Habitat Surveys and fluvial audits or condition assessments would be needed for accurate baseline and progress measures. WFD target is 100% by 2027; but given that we currently have only 1 river in Bucks at good status, the estimated target is for half to be classified as "good" ecological status and for all the chalk streams too.

¹⁴ Bucks assumed to be: c.187,400ha (1,874km²); MK assumed to be: 8,900ha (89km²); total = 196,300ha

Figure 7: Bucks and MK Forward to 2030, Table 1, page 21 from the Buckinghamshire and MK BAP 2030 Priority Habitat Targets (BRIG 2011)

It is important to remember that each parcel of habitat (each row within the metric) must be allocated a specific Strategic Significance category in the metric.

Area Habitats and Hedgerows and Lines of Trees

The following table highlights how this interim guidance is defined as per Metric 3.1:

Strategic Significance	Definition in Buckinghamshire
<p>High Strategic Significance</p> <p><i>This decision must be justified to the LPA in writing.</i></p>	<p>This category can only be applied when habitat enhancement or creation comprises priority habitat (see Figure 7) that falls within the description or target of a specific BOA and is located specifically within that BOA (see Figure 6).</p>
<p>Medium Strategic Significance</p> <p><i>This decision must be justified to the LPA in writing</i></p>	<p>Habitats that are enhanced or created for BNG either on-site or off-site are considered ‘ecologically desirable’ if the location and type of habitat produced is justified by a professional ecologist.</p>
<p>Low Strategic Significance</p> <p><i>This is the default category</i></p>	<p>Any other habitat parcel that cannot be assigned medium or high the Strategic Significance should remain as the default category of low.</p>

Figure 8: Interim definition of Strategic Significance for Area and Linear Habitats in Buckinghamshire

Examples of this could be to ensure the buffering of habitats considered to be of high strategic significance or providing important links within the existing landscape. This could be improving the ecological condition of a habitat from a botanical perspective and / or creating an important linkage for bats (BCT 2020). A range of potential fictional scenarios are provided in Section 10 Appendix to this guidance.

Should the professional ecologist wish to allocate a high or medium strategic significance within the Area Habitats and Linear Metric then a full justification as to why this is deemed appropriate must be provided in either / or both the Assessor Comments section (see Figure 9 below) of the metric or the associated BNG Report.

Comments	
Assessor comments	Reviewer comments

Figure 9: Screen shot of the Assessor and Reviewer Comments boxes within the Biodiversity Metric 3.1 which can be used to justify level of strategic significance selected for each habitat parcel.

Rivers and Streams

Introduction, defining ‘Rivers and Streams’ in the metric

Metric 3.1 defines ‘Rivers and Streams’ to include both ‘main rivers’ and ‘ordinary watercourses’. The Environment Agency defines as a watercourse as being any of the following: ‘*a river, brook, beck, ditch, stream, leat, goyle, rhyne and culvert*’ (Environment Agency 2018).

Main rivers are usually larger rivers and streams (Defra 2017). They are shown on the Environment Agency’s Main River Map available here: <https://environment.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=17cd53dfc524433980cc333726a56386> . Main Rivers are regulated under the remit of the Environment Agency.

All other watercourses that are not designated as ‘main rivers’ are known as ‘ordinary watercourses’ and are regulated by Lead Local Flood Authorities (LLFA). In Buckinghamshire, the LLFA is Buckinghamshire Council.

The Metric 3.1 clearly defines both ‘main rivers’ and ‘ordinary water courses’ as ‘*watercourses through which water follows (i.e. with a hydraulic function), which includes canals, canalised rivers and rivers with an ephemeral (temporary) nature, such as winterbournes and headwaters.*’ (Natural England 2022a).

It is also of note that ditches are also included in the Rivers and Streams part of the metric and are defined as ‘*artificially created linear water-conveyancing features that are less than 5m wide and likely to retain water for more than 4 months of the year*’ (Natural England 2022a).

Ditches have their own separate condition assessment within Metric 3.1 which does not require accreditation. All other river and watercourses including canals must be assessed within Metric 3.1 using the River Condition Assessment (RCA) . RCA surveyors must be accredited (Natural England 2022b).

Defining River Distinctiveness

Metric 3.1 predefines the distinctiveness for each river category depending on their ecological value. These are defined in Table 9-1 of the metric which is provided in Figure 10 below.

TABLE: 9-1 Distinctiveness categories for rivers and streams

Distinctiveness	Metric description	Weighting	Notes
Very high	Shown on the Priority Habitat rivers map	8	Rivers – Priority Habitat rivers and streams of high hydro-morphological and ecological status
High	Rivers and streams (Other)	6	All other rivers streams that are not classified as Priority River Habitat
Medium	Canals Ditch	4	Canal Ditch (see 8.28 for definition of a ditch)
Low	Culvert	2	A covered channel or pipe designed to prevent the obstruction of a watercourse or drainage path by an artificial construction ⁵²

Figure 10: Distinctiveness weighting applied by Defra for different Rivers for the Rivers and Stream section of the Biodiversity Metric 3.1. (Source: Biodiversity Metric 3.1 User Guide Natural England 2022a)

It is of note that Very High Distinctiveness rivers and streams are shown on the priority habitat map which is available to download from Defra’s opensource data here: https://naturalengland-defra.opendata.arcgis.com/datasets/7e5dd3c72f424fd5bc6f013d18dd770c_0/explore?location=51.925519%2C-0.857698%2C12.92

Defining Strategic Significance for Rivers in Buckinghamshire

Discussions between the NEP and the Environment Agency in early 2022 revealed that **given rivers are a continuum throughout the landscape it can be very difficult to apportion significance to any section of river that may or may not lie within a BOA and many do require restoration at some level.**

Given this is only interim guidance ahead of the publication of an LNRS for Buckinghamshire where all watercourses will be considered in a more appropriate depth, it has been decided at this stage that **all river enhancement or restoration for all rivers and streams (including priority habitat rivers) should be considered of high strategic significance.** In reference to **ditches, culverts and most canals,** we consider the **default Strategic Significance should be low unless,** ecological justification can be provided to the LPA. **This should be provided in the assessor comments box (Figure 9) and or the BNG report and further discussion with Buckinghamshire council is recommended.**

It is of note that Buckinghamshire Council will not be using BOAs for determining the strategic significance of rivers and streams.

The following table highlights how this interim guidance is defined as per Metric 3.1:

Strategic Significance	Definition in Buckinghamshire
<p>High Strategic Significance</p> <p><i>Default for all River and Stream Restoration</i></p>	<p>All rivers in Buckinghamshire both those shown on the Priority Rivers map as well as all other rivers / watercourses that are not canals, ditches or culverts should fit into this category. (i.e. those considered to be of high or very high distinctiveness)</p>
<p>Low Strategic Significance</p> <p><i>Default for all Ditch creation /restoration and culverts unless otherwise agreed with the LPA</i></p>	<p>Any canal or ditch unless there is adequate ecological judgement as to why a these should be upgraded (this should be agreed with the LPA). Culverts should also be considered as low strategic significance.</p>

Figure 11 Interim definition of Strategic Significance for Rivers and Streams in Buckinghamshire

The current Buckinghamshire’s BAP ‘Forward to 2030: Biodiversity Action Plan’ refers to some mapping work undertaken by Warwickshire County Council (Map 11 in Appendix 1), Natural Capital Solutions (Maps 12 to 14, Appendix 1) and the NEP on Green Infrastructure Opportunity zones (Map 15, Appendix 1). This work may in the future be used to help guide the location of BNG in Buckinghamshire through the LNRS project.

5. Defining Spatial Risk

The spatial risk element of the metric relates only to off-site BNG and takes into consideration **the distance between the site of habitat loss** (the planning application red line boundary) **and the off-site BNG site** outside of the planning red line boundary, when it is not possible to deliver all required BNG on-site.

Spatial Risk comprises one of the three components in the metric that help determine the value of the post-intervention scenario and biodiversity unit value for both on and off-site BNG within the Natural England Biodiversity Metric (see Figure 12 from Metric 3.1 below).

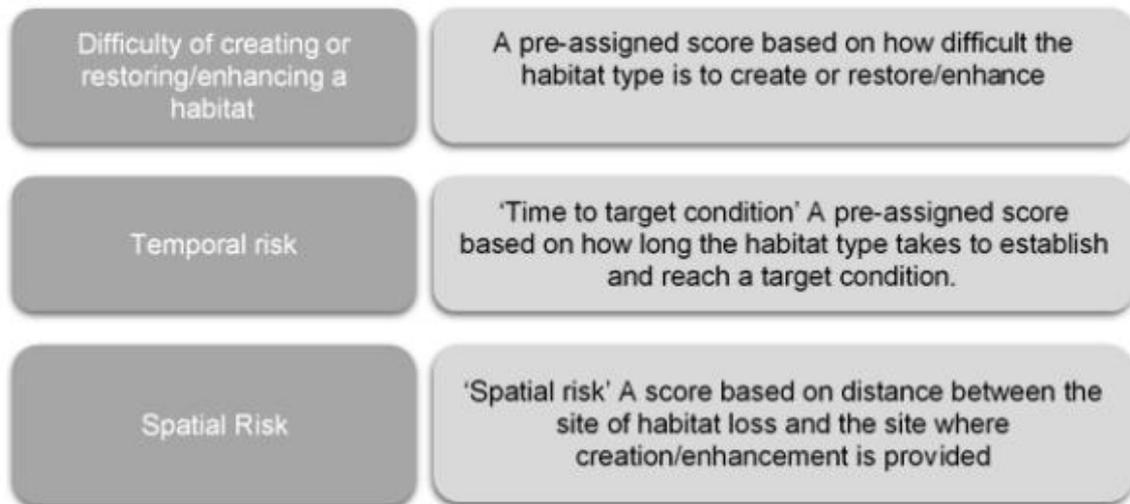


FIGURE 2-2 Risk components of biodiversity metric 3.1

Figure 12: Risk components of Biodiversity Metric 3.1. (Source: Biodiversity Metric 3.1 User Guide Natural England 2022a)

In the Biodiversity Metric:

- **Difficulty of creating or restoring / enhancing habitat** values are predetermined and cannot be changed;
- **Temporal Risk or 'time to target condition'** values are also pre-assigned; and
- **Spatial Risk value** is an additional multiplier '*applied to reflect the proximity of the off-site changes to the project sites where the biodiversity loss is occurring* (Natural England 2022a)'.

The Spatial Risk factor is closely linked to Principle 7 of the metric where Natural England states that '**Compensation habitats should seek, where practical, to be local to the impact. They should aim to replicate the characteristics of the habitats that have been lost, taking account of the structure and species composition that give habitats their local distinctiveness**' (Natural England 2022a). Ensuring that off-site habitat is located close to the impact have both social and ecological drivers '*e.g. to avoid depleting biodiversity in local areas or to recognise the cultural ecosystem services provided to a local community. For this reason, the metric penalises proposals where the off-site habitat is located at distance from the site of impact*' (Natural England 2022a).

The Spatial Risk categories for all three components of the Biodiversity Metric are provided in Figure 13 below from the Biodiversity Metric 3.1 guidance. Intertidal habitats are not relevant to Buckinghamshire County.

TABLE 5-7: Spatial risk categories

Variation in spatial risk categories between habitat groups			
Score	Area habitats (excluding intertidal habitats) Hedgerows and lines of trees	Intertidal habitats	Rivers and streams habitats
1.0	Compensation <u>inside</u> LPA or NCA of impact site	Compensation <u>inside</u> same Marine Plan Area, or deemed to be sufficiently local, to site of biodiversity loss	Within waterbody
0.75	Compensation <u>outside</u> LPA or NCA of impact site but in neighbouring LPA or NCA	Compensation <u>outside</u> same Marine Plan Area but in neighbouring Marine Plan Area	Within catchment
0.5	Compensation <u>outside</u> LPA or NCA of impact site and beyond neighbouring LPA or NCA	Compensation <u>outside</u> Marine Plan Area of impact site and beyond neighbouring Marine Plan Area	Outside catchment

Figure 13: Spatial Risk Categories for Biodiversity Metric 3.1. (Source: Biodiversity Metric 3.1 User Guide Natural England 2022a)

Spatial risk multiplier	
Spatial risk category	Spatial risk multiplier
Compensation inside LPA or NCA, or deemed to be sufficiently local, to site of biodiversity loss	1.0
Compensation outside LPA or NCA of impact site but in neighbouring LPA or NCA	0.75
Compensation outside LPA or NCA of impact site and beyond neighbouring LPA or NCA	0.5
Intertidal habitats - Compensation inside same Marine Plan Area, or deemed to be sufficiently local, to site of biodiversity loss	1.0
Intertidal habitats - Compensation outside same Marine Plan Area but in neighbouring Marine Plan Area	0.75
Intertidal habitats - Compensation outside Marine Plan Area of impact site and beyond neighbouring Marine Plan Area	0.5

Figure 14: Screen shot of Spatial Risk Multiplier options available for the Biodiversity Metric 3.1 for off-site Area and Linear Habitats.

There are 159 National Character Areas (NCA) within England. Natural England describes each NCA as representing ‘an area of distinct and recognisable character at the national scale. Their boundaries follow natural lines in the landscape, not county or district boundaries’ (Natural England 2022c).

6. Defining Spatial Risk in Buckinghamshire

Buckinghamshire Council has defined spatial risk for Buckinghamshire in paragraph 3.4.4 of the July 2022 SPD on BNG as *'the whole of Buckinghamshire Council is the local planning authority'* (Buckinghamshire Council 2022).

This consideration of proximity for off-site Biodiversity Net Gain Schemes is one of a number of other requirements that need to be considered when determining if a site is suitable for off-site BNG including security, quantity and equivalence (Buckinghamshire Council 2022).

In the event that :

- **an off-site area for BNG is proposed to fall outside of Buckinghamshire Council's Local Authority Area AND / OR:**
 - **you are proposing off-site BNG that involves river restoration or enhancement**
- PLEASE GET IN TOUCH WITH BUCKINGHAMSHIRE COUNCIL FOR FURTHER ADVICE.**

Defining Spatial Risk for Area Habitats and Hedgerows and Lines of Trees

There are 8 National Character Areas that lie within Buckinghamshire as follows:

- Yardley-Whittlewood Ridge;
- Cotswolds
- Bedfordshire and Cambridgeshire Claylands
- Bedfordshire Greensand Ridge
- Upper Thames Clay Vale
- Midvale Ridge
- Chilterns
- Thames Valley

An interactive map showing the precise boundary of these with links through to detailed descriptions of each NCA nationally is located here: <https://nationalcharacterareas.co.uk/>

Figure 15 below from the Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes BAP, courtesy of BMERC shows the National Character Areas within Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes

Map 8: National Character Areas

(Supplied by and with thanks to BMERC)

-  Bedfordshire Greensand Ridge
-  Bedfordshire and Cambridgeshire Claylands
-  Chilterns
-  Cotswolds
-  Midvale Ridge
-  Thames Valley
-  Upper Thames Clay Vale
-  Yardley-Whittlewood Ridge



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Figure 15: National Character Areas in Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes from the NEP's BAP courtesy of BMERC

Defining Spatial Risk for Rivers and Streams

Given the unique nature of rivers, Defra guidance for metric 3.1 uses a different spatial risk description than for Area Habitats and Hedgerows and Lines of Trees. Spatial Risk for rivers is described with reference to the Water Framework Directive (WFD) waterbody and catchment boundaries.

There are 10 River Basin Districts within England, the majority of Buckinghamshire lies within the Thames River Basin District with a section of the north of the county within the Anglian River Basin District. Each River Basin District has a number of Management Catchments within it which are occasionally split further into Operational Catchments. Each Management or Operational Catchment supports a number of waterbodies each of which have a hydrological boundary.

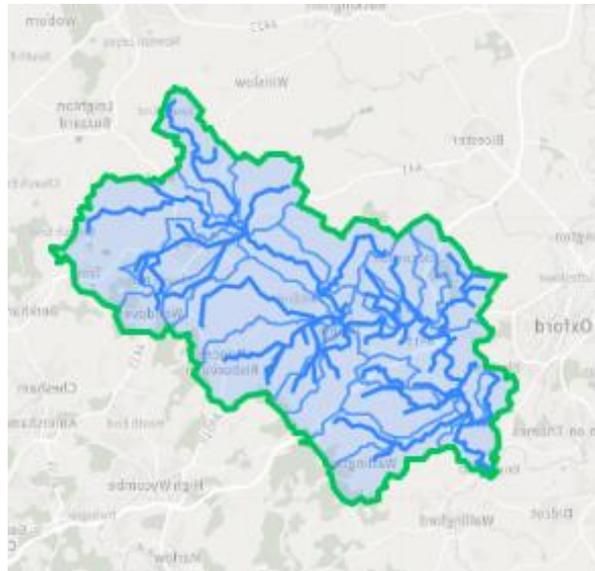
The extent of the waterbody boundary and its associated catchment boundary can be easily located on the Environment Agency's interactive mapping web Portal 'Catchment Data Explorer' that is accessible here: <https://environment.data.gov.uk/catchment-planning>.

BOX 1: An example of how to determine the waterbody and catchment boundaries for BNG using the Environment Agency Catchment Data Explorer (Environment Agency 2023)

A planning application within the Denham Brook, Pitchcott Brook west water body boundary requires a net gain in river units to be delivered.

**Denham Brook,
Pitchcott Brook west
Water Body**

Moderate ecological status



The above are screen shots of the relevant waterbody and catchment boundaries from the Environment Agency Catchment Data Explorer. Source:

<https://environment.data.gov.uk/catchment-planning/v/c3-plan/OperationalCatchment/3459>

- If the River BNG component is delivered within the Denham Brook & Pitchcott Brook boundary as illustrated above a spatial risk multiplier of 1.0 will be applied and units will not be devalued
- If the River BNG component is delivered within the Thames Operational Catchment also illustrated above, then a spatial risk multiplier of 0.75 will be applied. If outside a multiplier of 0.5 will be applied. The latter meaning that 25 and 50% extra units will be required to be delivered respectively compared to BNG being delivered within the Catchment

In line with Defra's Metric 3.1 guidance Buckinghamshire Council will expect the spatial risk multiplier to be applied to river metric calculations as shown in Figure 13 above. This will mean that off-site BNG for rivers should ideally be delivered within the same hydrological boundary of the waterbody of the planning application site as shown on the Environment Agencies interactive mapping tool. If this is not possible, and the off-site BNG can only be delivered outside of the waterbody boundary but within the same catchment then a disincentivising spatial risk multiplier of 0.75 will be added to the river unit delivery, if the BNG is delivered outside of the catchment and a 0.5 spatial risk multiplier will be applied.

Please contact Buckinghamshire Council if off-site BNG is to be delivered outside of Buckinghamshire Council's authority area even if this lies within the waterbody boundary for the Application Site.

7. Conclusion

This guidance has been produced ahead of the Local Nature Recovery Strategy for Buckinghamshire to provide an interim approach to defining both Strategic Significance and Spatial Risk in relation to Biodiversity Net Gain assessments undertaken in Buckinghamshire. In this guidance, we ask for **clear justification from the applicant's or land owner's ecological advisor as to why they consider a specific habitat parcel to be upgraded from the default of 'low' strategic significance to be considered 'medium' or 'high', or from 'low' to 'high' for Rivers and Streams.**

For all **Area Habitat and Hedgerows and Lines of Trees**, **High** Strategic Significance can only be applied when the habitat enhancement or creation **comprises a priority habitat that falls within the description or target for a BOA** as per the Natural Environment Partnership for Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes website. **Medium** Strategic Significance can be applied **using professional judgement.**

For **Rivers and Streams** all Rivers and Streams (including Priority Habitat Rivers) should be of **High** Strategic Significance with canals, ditches being a **default of low** unless professional justification indicates these could be raised to high. Culverts will always have a default of low.

Justification for the use of both medium and high Strategic Significance for area and Hedgerows and Lines of Trees, and any deviation from Figure 11 for Rivers and Streams should be provided in either / or the BNG Report and 'Assessor comments' section of the metric and be agreed with the LPA (see Figure 9).

It has also been agreed that Spatial Risk for Area and Hedgerows / Lines of Trees has been determined **as the entire of Buckinghamshire Council's Local Planning Authority remit (LPA)** as per the guidance within the Buckinghamshire Council Supplementary Planning Document (SPD). For Rivers and Streams Defra 3.1 guidance as outlined in Figure 13 should be followed where is anticipated **that river BNG should be delivered where possible within the water body boundary as defined by the Environment Agency.**

Please get in touch with Buckinghamshire Council to discuss any off-site BNG that is proposed located outside of Buckinghamshire

8. Key Website Links for Strategic Significance and Spatial Risk Decisions in Buckinghamshire

This guidance document has referred to a lot of websites that should be consulted prior to the publication of the Buckinghamshire LNRS to help determine the Strategic Significance and Spatial Risk for an application site and or BNG site. These have been listed there to help the user.

Strategic Significance

Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Biodiversity Action Plan

<https://bucksmknep.co.uk/forward-to-2030/>

Information on Buckinghamshire's Biodiversity Opportunity Areas (BOAs)

<https://bucksmknep.co.uk/biodiversity-opportunity-areas/>

Interactive map for the Biodiversity Opportunity Areas (BOAs) in Buckinghamshire

<https://bucksmknep.co.uk/biodiversity-opportunity-areas-map/>

Environment Agency Main River Map

<https://environment.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=17cd53dfc524433980cc333726a56386>

Natural England Priority Habitat Rivers and Streams Map

https://naturalengland-defra.opendata.arcgis.com/datasets/7e5dd3c72f424fd5bc6f013d18dd770c_0/explore?location=51.925519%2C-0.857698%2C12.92

Spatial Risk

Natural England National Character Areas Interactive map

<https://nationalcharacterareas.co.uk/>

Environment Agency Catchment Data Explorer for waterbody and catchment areas

<https://environment.data.gov.uk/catchment-planning>

9. References

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10. Appendix: Example scenarios for defining Strategic Significance in Buckinghamshire

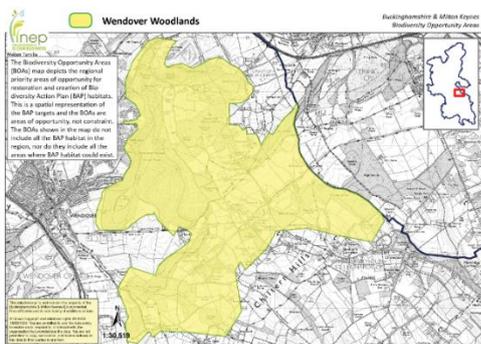
SCENARIO 1

A BNG site is proposed within the Wendover Woods BOA. The BNG delivery includes the enhancement / creation of three priority habitats: hedgerows, native lowland beech and yew woodland and lowland calcareous grassland. In addition, the owner wishes to put in a small garden pond which wouldn't be defined as a BAP priority habitat.

Suggested steps to take:

STEP 1: Check the site is within a BOA by using the NEP's interactive BOA map available here: <https://bucksmknep.co.uk/biodiversity-opportunity-areas-map/>

In this scenario the site lies within the Wendover Woods BOA:



STEP 2: Ensure the proposed habitat creation really is a BAP priority habitat (check definitions within the BAP and JNCC guidance against your target habitats available here: <https://hub.jncc.gov.uk/assets/2728792c-c8c6-4b8c-9ccd-a908cb0f1432>).

STEP 3: Check the description of the relevant BOA which is provided below the map. For Wendover Woods BOA this is as follows:

Joint Character Area: Chilterns

Landscape Types: Low wooded hills

Geology: Chalk. The plateau and dip slope are overlain with chalk with flints.

Topography: The escarpment is steeply sloping, rising to a plateau that falls away gently to the south east.

Biodiversity:

Calcareous Grassland – There is a concentration of calcareous grassland in the 2 SSSIs at Dancersend. Aston Clinton Ragpits SSSI is a valuable site with 9 orchid species, Chiltern and autumn gentians and 27 species of butterfly. There are also small areas of calcareous grassland at RAF Halton.

Woodlands – There is beech and yew woodland at Dancersend, Wendover Woods, Pavis and Northill Woods and the Great Widmoor and Barn Woods Complex. There are also BAP mixed deciduous woodlands at Dancersend SSSI and in LWSs including Drayton Wood and Buckland Wood.

Arable Field Margins – There are some arable fields on the plateau and the Chilterns is a Plantlife priority area for rare arable plants.

Targets:

Hedgerows – Management, Restoration, Creation

Archeology:

There is 1 scheduled ancient monument – Boddington Hill Fort.

STEP 4: Consider if a strategic significance category above the default of ‘low’ should be applied

Answer:

- Lowland beech and yew woodland, lowland calcareous grassland & priority hedgerows are all priority habitats that are listed in Figure 7 (from the current Bucks BAP) that have a target associated with them.
- Two of these habitats (Lowland beech and yew woodland & lowland calcareous grassland) are described in the BOA under the heading ‘Biodiversity’. These habitat parcels should therefore be assigned a score of ‘**High Strategic Significance**’ in accordance with the Interim Buckinghamshire Council Guidance on Strategic Significance and Spatial Risk.
- Priority hedgerows (that fit the definition of a BAP priority hedgerow) are mentioned in the targets for the BOA for management, restoration and creation so should also be assigned a score of ‘**High Strategic Significance**’ in accordance with the Buckinghamshire Council Guidance.
- Ponds to be created are not listed in the BAP and will not be of a BAP priority habitat quality and hence should be entered into the metric as ‘**Low Strategic Significance**’.

SCENARIO 2

A building to be retained but renovated within a planning application has been found to support a maternity roost of brown-long eared bats. During the bat surveys several flight lines used by commuting and foraging bats were identified and as part of the mitigation strategy for the site. Additional hedgerow planting will be provided to enhance existing connections with adjacent woodland. This hedgerow enhancement forms part of the EPS licence. The site does not lie within a Buckinghamshire BOA.

Question: What level of strategic significance could be assigned to this new planting?

Answer: The planning applicant's ecologist may wish to demonstrate, using their professional judgement a 'medium' strategic significance score could be applied to the hedgerow enhancement in question. Reference should be made to the Bat Conservation Trust's 2020 guidance on '*Core Sustainance Zones and habitats of importance for designing Biodiversity Net Gain for bats*'. The allocation of a medium score should be clearly justified in either or both the BNG report and or the metric 'Assessor Comments', see Figure 9.

However, please note that this habitat creation / enhancement for non-BNG outcomes (in this case a European Protected Species (EPS) licence for bats, could only ever '*contribute up to a point of equivalent to **no net loss of BNG** (as calculated by the Biodiversity Metric) but not beyond*' (Planning Advisory Service PAS website accessed on 06.12.22). Hence these enhancement measures alone cannot contribute to net gain as per current advice.

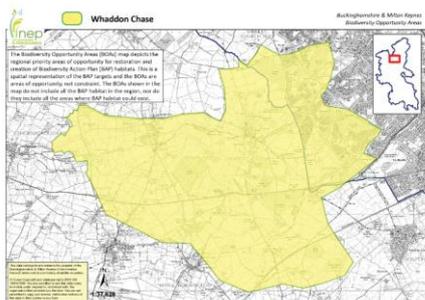
SCENARIO 3

A BNG site is proposed to create an area of Other Neutral Grassland on a currently predominantly arable site within a planning application within the BOA of Whaddon Chase in the north of the county.

Question: What level of strategic significance could be assigned to this habitat parcel of new Other Neutral Grassland?

Suggested steps to take:

STEP 1: Check the site does lie within Whaddon Chase BOA on the interactive map



STEP 2: Check the precise habitat that is to be created or enhanced by the proposed BNG (in this case 'Other Neutral Grassland' is not a BAP priority habitat)

STEP 3: Check the description of the BOA and appropriate targets.

Joint Character Area: Bedfordshire & Cambridgeshire Claylands

Landscape Types: Wooded agricultural land.

Geology: Mudstone with overlying till, head and sand and gravel deposits.

Topography: The North western end of a ridge running NW – SE. With gentle slopes running into the Great Ouse Valley to the north.

Biodiversity:

Woodland – There are many native woodland sites located across the area. There is a concentration of BAP quality woods south of Nash and Whaddon.

Fens – There is a large fen north of College Wood.

Lowland Meadows – There are several small areas of lowland meadow spread across the area.

Hedgerows – There are concentrations of pre 18th century enclosures around Little Horwood and Nash and these may contain species rich hedgerows.

Wood/ pasture & Parkland – There is a large parkland site at Whaddon.

Ponds – There are a few potential BAP priority ponds in the area.

Targets:

Fens – Management , Restoration, Creation

Hedgerows – Management , Restoration, Creation

Lowland Meadows – Management , Restoration, Creation

Woodlands – Management , Restoration, Creation

Wood-pasture & Parkland – Management , Restoration

Ponds – Management, Restoration, Creation

Archaeology:

Fields with existing ridge and furrow are found around Nash and Saldon. Whaddon Chase was an ancient hunting forest. SMRs are Snelshall Benedictine Priory and Whaddon Bowl Barrow.

STEP 4: Consider the appropriate level of strategic significance.

Answer: Other Neutral Grassland is not a BAP priority habitat, neither is it listed in the BOA biodiversity description or targets. Hence the Strategic Significance of this parcel of land should remain as the default of ‘**low**’ (no change).

SCENARIO 4

Question: A BNG off-set site is proposing to create some woodland planting outside of a BOA but the planting connects up two previously isolated areas of woodland. What strategic significance be applied to this proposed woodland area?

Answer: The planning applicant’s ecological advisor may wish to put forward justification to enable this woodland planting to be given a ‘medium’ strategic significance in the metric given its ecologically functionality in the landscape. This would be provided in the ‘Assessor Comments’ (see Figure 9) in the metric as well as the BNG report and need to be agreed with the LPA.

SCENARIO 5

Question: A planning applicant wishes to create an isolated small area of BAP priority woodland within an open area of predominantly arable land use. The area where the woodland is proposed has no landscape connections to other woodlands or hedgerows in the area. This site lies within a BOA, but BAP priority woodland is not listed in either the

description or targets for enhancement / creation within the BOA. What Strategic Significance should this woodland be assigned?

Answer: In this instance despite a priority habitat being created that would contribute to targets set for the BAP within the county as a whole, this isn't a specific priority habitat for this BOA and, due to its poor placing in the landscape, its 'landscape context' is not considered appropriate and the default of a low strategic significance multiplier should be applied to this habitat parcel.