

Wokingham Theatre
Cantley Park
Wokingham
Berkshire
RG40 5TU

Biodiversity Net Gain Assessment

Ref.: R2783_BNG_a

Report Quality Control Information	
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1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1.1** John Wenman Ecological Consultancy LLP was instructed by ET Planning on behalf of the applicant Wokingham Borough Council to provide a Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) Assessment for the land at Wokingham Theatre, to accompany a retrospective full planning application seeking consent for the construction of an extension to provide a new costume store, dressing rooms and toilet facilities.
- 1.1.2** This report follows a Preliminary Ecological Appraisal (PEA) (JWEC; November 2024; R2783_PEA_a). The baseline habitats for the site comprise: modified grassland (g4); sparsely vegetated land (u1f); developed land; sealed surface (u1b); built linear features (u1e); introduced shrub (847), bramble scrub (h3d), scattered trees (32) and ornamental hedgerow (h2b).
- 1.1.3** The proposed habitats are derived from the Site Layout plan and comprise largely retained habitats in the same condition and newly created habitats, in the form of: Developed land; sealed surface – buildings (u1b5) on previously modified grassland (g4) and sparsely vegetated land (u1f). Scattered native trees and a native hedgerow will be planted to enhance the site as part of the proposals.
- 1.1.4** The Statutory Biodiversity Metric calculation tool demonstrates that the feasibility of delivering a minimum of 10% onsite net gain for biodiversity is possible within the scope of the proposals. The tool gives a total onsite net % change of 12.55% in habitat units and 20.53% in hedgerow unit. The 'Wokingham Theatre – Statutory Biodiversity Metric (R2783_BNG_a)' document should be referred to separately for the full calculation. Due to the scale of the proposals, the onsite enhancements and associated management and monitoring can be secured by an appropriately worded condition; typically requiring a Landscape and Ecology Management Plan.

2 INTRODUCTION

2.1 Project Background

2.1.1 John Wenman Ecological Consultancy LLP was instructed by ET Planning on behalf of the applicant Wokingham Borough Council to provide a Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) Assessment for the land at Wokingham Theatre, to accompany a retrospective full planning application seeking consent for the construction of an extension to provide a new costume store, dressing rooms and toilet facilities.

2.1.2 This report follows a Preliminary Ecological Appraisal (PEA) (JWEC; November 2024; R2783_PEA_a).

2.2 Site Location and Context

2.2.1 The 0.29ha application site comprises a theatre surrounded by open grassland in Wokingham, Berkshire (OS grid reference: SU 80807 69726). The site is surrounded by the grounds of Cantley Park and Cantley Park Hotel, with playing fields and car parking to the north, open grassland and scattered trees to the south and the hotel grounds with a parcel of woodland and parkland with scattered trees to the east.

2.2.2 In the wider area, the land is predominantly residential with new residential development in progress to the north and west. The mature trees in the adjacent parkland and nearby Holt Copse & Joel Park Local Nature Reserve - 6.7 acres of semi-natural ancient woodland 320 metres to the south west of the sites boundary - offer high quality habitat for a range of protected and notable species.

2.3 Objectives

2.3.1 The aim of this BNG Assessment is to demonstrate that a minimum of 10% on-site net gain in biodiversity can be achieved as part of the proposed development. The key objectives are to:

- detail the approach taken for the BNG calculation (i.e. the Statutory Biodiversity Metric);
- describe and map the baseline habitats and important ecological features on site;
- describe and map the proposed habitats based on post-development design;
- complete the biodiversity metric tool with supporting condition assessment sheets; and
- outline the implementation of the design concepts and the long-term

management to deliver BNG.

- 2.3.2** This BNG Assessment report should be read in conjunction with the completed Statutory Biodiversity Metric calculation tool and habitat condition assessment documents.

3 POLICY BACKGROUND

3.1 National Planning Policy

3.1.1 The biodiversity duty imposed through the Environment Act 2021 states that Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) must consider what action they can take to conserve and enhance biodiversity in England.

3.1.2 The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), published in December 2023, sets out the Government's planning policies for England and how they should be applied. Section 15 of the NPPF sets out the approach LPAs should adopt to conserve and enhance the natural environment when determining planning applications. The selection of excerpts taken from Section 15 refer to Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) as follows:

Paragraph 180. Planning policies and decisions should contribute to and enhance the natural and local environment by: [...] d) minimising impacts on and providing net gains for biodiversity, including by establishing coherent ecological networks that are more resilient to current and future pressures [...]

Paragraph 185. To protect and enhance biodiversity and geodiversity, plans should: [...] b) promote the conservation, restoration and enhancement of priority habitats, ecological networks and the protection and recovery of priority species; and identify and pursue opportunities for securing measurable net gains for biodiversity [...]

Paragraph 186. When determining planning applications, local planning authorities should apply the following principles: [...] d) development whose primary objective is to conserve or enhance biodiversity should be supported; while opportunities to improve biodiversity in and around developments should be integrated as part of their design, especially where this can secure measurable net gains for biodiversity or enhance public access to nature where this is appropriate [...]

3.1.3 In England, BNG became mandatory for major development from the 12th February 2024 and for minor development (small sites) from the 2nd April 2024 under Schedule 7A of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 (as inserted by Schedule 14 of the Environment Act 2021). In practice, planning permission in England is now subject to a

condition to secure a minimum 10% net gain for biodiversity, unless the development is a type that is exempt from mandatory BNG requirements.

3.2 Local Planning Policy

3.2.1 Wokingham Borough Council website states that once planning permission is granted, a plan to create at least a 10% improvement of biodiversity, from the baseline assessment, will need to be provided.

3.2.2 The Wokingham Borough Council website states that *'Information about the existing biodiversity on site, sometimes called a baseline assessment, will need to be submitted by applicants. If planning permission is granted, a plan to create at least a 10% improvement of biodiversity, from the baseline assessment, will need to be provided. The biodiversity net gain requirement has been agreed by the Government and is additional to existing local and national policy and guidance. If permission is granted then a statutory condition, called the General Biodiversity Gain Condition, is applied – this condition cannot be changed or removed. A metric has been developed by the Government that will allow all the relevant information to be submitted. The metric tool will help work out the value of the biodiversity on the site and measure this in 'units'. This will mean the 10% increase in 'units' can be shown as part of a planning application. The metric will need to be supported with other information including whether if the increase in biodiversity will be provided on or off site and/or if there is an exceptional ecological reason to not follow the metric. Where the improvement to biodiversity is provided on the site, it is expected this will be in place for a minimum of 30 years and will be monitored over this time. The Council will likely use planning conditions or a legal agreement to make sure this is the case. The Council will also have to provide a report on the status of biodiversity net gain at least every five years. Where the improvement to biodiversity is provided off the site, a legal agreement will be required to secure this, and the improvement will need to be registered with Natural England. If it isn't possible to provide biodiversity improvement on or off the site, it will be possible to purchase 'credits' from the government.'*

4 METHODOLOGY

4.1 Baseline Information

Desk Study

- 4.1.1** A desktop study was conducted by Vicky Potts – an experienced Senior Ecologist and full member of CIEEM – before and after visiting the site. The study utilised data from the local environmental records centre and online resources to acquire information on the nature of the site and its surroundings and highlight any potential ecological features.
- 4.1.2** Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre (TVERC) was commissioned to undertake a search of pre-existing records of protected and/or notable species and non-statutorily designated wildlife sites held by them within a 1km radius around a central point inside the site.
- 4.1.3** The DEFRA Data Services Platform was used to obtain geospatial datasets for designated sites (i.e., RAMSAR, SPA, SAC, SSSI) and habitat inventories (i.e., Priority Habitat Inventory, Ancient Woodland Inventory) to be analysed in QGIS. The Multi-Agency Geographical Information Centre (MAGIC) website was examined for granted European Protected Species (EPS) licence applications. Furthermore, open access geospatial datasets and Google Earth satellite imagery were used to determine the extent and connectivity of habitats, how the site is linked to the surrounding landscape and whether the development could have wider scale impacts on biodiversity.
- 4.1.4** Google Earth satellite imagery was consulted to provide insight into historic and current land use; such information helps contextualise the continuity of habitats and determine the importance of existing ecological features.

UK Habitat Classification

- 4.1.5** A site walkover was undertaken on 2nd October 2024 by Vicky Potts MCIEEM assisted by Verity West. The site was surveyed using the UK Habitat Classification (UKHab) system (UKHab Ltd 2023) in accordance with the CIEEM Guidelines for Preliminary Ecological Appraisal 2nd Edition (CIEEM 2017). Particular attention was given to evidence of protected and priority species (NERC Act 2006 Section 41 species of principal importance) and the site's potential to support such species. Habitat condition

assessments were carried out in accordance with the Statutory Biodiversity Metric (February 2024).

Biodiversity Net Gain Approach

4.1.6 This Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) Assessment uses the Statutory Biodiversity Metric (February 2024) to calculate the losses and gains in biodiversity unit value resulting from the proposed redevelopment. The biodiversity metric tool has been used to guide the proposed site layout and landscaping in order to deliver a minimum 10% net gain for biodiversity.

4.1.7 The biodiversity metric rules must be followed for a valid biodiversity net gain and are as follows:

***Rule 1:** The trading rules of this biodiversity metric must be followed.*

***Rule 2:** Biodiversity unit outputs, for each type of unit, must not be summed, traded, or converted between types. The requirement to deliver at least a 10% net gain applies to each type of unit.*

***Rule 3:** To accurately apply the biodiversity metric formula, you must use the statutory biodiversity metric calculation tool or small sites biodiversity metric tool (SSM) for small sites.*

The tools remove the need for a user to manually calculate the change in biodiversity value.

The tool will summarise the results of the calculation and inform a user whether the biodiversity net gain objective has been met.

***Rule 4:** In exceptional ecological circumstances, deviation from this biodiversity metric methodology may be permitted by the relevant planning authority.*

4.1.8 The biodiversity metric principles inform the use of the biodiversity metric tool and are as follows:

***Principle 1:** The metric assessment should be completed by a competent person.*

***Principle 2:** The use of this biodiversity metric does not override existing biodiversity protections, statutory obligations, policy requirements, ecological mitigation hierarchy or any other requirements. This includes consenting or*

licensing processes, for example woodlands.

Principle 3: *This biodiversity metric should be used in accordance with established good practice guidance and professional codes.*

Principle 4: *This biodiversity metric is not a complex or comprehensive ecological model and is not a substitute for expert ecological advice.*

Principle 5: *Biodiversity units are a proxy for biodiversity and should be treated as relative values.*

Principle 6: *This biodiversity metric is designed to inform decisions in conjunction with locally relevant evidence, expert input, or guidance.*

Principle 7: *Habitat interventions need to be realistic and deliverable within a relevant project timeframe.*

Principle 8: *Created and enhanced habitats should be, where practical and reasonable, local to any impact and deliver strategically important outcomes for nature conservation.*

Principle 9: *This biodiversity metric does not enforce a minimum habitat size ratio for compensation of losses. Proposals should aim to:*

- *maintain habitat extent - supporting more, bigger, better and more joined up ecological networks*
- *ensure that proposed or retained habitat parcels are of sufficient size for ecological function'*

5 BASELINE INFORMATION

5.1 Desk Study

Designated Sites and Priority Habitats

- 5.1.1** The desk study data highlighted one internationally designated SPA which was over 5km from the site: Thames Basin Heaths SPA. The desk study highlighted one nationally designated statutory site within a 2km radius of the site Holt and Joel Copse LNR 520 m to the south of the site and one non-statutorily designated site Holt Copse LWS 320 m to the south west of the site.
- 5.1.2** The site falls within the Impact Risk Zone (IRZ) for several SSSIs including: Lodge Mill and Sandford Mill SSSI, Longmoor Bog SSSI, Heath Lake SSSI and Wykery Copse SSSI. They sites are all over 4 km to the site with the closest being Lodge Mill and Sandford Mill SSSI 4199 m to the northwest.
- 5.1.3** One Biodiversity Opportunity Area (BOA) – an area supporting a high concentration of UKBAP habitats and species – is situated within the search area: Waltham to Binfield Woodlands and Parklands BOA is situated 1.36 kilometres to the north east of the site.
- 5.1.4** The application site contains no irreplaceable habitats (e.g. Ancient Semi-natural Woodland) or priority habitats (NERC Act 2006 Section 41 habitats of principle importance). A patch of deciduous woodland – a habitat of principle importance is situated just over 30 m to the southeast at Cantley House Hotel. A patch of semi-natural ancient woodland is present within Holt Copse and Joel Park Local Nature Reserve 320 metres to the south west of the site boundary.

Protected and Notable Species

- 5.1.5** A search on MAGIC revealed six bat mitigation licences have been granted within a 2-kilometre radius of the application site, covering licensable works affecting the following species: soprano pipistrelle (*Pipistrellus pygmaeus*), brown long-eared (*Plecotus auritus*), common pipistrelle (*Pipistrellus pipistrellus*) and noctule (*Nyctalus noctula*). The closest licence was for the destruction of a resting places and breeding site for noctule, 437 m south of the site (Case ref.: EPSM2009-1496). The buildings were assessed to have negligible potential suitability for bats and the site lacked important habitats for foraging and commuting bats in the local area. A sensitive

lighting scheme was recommended to avoid any potential additional negative impacts on foraging and commuting bats using adjacent habitats.

5.1.6 Four waterbodies have been identified within 500m of the site, including two at Cantley Park 224 m and 238 m to the southeast, and two further ponds 463 m and 439 m to the northeast of the site. There are also additional waterbodies at a sewage treatments work from 421 m to the northeast. A search of MAGIC returned an absence of great crested newts (*Triturus cristatus*) for the closest ponds at Cantley Park in surveys undertaken between 2017 and 2019. A search of MAGIC returned one mitigation licence within at least a 2km radius from the application site, covering licensable works affecting great crested newts (*Triturus cristatus*), for the destruction of a resting place and breeding site at a site 1163 kilometres to the northeast (Case ref: EPSM2013-5426). A search of NatureSpace GCN impact risk zones show the site to fall within a red zone – i.e. the area comprises highly suitable habitat – the most important areas for great crested newts. Further assessment of the site in relation to the desk study findings determined the risk of adverse impacts on a local GCN population was very low.

5.1.7 No further protected species surveys were recommended but precautionary avoidance measures for amphibians and reptiles were recommended to ensure there was no breach of the legislation protecting these animal groups.

5.2 Baseline Habitats Onsite

5.2.1 The baseline habitats for the site comprise: modified grassland (g4); sparsely vegetated land (u1f); developed land; sealed surface (u1b); built linear features

(u1e); introduced shrub (847), bramble scrub (h3d), scattered trees (32) and ornamental hedgerow (h2b) – refer to **Figure 1** below.



Figure 1. Baseline Habitats Plan

5.2.2 Condition assessments of each habitat, where applicable, were completed and detailed in a separate document (Wokingham Theatre; Habitat Condition Assessments; R2783_BNG_a) and the following was noted:

- Baseline condition assessments were defined as: Modified grassland parcels (2) – poor; Sparsely vegetated land (1) – poor; and Scattered trees (4) – poor.

5.3 Proposed Habitats Onsite

5.3.1 The post-development habitat onsite is derived from the Site Layout plan (refer to Appendix 2) and includes the following minor changes – refer to Figure 2 below:

- Modified grassland and Sparsely vegetated land lost to Developed land sealed surfaces onsite;
- Enhancement of the site with the additional planting of 8 native trees along the eastern and south western boundary (as per guidance, newly planted trees are assigned poor condition);
- Enhancement of the site with the additional planting of at least 5 metres of hedgerow with native species along the north eastern corner of the site.

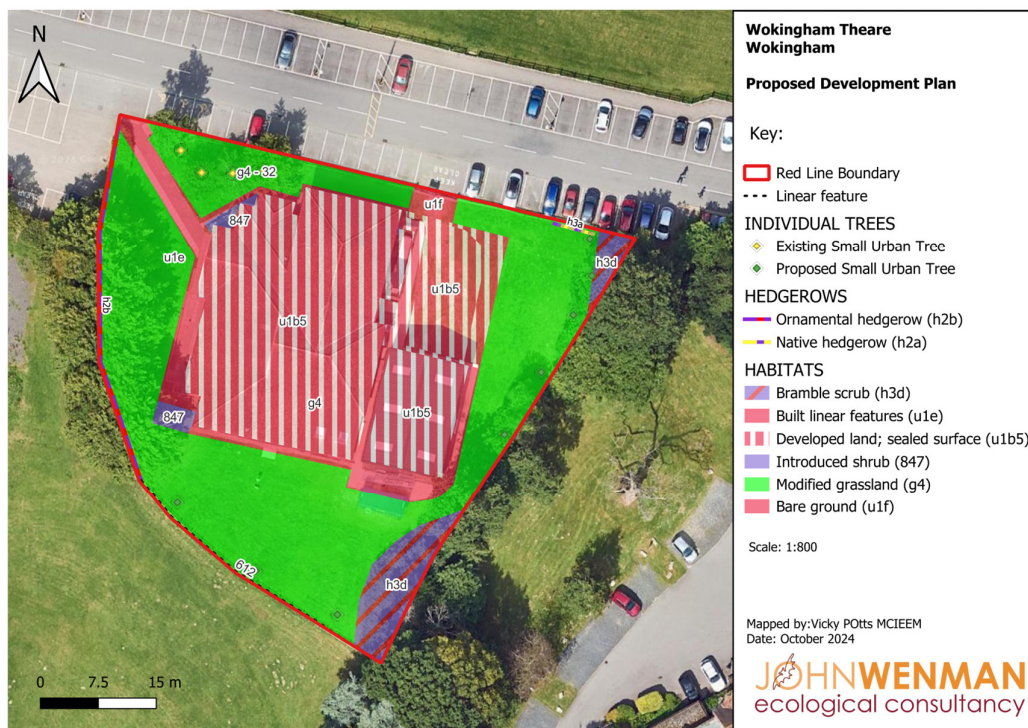


Figure 2. Post-Development Habitat Plan

5.4 Calculation Result

5.4.1 The Biodiversity Metric calculation tool demonstrates that the feasibility of delivering a minimum of 10% onsite net gain for biodiversity is possible within the scope of the proposals – see metric calculation tool enclosed separately (Wokingham Theatre – Statutory Biodiversity Metric; R2783_BNG_a). The final results taken from the tool gives a total onsite net % change of 12.55% in habitat units and a net % change of 20.53% for hedgerow units for achieving a 10% net gain. – see **Figure 5** below.

FINAL RESULTS		
Total net unit change (Including all on-site & off-site habitat retention, creation & enhancement)	Habitat units	0.06
	Hedgerow units	0.01
	Watercourse units	0.00
Total net % change (Including all on-site & off-site habitat retention, creation & enhancement)	Habitat units	12.55%
	Hedgerow units	20.53%
	Watercourse units	0.00%
Trading rules satisfied?	Yes ✓	

Figure 5. Final Results taken from the Statutory Biodiversity Metric calculation tool .

5.5 Project Implementation and Management

Scattered Trees and Native Hedgerow Planting

- 5.5.1** The newly planted scattered trees will be planted with native trees such as field maple and cherry and the hedgerow will be planted with native species such as beech, hazel, dogwood, and hornbeam. The newly planted whips will require minimal management and maintenance beyond the initial planting and care. The hedgerow will be mulched to suppress competition from weeds using locally sourced wood chips (the use of compost or plastic mulch should be avoided). The hedgerow will be given an initial soak with water if there is no heavy rain within the first few days of planting and will only be watered again in a period of drought if necessary.
- 5.5.2** Stakes and ties will be used to support the newly planted whips and will be inspected monthly and adjusted/replaced as necessary; the use of plastic spirals and tree guards will be avoided. The whips' health will be assessed every two months in the first year and replacement whips will be planted if any fail resulting in a gap in the hedgerow or if any of the scattered trees fail.

6 REFERENCES

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