

TITLE	Biodiversity Net Gain Pilot Project – Supplementary Paper
FOR CONSIDERATION BY	Executive on 21 March 2023
WARD	(Charvil, Coronation directly and All Wards indirectly);
LEAD OFFICER	Director, Place and Growth - Simon Dale
LEAD MEMBER	Executive Member for Environment, Sport and Leisure - Ian Shenton

PURPOSE OF REPORT

To update the Executive on feedback from the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee following its consideration of the proposed Biodiversity Net Gain pilot project at Ashenbury Park.

Recommendations to the Executive from the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee

That:

- 1) officers ensure that there is clear communication with residents and community groups about the aims of the BNG pilot project in Ashenbury Park and the expected outcomes;
- 2) design work on the pilot project proceed, but no physical works take place on site until the public consultation has been completed, evaluated and reported - consultation to include an option with no changes to Ashenbury Park;
- 3) officers explore potential mitigations relating to the financial risks and outcomes relating to the project;
- 4) the Executive notes Scrutiny Members' concerns about the potential negative impact on communities if BNG projects are not linked to the areas which are taking new housing development;
- 5) the Executive receive a map showing the proposed pilot project site within Ashenbury Park (included with this paper);
- 6) officers provide a briefing for all Members on the introduction of BNG into the planning process and the specific pilot BNG project in Ashenbury Park.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

At its meeting on 15 March 2023, the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee considered the proposals for a Biodiversity Net Gain pilot project at Ashenbury Park in Woodley. The Committee made a number of comments and recommendations to the Executive which are set out in this supplementary paper.

Background

At its meeting on 15 March 2023, the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee considered the proposals for a Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) pilot project at Ashenbury Park. Members noted that a minimum 10% Biodiversity Net Gain was expected to become mandatory for all relevant developments from November 2023.

In discussing the proposed pilot project at Ashenbury Park, Members raised the following points.

What was a Biodiversity Net Gain unit? It was confirmed that BNG units were part of a methodology used to measure habitats. Using a Government developed tool, existing sites could be overlaid with biodiversity improvements which were translated into a points system. In effect, it was a type of offsetting – developers had to demonstrate that they could deliver a minimum of 10% BNG. BNG units could be purchased from any landowner (public or private) prepared to create and maintain new/enhanced habitats, including restriction on other uses of a site for 30 years. There was an opportunity for WBC to become a provider of BNG units through the enhancement of sites such as Ashenbury Park and other countryside sites and public open spaces.

If the project went ahead, would Ashenbury Park become a country park? It was confirmed that the park's designation would not be changed. The car park and play area would remain under amenity management. Ashenbury Park was estimated to be a 25 hectare site. The proposed improvements were likely to generate circa 35 BNG units.

Once completed, would the site be included in WBC's asset register? It was confirmed that the Council would have to maintain the BNG units for 30 years. After that they could not be re-sold – this was Government policy.

Members noted that BNG was a type of carbon offsetting, which had been in place for many years. In relation to BNG was the aim to promote diversity of habitats or maximise income generation for the Council? It was confirmed that there would have to be a balance – it was more than just tree planting, it was about a variety of habitats.

How did BNG differ from earlier measures such as the development of SANGs linked to new development? It was confirmed that the key difference was that BNG was a measurable rather than a subjective system. Looking ahead, new strategic SANGs may be combined with the BNG system. It was important that the BNG system was attractive to private landowners as well as local authorities. BNG did not alter the normal environmental protections in the Planning system.

In years ahead, how would the BNG be monitored and reported? It was confirmed that the Government was proposing to set up a register for allocation of BNG units. In addition providers of BNG units would be required to submit regular progress reports to the planning authority throughout the 30yr period.

Members queried the approach to public consultation over the pilot project. Would consultation take place before the project was implemented? Members felt it important that local residents had the chance to comment on the proposals before work started on the ground. This included an understanding of the BNG system and the benefits for local communities. It was confirmed that consultees would include residents, ward

Members and Woodley Town Council. It should be possible to complete a consultation exercise before the relevant planting season commenced in the autumn of 2023.

What safeguards existed to ensure that BNG improvements were near to the sites taking new development? It was confirmed that a “temporal discount rate” would be applied – this meant that the value of BNG units reduced the further away the BNG site was from the development site.

The Committee agreed that its comments and questions be submitted to the Executive in order to inform the discussion on the proposed pilot project at Ashenbury Park.

The Committee also agreed six specific recommendations to the Executive which are set out earlier in the supplementary paper.

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