



Q&A with Claudia Stephens

Biodiversity net gain requirements for planning.

In an enlightening interview with [Claudia Stephens](#) from Urbanist Architecture, we delved into the critical topic of [biodiversity net gain \(BNG\)](#), a mandatory requirement in UK planning. Through our discussion, Claudia shed light on the practical applications and challenges of implementing BNG in today's development landscape.



Can you explain what the term 'biodiversity net gain' (BNG) means?

Biodiversity net gain is an approach to development and land management that aims to leave the natural environment in a measurably better state than it was prior to development. 10% better, to be exact. BNG has become a compulsory condition for achieving planning permission, applying to all major developments from January 2024 and smaller sites from April 2024.



What prompted the introduction of biodiversity net gain requirements?

Several factors have driven the push for BNG, but ultimately it's the UK's commitment to tackling climate change and achieving net zero by 2050 that's most pertinent. The idea of BNG is that it will not only preserve and protect natural habitats but improve them. Given the reputation property development has for negatively affecting the environment, the move is a step in the right direction that will see much-needed development continue while maintaining and revitalising our natural habitats.



How is biodiversity measured and who is responsible for this measurement?

Great question. Biodiversity is typically calculated using a specific tool and metrics set out by the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra). The process compares the quality of the site both before and after development and focuses on the location, distinctiveness, condition, and size of the habitat. This assessment then forms part of a biodiversity gain plan that developers must submit for approval by their local authority. Developers are responsible for supplying the measurement, which they'll either complete themselves or with the help of an ecologist.



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What strategies can developers use to achieve the required 10% biodiversity net gain?

Developers have several options for achieving this 10% gain. Firstly, they can enhance biodiversity on-site by landscaping and use of green infrastructure, which is certainly the simplest option. Alternatively, if there isn't scope to provide all of the improvement on-site, then developers can combine some on and off-site improvements to amount to that 10%. However, it's important to note that off-site improvements must be

made on a registered biodiversity gain site, which needs to be secured through either a Section 106 or a conservation covenant — a more complex process than just producing the gain on-site. While these are the two main options, there's also a third route, which is to purchase statutory biodiversity credits from the government who will use the cash for habitat creation in England. These credits are extremely costly though, and should really only be deferred to as a last resort.

“Exempt developments include... self-build projects on sites under 0.5 hectares for no more than nine dwellings.”



Are there exceptions to the BNG requirement?

BNG requirements don't apply to all development types. Exempt developments include householder applications such as extensions, those affecting less than 25 square metres of habitat or five metres of linear habitats, and self-build projects on sites under 0.5 hectares for no more than nine dwellings. Developments solely to meet BNG conditions, parts of the high-speed rail network, urgent crown developments, permitted developments, and irreplaceable habitats are also exempt, ensuring a balanced approach to development and environmental conservation. However, it is important to regularly verify this list against the most recent legal documents, as exemptions can be updated based on new regulatory changes.



What challenges do developers face in implementing BNG, and how can they be addressed?

There are a few challenges involved with implementing BNG, namely accurately measuring biodiversity values, designing developments to achieve BNG, and managing habitats for long-term sustainability. To help navigate these obstacles, we recommend developers work with specialist consultants to create a robust biodiversity gain plan.



Could you explain the role of the Biodiversity Gain Site Register in the BNG process?

The Biodiversity Gain Site Register, managed by Natural England on behalf of Defra, plays a pivotal role in the BNG framework. It offers a publicly accessible source of information about off-site biodiversity gains across England. This digital service enables landowners to register their sites for off-site BNG, developers to view available off-site habitat enhancements, and local planning authorities to monitor habitat enhancements as part of their BNG plan checks. This initiative aims to streamline the BNG process, ensuring transparency and accountability in how biodiversity gains are achieved and reported (Natural England).



Have there been any concerns or challenges raised regarding the implementation of BNG, especially for minor developments and local planning authorities (LPAs)?

Concerns have been raised about the relatively short transition period for LPAs and small-scale developers to prepare for the full implementation of BNG, particularly for minor developments. Feedback indicates that there was a significant reduction in the initially planned transition period due to government delays, leading to concerns about insufficient time for adequate preparation.



How does the BNG requirement integrate with other environmental regulations and initiatives in the UK?

BNG is integrated into UK environmental initiatives, supporting the Environment Act 2021 and aligning with local nature recovery strategies to enhance ecosystem resilience. BNG complements the National Planning Policy Framework's green infrastructure standards, ensuring that Green Belt developments, as well as urban projects, meet biodiversity targets and contribute to broader environmental objectives. This strategic approach enhances ecological benefits and supports the UK's sustainability goals.



How is the architectural design community responding to the new BNG requirements and what design strategies are being considered to meet these biodiversity enhancements?

In response to BNG requirements, architects are innovating by integrating subtle environmental features directly into their designs. Strategies like embedding living walls, green roofs, and native landscaping are becoming increasingly common and serve three key purposes: fulfilling biodiversity targets, enhancing building sustainability, and improving the aesthetics of a space. This shift represents a broader move towards designs that are both environmentally responsible and community-focused, and in my opinion, is an exciting step forward.



How do you assist clients with BNG requirements?

At our multidisciplinary firm, comprising architects and town planners, we are well versed in navigating planning policies and delivering designs that adhere to local planning authority (LPA) requirements. We engage comprehensively throughout the project lifecycle — from the initial design phase to navigating BNG requirements and securing planning approval. We ensure that we not only meet but exceed our clients' expectations, effectively managing all aspects of BNG compliance.

With thanks to [Claudia Stephens](#) from [Urbanist Architecture](#)
for sharing her expertise and giving her time.

If you would like to speak to the Kiss team call [0118 3800 172](tel:01183800172) or email support@kisshouse.co.uk