Call for Project Sites Guidance Note

Introduction

This guidance note is intended to assist those in submitting a project site for consideration.

About this Call for Project Sites

This process is an opportunity for landowners/agents to submit land which they believe could be suitable for providing Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG), make a contribution to reducing the discharge of nutrients into the Solent, be designated as Suitable Alternative Natural Green Space (SANG) or Green Infrastructure Assets or be replanted for Carbon Sequestration . Some sites could potentially deliver more than one type of benefit.

These project sites may be needed in Test Valley to bring forward planned housing development, as off-site locations to mitigate environmental impacts from development that cannot be avoided or mitigated on the development site itself.

The aim of this call for project sites will be to help identify a range of potential sites of varying scales along with expressions of interest from landowners/agents who would be interested in managing, or disposing of, land for this purpose.

Following initial evaluation site promoters may be contacted to discuss how their sites could be used for environmental benefits.

Next steps

Project site promoters are not being asked to commit to any formal arrangement at this early stage. The Council hopes to work with interested parties to identify appropriate project locations, and to establish workable management and monitoring arrangements should viable options be identified by this process.

Specific details will need to be determined, however the following approach is envisaged at this stage:

- Identified sites would be subject to further assessment with regard to suitability of schemes.
- A management plan agreement would be required between the Council and the landowner or a mitigation scheme provider. This is to enable the implementation, management, maintenance and monitoring of the project site for an agreed term. The Council will encourage longer term protection where this is acceptable to landowners. This could range from a minimum of 30 years for BNG (based on emerging provisions) to at least 80 years for nutrient offsetting and SANG.
- An appropriate arrangement to compensate landowners will need to be agreed. There may be alternative approaches including direct negotiations between developers and landowners of suitable sites, or through an independent intermediary.

- An appropriate legal agreement (a Section 106 agreement or planning obligation) would be necessary for the site and at the planning application stage to secure the required nutrient offsetting or BNG[1] for a particular proposed development.

Background

Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG)

The Government has announced intensions to introduce a mandatory minimum 10% BNG for development subject to the Town and Country Planning Act 1990. As set out in the Environment Bill, where key parts relate to the delivery of BNG (Part 6: Nature and Biodiversity), and the supporting Schedule 14 (sections 9(3), 13 (2), 14(2) and 15)[2].

Reflecting the mitigation hierarchy in national policy, and included within the adopted Local Plan policy E5[3] development projects should primarily seek to avoid impacting existing biodiversity adversely, then to minimise them by appropriate on-site mitigation to enhance the value of existing biodiversity on-site. This is separate to the attainment of biodiversity net gain.

Achievement of 10% BNG on-site may not be possible on some development sites, especially smaller sites and in locations within existing settlement boundaries. After all reasonable measures have been taken on-site, outstanding BNG requirements will need to be provided on a suitable off-site location. In accordance with the proximity principle, those off-site locations for BNG would preferably be in the same general area as the development site.

To support this approach, the Council is undertaking a call for project sites within the Test Valley Borough which could deliver appropriate biodiversity net gain in the context of the local environment and planned development. The minimum period required for a BNG project is currently anticipated to be 30 years according to Schedule 14, Section 9(3) of the Environment Bill.

BNG sites could also deliver conservation benefits to provide biodiversity benefits relative to existing land use, to compensate for any losses elsewhere and provide required net gain. A portfolio of BNG offsetting project sites would assist the Council and developers to accommodate planned development and secure the enhancement of biodiversity by a minimum of 10%.

Nutrient Management

Natural England has advised the Council that housing and similar development is likely to have a harmful effect on the Solent, an area internationally designated and protected for its nature conservation value. Their best available evidence is that large parts of the designated sites are in unfavourable condition due to high levels of nutrients which reduces the oxygen content in water; reducing aquatic insects and

[1] Subject to the Environment Bill and next Local Plan

[2] Timescales for implementation is Test Valley will depend on the provisions of the emerging legislation

[3] Available: https://testvalley.gov.uk/planning-and-building/planningpolicy/local-development-framework/dpd

fish to survive, reducing food sources for protected species such as water birds which the international nature conservation site is designated to protect.

The most significant source of nutrients (and related compounds such as ammonia) are from agriculture (fertilisers and animal waste), and sewage treatment works.

Natural England advice[4] is that new development must achieve 'nutrient neutral development' status to avoid making the situation worse.

It is unlikely for development to achieve neutrality by mitigation on the development site itself. Greater efficiency in waste water treatment may deliver some improvements, but only in the longer term. There is a need to find offsite land-based mitigation solutions to counterbalance additional load of nutrient levels in waste water from development for residential and overnight accommodation entering the protected water environment, thus enabling development to be nutrient neutral. This could involve changing the way land is managed to reduce nutrient input, see Natural England Guidance[5].

Suitable Alternative Natural Green Space (SANG)

Suitable Alternative Natural Green Space (SANG) is the name given to the green space that is of a quality and type suitable to be used as mitigation in the context of certain nature conservation designations, including Special Protection Areas (SPA). An SPA is part of a European-wide network of sites of international importance for nature conservation established under the European Community Wild Birds and Habitat directives.

In the borough of Test Valley there are currently two SPA mitigation zones, these relate to the New Forest SPA and the Solent SPAs. SANG sites would ideally be in a location where it will divert visitors away from these SPAs which are sensitive to additional human disturbance and where a significant increase in visitors is predicted[6]. Sites would also be in a location which would be acceptable in terms of planning policy and traffic generation, and would not have an unacceptable impact on biodiversity.

The aim is to provide more greenspace within an optimal walking distance of new developments and offer more substantial areas of greenspace suitable for visits by car. SANG provides potential opportunities for linking greenspace provision with wellbeing and biodiversity agendas as well as mitigation for visitor disturbance. Providing publically accessible areas in or nearby SANGs would enable families and children to reconnect with nature.

Carbon Sequestration

[4] Available: https://www.testvalley.gov.uk/planning-and-building/guidance/solent-southampton-water-special-protection-area

[5] Available: Natural-England's-latest-guidance-on-achieving-nutrient-neutrality-for-new-housing-development-June-2020.pdf (push.gov.uk)

[6] Additional information on SANGs for the Solent SPAs can be found in the Solent Recreation and Mitigation Strategy Available: https://testvalley.gov.uk/planning-and-building/guidance/solent-southampton-water-special-protection-area

Carbon sequestration is the long-term storage of carbon that has the immediate potential to become carbon dioxide gas in plants and soils, as well as geologic formations, and the ocean. Concerted efforts to plant trees in new places (afforest) and replant deforested acreage (reforest) could increase this, depending on species, growth patterns and other variables. Forest management practices emphasizing carbon storage and the particular species of trees and other forest plants with the ability to take up and store carbon could push these numbers higher.

Afforestation and reforestation are one of many potential approaches to carbon sequestration; land owners may wish to submit sites for numerous carbon capture projects including, but not limited to, carbon farming[7] and grasslands.

Green Infrastructure Assets (GIA)

Green infrastructure assets include open spaces such as woodlands, fields, hedges, lakes, ponds, coastal habitats, as well as public rights of way or rivers. Assets involving water can also be called 'blue infrastructure', but these are all included in the overarching term of 'green infrastructure'.

These assets provide areas for recreation and education, habitats for wildlife and also provide environmental services such as flood defence or absorption of air pollution. For this reason, these natural and semi-natural areas are identified as part of the basic 'infrastructure' within the Borough.

Green infrastructure assets should be protected and enhanced to help sustain and improve quality of the local environment. Green infrastructure assets should be linked to form part of a wider network, as this helps them to withstand climate change and other impacts.

What will the call for project sites cover?

The Council is seeking sites within the planning area of Test Valley Borough Council. Priority sites for both BNG and Solent nutrient mitigation projects will be devised by the Council. The Council particularly seeks sites that would essentially buffer or expand existing habitats or provide a corridor between existing habitats for example by connecting woodland blocks, buffering ancient woodland and species rich grassland creation. Prioritising project sites in this way is expected to deliver the greatest gains for biodiversity, by delivering improvements to the existing ecological network.

[7] Available: https://www.carboncycle.org/carbon-farming/