

REPORT TO: Executive Board

DATE: 12th March 2026

REPORTING OFFICER: Executive Director Environment and Regeneration

SUBJECT: Developing a Biodiversity Net Gain Programme for Halton

PORTFOLIO(S): Environment & Urban Renewal
Housing & Environmental Sustainability

WARD(S) Borough wide

1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to seek the views of Executive Board Members regarding the development of a Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) Programme, including the allocation of proposed sites.
- 1.2 BNG is a mandatory approach to development in England, requiring a minimum 10% increase in habitat quality or quantity compared to the state of the site before a development takes place. Developers can choose to offset this requirement by ‘buying credits’ on other sites. These sites may not be necessarily in the same Local Authority area.
- 1.3 The report seeks approval to appoint a BNG Responsible Body and to undertake further financial modelling work to ascertain potential income that could be generated on designated sites.

2.0 RECOMMENDATION: That

- 1. Approval is given to enable the sites presented in the report (Appendix 1) to be designated for biodiversity enhancement and restoration.**
- 2. Subject to further work, the Board agrees that the sites mentioned would be protected for at least 30 years, as set out in the Environment Act 2021.**
- 3. the Executive Director Environment & Regeneration in consultation with the Portfolio Holders for Environment and Urban Renewal and Housing and Sustainability be authorised to appoint a BNG Responsible Body in order**

to progress five pilot sites as identified in section 3.10 of the report.

4. the Executive Director Environment & Regeneration and Director of Finance in consultation with the Portfolio Holders for Environment and Urban Renewal, Housing and Environmental Sustainability and Portfolio Holder for Resources, be authorised to undertake further exploratory work to model potential income streams and to identify up front expenditure required to achieve this.

5. Members views are sought on the financial options outlined in section 5.5.

3.0 SUPPORTING INFORMATION

3.1 Halton Borough Council has a duty to support biodiversity within the Environment Act 2021 to;

- Plan what can be done to conserve and enhance biodiversity.
- Develop policies and specific objectives based on your considerations made within the planning stage.
- Action to deliver your policies and achieve your objectives.

3.2 Progress on Biodiversity Net Gain contributing to improved greenspaces also has formed part of the Council's Climate Change Action Plan.

3.3 This report advises Members on how HBC will meet these requirements, through the allocation of parcels of land for ecological conservation and enhancement. These sites will be known as Biodiversity Enhancement Areas (BEAS).

The allocation of these sites is needed to assist with the national targets set out by the government to:

By 2030:

- halt the decline in species abundance.
- protect 30% of UK land.

By 2042, the government has committed to:

- increase species abundance by at least 10% from 2030, surpassing previous levels.
- restore or create at least 500,000 hectares of a range of species rich habitats.
- reduce the risk of species extinction.
- restore 75% of the one million hectares of terrestrial and freshwater protected sites to favourable condition, securing their wildlife value for the long term.

- 3.4 **Providing a Full Range of Ecosystem Services**
Greenspace, such as parks, woodland, fields and allotments as well as natural elements including green walls, roofs and incidental vegetation, are increasingly being recognised as an important asset for supporting health and wellbeing. Green spaces are said to provide the full range of ecosystem services:
- They offer provisioning opportunities for physical goods that people can harvest from the environment such as food, wood and fibre, water and fuel.
 - Provide regulating services that occur in the ecosystem that lead to benefits such as climate stabilisation, flood management, and water filtration.
 - Cultural benefits through recreational and education as well as improving mental health and building spiritual connections.
 - They provide a wider support network. Ecosystems could not function without supporting services, such as the nutrient cycle, soil formation and habitat provision for biodiversity.
- 3.5 **Protecting Wildlife**
Effectively managed protected areas are a critical tool for safeguarding biodiversity, maintaining ecosystem equilibrium, preserving irreplaceable habitats, building resilience to climate change, providing global food security, maintaining water quality, conserving natural resources, driving economic success, curbing the spread of diseases and pests, and providing many other benefits to wildlife and human health.
- 3.6 Designating these sites for protection and enhancement, will allow the Environment Services team to put in place a plan for protection of flora and fauna across the borough. Each site will have a specific management plan which states exactly what wildlife conservation will take place. The details within these documents will match targets set out by national strategies as well as recommendations within the Local Nature Recovery Strategy, Merseyside and Cheshire Biodiversity Action Plan.
- 3.7 **Potential Financial Benefits**
The sites outlined in this report will serve as the baseline for creating BNG opportunities through habitat banks. Each site will contain a certain number of 'units' depending on the habitat types are on the particular site. Units represent the ecological value of the created, enhanced or retained habitat within the bank, provided that there is measurable uplift in condition. In this way, habitat banks provide a mechanism for meeting regulatory obligations to compensate for habitat loss.
- 3.8 Within the bank HBC can sell off the units for a specific amount for safeguarding areas for 30 years. Sites have the potential to hold 50+ units meaning there is a potential for a significant income for

HBC. Members are requested to authorise further modelling work to better understand the opportunities for generating income.

3.9 The creation of these sites creates 'green capital' which HBC can use to limit the issues in the borough, improving health and wellbeing, managing health and social care costs, reducing health inequalities, improving social cohesion. All sites remain in council ownership.

3.10 It is proposed that, in the first instance the scheme would be piloted using 5 trial sites:

Hale Road Woodlands
Halton Moss
Clinton Woods
Murdishaw Valley
Moore Meadows

These sites were prioritised by Environmental Services after reports were commissioned on 13 potential sites during 2025.

However, to progress work on these sites, the Council would need to appoint a Responsible Body as outlined in section 4.3 below. It is anticipated that implementation would take place during summer/autumn 2026.

4.0 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

4.1 These recommendations are designed to assist with meeting national targets and complying to nation legislation, there will be limited impact on the policies within HBC. It will mean that land is taken up and not designated for development but the wider benefits outlined in this report will outweigh this issue.

4.2 Public authorities that operate in England must consider what they can do to conserve and enhance biodiversity in England. These areas will help feed into local and national strategies including local nature recovery strategies, species conservation strategies and protected site strategies.

4.3 The introduction of a Habitat Banking system is in accordance with the Council's Climate Change Action Plan.

In developing a Biodiversity Net Gain programme, Halton Borough Council would be required to appoint a Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) Responsible Body. This is a designated organisation that enters into legal conservation covenants and or Section 106 agreements with landowners to secure, monitor, and enforce long-

term (minimum 30-year) habitat enhancements. They ensure BNG targets are met, manage legal obligations, and submit annual returns to the Secretary of State. Members are advised that it is not possible for the Council to be a Responsible Body when managing its own sites.

5.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 Further work is required to further scope the business model. On the one hand it is acknowledged that costs will need to be identified for the 30-year delivery of each Council owned site identified for inclusion in a Habitat Bank Vehicle (HBV), this could be a list of options for each habitat type to understand the financial implications for the council. Further analysis of costs will be undertaken to determine expenditure already incurred by the authority.
- a. All set up costs
 - i. Staff (in-house/contractor model)
 - ii. Equipment
 - iii. Other capital costs
 - iv. Other costs
 - b. Maintenance costs and requirements over the 30 years
 - c. Monitoring costs as required through the guidance and legislation.
- 5.2 On the other hand, this will enable the identification of an indicative per unit cost for delivering and, therefore, selling a biodiversity unit for Halton HBV on a variety of different habitat types on a full cost recovery model. As the market for the sale of BNG units has been established a cost comparison with other suppliers could be considered to ensure that HBV BNG unit costs are competitive whilst providing opportunity for income generation.
- 5.3 With the potential for including these sites within Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) planning there is an income source for ensuring these sites are protected for the next 30 years. There will need to be a certain aspect of initial funding to ensure Environment Services can manage these areas as per the agreed management plans. This will mainly involve purchasing the correct equipment for grass cutting, tree works and monitoring. These will be one off purchases and as the finances come in from BNG these will be significantly reduced. It is anticipated this cost can be achieved within existing budgetary provision.
- 5.4 Nevertheless it is anticipated that a significant income stream will be generated. Therefore, Members are asked to consider, in principle, how the Council would best maximise this income. Options are set out below:

- 5.5
1. Use any income to reduce as, a 'one off', the Council's Exceptional Financial Support (EFS) obligations. This would support the Council's revenue budget by reducing the Council's debt.
 2. Apply a blended approach whereby some of the income could be used to partially reduce the Council's EFS allocation and the remainder of the income could be used to a) reinvest in supporting the continuing day to day maintenance of the borough's green and open spaces and or b) provide a capital investment fund to allow for the upgrade and refurbishment of the Council's 'green assets' in the longer term.

6.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES

6.1 Improving Health, Promoting Wellbeing and Supporting Greater Independence

Incorporated within the management of the sites, areas can be made for public access and educational opportunities. Interaction with natural spaces offers a variety of mental, physical and social benefits for humans, ranging from stress reduction, quicker healing, and improved concentration in children. Providing these green areas would work directly towards the council priorities.

6.2 Building a Strong, Sustainable Local Economy

Sites can be used for green and blue finance opportunities which can be reinvested in benefits for wildlife and people.

6.3 Supporting Children, Young People and Families

These recommendations will have limited impact on this priority. There is potential to use these sites for education and traditional skills.

6.4 Tackling Inequality and Helping Those Who Are Most In Need

These recommendations will have negligible to no impact on people who are most in need.

6.5 Working Towards a Greener Future

Having these sites will provide a wide range of ecosystem services which directly input into the green future of the borough. It will allow for not only biodiversity, social, cultural and economic improvements but can be used as a baseline for environmental improvements for years to come. There is potential for these areas to inspire local people to become more passionate about the environment around them and how they can improve their local area in the future.

6.6 Valuing and Appreciating Halton and Our Community
Wildlife and landscape improvements will make the local area a much nicer place to be, it will show just what can be done in urban and heavily industrial areas. Any financial gains from these sites can be directly used to improve the local areas for the community and wildlife. There is also potential to improve how the borough is widely appreciated on an ecological scale.

6.6.1 The loss of nature affects our economy, our culture and our daily life as individuals. Investing in nature, biodiversity and ecosystems, geodiversity and landscapes above and below the water will help improve the quality of these services as well as securing them for future generations.

7.0 RISK ANALYSIS

7.1 The greatest risks regarding timescales of allocation have been mentioned above but due to government overarching policies the risk is deemed to be negligible. Due to the careful consideration of sites the risks have been reduced significantly. If HBC do not show that they are working towards the national targets there may be legislative implications but also a reputational risk to the Council if the Council does not apply actions outlined in its Climate Change Action Plan. An allocation of these sites to BEAs as proposed in this report will demonstrate that the council is committed to fulfilling its biodiversity principles.

8.0 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES

8.1 The recommendations are deemed to have no equality or diversity issues.

9.0 CLIMATE CHANGE IMPLICATIONS

9.1 There will be some impacts through any potential management practices and machinery. However, through careful planning by Environment Services these can be very minimal. The ecologists employed by HBC will also be monitoring the standard of the sites to be constantly looking for environmental improvements.

10.0 LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS UNDER SECTION 100D OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

‘None under the meaning of the Act.’

Appendix 1
Sites for Consideration

Site Name	Habitat Type
Wigg Island	Grassland Woodland, Coastal areas
Halton Moss	Grasslands, Woodland
The Bongs	Grasslands, Woodlands, Urban Suburban
Sunnybank Park	Grasslands, Woodlands, Urban Suburban
Clincton Wood	Woodland, Wetlands
Regency Park	Woodland, Wetlands
Norton Cross	Woodland, Grassland
Eanleywood Lane	Grassland
Murdishaw Valley	Woodland, Grassland
Daresbury LWS	Woodland, Grassland, Watercourses
Daresbury Firs	Woodland, Grassland
Disused Railway Line South of Warrington Road	Urban Suburban
Dorchester Park	Woodland
Dutton Hospital Wood	Woodland
Gigg Lane	Heathland, Woodland, Bracken, Grassland
Hale Road Woodland	Woodland, Grassland
Haystack Lodge	Grassland
Keckwick Brook	Watercourse
Land North of Hallwood Park	Grassland, Woodland
Halton Moss	Woodland, Grassland, Watercourses
Moore Moss	Woodland, Grassland, Watercourses
Moore Meadows	Woodland, Grassland, Watercourses
Oxmoor	Flood Prevention/Eluviation
Pickerings Pasture	Coastal , Grassland, Woodland
Pond at Delphfield	Watercourses
Quarry Court	Grassland
Runcorn Hill	Woodland, Heathland, Grassland, Watercourse
Southern Verge Embankment	Grassland, Woodland
St Helens Canal/Sankey	Wetland and Watercourses
Stenhills Open Space	Grassland, Woodland
The Glen	Grassland, Woodland
Widnes Warth Saltmarsh	Coastal
Halebank Linear	Grassland, Watercourse, Urban Suburban
Desoto Road Trans-Pennine Trail Stretch	Urban and Suburban Open Mosaic
8384614 St Chads School Field Adjacent	Grassland
Moss Bank Linear	Grassland
Arley Drive Woods	Grassland Woodland
Cunningham Road Linear	Grassland
HBC Previous Grazing Land	Grassland