



Wigan[♥]
Council

Wigan Council Biodiversity Duty Report

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1. Background

1.1 Introduction

1.1.1 This report is Wigan Council's response to the strengthened Biodiversity Duty under the Environment Act 2021: what we committed to, what we achieved in the period, and what we will do next.

1.2 Legal context, scope and reporting period

1.2.1 Public authorities must consider, set policies/objectives, and act to conserve and enhance biodiversity (NERC Act 2006, as amended by Environment Act 2021).

1.2.2 Reporting requirement – Local authorities and Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) must publish a biodiversity report with actions taken, future plans, and (for LPAs) BNG information. This report covers the reporting period 12 February 2024 to 1 January 2026.

1.2.3 This report covers Wigan Council's corporate functions, including partnership working and its role as LPA.

2. Our policies, objectives and actions

2.1 Progress with Unity

- 2.1.1 Progress with Unity (PwU) is the council's ten-year movement for change, built around two missions:
1. Create fair opportunities for all children, families, residents & businesses (explicitly tackling environmental inequalities), and
 2. Make all our towns and neighbourhoods flourish for those who live and work in them.
- 2.1.2 Biodiversity underpins both missions: access to nature improves health and wellbeing and reduces inequalities; restoring habitats increases flood resilience, air quality and climate adaptation—benefits highlighted in the Council's Our Natural Environment Action Plan which highlights how our corporate functions play a part addressing biodiversity and also through the Greater Manchester Local Nature Recovery Strategy (GM LNRS).

2.2 Mission 1

- 2.2.1 Fair opportunities / tackle environmental inequalities: The GM LNRS (2025–2035) identifies priority places and actions to recover wildlife and improve equitable access to green space. Wigan Council's Cabinet agreed publication in July 2025, and the GMCA has confirmed the GM LNRS as the city-region's plan for nature. This provides a spatial lever to reduce "green deficits" in underserved communities through incorporating the opportunities, priorities and actions into our functions particularly through taking account of the GM LNRS in our planning policies.
- 2.2.2 Since 12 February 2024 (majors) and 2 April 2024 (small sites), planning applications must deliver at least +10% biodiversity net gain and secure it for 30 years. This will steer investment into LNRS priorities and should support closing the gap in nature-poor neighbourhoods further supporting fair opportunities and reducing environmental inequalities.
- 2.2.3 Protecting and updating the local nature network through mechanisms such as the Sites of Biological Importance (SBI) Review embeds up-to-date local sites into decision-making and the policies map - explicitly supporting PwU by reducing environmental inequalities and creating flourishing neighbourhoods. Information on the SBI review is reported annually in our Authority Monitoring Report which is available on the Wigan Council website.

2.3 Mission 2

- 2.3.1 The Initial Draft Wigan Borough Local Plan explicitly aligns the plan with PwU and sets the policy framework to protect and enhance environmental assets, designate / allocate land, and integrate green infrastructure turning the mission into statutory policy.
- 2.3.2 The Wigan Greenheart Landscape Recovery programme (1,400ha, including the Flashes of Wigan & Leigh National Nature Reserve) is a long-term, multi-partner scheme restoring wetlands and linked habitats (e.g. willow tit and bittern) and connecting communities with nature - the essence of “flourishing places.”
- 2.3.3 The adopted Places for Everyone Plan (March 2024) is part of Wigan Borough’s development plan and embeds a “Greener Places” strand that our Local Plan must read alongside. It strengthens the hook for biodiversity, blue-green infrastructure and climate resilience in growth areas helping our towns and neighbourhoods to flourish.

2.4 Initial Draft Wigan Borough Local Plan

- 2.4.1 During the reporting period Wigan Council has been preparing a new local plan. As mentioned previously this is aligned with our PwU missions and contains a number of policies designed to continue to support nature recovery in the borough.
- 2.4.2 Regulation 18 consultation on the Initial Draft Local Plan (“Planning for the Future to 2040”) took place during this reporting period from 20 April to 24 June 2025. This followed previous consultations on Issues and Options in Autumn 2022 and on Options and Preferences in Autumn 2023, the latter completing in December 2023 just prior to the start of this reporting period.
- 2.4.3 The Initial Draft Local Plan is available to view on the council website and contains multiple policies within the Environment chapter with a focus on biodiversity and nature recovery as highlighted below.

2.5 Headline policy strands for biodiversity from the Initial Draft Wigan Borough Local Plan

- 2.5.1 **Wildlife habitats & species:** The proposed policies protect statutory and local sites (Special Areas of Conservation (SAC), Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), National Nature Reserves (NNR), Local Nature Reserves (LNR), and Sites of Biological Importance (SBI)) and irreplaceable habitats; and applies the mitigation hierarchy to all proposals (avoid–mitigate–compensate).

- 2.5.2 **Nature Recovery:** Proposed policies will align planning decisions and enhancements with the GM LNRS and its Nature Network maps with LNRS mapping shown on the accompanying evidence map to inform development proposals and decision.
- 2.5.3 **Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG):** Embeds the statutory BNG regime and sets a strategic objective to steer delivery towards sites within the Greenheart Landscape Recovery Scheme and LNRS priorities.
- 2.5.4 **Green & blue infrastructure (GI) and SuDS:** Policies will require developments to integrate GI and biodiversity-led SuDS, strengthening the GI network alongside flood policies; delivery projects are captured in the draft Infrastructure Delivery Plan.
- 2.5.5 **Connectivity:** Policies will safeguard and enhance strategic GI assets aligning with the LNRS and reducing severance.
- 2.5.6 **Trees, woodlands & hedgerows:** Policies require the retention, appropriate replacement and canopy cover increase through native planting and long-term management.
- 2.5.7 **Strategic landscapes:** The Initial Draft Local Plan recognises the importance of the Flashes of Wigan & Leigh NNR, Wigan Greenheart and Chat Moss for protection and restoration, dovetailing with the Greenheart Landscape Recovery Scheme and LNRS priorities.
- 2.5.8 When considered as a whole these policies will provide positive outcomes for biodiversity in the borough by steering BNG and on-site enhancements into LNRS priority areas, concentrating investment where it expands the Greater Manchester Nature Network's connectivity and ecological value, accelerating species recovery. At the same time, biodiversity-led SuDS and targeting restoration along key corridors will cut flood risk, improve water quality and create accessible green space. Protecting and restoring peat/mossland at Chat Moss prevents carbon loss and strengthens landscape-scale climate adaptation. Finally, the policies support flagship wetland projects across the Wigan Greenheart Landscape Recovery Scheme and the Flashes of Wigan & Leigh NNR demonstrating landscape-scale recovery that benefits wildlife (e.g., willow tit, bittern) while enhancing access and strengthening local identity.

2.6 Wigan Greenheart Landscape Recovery Scheme

- 2.6.1 The key biodiversity and nature recovery project that the Council is involved in is the Wigan Greenheart Landscape Recovery Scheme (LRS).

- 2.6.2 The LRS is an innovative, sustainable, long-term project which will transform around 1,400 hectares of former industrial land, the vast majority of which is Council owned, to create a climate-resilient, connected nature network. Habitats rich with wildlife will welcome people and offer local green space benefits to communities, while providing nature-based solutions for wider society and the economy.
- 2.6.3 With the Flashes of Wigan and Leigh National Nature Reserve at its heart, Wigan Greenheart LRS is a human-made landscape. For over two centuries, it fuelled the Industrial Age. Much of the local area was dominated by the mining and textile industries. When these declined, the land left behind created a huge opportunity – and challenge - for nature recovery. After 50 years of partial recovery from industrial impacts, it already has significant wildlife value, with iconic and rare species such as Willow Tit, Water Vole and Bittern, and the landscape sits at the heart of the Great Manchester Wetlands Nature Improvement Area.
- 2.6.4 Our long-term plans provide a blueprint – or a green-print - for achieving a sustainable future for the benefit of all. Via a blended public and private financing model, the Council alongside key partners Lancashire Wildlife Trust and Forestry England will make a step change in the quality and quantity of nature recovery and community wellbeing, delivering land management, community engagement and access enhancements over the next 20 – 30 years. This will offer opportunities for interested businesses to support a high profile, public-facing nature restoration programme that enables the creation of private-sector benefits and partnerships, backed by the UK government through DEFRA's Landscape Recovery Scheme.



2.6.5 The LRS has provisionally secured £20.8m in real terms from Defra (excluding VAT/inflation) for the blended finance plan for the scheme that will also target around a further £11m from the private sector.

2.6.6 To date, the development of the LRS has involved partnership working and engagement across Wigan Borough with organisations such as Greater Manchester Ecological Unit (GMEU), City of Trees, GMCA, Natural England, Environment Agency, United Utilities and Mersey Rivers Trust. There has also been extensive community engagement throughout the project development phase lead by Lancashire Wildlife Trust which will continue as one of the key pillars of the LRS in the project implementation phase.

2.7 Wigan Greenheart LRS completed actions

2.7.1 Through the project development phase, we have identified two potential off-site habitat bank sites to deliver habitat units aligned to the mandatory BNG system and LNRs priority areas and informed by GMEU Needs & Supply assessment.

2.7.2 The baseline habitat surveys have been completed for the two sites, allowing BNG unit delivery to be quantified using the Statutory BNG metric informed by detailed LRS habitat interventions and land management plans. The details from these plans have been incorporated into Habitat Management and Monitoring Plans (HMMPs) for the two sites, to be reviewed by GMEU in March 2026. Following this registration of the sites with Natural England will take

place in spring-summer 2026 when the LRS enters implementation phase, allowing BNG units to be sold on the open market.

- 2.7.3 The LRS project team has consulted with multiple Responsible Bodies including the GMCA and the project team (with Landowner) are reviewing options to make decision on who to move forward with once the LRS enters project implementation phase.
- 2.7.4 The project delivery phase has involved extensive partnership working with GMCA, GMEU, Natural England, Lancashire Wildlife Trust and landowners ensuring that the LRS plans has been informed by specialists and will deliver its expected outcomes over the 20-year implementation phase.

3. Our future actions

3.1 Wigan Borough Local Plan

3.1.1 As previously mentioned, the Initial Draft Local Plan for Wigan Borough has been published and consulted upon receiving positive feedback on elements relating to biodiversity. The Council intends to enter the Regulation 19 pre-submission stage consultation on the publication version of the local plan this year. This will mean that policies relating to biodiversity are in place before the next Biodiversity Duty Reporting period (within 5 years of the end of this reporting period) at which point progress will be further reported on.

3.2 Wigan Greenheart Landscape Recovery Scheme

3.2.1 The LRS is due to enter the project implementation phase by summer 2026. To do this a Single Legal Entity (SLE) needs to be established in the form of a new company which will manage the LRS funding from Defra. The SLE will also enable the council to register its own land as habitat banks through the signing of conservation covenants with Responsible Bodies. A report to Cabinet is expected in spring to confirm these details.

3.2.2 The biodiversity benefits of the LRS across 1,400 hectares of land will be phased in 5-year parcels. The first phase from 2026-2031 is intended to deliver a biodiversity uplift across an initial 530ha of land.

3.2.3 This first phase will involve the registration of two habitat bank sites on council land at Bickershaw and Victoria Fields. The preparatory work for these sites has already taken place under the LRS completed actions above.

3.2.4 Several other work strands are intended to begin in the first 5-year phase. A wider carbon research and development project will commence 5 years of carbon monitoring linked to the project. A Corporate Social Responsibility project will engage with and seek funding from the private sector in order to directly deliver benefits to Willow Tit and their habitats. Finally, a Citizen Science programme will be set up in partnership with the GMEU. This will provide further engagement opportunities with our communities and allow people in Wigan Borough to contribute directly to research and scientific evidence over the 20 year LRS period.

4. Biodiversity net gain information

4.1.1 This section of the report contains information on:

- the actions carried out to meet BNG obligations
- details of BNG resulting, or expected to result, from approved biodiversity gain plans
- how Wigan Council plan to meet BNG obligations in the next reporting period

4.2 Implementation of Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) obligations

4.2.1 Wigan Council, as Local Planning Authority, is required by the Environment Act 2021 to ensure that all planning applications for proposed development (with the exception of specific exemptions) secure a 10% net gain in biodiversity. This net gain can be achieved on-site through enhancing existing or creating new habitats, off-site through the purchase of biodiversity units from a habitat bank or the purchase of statutory credits from the government; or a combination of these. When deciding how to achieve the 10% net gain, applicants should apply the Biodiversity Gain Hierarchy which prioritises the enhancement of existing on-site habitats before considering allocation of off-site gains and finally purchasing biodiversity credits.

4.2.2 The statutory framework for biodiversity net gain requires a Biodiversity Gain Plan to be submitted and approved by the local planning authority to discharge the biodiversity gain condition prior to the commencement of development. To do this, the applicant must submit a Biodiversity Gain Plan supported by a completed metric (showing all pre- and post-development calculations), final habitat plans and details of off-site units or credits that have been purchased. The condition is required to be discharged before work can begin on site

4.2.3 The Council receives ecological advice from GMEU on any relevant planning applications and development plan documents. In relation to BNG, the service that GMEU provides involves:

- providing pre-application advice on ecology and BNG matters;
- reviewing and making recommendations on BNG metrics and other BNG-related documents, such as draft biodiversity gain plans and draft HMMPs submitted as part of planning applications;

- Making recommendations and negotiating with developers on the best outcomes for BNG, such as identifying the most suitable locations and forms of habitat provision;
- Reviewing post-permission BNG documents, including final metrics, gain plans and HMMPs and making recommendations on the appropriateness of final proposed BNG schemes and discharges of BNG-related conditions.

4.2.4 The Council has also arranged for GMEU to undertake post-permission BNG monitoring (or “auditing”) of relevant schemes, such as those involving “significant” on-site BNG. This service involves tracking on-going habitat creation / enhancement on relevant sites, requiring regular monitoring reports from habitat managers, site visits, reviewing and making recommendations on submitted reports, providing advice on any necessary mitigation, supporting enforcement action (if necessary), keeping a register of all habitat banks (and unit allocations) in Greater Manchester and providing BNG data.

4.3 Monitoring biodiversity gains and the results of this monitoring

4.3.1 Table 1 below sets out the quantitative BNG data: general data Feb 2024-Dec 2025. This period relates to the date that BNG first became mandatory for major development (12th February 2024) and the end of the reporting period for this Biodiversity Duty Report (31st December 2025)

Table 1: Quantitative BNG data: general data (February 2024 – December 2025)

Consented applications requiring net gains	Number	Proportion
Total number of planning permissions granted that require biodiversity net gain in the reporting period	24	n/a
Total number of planning permissions granted in the reporting period where an exemption to the biodiversity net gain condition applies	154*	n/a
Number of biodiversity gain plans approved	2	
Total number of biodiversity gain plans approved securing BNG through on-site units only	2	100%
Total number of biodiversity gain plans approved in the reporting period securing BNG through off-site units only	0	0%
Total number of biodiversity gain plans approved in the reporting period securing BNG through statutory credits only	0	0%
Total number of biodiversity gain plans approved in the reporting period securing BNG through a combination of on-site and off-site units	0	0%

Total number of biodiversity gain plans approved in the reporting period securing BNG through a combination of on-site units and statutory credits	0	0%
Total number of biodiversity gain plans approved in the reporting period securing BNG through a combination of off-site units and statutory credits	0	0%
Number of approved biodiversity gain plans that impact on irreplaceable habitat	0	
Location and number of approved offsite biodiversity units	n/a	

4.3.2 The figure with the asterisk relates to decisions from May 1st 2025 as prior to this the data was not recorded in the version of the software which we operated at the time.

4.3.3 Table 2 below sets out quantitative BNG data: overall expected gains and losses across all biodiversity gain plans approved February 2024 - December 2025

Table 2: Quantitative BNG data: overall expected gains and losses across all biodiversity gain plans approved February 2024 - December 2025

Overall expected gains and losses	Area Habitats	Hedge-rows	Water-courses	Total
Total number of pre-development biodiversity units approved on-site broken down by area/hedgerow/watercourse	1.53	0.11	0.00	1.64
Total number of post-development biodiversity units approved on-site broken down by area/hedgerow/watercourse	1.79	0.27	0.00	2.06
Total net unit change in biodiversity units, on-site broken down by area/hedgerow/watercourse	0.26	0.17	0.00	0.42
Average percentage (%) change in biodiversity units, on-site	0.17	1.58	0.00	1.75
Total number of baseline biodiversity units approved off-site broken down by area/hedgerow/watercourse	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Total number of post-intervention biodiversity units approved off-site broken down by area/hedgerow/watercourse	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Total net unit change in biodiversity units, off-site broken down by area/hedgerow/watercourse	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Average percentage (%) change in biodiversity units, off-site	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Total number of biodiversity units offset using statutory credits broken down by area/hedgerow/watercourse	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Total net unit change in biodiversity units (including any units offset using credits)	0.26	0.17	0.00	0.42
Average percentage (%) change (including statutory credits)	0.17	1.58	0.00	1.75

4.4 Meeting future BNG obligations

4.4.1 The Council will continue to meet statutory obligations relating to BNG, including taking into account any changes to the BNG system introduced through national planning reforms - for example changes to minimum site thresholds and exemption categories. The Council will work with GMEU, GMCA and the other GM local authorities to understand and implement these changes, including helping to prepare any new guidance material or adopting new working practices.

4.5 Progress on bringing forward Council-owned BNG habitat banks and supporting the development of a local BNG market

4.5.1 Alongside the other GM authorities, Wigan Council has been working closely with GMCA in bringing forward suitable Council-owned land to be used as BNG habitat banks. As a Responsible Body, the GMCA (in conjunction with GMEU) are able to support the Council through this process, including providing a full site verification and auditing service. As part of the Wigan Greenheart Strategy, the Council are at an advanced stage in the identification and preparation of sites to be brought forward through this process and hope to be one of the first GM authorities to establish a local authority habitat bank.

4.5.2 Once the Responsible Body service has been fully established, and potential sites have been fully assessed and approved for use, the Council will be able to register land on Natural England's biodiversity gain site register. The Council will then be able to sell biodiversity units for off-site BNG schemes. Not only will this contribute to wider nature recovery objectives in establishing new and enhanced habitats, it will also support a local habitat bank market. This will help to encourage any new habitat required through development taking place in the borough to be replaced within the borough.

4.5.3 Wigan Council has also taken a pro-active approach to supporting other habitat banks establishing in the borough. We have signed two Section 106 agreements to establish habitat banks at Cutacre with Lancashire Wildlife Trust and Allwood Farm with Greenearth Development Group an update on their status is in the next section.

4.5.4 The council will continue to work with habitat bank providers to bring forward appropriate schemes within the borough to further support the emerging off-site BNG market.

4.6 Cutacre Habitat Bank

- 4.6.1 Starting Biodiversity Units Numbers: 71.58 (56.58 area units; 15 hedgerow units)
- 4.6.2 Number of Units Allocated (to date): 0.26 area units; 0.03 hedgerow units
- 4.6.3 Total area of habitats created: 9.9ha (this is enhancement rather than creation)
- 4.6.4 Management prescriptions completed in the 2025/2026 autumn and winter period: see below synopsis.
- 4.6.5 Woodland compartment:
- thinning works in woodland compartment to reduce single species dominance undertaken
 - INNS species management works
 - initial round of ground flora plug planting in woodland to improve ground flora diversity
- 4.6.6 Grassland compartments:
- cut and collect of arisings
 - aftermath grazing by cattle
 - sowing of yellow rattle
 - seeding of MG5 species mix
 - topping cut of rush
 - INNS management
- 4.6.7 Lowland heathland
- clearance of pioneer tree species
 - set up system to allow cattle grazing through habitat to increase structural diversity
 - INNS management
- 4.6.8 Hedgerows
- planting up new species-rich hedgerows targeted at the site
 - coppicing outgrown species to return to a layable state has taken place across all target hedgerows where required

- restocking all coppiced sections of the hedgerow to increase species richness to meet target distinctiveness
- laying of a number of hedgerows at suitable age structure to lay. restock with new whips where required to increase species richness
- implemented trimming on hedgerows not yet suitable for laying
- INNS management

4.7 Allwood Farm Habitat Bank

4.7.1 Total Habitat Bank Area (not including newly planted individual trees): 25.72ha

4.7.2 Area Habitats breakdown:

- (Created and enhanced), Other Neutral Grassland: 23.99 ha
- (Created) Individual (Rural) trees: 1.47 ha
- (Enhanced) Tall forbs: 1.01ha
- (Retained but still managed) Other woodland; broadleaved: 0.6 ha
- (Retained but still managed) Pond, non-priority habitat: 0.12ha
- (Retained but still managed) Individual (Rural) trees: 0.04ha

4.7.3 Hedgerow breakdown:

- (Created) Species-rich native hedgerow with trees: 0.27km
- (Enhanced) Line of trees - associated with bank or ditch: 0.36km
- (Enhanced) Species-rich native hedgerow: 0.6km
- (Enhanced) Native hedgerow: 0.28km

4.7.4 Watercourse breakdown:

- (Enhanced) Ditches: 0.59km

4.7.5 Site wide Biodiversity Gains

- Area Habitats: 178.05 HU (+308.67%)
- Hedgerows: 6.25 HedgeU (+98.88%)
- Watercourses: 2.14 WU (+140.02)

4.7.6 Total units Allocated to Development (as of 12/03/2026)

- Area Habitats: 116.68 HU
- Hedgerows: 1.45 HedgeU
- Watercourses: 1.92WU

4.7.7 Management Prescriptions Completed (Winter 2025-2026 works)

- Other Neutral Grassland
 - Cut existing grassland and spring scarification of soils
- Wet Ditches
 - Create banking to protect waterbodies from run-off or nutrient enrichment from surrounding grassland enhancements
 - Treatment of giant hogweed
- Ponds
 - Create banking to protect waterbodies from run-off or nutrient enrichment from surrounding grassland enhancements
- Hedgerows
 - Gapping up on existing hedgerow lengths using density of 6 plants per metre in a double staggered row
 - Planting new hedgerow using UK native species including blackthorn, buckthorn, guelder rose, common dogwood, common hazel, hawthorn, dogrose with density of 6 plants per metre in a double staggered row
 - Enhancing existing hedgerow through laying and restocking as required
- Line of Trees
 - Plant trees: 1 bare root tree per 5 m, including tree guard installation, at least 70% native tree species
- Individual trees
 - Plant trees: Include tree guard installation and bare root stock consisting of English oak (40%), horse chestnut (10%), beech (20%), alder (30%)
- Woodland
 - Plant trees: 1 tree per 5 m with a mixture of bare root silver birch, hawthorn, oak, field maple
- Tall Forbs
 - Single annual cut and collect of a single coup of tall forbs, on a rotation of every third year, to a height of 100-150 mm
 - Inspect for Schedule 9 invasive species and treat as required

