

Southend-on-Sea Biodiversity Duty Report 2026



Southend-on-Sea
City Council

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1. Introduction

Southend-on-Sea City Council (SCC) are submitting this biodiversity duty report as required by Section 40 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act (NERC) 2006, amended by the Environment Act 2021. This report focuses on how biodiversity has become an integral consideration to any decisions made by the council for the city.

The council is committed to aid national goals outlined in the Environment Improvement Plan (EIP) 2025. Southend-on-Sea holds Areas of Particular Importance for Biodiversity (APIB), with the coastline being one of the significant ecological assets in the region. The city hosts a wide range of designated sites, habitats, and protected or notable species—including both coastal and terrestrial species or sites. The council's current plans to conserve and improve natural features will be featured in this report, showing demonstration of efforts previously made and which are being made to contribute to environmental targets, legislation and local priorities.

In addition to ecological conservation, this report highlights the importance of climate adaptation and resilience. As Southend-on-Sea faces the pressures of urbanisation, population growth, and a changing climate, the integration of nature-based solutions, policies and long-term adaptation measures is essential.

SCC is a unitary authority comprising 17 diverse wards, each offering unique opportunities to preserve and enhance biodiversity as well as expanding green and blue spaces. This report sets out how the Council supports net gain opportunities through strategic planning, partnership working, and targeted environmental initiatives.

2. Biodiversity Net Gain

The requirement for Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) came into place on 12th February 2024 for major building developments, followed by the necessity for biodiversity net gain from smaller developments on 2nd April 2024.

BNG is compulsory under Schedule 7A of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990, after being amended by Section 14 of the Environment Act 2021. It introduces new duties for habitat recovery and protecting vulnerable species and habitat types. The legislation states that a 10% gain for biodiversity must be achieved for new developments over 0.2 hectares (except for certain exempt plans), meaning areas must have a higher biodiversity or ecological value than they did before development takes place.

BNG is calculated using set metrics – habitat type, size, distinctiveness, condition and strategic significance. If a site has higher units, the more valuable the habitat and ecology is.

Some instances where exemptions from the above rule may exist include those for ongoing planning applications that were submitted before 12 February 2024, or variations to existing permissions like building extensions or alterations.

In situations where habitat lost from developments cannot be recreated within the Local Authority area, developers can purchase statutory biodiversity credits that will in turn fund long-term habitat creation (for a minimum of 30 years) or enhancement elsewhere outside of the area.

BNG can be delivered through on-site measures (which should be the first option for appropriate and most beneficial net gain), off-site delivery or strategic habitat creation – such as future habitat bank opportunities that are currently being explored by SCC.

Southend-on-Sea will continue to report on BNG following this document as part of the statutory five-year reporting cycle.

Local BNG Data

As of the 31 December 2025 initial reporting date, no biodiversity net gain has been accounted for in Southend-on-Sea since the introduction of legislation. No habitat units have been gained in or outside of the Local Planning Authority's boundary by the above reporting deadline. One development currently has a plan approved for biodiversity net gain, but it is yet to be implemented. Further applications requiring and proposing BNG measures continue to progress through the planning system and process.

Some reasons behind no biodiversity net gain so far includes developments that have qualified for exemptions where they are less than 0.2 hectares, or if plans were submitted before the introduction of net gain legislation (pre-February 2024). Where some sites have a baseline biodiversity unit value of 0, this means that the required, statutory 10% gain will also equate to 0 – meaning no plans are required for biodiversity.

Most planning applications or permissions in Southend within the reporting timeframe have been for minor development on previously developed land, and so, most are exempt from the BNG requirement.

Southend-on-Sea Statistics:

Approximately 167 planning permissions were granted between the full reporting year of 2024 to 2025. Of these, 52% were conversion or changes of use of existing buildings, and 24% involved demolition and redevelopment of existing buildings. A further 24% involved development on previously developed land or small urban infill sites.

158 of the permissions were exempt from the Biodiversity Gain Requirements (Exemptions) Regulations 2024, including:

- Sites with an existing planning permission prior to the introduction of mandatory BNG.
- Developments below the stated thresholds (developments that did not or will not impact a priority habitat, and are less than 25 square metres of on-site habitat- or 5 metres of on-site linear habitat such as hedgerows).
- Variations of planning permission.
- Householder applications such as home extensions and loft conversions
- Three self-build or custom build housebuilding exemptions.
- Developments granted permission by a development order (including permitted development rights).

The three self-build and custom build exemptions granted in this period may actually require a Biodiversity Gain Plan in cases where the property is not occupied for at least three years from first occupation as a self-build property.

There were eight planning permission not considered to fall within an exemption and therefore these are required to submit a Biodiversity Gain Plan. The statutory framework for biodiversity net gain requires a Biodiversity Gain Plan to be submitted and approved by the planning authority to discharge the biodiversity gain condition prior to the commencement of development. The Biodiversity Gain Plan in these cases should be submitted no earlier than the day after planning permission has been granted. None were submitted in the reporting period.

Going forward:

BNG conditions will continue to be monitored and enforced by SCC Planning teams. Planning applications will be refused where BNG requirements are not met or where there is not enough evidence to demonstrate how biodiversity will be enhanced over the mandatory 30-year period set out by legislation.

The LPA, as mentioned, continues to explore the potential for an establishment of a habitat bank which would support future off-site net gain delivery.

Biodiversity and net gain initiatives will be implemented into forthcoming corporate policies and plans including the new Local Plan.

Potential Enhancement Opportunities

In line with the introduction of net gain in February 2024, baseline habitat surveys were conducted in Autumn 2023 (and published in May 2024) by Essex Ecology to identify locations offering the most potential for enhancement opportunities. Surveys of a small number of sites provided an initial understanding as to where developers could most effectively deliver ecological improvements. The pilot sites were chosen as they reflected a range of site sizes and types, including a diverse range of green spaces and habitat types when analysed together. They therefore allow a comparison of contrasting environments for enhancement potential – whether that is determined as just small-scale interventions or larger opportunities for enhancement and strategic interventions.

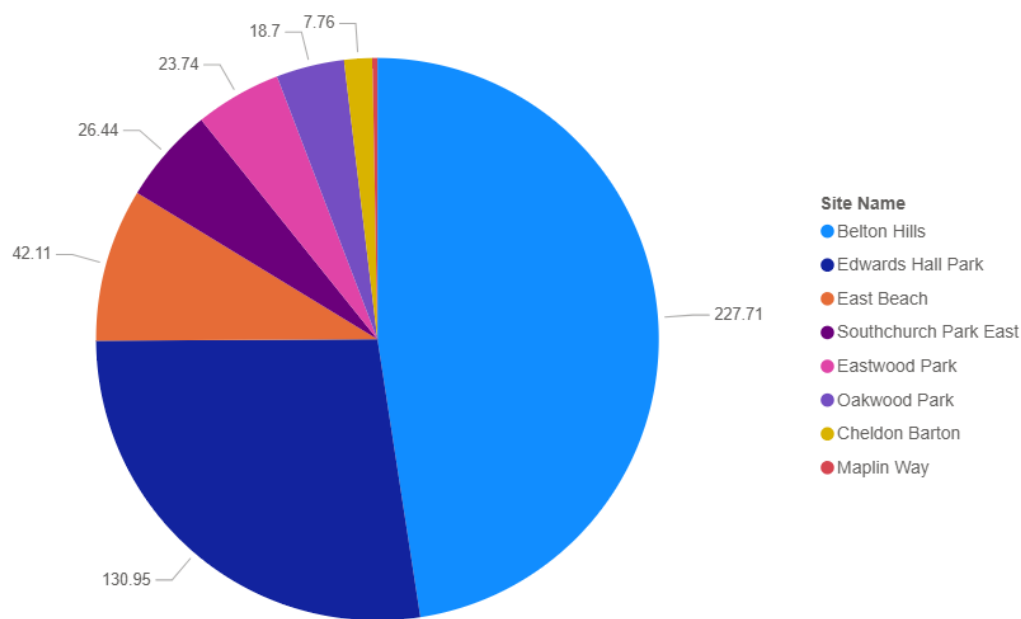
Figure 1, presenting the potential uplift in biodiversity units across eight surveyed sites in Southend-on-Sea

Site Name	Site Area (ha)	Baseline (total biodiversity units)	Max Potential Uplift from Enhancements (total biodiversity units)	Habitat Types for Enhancement	Habitat Types for Habitat Creation
Belton Hills	32.243	202.24	227.71	Neutral Grassland; Blackthorn Scrub; Hawthorn Scrub; Mixed Scrub; Broadleaved Woodland	Arable; Neutral Grassland; Mixed Scrub; Ponds; Hedgerows
Edwards Hall Park	11.8	101.82	130.95	Neutral Grassland; Blackthorn Scrub; Broadleaved Woodland	-
East Beach	11.3	23.1	42.11	Modified Grassland; Neutral Grassland; Broadleaved Woodland; Line of Trees	Neutral Grassland; Mixed Scrub; Tree Planting; Hedgerows

Southchurch Park East	7	38.67	26.44	Modified Grassland; Neutral Grassland; Blackthorn Scrub; Hawthorn Scrub; Mixed Scrub; Broadleaved Woodland; Line of Trees	Neutral Grassland; Mixed Scrub; Tree Planting; Hedgerows
Eastwood Park	6.23	20.82	23.74	Modified Grassland; Mixed Scrub; Broadleaved Woodland; Line of Trees	Neutral Grassland; Mixed Scrub; Tree Planting; Hedgerows
Oakwood Park	6.22	16.48	18.7	Modified Grassland; Broadleaved Woodland	Neutral Grassland; Mixed Scrub; Tree Planting
Maplin Way	1.57	20	1.35	Modified Grassland; Broadleaved Woodland	Neutral Grassland; Tree Planting; Hedgerows
Cheldon Barton	0.365	1.51	7.76	Modified Grassland	Neutral Grassland; Tree Planting; Hedgerows

The sites surveyed were evaluated and can be compared to see the most opportunistic site for habitat enhancements and therefore would allow for the highest increase in biodiversity units. Belton Hills has the greatest opportunity for potential uplift from biodiversity enhancements. The data also indicates that Cheldon Barton has the highest difference in units from potential uplift compared to its baseline units, while Maplin Way has the lowest – only showing a potential uplift of 6.75% in units.

Figure 2, Sites with the Greatest Opportunity for Biodiversity Uplift (in Biodiversity Units)



These sites provide promising opportunities for targeted enhancement activities, showing Belton Hills and Edwards Hall Park as the sites that may have the greatest capacity for future delivery of biodiversity initiatives.

Additional habitat types and sites not included in these surveys may also present great enhancement potential. Ongoing assessments and surveys of areas will help understand potential opportunities.

The next Southend-on-Sea biodiversity duty report will be published by April 2031, with updated information on BNG delivery and habitat creation. Progress achieved will continue to be communicated through a variety of corporate reports, plans and policies.

3. Policies and Plans for Biodiversity

In addition to planning decisions for BNG, biodiversity is also embedded across a range of local policies and strategies.

SCC supported and participated in the development of the Greater Essex Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS). The strategy focuses on increasing resident access to green space, particularly in urban areas, by planting trees and creating wetlands as well as incorporating green walls and roofs into new developments. It identifies opportunities for habitat creation and enhancement throughout the city.

As outlined in the LNRS, considering the benefits of the city's green and blue spaces will not only save different kinds of plants and animals, but allow for healthier people by giving places to relax and connect with nature or reducing floods and making air or water cleaner. An interactive map was produced alongside the LNRS which identifies opportunity areas in habitats across the region. It highlights some areas which Southend-on-Sea may focus on in the next few years – getting up to date information and knowledge on these opportunistic areas and deciding on actions for enhancing them. For example, woodland and grassland habitat enhancement areas.

In addition, the council also is part of the Essex Coast Recreational Disturbance and Avoidance Mitigation Strategy (RAMS) partnership – which aims to prevent harm or disturbance to protected wildlife along the coast. It focuses on protected bird species and the habitats they live in, by mitigating recreational impacts arising from new housing development. In-combination impacts are mitigated using the Essex Coast RAMS tariff – which places a charge per dwelling. This is currently £169.45 per dwelling but increases in line with the Retail Price Index each April. The charge ensures measures set out by the RAMS are funded, and mitigation measures to protected coastal birds and habitats are considered alongside housing.

The new Southend-on-Sea Local Plan seeks to support the enhancement of our natural environment. Draft Strategic Policy SP8 seeks to 'protect and enhance national and internationally important sites for nature conservation' (ii) and 'secure a net gain in biodiversity for the city as a whole' (vi). It also aims to provide a new Country Park on the northern edge of Southend-on-Sea. The latter has been a long-held ambition, as identified in the Core Strategy (2007). It is anticipated that the new local plan will be submitted for examination in 2027 following the Regulation 19 consultation in the summer of 2026.

Other Southend-on-Sea Strategies Incorporating Biodiversity

Numerous supporting documents integrate biodiversity into local decision-making:

Southend-on-Sea Local Biodiversity Action Plan Annual Report 2014: Identifies local priority or protected species. Updated surveys are planned in order to refresh ecological baselines.

A Grassland Management Strategy for Bees and Other Pollinators 2023–2028: Set out the actions that support pollinator species recovery, including green roofs, wildflower meadow expansion and collaborative efforts to improve biodiversity by habitat creation.

South Essex Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy and Study 2020: Reviewed open spaces across Southend-on-Sea and their capacity for differing opportunities to support biodiversity, restoration and climate change initiatives.

Local Plan Integrated Impact Assessment Scoping Report 2017: Combines assessments across different sectors - biodiversity, climate change and environmental quality – and areas. It identifies current baseline conditions such as designated sites, protected species and priority habitats.

Together, these documents ensure biodiversity and net gain are always considered around any land management and developments taking place within the city.

4. Species and Habitats

The species and habitats of Southend-on-Sea requires more attention as the city continues to urbanise and the climate is changing. As referenced in the Greater Essex LNRS, Southend-on-Sea holds many APIBs (Areas of Particular Importance for Biodiversity) throughout the city. It is one of the largest settlements in Essex and provides abundant opportunity for species throughout its green and blue spaces.

Species:

Southend-on-Sea is home to a range of priority and vulnerable species, some residing in the city's specially designated habitats, including the following that have been noted from local evidence:

Mammals

Western Hedgehog (*Erinaceus europaeus*)
Hazel Dormouse (*Muscardinus avellanarius*)
Water Vole (*Arvicola amphibius*)

Birds

Dark-bellied Brent Goose (*Branta bernicla bernicla*)
Hen Harrier (*Circus cyaneus*)
Grey Plover (*Pluvialis squatarola*)
Red Knot (*Calidris canutus*)
Dunlin (*Calidris alpina*)
Black-tailed Godwit (*Limosa limosa*)
Ringed Plover (*Charadrius hiaticula*)
Little Tern (*Sternula albifrons*)

Invertebrates

Heath Fritillary Butterfly (*Melitaea athalia*),
Shrill Carder Bees (*Bombus sylvarum*)

Reptiles

Adder (*Vipera berus*)

Pressures and risks

These species suffer from pressures like recreational disturbance, human activity and exercise as well as dog walking in sensitive areas, or urban developments and climate change. Urbanisation poses threats to habitats or fragments them, reducing ecological connectivity whilst the everchanging climate alters the most optimum habitat conditions and the food which is available to species.

Ongoing development and delivery of local policies and plans, designated sites, further baseline surveys on species within the city and habitat management will continue to reduce such risks and allow for recovery of species and their abundance over time.

Habitats:

Southend-on-Sea is home to a diverse range of nationally and internationally important habitats which include various conservation designations, priority habitats and irreplaceable ecological features that support the city's biodiversity.

Designated Sites:

National Nature Reserve (NNR)

- Leigh Nature Reserve (Two Tree Island) – the city's only nationally recognised reserve, providing key coastal and intertidal habitats.

Local Nature Reserves (LNRs)

- Belfairs Nature Reserve
- Southend-on-Sea Foreshore
- Belton Hills Nature Reserve
- Shoeburyness Old Ranges

Ramsar Sites (internationally important wetlands)

- Benfleet and Southend Marshes
- Foulness

Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI)

- Benfleet and Southend Marshes
- Great Wood and Dodd's Grove

Special Areas of Conservation (SACs)

- Essex Estuaries

Special Protection Areas (SPAs)

- Benfleet and Southend Marshes
- Foulness

Several of these areas overlap- such as Benfleet and Southend Marshes- signifying their ecological value and environmental importance.

Priority Habitat Types

Priority habitats noted in the city include:

- Coastal Saltmarsh
- Intertidal Mudflats
- Hedgerows
- Lowland Meadows

- Lowland Dry Acid Grassland
- Lowland Mixed Deciduous Woodland
- Coastal Sand Dunes
- Ponds (depending on the species present)

These habitats support specialist species and maintain ecological diversity across the area.

Irreplaceable Habitats

Certain habitats require a particularly high level of protection because they cannot be recreated elsewhere. In Southend-on-Sea, this includes:

- **Ancient Woodlands:** Belfairs Woods and eastern parts of Hadleigh Great Wood (both of which fall under the Great Wood and Dodd's Grove woodland complex, which also extends into the region of Castle Point)
- **Saltmarsh:** Leigh National Nature Reserve, Benfleet and Southend Marshes
- **Coastal sand dunes**
- **Individual ancient and veteran trees**

These irreplaceable habitats are recognised under Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) guidance and form a core component of long-term nature recovery. Development on irreplaceable habitats such as the above is not permitted and will not be approved except in exceptional circumstances, which may include developments of major national infrastructure of importance, developments delivering health, safety or security benefits, schemes where no feasible alternative locations exist for development. Societal benefits will need to outweigh the environmental damage taken place by removing irreplaceable habitats.

Bespoke compensation strategies (possibly including long-term funding to manage other irreplaceable habitats, habitat buffering, protection, or expansion, or securing large areas of high-value habitat for conservation)

Increasing habitat features such as hedgerows, woodland edges, ponds and wildflower meadows within parks, green areas and open spaces are also extremely important for biodiversity, improving ecological connectivity across Southend-on-Sea.

5. Engagement and Achievements

SCC deliver a range of projects, and education or engagement activities that directly support local biodiversity and the conditions required for long-term biodiversity net gain.

Schools and young people are reached through sustainability and environmental education initiatives, one being those offered by Southend Tree Wardens. The group provides tree planting opportunities for nurseries and schools, supports volunteer involvement in woodland management techniques such as coppicing (which in turn benefits biodiversity by providing more sunlight to the woodland) or in local events. The Southend Learning Network provides schools with resources on sustainability, waste, recycling, and environmental responsibility. These programmes encourage pupils or children to adopt pro-environmental behaviours and contribute to a cleaner, greener Southend-on-Sea.

Partnership working also plays an important role. SCC has previously collaborated with organisations within their supply chain to deliver biodiversity-focused grassroots projects, including citizen science monitoring, school sensory gardens, food growing spaces, and volunteering in parks and open spaces. Participation in international programmes such as *Interreg 2 Seas* has also supported nature-enhancing initiatives including the *Nature Smart Cities* and *PlastiCity* projects, assisting creations like that of the outstanding BREEAM recognised, sustainable Launchpad building. Both projects, and more under this programme, have improved local ecological opportunities.

Species-specific initiatives also strengthen biodiversity objectives and recovery efforts. The Heath Fritillary Working Group, supported by Essex Wildlife Trust (EWT), helps monitor and conserve one of the UK's rarest butterflies, while local monitoring efforts also contribute to understanding the status of Hazel Dormice within Southend-on-Sea.

Broader community engagement is supported through biodiversity grants, planting workshops, and opportunities for volunteers and local groups to help restore and care for green spaces across the city. SCC is also a lead partner in the DEFRA funded Catchment to Coast project, which includes initiatives aimed at improving habitat quality, waterways and climate resilience.

Together, education, monitoring and engagement activities help embed biodiversity into everyday community life. By raising awareness, encouraging participation, and supporting local action, SCC enables residents of all ages to play an active role in protecting and enhancing the natural environment, with associated benefits for wellbeing, mental health and outdoor activity.

6. Summary

SCC have outlined its' current involvement in BNG and identified potential areas for enhancement. Since the introduction of BNG requirements, no developments within the reporting period have resulted in a measurable net gain outcome yet. This reflects the early stage of implementation and the time required for applications, assessments, and design processes to progress under the new legislative framework.

Work so far has involved supporting applicants to involve BNG principles into their proposals and ensure that submitted plans meet statutory requirements. Although no completed schemes have yet delivered quantifiable biodiversity gains, the number of enquiries and emerging applications indicates increasing engagement with the process.

Across the local area, several opportunities for habitat enhancement and ecological improvement have been identified through routine data collection, case reviews and site appraisals. These opportunities will help inform future applications and guide developers toward delivering outcomes that support local priority habitats, species, and wider ecosystem resilience. Additionally, community involvement and partnership projects have proven to play a key role in nature recovery, supporting species and habitats – helping to create suitable conditions needed for biodiversity to thrive.

As legislation becomes more embedded in practice and additional applications progress to implementation, it is expected that BNG delivery will become more evident in subsequent reporting periods. Strengthening and applying strategic policies will ensure targeted protection of biodiversity, priority species and habitats, in line with net gain requirements. Continued monitoring, reviews, and effective use of available enhancement opportunities will help ensure that future developments and schemes are well positioned to achieve meaningful biodiversity benefits.

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Glossary

Terms	Definitions
Biodiversity	The range of plant and animal life in areas, habitats or ecosystems.
Ecological Diversity	The range of species, habitats and ecosystem processes in an area.
Priority Habitats or Species	Plants, animals or habitats recognised to have conservation importance.
Pollinators	Insects like bees which support plant reproduction.
Baseline	The initial (biodiversity) value before a site may change in any way.
Biodiversity Units	Measurement for calculating biodiversity value, gains or losses.
Metric	System of measurements to calculate biodiversity changes by habitat evaluation.
Statutory Credit	Government-issued biodiversity credits for off-site compensation and enhancement.
Strategic Significance	Measure of habitat importance in BNG metrics.
Local Planning Authority (LPA)	Government body responsible for planning decisions and BNG compliance.
Saltmarsh	Coastal wetlands made by saltwater tides which support specific species.
Sand Dunes	Mounds of sand along the coast supporting specific species.
Intertidal	Areas exposed only at low tide, where most species inhabit.
Green or Blue Infrastructure	Interconnected networks of natural or semi-natural features in urban environments including green spaces like parks and ponds or wetlands.

Irreplaceable Habitats	Habitats like ancient woodland or saltmarshes which cannot be recreated.
Ancient Trees and Woodlands	Irreplaceable habitats that have high biodiversity value and history in an area.
APIBs	Areas of Particular Importance for Biodiversity, designated to be protected and enhanced.
Designated Sites	Protected or recognised conservation areas due to natural or cultural importance.
Habitat Bank	A designated area for habitat enhancement or creation where credits can be purchased from to compensate for habitat loss elsewhere.
Habitat Enhancement	Improving features or conditions within a habitat to increase biodiversity.
Habitat Fragmentation	Where habitats are broken up into isolated segments or patches.
Mitigation	Measures or actions taken to reduce negative environmental impacts.
Nature-based Solutions	Actions aimed at solving environmental challenges – protecting, conserving, restoring habitats and their functions.
Climate Adaptation	The process of adjusting actions or strategies to cope with the changes in climate and secondary effects like biodiversity loss and extreme weather.
Climate Resilience	The capability and preparedness to prepare for climate change impacts whilst maintaining normal functions.
Urbanisation	Making an area more built-up and urban, which puts pressure on habitats.
Catchment to Coast	A programme funded by DEFRA to improve habitats, waterways and climate resilience.