

Iford Biodiversity Project, South Downs

NATURAL
ENGLAND

Biodiversity net gain land management

Biodiversity net gain (BNG) offers landowners a new way to fund nature recovery on their land, alongside providing an alternative income stream to complement other business activities. This document explores how BNG can refocus land management plans and sit alongside traditional farming activities.

[Iford Biodiversity Project](#) is the latest environmental strategy for Iford Estate, a farm in the South Downs National Park which has been managed by the Robinson family for more than 125 years. The family has always explored new opportunities for environment and land use, and this has taken on a little more urgency as farm profit margins have narrowed in recent years.

In 2020, Iford Estate was selected to be one of Natural England's statutory biodiversity credits pilots, in preparation for mandatory BNG. Monies from sale of statutory biodiversity credits will be invested in habitat delivery in England. Together with Defra, Natural England is investigating the potential projects in which the Secretary of State may choose to invest in future.

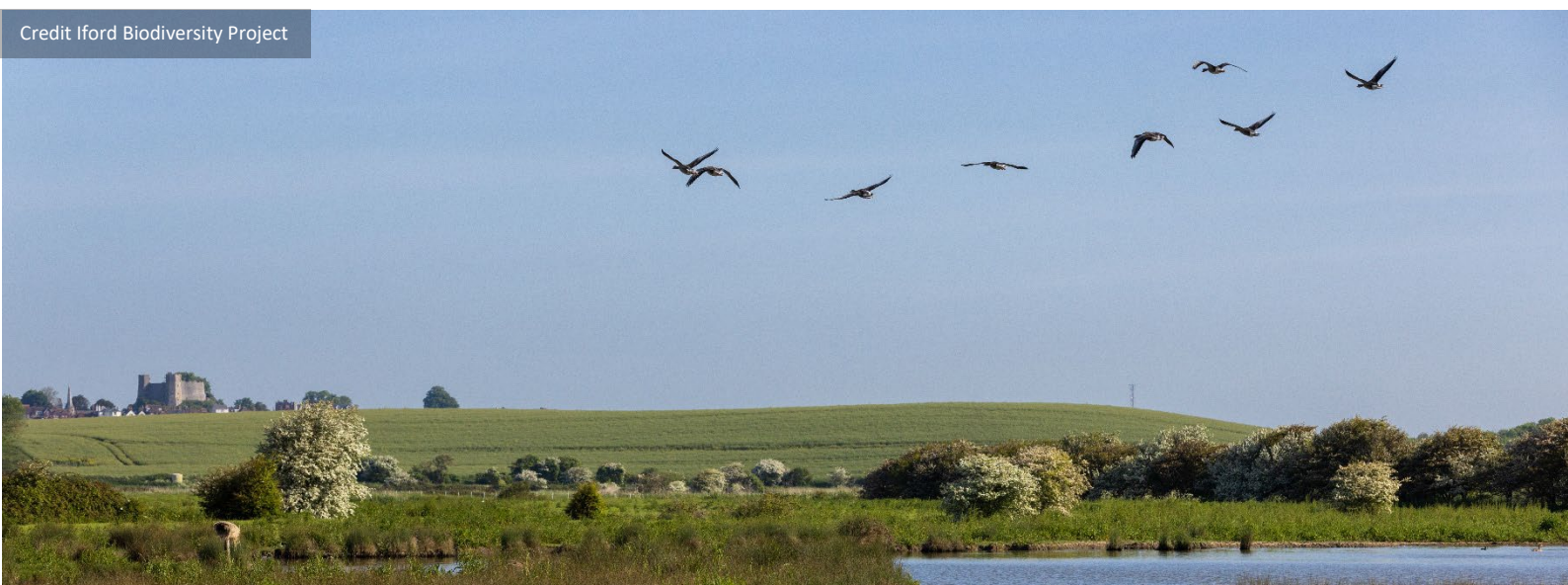
Initially, the aim was to explore any options offered by this new policy. Now, even before BNG is launched, Iford Biodiversity Project is a well-established business model already selling biodiversity units and delivering an increase in biodiversity in the area.

Why BNG?

In the current agricultural transition, especially with the winding down of the Basic Payment Scheme and a growing need for climate mitigation, many farmers are choosing to broaden their opportunities. This has been the approach of the Iford Estate. BNG is one of the many alternative income streams open to landowners, offering a structured way to contribute towards nature recovery, whilst maintaining ownership of the land.

"BNG is a way to tap into the development market without doing any of the development itself," explains Ben Taylor, Managing Director. "Iford will not have development on the farm owing to our environmental status and location within the South Downs National Park. We can, however, support development in a way that contributes to the recovery of nature and finances the good work we do on the land."

Credit Iford Biodiversity Project



BNG-inspired land management principles

“BNG has been a real catalyst for developing our vision and a new approach to our land management principles,” says Anthony Weston, technical lead for Iford Biodiversity Project and Director of CLM, a land and property management consultancy.

“It has prompted a whole different way of thinking. By doing the BNG baseline and considering our options with BNG, we have also found ourselves exploring other environmental, social and governance (ESG) options, which could all be great sources of funding. It all boils down to what is feasible.”

Preparing for BNG can take some time and should always be supported by a competent person.

“I always approach these things with a good amount of scepticism,” adds Ben Taylor. “It feels like a lot of time and money, and therefore a big risk. But three years later it is so exciting to realise what we can do. We’re looking at factoring in the cost of the risk taken into the price paid by private market for off-site units.”

The importance of engagement

BNG involves a lot of people, from the developers, to landowners, local planning authorities (LPAs), and the communities impacted. Engaging with everyone involved is key.

Right from the beginning, Ben Taylor told the local community what they were working on through his regular newsletter. When he held a community event to present more detailed plans, the atmosphere was almost universally supportive.

Nature restoration is generally viewed positively, especially when it is accompanied by greater access to better green space. “We may have benefitted from the success of the Knepp rewilding project, which isn’t too far away,” concedes Ben Taylor.

Anthony Weston agrees that community support cannot be taken for granted. While rewilding may have a positive profile in many places, he has experience of rewilding golf courses, and some neighbours have been vocal about the perceived “mess”. “This is why early engagement is key. While this is a ground-breaking vision of nature recovery, you need to bring people onboard right from the start.”

Iford Biodiversity Project has found that a huge variety of stakeholders have bought into BNG as a ground-breaking vision. Finding the right people to help move things forwards was less straightforward. “We struggled to engage our more technical stakeholders early on as we didn’t know how to find them,” explains Ben Taylor. “We succeeded by reaching out to as many people as possible.”

As BNG becomes mandatory, there will be greater awareness of the policy and engagement will be easier.





Securing the land with legal agreements

Iford Biodiversity Project is unusual in that the local planning authority is the South Downs National Park, which means it has some different objectives in comparison with other LPAs.

The South Downs National Park did a call for nature sites, and this was the perfect route through to setting up a section 106 agreement to secure the land. The hope is that more and more LPAs will be doing a call for nature.

“It is worth having all these conversations and prompting the LPA to look at BNG as an incredible opportunity on their side too,” Ben Taylor adds. “While it took us a lot of legwork on both sides to get a section 106 in place, I know we would all say it has been worth it. By pioneering the way, we hope it will be much quicker and easier for those who follow.”

Benefits for the early bird

The temporal multiplier in the [biodiversity metric 4.0](#) means that biodiversity units which are ready today but not used for some time actually increase in value as the same habitat is worth more units each year it has been allowed to develop. This is because the habitat will have had additional time to establish and there is clear delivery of the habitat rather than just an action plan to do so. For example, starting with “poor” calcareous grassland and then selling some biodiversity units once they reach “moderate” condition or even “good” condition means that the same upfront investment is worth more the later it is cashed in.

Investing in and beginning the habitat creation or habitat enhancement process before starting to sell the biodiversity units is called ‘habitat banking’. This is different from ‘land banking’ which is when the biodiversity units are sold in advance of habitat creation and delivery works only start when a deal is done. In ‘land banking’, there are less biodiversity units and a greater risk of non-delivery for developers. For landowners, however, ‘land banking’ means carrying less financial risk, because the money is received for the habitat works in advance of starting them.

“This is a clear benefit for the early movers,” Ben Taylor points out. “We’ve made our first sale with habitat banking. It is an investment for the developer and means we can work on our habitat delivery now.”

BNG as a complement to agriculture

“It is important to note though that we will still be producing food. We will still be farmers,” stresses Ben Taylor, Managing Director.

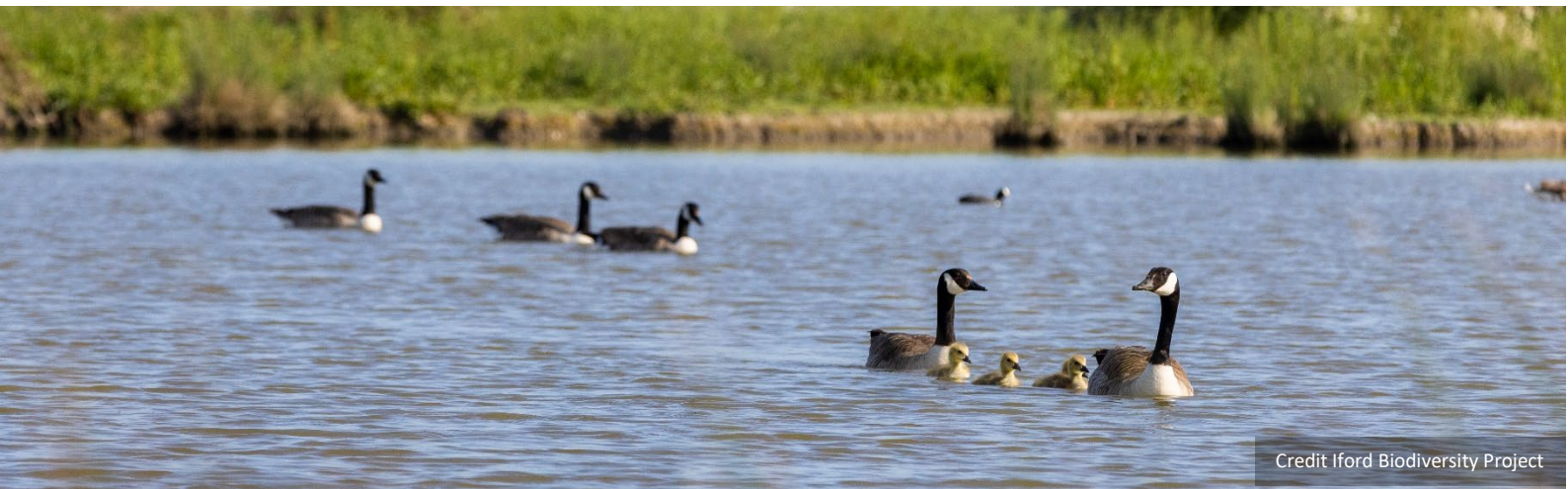
“We have deliberately allocated the best quality land to remain as arable land, the more marginal land which our forefathers found to be suitable only for grazing will be once again used for grazing, in a very low intensity way, and with the environment as the focus, not the livestock.



“In this way biodiversity can thrive, and we hope and expect to see large increases in the sort of rare species we already see in small areas of the farm, as well as lots of new ones.”

Challenges as opportunities

The design of Iford Biodiversity Project has largely been led by [the BNG metric](#). It is important to be realistic about what can be delivered rather than too aspirational and open up the project to risk. “We’re always asked why we’re not delivering chalk grassland,” Ben Taylor says. “The answer is the metric rightly disincentivises this habitat because it is so hard to deliver. We’re looking at what will really work in this landscape.”



“There is a common desire to plant trees everywhere,” Anthony Weston adds. “Again, this rightly doesn’t work in the metric because of how long trees take to grow. Instead, we’re looking at scrubby mosaic, with the idea that some of this may become open woodland further down the line.”

The biggest challenge the Iford Biodiversity Project faces is the possibility of losing the seawall further off the estate owing to rising sea levels and climate change. “It was a bit of a bombshell,” acknowledges Ben Taylor, “but actually, it comes with huge opportunities for us. We were thinking of freshwater habitats and now we can consider saline habitats too.”

With all these habitats, there is a need to plan in adaptation for climate change. The 30-year agreement covers anticipated milestones in the national and global efforts to address climate change.

Natural England seeks to achieve thriving Nature for people and planet by building partnerships for Nature’s recovery.

Biodiversity net gain is part of the government’s Environment Act 2021. Natural England is working closely with and advising Defra on the design and development of BNG.

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