

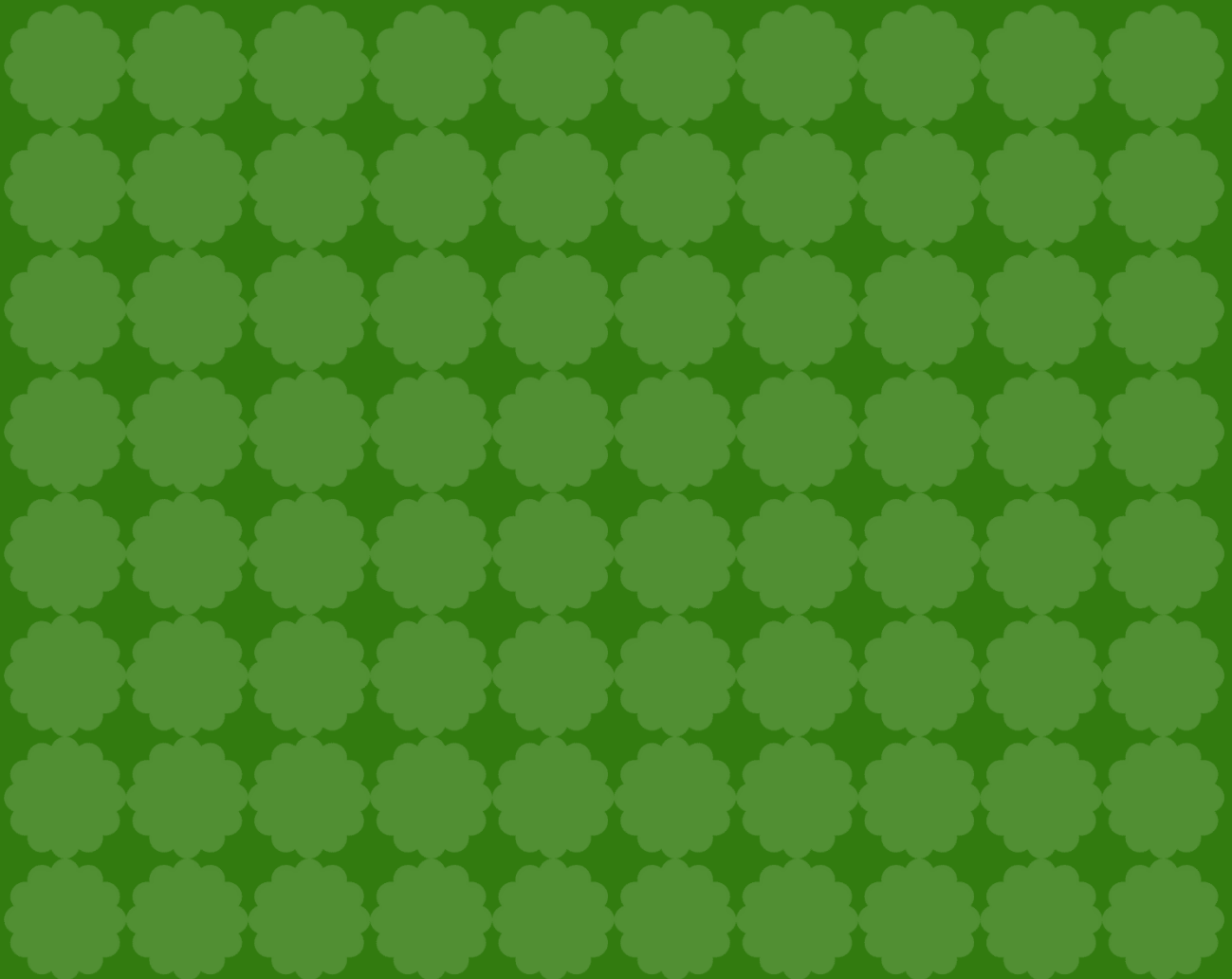
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DOING THINGS DIFFERENTLY FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

Land at Hilton Lane, Salford, and Biodiversity Net Gain

Bellway Homes Case Study

March 2021



Introduction

Bellway Homes were aiming to develop 209 residential dwellings with open space on an area of 6.5ha of land at Hilton Lane, Salford. Prior to development the site consisted of species-poor grassland with hedgerows on the boundaries.

The development would result in the loss of the grassland within the site. The developer was not able to secure a net gain for biodiversity on the site due to the required housing numbers. To provide the biodiversity gains needed, the developer contributed a sum of money via a section 106 agreement for the provision of green infrastructure locally, including funds for habitat creation and enhancement.

Offsite habitat management was focused at Blackleach Country Park, a Local Wildlife Site owned and managed by Salford City Council. The habitat creation works will be focussed on the creation of species-rich grassland to compensate for the habitats lost on site.

With this compensation agreed, the scheme was deemed to have met the requirements for Biodiversity Net Gain. Agreeing to deliver Biodiversity Net Gain with a specific percentage gain and a clear method for offsite compensation can avoid costly delays and would have resulted in this development moving through the planning process more quickly.

The following case study was an initial pilot undertaken in 2018/19, which was an example lead and submitted by the developer. The Local Planning Authority does not endorse the findings of this work but is happy for this work to be shared.

Background

In 2019, a planning application was submitted to Salford City Council by Bellway Homes for the erection of 209 residential dwellings, creation of open space and associated infrastructure works, on an area of land at Hilton Lane, Salford, in the urban fringe between Worsley, Walkden and Tyldesley in Salford (Figure 1).



Figure 1 - Aerial View of the Hilton Lane application site (Nature Park West to the left).

The application site is a 6.5-ha former playing field, used for sheep grazing, dominated by species-poor grassland but with intact hedgerows on the boundaries. The application site, although having low intrinsic biodiversity value itself, is adjacent to a Local Wildlife Site (LWS), referred to as 'Nature Park West'.

There is a railway line to the north of the site which provides habitat connectivity. To the south and east of the site are areas of recently constructed residential development called Burgess Farm, which underwent a Biodiversity Net Gain assessment retrospectively.

Ecological advice on the planning application was provided to the Council by Greater Manchester Ecology Unit (GMEU).

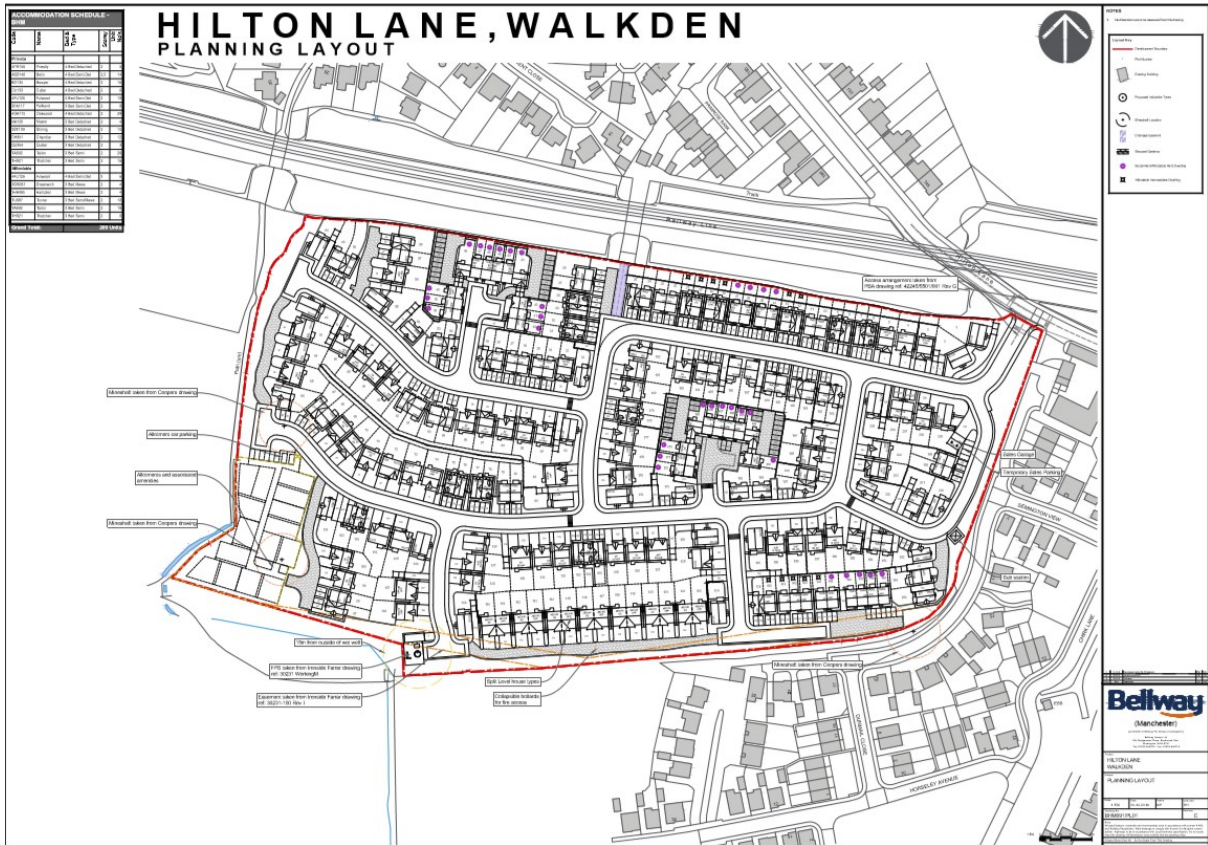


Figure 2 - Illustrative plan of Hilton Lane development.

How the Scheme Considered Biodiversity Net Gain

The application site was allocated for residential development by Salford City Council as part of the Council's Local Plan. As part of the policies relating to the allocated site, any future development was required to provide biodiversity enhancement, primarily by contributing to the improvement and future management of the adjacent Nature Park West, a Local Wildlife Site, and by providing habitat connectivity through the site.

Ecological surveys of the site were undertaken to inform the planning application. The site had previously been surveyed by Greater Manchester Ecology Unit (GMEU) on behalf of the Council.

The surveys found that the site was dominated by species-poor improved and semi-improved grassland, with low potential to support any protected species but with some limited potential to provide sub-optimal terrestrial habitats for great crested newts, known to be present in the wider area (Figure 3).



Figure 3 - Phase 1 Habitat Map for Hilton Lane Development.

The proposed development would result in the almost total loss of the improved grassland within the site, although established hedgerows at the southern and eastern boundaries were possible to retain and manage for the long-term.

Although the habitats to be lost were of low distinctiveness and in poor condition, the development as planned would result in a loss in biodiversity. The biodiversity metric was used to quantify the loss but not the gain on site.

Subsequently, discussions were held between Bellway Homes, GMEU and Salford City Council to try to secure biodiversity enhancements within the red line of the application.

However, the number of housing units needed to be maintained due to the requirement of Salford City Council to secure a minimum number of affordable dwellings on the site. The developer also made the case that decreasing the number of housing units planned on the site being would make the site unviable.

A biodiversity metric was not applied to the updated scheme. However, some changes were made to landscaping provision following site-based discussions and landscape analysis. These changes were primarily aimed at improving habitat connectivity through the site. Amendments included:

- Widening of landscape buffers at site boundaries and appropriate management of boundary habitats
- Provision of significant new tree and shrub planting within the site
- Making boundaries within the site, and providing hedgehog holes in garden fences
- Providing bird nesting and bat roosting provision within and close to the site

Nevertheless, these measures were still considered to be insufficient to demonstrate a biodiversity enhancement as required by Policy and GMEU maintained an objection to the planning application.

This information from the biodiversity metric was used to inform the additional off site (or offset) requirements. The cost of delivering the offsite biodiversity gains was based on specific requirements for compensation on the specific offset site identified for the project.

Providing offsite Biodiversity Net Gain

Following further representations from GMEU, the Council decided that if the scheme were to be made acceptable in Policy terms, offsite habitat provision would be required.

Unfortunately, the developer was unable to secure habitat enhancement on the adjacent land.

The developer then agreed to provide a sum for the provision of green infrastructure locally, including funds for habitat creation and enhancement. The funding will be made available to the Council under the terms of an S106 agreement.

Habitat provision funded through the S106 will be provided at Blackleach Country Park (Figure 4), a Local Wildlife Site within 1.5 miles of the application site. The Country Park is owned and managed by Salford City Council. The habitat creation works will be focussed on the creation of species-rich grassland. As Blackleach is known to support great crested newts, the habitat enhancements will also be designed to benefit amphibians.



Figure 4 - Aerial view, Blackleach Country Park, Walkden.

Project Outcomes

Although the areas of new habitat to be created will not cover the area of habitat to be lost, the habitats will be of greater value for biodiversity than those to be lost. GMEU accepted that the new habitat provision would, over time, represent a net gain in local biodiversity, although a percentage gain was unable to be quantitatively arrived at due to the timescales required for the survey and assessment.

Lessons Learned

This study demonstrates the challenges and opportunities Biodiversity Net Gain provides. To make the most of the opportunities and avoid the challenges it is important:

- To make sure that the requirements from the Local Planning Authority for a percentage net gain using the metric are clear at the outset of the development process. This will help plan for Biodiversity Net Gain from the outset and decrease associated costs.
- To use the Biodiversity 2.0 metric throughout the development process. Using the metric enables developers to quantify biodiversity value associated with the landscaping of the site, including gardens. This will also help clarify what is required and what the compensation sites (including the offsite habitat enhancement) are providing. This will be a requirement of future planning applications.
- That the options for setting up offsite biodiversity work are set out clearly and understood by all involved. Ideally several of these options, including the offsite work being provided by the Local Planning Authority, should be set up and available to the developer so that they can select the best option for their development. It will be important to have a transparent methodology for working out the required financial contributions for the creation of different habitat types offsite where the applicant does not own or control the land. This is important to make delivering a 10% net gain deliverable for all projects and to ensure any additional surveys needed to assess the gains on the offsite area are undertaken before the planning application is submitted.

- Biodiversity Net Gain requires ecologists to be involved in the design and construction of a development. Ecologists will be needed to support the developer and the local authority.
- A management plan and arrangements for ongoing monitoring and reporting should be produced. This will need to cover the offsite and onsite biodiversity and landscape plans, setting out targets for 30 years with actions set for at least the next five. This will be requirement for planning applications.

Agreeing to deliver Biodiversity Net Gain with a specific percentage and a clear method for offsite compensation can avoid costly delays and would have resulted in this development moving through the planning process more quickly.