

Ecologists warn of 'perverse outcomes' of BNG metric

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Issues including difficulties in obtaining information and data and a shortfall in experienced ecologists have left environmental professionals facing “ethical concerns” as they grapple with the recently introduced biodiversity net gain (BNG) mechanism, a survey has found.



BNG, which came into force in February this year, is a key mechanism for achieving the UK's legally binding target to halt nature's decline by 2030.

To comply with BNG, most new developments must compensate for any habitat they destroy, and then add an extra 10%'s worth of habitat, either on site, locally or through government credits.

However, the policy has faced teething issues, with campaigners recently warning of a “mass abuse” of the exemptions to the scheme that they said was putting the legal target to halt species decline by 2030 at risk.

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Now, a survey of more than 100 members of the Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management (CIEEM) – a professional body for ecologists and environmental managers – found that only one-fifth of respondents believe that BNG has been successful so far.

Some 89% of respondents to the survey, carried out by AI firm AiDASH on behalf of CIEEM, said that they do not think the BNG metric describes everything needed to prepare an application.

Two-thirds of respondents said they do not think it is easy to find the relevant data for identifying and defining habitats and 63% do not think it is easy to access data to determine the strategic significance of habitats.

Nearly nine out of 10 respondents (89%) also said there remains a “substantial and concerning” shortfall in experienced ecologists to deliver BNG, with only one quarter of respondents finding there to be sufficient training opportunities to develop the skills relevant to the BNG metric.

As a result of these challenges, 73% of respondents said they have felt “pressured, rushed, or stretched” when delivering BNG, with half of respondents also reporting “professional ethical concerns” about issues, including “perverse outcomes” of the metric or pressure to deliver a 10% gain.

Mark Nason, head of professional practice at CIEEM, said: “Having the right skills and capacity within the ecology and environmental management sector is crucial to nature recovery. BNG is a core part of England’s approach and is inevitably resulting in more work and pressure in our sector.

“We need to work together to make BNG a success, and this means learning lessons from implementation since February, and improving capacity within the sector. Better access to training, data, and appropriate use of AI tools are all part of the solution”.

ENDS has contacted DEFRA for comment.



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