

# **Biodiversity net gain. Good practice principles for development**

## ***Case studies***

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# 26 Renewables and biodiversity offsets, Scottish Borders Council

## Details

<b>Organisation</b>	Scottish Borders Council
<b>Project partners</b>	Scottish Agricultural College, Scottish Borders Council, Borders Forest Trust, Southern Uplands Partnership, Tweed Forum, the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust, the RSPB, East Lothian Council, RES, Scottish & Southern Energy, Scottish Power Renewables, Fred Olsen Renewables/Natural Power, Cemex, Infinis EDF and NTR
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## 26.1 PROJECT SUMMARY

The Scottish Borders contain a wide variety of biodiversity assets of international, national and local value. This area has seen a significant amount of renewable energy development, particularly wind energy. National and local planning policy is supportive of renewable energy development, while also seeking to minimise adverse effects on wildlife.

Scottish Borders Council's local development plan requires that wind farm developers demonstrate that they have considered options for minimising impacts, including options for locating the wind farm in relation to the biodiversity interest of the site and surrounding area. However, for locally-important biodiversity, local development plan policy allows that the reasons in favour of development may sometimes outweigh the desirability of retaining particular habitat features on a development site. Where this is demonstrated, the Council's policy seeks local compensation measures aimed at ensuring no net loss of Local Biodiversity Action Plan (LBAP) habitats, including the creation of new habitats or the enhancement of existing habitats to deliver multiple benefits adopting an ecosystem approach.



Figure 26.1 Scottish Borders

## 26.2 OUTCOMES

The Council and stakeholders have developed a biodiversity offset scheme that accounts for the residual environmental impacts of renewable energy on black grouse, blanket bog and other upland habitats, and to compensate for loss of woodland in accordance with the Scottish Government's policy (Forestry

Commission, 2009). The implementation of 11 schemes has ‘mainstreamed’ biodiversity into the planning process by seeking biodiversity benefits at the landscape scale, while simultaneously benefiting ecosystem services. These include flood protection (riparian woodland, wetlands and bog habitats), water quality (siltation, diffuse pollution), carbon storage (woodland, grassland and bog habitats) and recreation (game management, fisheries management).

Careful negotiation by the partner NGOs with farmers and landowners has balanced their needs with those of biodiversity and flood protection gains. The programme of works for an offset project is agreed with a third party (a local environmental NGO) and secured with the Council by a legal agreement through the statutory planning process. The projects are steered by a small group chaired by the Council, with developer and NGO representatives. Projects use bespoke geographic information systems (GIS) decision support tools including mapping, developed under a national land-use strategy pilot project (Scottish Government, 2016) to guide the work. Costings are based on agri-environment rates plus a management fee for administration of the project.

Working in partnership with the local authority planners, developers, local and national NGOs, and local land managers has worked well. This combined approach has helped to identify sites where habitat enhancement could deliver for biodiversity and enhance the habitat network within the wider landscape. The mechanism developed under the planning process has been robust and there has been an increasingly positive response to this from renewable energy developers.

Initial projects under the Scottish Borders biodiversity offsets programme included two black grouse projects (Central Southern Uplands and Lammermuirs), targeted in core areas for the species in the region and building upon an existing vehicles run by the Southern Uplands Partnership and Lammermuir Black Grouse group. These projects have together put more than 30 000 hectares under positive management for this bird. Through the Scottish Rural Development Programme, offsetting has attracted more than £3M in extra resources for habitat improvement and management. The habitat works also help meet the objectives of the Scottish biodiversity strategy (Scottish Executive, 2004), the Scottish Borders LBAP (2018), the Forestry Commission (2009) and the Council’s biodiversity duty under the Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004.

Current projects are:

- Penmanshiel compensatory replanting scheme – creating 110 hectares of new woodland including native woodland, amenity woodland and commercial conifer and broadleaves to deliver multiple benefits.
- Langhope Rig Ale water wetlands – providing and improving wetlands in a catchment important for basin mires.
- Langhope Rig Upper Teviot riparian woodland scheme – delivering natural flood management benefits in catchments upstream of Hawick.

A further scheme (Quixwood windfarm) will develop breeding wader habitat in core areas within the region, known as the Borders Wader Initiative, and will be launched in spring 2018.

## **26.3 KEY BENEFITS AND SUCCESS FACTORS**

The offset scheme illustrates a policy approach to conserving and improving biodiversity, based on a hierarchy of policy options. Developers must first try to avoid adverse impacts on habitats and species, for example by considering development sites that have no sensitive features. They must then seek to mitigate biodiversity impacts through, for example, the timing and method of construction. Where residual impacts on local biodiversity cannot be avoided then, as a last resort, these must be compensated for.

By working with local partners to develop an offset mechanism, the Council has ensured that, where compensation is the only option, appropriate habitat compensatory measures can be secured. When well planned and executed, compensation in the form of offsite biodiversity enhancement may be more

beneficial for the affected wildlife than seeking to maintain existing, isolated habitats and species on proposed development sites. The offset mechanism has also informed the Forestry Commission Scotland (2009) guidance.

Several lessons have been learned since the project approach started in 2009. Developing a mechanism that brings together a partnership of planners, developers and NGOs has been invaluable as has the specific formation of effective delivery partnerships that are able to work closely with the farming community. In addition, developing a set of documents and agreements to secure delivery has been important, such as the biodiversity guidance by the Scottish Border Council (2006). This has helped to mainstream biodiversity provision and offsets into the planning system.

The approach has exceeded initial habitat targets, however the ability to secure long-term habitat protection and management has been a challenge. More recent projects are focusing on this issue, for example the Penmanshiel project will secure woodland under 20 year contracts, and the local authority, and the Langhope Rig Ale water wetlands and Upper Teviot riparian woodlands will secure habitats under a 10-year agreement.

The next step for the authority will be to improve financial costings for compensation, potentially by using biodiversity metrics.