

**Biodiversity Net Gain Opportunity Creation**  
**East of England Region**  
Highways England and Atkins Ltd

**BIG Biodiversity Challenge Award Category:** *Client-led project Award*

**Project overview**

Highways England (HE)'s national Environment & Wellbeing Designated Funds includes a biodiversity budget for habitat creation and enhancement, within the HE Estate and through supporting local partners. HE East of England region engaged Atkins to reach out across the nature conservation community to use this funding in a transformative way.

**What were the biodiversity conditions on site, prior to the enhancement?**

The HE East of England network consists of over 2,000km of road, with extensive areas of vegetation on verges and other soft estate areas. Such an extensive network provides exceptional opportunities to improve habitat through creation or enhancement.

This ongoing project comprises several sites within HE Estate and also funding projects with local partners. At the start of the project, HE's East of England team had a few active applications for funding from existing partners but were very aware that these were from just a small sample of the organisations that could apply for funding across the region.

**What were the reasons behind this project ?**

HE are committed to achieving no net loss of biodiversity across their activities by 2025, as a step on the pathway towards biodiversity net gain.

To meet this target, HE has a budget ringfenced within its Biodiversity Designated Funds for biodiversity net gain. This would be delivered by habitat creation and enhancement, within the HE Estate and through supporting partners. Community engagement is key to achieving this, but the team were concerned that the funding opportunity was not well enough known, and potential partners wouldn't know where to start in making applications.



Designated funds plan 2020-2025

<https://highwaysengland.co.uk/media/lh2ll0ao/designated-funds-plan-2020-2025.pdf>

### What were the biodiversity measures taken?

Habitat creation and enhancement opportunities on the Highways Estate have been identified and designed, tailored to deliver biodiversity net gain as measured using Defra's Biodiversity Metric 2.0.

This project is just one step towards delivering a region-wide network of projects on the ground. Following a systematic search of the HE soft estate four areas of opportunity were selected for feasibility study stage with proposed habitat interventions to create mixed scrub habitat and neutral grassland enhancement. Following the habitat interventions proposed, the selected areas combined would potentially achieve 1000% increase in biodiversity. This study identified these opportunities, but it also created a long list of similar opportunities along roads across the region. This means that once interventions have been trialed, those that are most successful can be replicated on similar sites across the region.

Partnership projects were also promoted successfully.

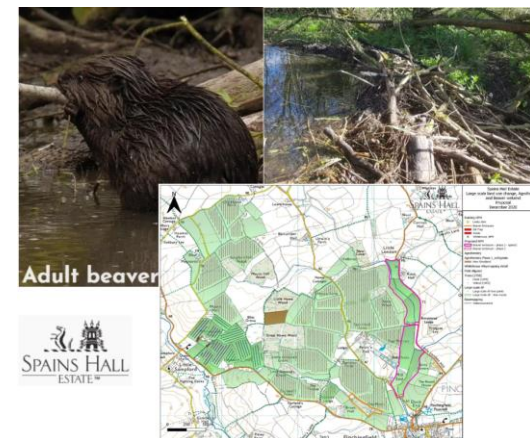
- Six projects have already been submitted as ideas for funding across the East of England region, and more are expected over coming months. Several proposals submitted by local partners are currently being discussed such as Spains Hall Estate (approximately 400ha of habitat interventions proposed), Suffolk Wildlife Trust (4km of dykes, creation/restoration of 28 ponds and other habitats interventions amounting to over 150ha), Essex County Council (13ha).;
- Connections have been created with two national organisations (Wildfowl and Wetland Trust and Buglife), to begin work on national programme applications; and
- Over forty staff from nature conservation charities and other organisations were trained in using Biodiversity Metric 2.0. This will not only support them in applying for funding from Highways England, but will also improve their opportunities to apply for other funding as the metric will underpin increasing numbers of funding opportunities over the next few years.

### A47 Hardwick Roundabout

- The site comprises 2.94 ha of amenity grassland in poor condition
- Proposal:
- 1.16 ha of mixed scrub in moderate condition is proposed 5 m+ from the carriageway
  - 1.78 ha of other neutral grassland in moderate condition proposed 2 m – 5 m from the carriageway



*Habitat Intervention proposed within the Highways England Estate*



*Potential Partner project submission for the funding*



### Further information

Atkins undertook an exceptionally challenging project to support Highways England by identifying funding opportunities across the Highways Estate itself but also promoting partnership with charities, landowners and other organisations across the region. On behalf of HE, Atkins have delivered training webinars dedicated to inform and encourage partners to apply for the available funding. Atkins also delivered a free Natural England Biodiversity Net Gain 2.0 Metrics Calculation Tool training webinar to upskill partners in preparation for their project submission.

This project is an excellent example of an initiative to compensate for the environmental impacts of operations, thereby minimising the long-term impacts. It will help Highways England enhance the quality of the natural environment on the soft estate and on sites managed by partners. The way the project was undertaken has created a model that can easily be duplicated across other regions or extended within the regions and could be shared with organisations outside Highways England and its supply chain. All the team involved were inspired by the work. The key lesson learned was the importance of open and active engagement between developers and the nature conservation charities.

All the partner organisations who received free training will be able to apply this not only to support their efforts in applying for funding from Highways England but from other funders committed to work towards biodiversity net gain on individual projects or across all their operations.

### Project Team

- Highways England East of England Region: Simon Baldrey and colleagues
- Atkins ecologists, GIS specialists and Highways project managers, particularly Claire Wansbury, Aline Gomes, Veronica Barrand, Ellen Davies and Lewis Mould

### What was the motivation for carrying out the enhancement?

This project was inspired by Highways England’s national commitment to work towards biodiversity net gain. Stakeholder engagement is key to achieving this, but the team were concerned that the funding opportunity was not well enough known, and potential partners wouldn’t know where to start in making applications. We passionately wanted to ensure that this funding gets used to deliver genuine benefits to wildlife and local communities on the ground. Highways England & Department of Transport have been visionary in creating the ringfenced national fund, and our motivation was to make the East of England region an exemplar of its use.



East of Region Network opportunity search area



Image of slide from training course