

BIODIVERSITY OPPORTUNITY AREAS (BOAs)

Background, Governance & Process for BOA Creation & Review

Background – the need for BOAs

The wildlife of important habitats such as that found on SSSIs and LWSs cannot survive indefinitely in isolation but need to be part of a wider network of habitats connected at a landscape scale. This allows populations to move, adapt to changing conditions locally and maintain genetic diversity. In order to successfully conserve a viable natural environment, we also need to take into account physical factors such as water and nutrient cycling. These processes link sites to the wider landscape and affect the habitat found. In other words, we need to reconnect biodiversity with ecosystems, and change the scale of work towards a landscape focus.

Landscape-scale conservation reconciles the protection of priority habitats and species with ecosystem function. It allows us to adopt a more sustainable approach to custody of the land; ensuring biodiversity can adapt and thrive in the face of climate change and other pressures. To achieve this, opportunities must be sought to expand, link and buffer sites. We need to increase the quality of the entire countryside for wildlife. This will begin to reverse the current fragmented picture of ecosystems, and enable us to reclaim a healthy and functional environment. This change is also vital to safeguard our own quality of life, as we are dependent on natural services such as climate regulation, water and air quality, and food production.

Working to conserve and recover nature at scale to achieve thriving plants and wildlife supports both national and international goals and objectives for biodiversity in the face of a global climate and nature crisis. Tackling biodiversity loss and halting the decline in species abundance to achieve thriving plants and animals is the “apex” goal of the UK government’s [2023 Environmental improvement Plan](#), which is aligned to the UK Environment Act 2021. Local Nature Recovery Strategies also aim to work at scale to recover nature. And there are also key international goals for nature, including the 30x30 Biodiversity Goal¹, aimed at reversing habitat and species loss, and the protection and management of 30% of the world’s terrestrial, inland water, coastal and marine areas by 2030. Over 190 countries have committed to this, including the UK. Working at the landscape scale to make space for nature is also famously part of the “more, bigger, better, more joined” Lawton Principles. Local conservation is therefore key to delivering national and internal strategies, goals and obligations for nature.

BOAs in Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes

The identification of Buckinghamshire’s BOAs was a detailed assessment process. It took into account existing concentrations of UK BAP habitat, important areas for UK BAP and other rare species, land with potential for habitat restoration, and several other factors (including geology, topography and hydrology). Many of the areas identified are well known in the county for their nature conservation importance and they all contain BAP habitat.

BOAs identify the most important areas for wildlife where targeted action will have the greatest benefit. Their aim is to create focus areas for actions to restore biodiversity at a landscape-scale through the maintenance, restoration and creation of priority habitats.

¹ The Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework 2020 available at: [Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework](#)

BOAs do not represent a statutory designation or a constraint upon activities. They indicate areas where there are substantial opportunities to make positive changes for biodiversity, and should be used to inform conservation strategies and place planning.

Twenty-three regional BOAs were originally identified in Bucks and MK (with an additional two being predominantly in neighbouring counties but with small areas in Bucks). BOAs are a means of indicating where significant gains can be made for biodiversity. BMERC research in 2020 showed that over the c.5,000 ha of priority habitat in Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes, around 78% was inside the BOAs. So, BOAs do not contain all BAP habitat or all the areas where BAP habitat creation or restoration is possible throughout Bucks & MK. But each BOA supports one or more of the priority habitats in Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes, and BOAs are useful in directing conservation effort.

While BOA information is stored on the NEP's website, it was one of its predecessors, the Buckinghamshire Nature Conservation Forum, that was involved with the original assessment of the 23 BOAs in Buckinghamshire. In 2024, in response to the River Thames Conservation trust seeking a BOA extension to their BOA in Buckinghamshire the NEP is now custodian of the BOA process and coordinator of the Nature Recovery Delivery Group (NRDG)².

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) (section 15 paras 180-194) 'Conserving and enhancing the natural environment' includes reference to providing net gains for biodiversity where possible, protection and enhancement of networks of biodiversity and green infrastructure, promoting priority habitats and species and the importance of ecosystem services and soils.' This is reflected in Local Plans drawn up by the local planning authorities in Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes.

Document Aims

This document defines the process and evidence required for approval of proposed minor BOA boundary modifications, new extensions to existing BOAs and identification of new BOAs, and provides a framework which can be applied to future proposed amendments. It sets out the required criteria, consultation and approval process as agreed by the Nature Recovery Delivery Group (NRDG) coordinated by the Buckinghamshire & Milton Keynes Natural Environment Partnership (the NEP).

BOA Review Aims

- To produce updated maps and enhanced accompanying statements for all BOAs.
- To provide guidance on how BOA maps and statements should be used.
- To identify and cost (in broad terms) potential projects that contribute to the conservation and enhancement (of habitats and species) within each BOA and deliver net gains for biodiversity. These projects to be maintained on a central spreadsheet, updated annually and available to all, to promote delivery through development and planning contributions.
- To promote information and knowledge about BOAs within Local Authority Members, Managers and Planning officers; business developers and conservation organisations.

² The NEP's NRDG includes representatives from BBOWT, RSPB, local planning authorities, NE, FC, BMERC and the Chilterns National Landscape

Procedure for Selection, Modification and Additions to Buckinghamshire & Milton Keynes' Biodiversity Opportunity Areas (BOAs)

Selection Factors

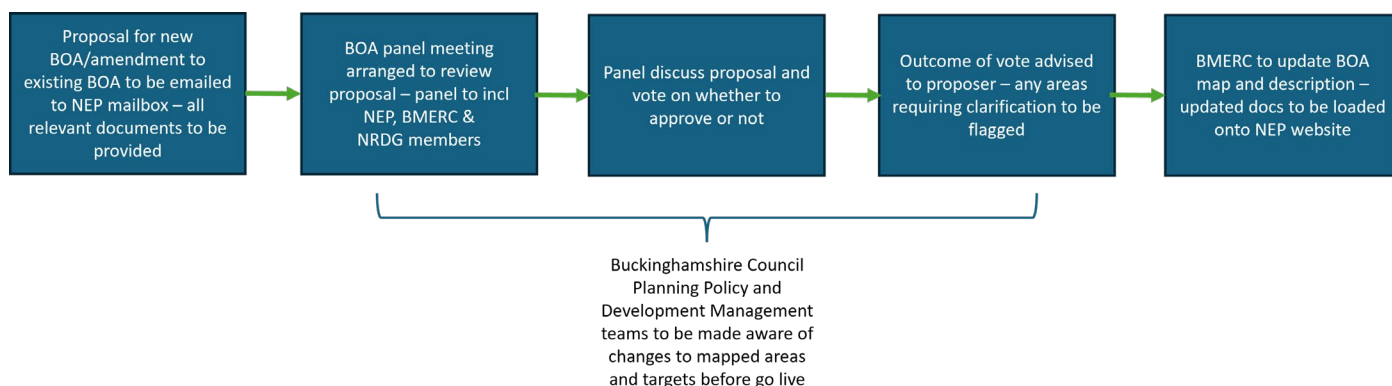
The following factors are agreed as being the key criteria to be met for identifying areas as BOAs. A **majority** should be present in any area under consideration either as a new BOA or extension to existing BOA.

- Concentrations of priority habitat (previously known as UKBAP habitat).
- Important areas for protected and notable species.
- The presence of important geological features.
- The presence of notable hydrological features and/or floodplain connectivity.
- Potential for habitat restoration: land with good potential to restore the main target habitats of the Buckinghamshire & Milton Keynes Biodiversity Priority Habitats Targets.
- Potential to link areas of existing priority habitat. Factors to be taken into account when considering potential are topography (most chalk and limestone grasslands, for instance, occur on steep slopes where the soils are thinner and thus steeper sloping land has greater potential); geology and areas with existing habitat restoration schemes.

Additional information to be included in BOA descriptive statements:

- Archaeology – areas with concentrations of archaeological features, including landscape archaeology such as ridge and furrow.
- Public access.
- Cultural significance – areas with landscape features of social, historical or artistic importance.

Proposals Process



Proposals should be provided to the NEP³ with the following forms of evidence, to allow proposals to be carefully considered;

³ The NEP mailbox is: nep@buckinghamshire.gov.uk

An A3 or A4 jpeg map at an appropriate scale with 1:25,000 Ordnance Survey base maps. If available, selection features and boundaries should be mapped to OS polygons and clearly marked and GIS layers provided (.tab or .shp files).

A report describing how the area meets the criteria. The report should include;

- How the area meets each of the relevant criteria.
- Main priority habitats and species present.
- Opportunities to enhance/extend the BOA (for extensions and new BOAs).
- Characterization of the BOA (for new BOAs).

Brief description of the nominator's qualifications and experience.

Any other background or supporting information e.g. species lists, habitats surveys.

Assessment process

A panel consisting of NRDG members, the NEP and BMERC will be convened to review and discuss the proposal. A majority agreement is required to determine decisions. If additional information is required to reach a decision this will be requested. The NEP will advise nominators of the outcome after the panel meeting.

Notification process

Following any approved changes to an existing BOA or acceptance of a new BOA, the relevant BOA maps and descriptions will be updated. The new BOA descriptions will be updated by BMERC and uploaded onto the NEP website⁶. New GIS datasets will be commissioned from BMERC and sent to existing funding partners as part of their annual agreements, and available to other organisations on request from BMERC⁴.

Minor modifications to existing BOAs resulting from anomalies and errors

Minor boundary modifications may occur to correct mapping errors (e.g. part of a Local Wildlife Site was originally omitted) or where updated or improved data has become available (e.g. habitats survey carried out on Local Wildlife Site) or to align boundaries with Biodiversity Opportunity Areas in neighbouring counties where considered appropriate.

Extensions to existing BOAs and new BOAs

Extensions to existing BOAs where, for example, land adjacent to an existing BOA has been purchased and brought into conservation management with the target of delivering a new area of Priority Habitat. Alternatively, entirely new BOAs or an extension to an existing may be proposed when new and/or improved habitat mapping brings new knowledge of sites meeting the key criteria listed above.

⁴ <https://www.bucksmkerc.org.uk/>