



# Making the ‘golden rules’ green: nature-friendly design and building in all new developments

29 October 2024

This briefing is on behalf of environmental coalition [Wildlife and Countryside Link](#).

## Executive summary

The Government should mandate nature-friendly design and building in all new developments. Existing voluntary approaches have not resulted in the step-change in nature-inclusive development needed across the country.

A new biodiversity chapter of the Building Regulations 2010 should require all new buildings to include suitably designed and located swift bricks, bat boxes, hedgehog highways, and green roofs. A dedicated National Development Management Policy should require all new developments to embed wider nature-friendly design, alongside nature-friendly building.

By ensuring new development provides homes for both people and wildlife, the Government can deliver its housing targets alongside contributing to nature recovery.

## Background

The Government has rightly recognised that its agendas to tackle the climate and nature crises and to deliver more housing for people must be delivered together. The Labour Party’s manifesto committed to taking ‘steps to build more high quality, well-designed and sustainable homes and places that increase climate resilience and promote nature’s recovery.’<sup>1</sup>

So far, however, the Government has not published any specific proposals to achieve this as part of its planning reforms (including in the most recent consultation on the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)).

<sup>1</sup> <https://labour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Change-Labour-Party-Manifesto-2024-large-print.pdf>



One way in which developments can contribute to nature recovery is through nature-inclusive design. This approach ensures developments avoid harm to natural habitats in the first place, design with and around natural habitats on site such as existing mature trees, and build in features to support biodiversity, such as swift bricks.

Many nature-friendly design elements are low-cost, easy to implement and are already being implemented by progressive developers. However, a voluntary approach has not been enough to mainstream nature-friendly design across the development industry.

**An effective and economical measure that the Government could take to boost biodiversity throughout new development is to mandate minimum nature-friendly standards, including nature-friendly built environment features such as swift bricks and wider nature-friendly landscape features.**

This briefing, as requested by Minister for Housing & Planning Matthew Pennycook MP at a roundtable with environmental organisations on the NPPF on 19 September 2024, sets out the case for mandatory nature-friendly design in all new development, including what features should be compulsory and how these requirements could be enacted.

### What is nature-friendly design?

A new development, if designed with specific features, can provide homes for wildlife as well as for people. Nature-friendly design includes:

- Appropriate site selection to avoid harm to habitats and species;
- Building nature into development design from the outset to protect and enhance existing site habitat features, such as mature trees;
- Enhancing habitat connectivity, for example, by creating or maintaining green or blue corridors;
- Designing landscape schemes to boost biodiversity, climate resilience and public amenity, for example, by designing for target species and planting native species;
- Sustainable urban drainage to better mitigate for extreme weather events, increasing in frequency and intensity due to climate change;
- Management plans to secure the delivery and long-term maintenance of nature-friendly developments; and,
- Nature-friendly building features.



Nature-friendly building features are built into the fabric of the development and can provide homes for building-dependent species like swifts and some bat species, create more habitat for small flora and fauna on the roofs of buildings, and enable the movement of ground-dwelling wildlife between developments.

These nature-friendly built environment features include:

- boxes or bricks which provide nests for swifts, swallows, starlings, and other birds;
- boxes or bricks which provide roosting places for bats;
- holes in fences or walls which allow wildlife such as hedgehogs to pass through; and,
- green biodiverse roofs and walls which attract birds, bees, and other insects.

By incorporating these measures from the outset and using ecological expertise to ensure appropriate implementation, new developments in urban and rural areas can help minimise the environmental impacts of development or even make an important and direct contribution to enhancing biodiversity.

Nature-friendly design will also provide other benefits. Green roofs reduce water runoff from storms and provide urban cooling.<sup>2</sup> Watching and hearing birds has a positive impact on people's mental wellbeing,<sup>3</sup> with resulting NHS cost savings. Green buildings can have higher property values.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to boosting wildlife and providing co-benefits for climate adaptation and people's health and wellbeing, nature-friendly design features have huge support from the public<sup>5</sup> and from across political parties<sup>6</sup> and do not affect building integrity and do not significantly affect cost.<sup>7</sup>

In the same way as there are energy efficiency requirements or water efficiency standards for new buildings, although these should be strengthened, design for biodiversity should also be built into all new developments.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1364032123001624>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-022-20207-6>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.jll.co.uk/en/newsroom/environmentally-sustainable-real-estate-attracts-higher-prices>

<sup>5</sup> <https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/626737>

<sup>6</sup> <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2023-07-10/debates/203F1289-9D61-415A-9429-984EFBF599F5/NewHousingSwiftBricks>

<sup>7</sup> For example, swift bricks and bat box cost around £25 each (<https://farrarbamforth.co.uk/swift-bricks-whats-all-the-fuss-about/>).



## **Nature-friendly design and building is not currently common practice**

Currently, nature-friendly development is not yet common practice in England.

There are excellent examples, such as Barratt Homes' Kingsbrook development in Aylesbury which since 2016 has been implementing a comprehensive range of measures across a 2500-unit housing development, including swift bricks in all new homes,<sup>8</sup> showcasing what is possible while remaining commercially viable. However, nature-friendly design and building is not mainstreamed across the industry.

Despite a significant public campaign for swift bricks last year, which was supported by some housebuilders including Thakeham,<sup>9</sup> the previous Government resisted public and industry calls to make swift bricks compulsory.

The housebuilding sector has recognised the lack of biodiversity-inclusive design, with a new Homes for Nature initiative from the Future Homes Hub which started this year. Through this voluntary scheme, there are 21 homebuilders committed to including a bird-nesting brick or box for every new home built, as well as hedgehog highways as standard on all new developments.<sup>10</sup> While a welcome initiative, the very small proportion of the large homebuilder sector who have made this pledge helps demonstrate the limitations of the voluntary approach.

**Given the number and variety of developers and the number of new homes and infrastructure the Government aims to plan in the next five years, a voluntary approach led by developers is useful, but not sufficient.** Voluntary approaches have not worked in other sectors, for example, to end the selling of peat in garden centres<sup>11</sup> and to phase out the use of lead ammunition.<sup>12</sup>

**Existing planning policy and planning guidance has also not led to nature-friendly building and landscape features embedded as standard in all new developments.** Currently, national planning policy encourages local planning authorities to set policies in their local development plans to realise 'opportunities to improve biodiversity in and around developments as part of

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.rspb.org.uk/helping-nature/so-many-ways/explore/welcome-the-wildlife>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/sep/04/lords-to-debate-mandating-swift-bricks-in-new-uk-homes>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.futurehomes.org.uk/homes-for-nature>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.wcl.org.uk/enough-is-enough-it%E2%80%99s-time-for-a-total-ban-on-peat-use-in-horticulture.asp>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.conservationevidence.com/individual-study/11848>





their design.<sup>13</sup> National planning guidance, including in the National Model Design Code (NMDC), highlights swift bricks, bat boxes and hedgehog highways as options for local planning authorities as opportunities to enhance biodiversity through integrating habitats in new development.<sup>14</sup> However, it is not clear how many planning officers and developers are aware of the NMDC and guidance and how well it is being applied.

The existing Government approach means that policy on nature-friendly design and building remains under the jurisdiction of local planning authorities. While there are some examples of local plans, such as Brighton and Hove City Council and Cornwall Council, which have required the provision of swift boxes in new development,<sup>15</sup> few across the country have adopted a requirement or policies to encourage embedding nature-friendly design or building measures into new developments. Given the lacklustre national policy and guidance and the long time it takes for local authorities to agree and approve a new local plan and policies, nature-friendly design should instead be mandated from the centre.

Nature-friendly design features are low-cost and easy to implement and are already being implemented by progressive housebuilders. Mandating nature-friendly design is a straightforward and cost-effective measure that the Government can take to ensure all new development delivers for nature recovery.

### **How to mandate nature-friendly design in all new development**

The Government could quickly mandate nature-friendly design through: (1) a new biodiversity chapter of the Building Regulations 2010 to require specific nature-friendly building features and (2) a biodiversity design National Development Management Policy to introduce compulsory wider nature-friendly design measures in all new developments.

#### **(1) A new biodiversity chapter of the Building Regulations 2010 to mandate nature-friendly building features**

The Building Regulations 2010 apply to all building across England and Wales, made under powers set out in the Building Act 1984. Building regulations can be made for several

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<sup>13</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/669a25e9a3c2a28abb50d2b4/NPPF\\_December\\_2023.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/669a25e9a3c2a28abb50d2b4/NPPF_December_2023.pdf) (para 186)

<sup>14</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6111531fd3bf7f043c4badd1/NMDC\\_Part\\_2\\_Guidance\\_Notes.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6111531fd3bf7f043c4badd1/NMDC_Part_2_Guidance_Notes.pdf) (page 25)

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.brighton-hove.gov.uk/planning/planning-applications/guidance-note-provision-swift-boxes-including-swift-bricks-new-development> and <https://www.cornwall.gov.uk/media/v1roqk0x/planning-for-biodiversity-v15.pdf>



purposes, including ‘furthering the protection or enhancement of the environment.’<sup>16</sup> They include overarching requirements on what new buildings must include and detailed guidance on how to comply with the requirements. There are chapters, for example, on energy efficiency and water efficiency, as well as specifications on structure, materials, provision of light, and more.

Nature-friendly built environment features are applicable to building across the country and can be part of the buildings themselves so would fit naturally into the Building Regulations.

For example, all new developments should be required to include:

- One swift brick or box at a ratio of one per unit (for example, a 30-unit development may have 30 bricks in multiples of three on 10 units).
- One house martin cup for every unit (applied as an average ratio).
- Integrated bat bricks or boxes, appropriately located and designed, clustered away from sources of artificial lighting and in the vicinity of existing and future green corridors, at a ratio of one per every few units.
- Holes in fences or walls in all new development to allow hedgehogs and other ground-dwelling wildlife free movement.
- Biodiverse green roofs where appropriate, in adherence with best practice standards such as Green Roof Organisation (GRO) Best Practice Guidance.<sup>17</sup>

Adding a biodiversity chapter and nature-friendly built environment specifications to the Building Regulations 2010 would not require primary legislation, just amending secondary legislation using a statutory instrument.

Making nature-friendly building compulsory via the Building Regulations would ensure these biodiversity elements are built into the design and construction of new developments from the outset. Detailed guidance via the Building Regulations’ Approved Documents ensures that nature-friendly built environment features are suitably located and designed, depending on the type of building. Also, mandating nature-friendly building through the Building Regulations is the fastest route to achieving this end, rather than waiting for local planning authorities to update local development plans and policies on a five-year review schedule. This approach could build on existing standards and support existing voluntary approaches, speeding up-take across the sector.

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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1984/55/part/I/crossheading/power-to-make-building-regulations>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.bauder.co.uk/technical-centre/standards-and-knowledge/green-roof-code>



The Government's upcoming Planning and Infrastructure Bill could also be a legislative vehicle to amend the Building Regulations 2010 to add nature-friendly building requirements.

**(2) A 'biodiversity design' National Development Management Policy (NDMP) to require all new developments to include nature-friendly design**

A biodiversity NDMP, under the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023, would complement and support a biodiversity chapter in the Building Regulations. The NDMP should require all new development to include nature-friendly design features across the development and specify what these elements should be.

The biodiversity design NDMP could:

- Apply certain constraints for appropriate site selection to avoid harm to habitats and species;
- Require that existing site habitat features, such as mature trees, are retained and enhanced;
- Require elements of habitat connectivity, for example by creating or maintaining linear features such as hedges, grassland corridors, fish passes in rivers and streams;
- Design habitats for target species onsite;
- Prohibit artificial grass in new developments and encourage locally appropriate native plants and insect hotels in gardens and walls;
- Require wildlife lighting assessment and apply strategies in new developments that minimise the impact of lighting on nature while also address the needs of people, in line with existing best practice standards<sup>18</sup> and guidelines<sup>19</sup>;
- Require biodiversity management plans to be created to increase the likelihood that nature-friendly measures are maintained into the future, covering all biodiversity enhancement onsite, including measures taken to achieve the statutory 10% Biodiversity Net Gain;
- Require elements of information and interpretation about the features so that new residents understand what has been done and why; and,
- Support the Building Regulations in requiring nature-friendly building features.

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<sup>18</sup> <https://theilp.org.uk/publication/guidance-note-8-bats-and-artificial-lighting/>

<sup>19</sup> <https://portals.iucn.org/library/sites/library/files/documents/PAG-033-En.pdf> and [https://www.cms.int/sites/default/files/publication/cms\\_light\\_pollution\\_guidelines\\_complete\\_0.pdf](https://www.cms.int/sites/default/files/publication/cms_light_pollution_guidelines_complete_0.pdf)





All these nature-friendly design measures should be mainstreamed into all new developments by being required through a new biodiversity NDMP.

Both nature-friendly landscape and building features must be designed and implemented with the appropriate ecological expertise to ensure good outcomes for wildlife. Monitoring and evaluation of the design and building features should be conducted to better understand the efficacy of the features and to improve the design and implementation where needed.

### **Supporting wider environmentally-positive planning**

Nature-friendly building and design requirements should form part of a wider approach to environmentally-positive planning. This should include:

- A requirement for all new development to provide Sustainable Urban Drainage (SuDS) by implementing Schedule 3 of the Flood and Water Management Act 2010 (sustainable urban drainage systems provide an alternative to channelling surface water run-off into nearby watercourses through pipes and sewers, instead via, for example, swales or wetlands);
- Fixing current problems with the implementation of existing Biodiversity Net Gain<sup>20</sup> and consulting on applying BNG to Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIPs) developments;
- Stronger standards for water efficiency, energy efficiency, and sustainable materials use; and,
- Mandatory Green Infrastructure Standards,<sup>21</sup> including Accessible Greenspace Standards, Urban Tree Canopy Cover Standard, and Urban Greening Factor in all new developments. (Green Infrastructure Standards are a tool developed by Natural England which sets out standards for different types of green infrastructure in new development, including access to nature, urban trees, and general greening in urban environments.)

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<sup>20</sup> [https://wcl.org.uk/docs/Fixing\\_Biodiversity\\_Net\\_Gain\\_September\\_24.pdf](https://wcl.org.uk/docs/Fixing_Biodiversity_Net_Gain_September_24.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> <https://designatedsites.naturalengland.org.uk/greeninfrastructure/home.aspx>





## Biodiversity Net Gain

Nature-friendly design would be complementary to the statutory requirement for all new developments to provide at least a 10% Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG). Measures that contribute towards delivering BNG must be additional and could include onsite or nearby habitat enhancement or habitat creation in line with the Local Nature Recovery Strategy.

While BNG is an important policy that has the potential to contribute to nature's recovery, it does not provide for nature-friendly building, including specific features that can support specific species, in the fabric of development.

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Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) is the largest nature coalition in England, bringing together 86 organisations to campaign for nature, climate, animal welfare and a healthy environment for everyone. Wildlife and Countryside Link is a registered charity number 1107460 and a company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales number 3889519.

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