

Biodiversity Offsetting

Buglife position



What is biodiversity offsetting?

Biodiversity offsetting aims to more closely link conservation activities with new development to secure compensation for biodiversity losses arising from new development.

Throughout the UK, wildlife often loses out to new development. The recent '*State of Nature*' report indicated that 60% of all species are in decline and this can partly be attributed to the loss of semi natural habitats and an increase in urbanisation.

The Department for Environment and Rural Affairs (Defra) believes that biodiversity offsetting will be a cheaper and quicker option for mitigation and compensation as well as having a better outcome for biodiversity than current practice does. Buglife is more cautious but believes that biodiversity offsetting could contribute to a more joined up approach to nature conservation, helping to create better ecological networks and preventing habitat loss from development.

The invertebrate situation

Two out of three invertebrate species are declining, with many threatened by extinction. Underlying this trend of decline is the loss and degradation of important invertebrate habitats such as wildflower rich grassland, saltmarsh, brownfield land and coastal dunes. Changes to the way we manage our countryside, development pressure and the more recent impact of climate change, have had a major impact on invertebrates.

Sites of value for invertebrates are consistently threatened by development. With only 15% of Sites of Special Scientific Interest citations in England noting invertebrate interest, most sites supporting endangered species are not legally protected. Invertebrate conservation has been historically of low priority within the planning system and little mitigation and compensation that is of direct benefit to invertebrates has been carried out.

Buglife sees the development of biodiversity offsetting as one possible way of addressing current pressures and threats to invertebrate populations but believes offsetting should only be undertaken where the following conditions are met:-

1. Offsetting schemes must be underpinned by robust metrics to calculate offsetting requirements.
 - a. These metrics must be science based. Where there are gaps in knowledge, as with many invertebrate species and their requirements, research must be carried out to ensure that most appropriate and effective methodology is being used. It should be accepted that some habitat losses or species impacts cannot be offset and these should be excluded from any schemes.
 - b. Species of conservation significance (IUCN red listed and/or BAP listed) must be incorporated into the framework. The current methodology focusses on habitats and this may mean that the specialist habitat niches that invertebrates require are over looked, leading to local extinctions.

- c. All development must be assessed so that the gross impact of development on individual species and habitats is known.
 - d. As well as directly measurable impacts of developments on their immediate area, the indirect impacts that increasing development has on wildlife habitats must be included. For example cumulative loss of sites at a landscape scale, increasing car use, recreational pressure and water use must also be assessed and form part of the offsetting programme.
2. Biodiversity offsetting must be the last resort; avoidance of harm is always the most reliable method of conserving biodiversity, and is likely to also be much cheaper than the cost of recreating like-for-like habitat. The principles within the National Planning Policy Framework – avoidance, mitigation and, as a last resort, compensation, should be adhered to.
 3. Offsetting must never lower the level of protection provided to SACs, SPAs and SSSIs, these tiny areas of habitat are a critical part of what remains of our rich natural heritage. If wildlife is to thrive and improve these are the reservoirs from which it will do so – their protection is essential.
 4. Offsetting must ensure that the direct impact of development on individual species and habitats is remediated in terms of those species and habitats as close to the area of damage as is possible. Any additional offsetting, for instance offsetting of an undefined impact of development on wildlife, must be targeted at developing strategically planned and locally approved landscape scale wildlife habitat networks.
 5. Offsetting schemes must be:
 - a. Strictly and independently regulated.
 - b. Transparent, enforced, monitored and evaluated over an ecologically appropriate timescale.
 - c. Guaranteed in perpetuity through land safeguarding or covenanting and the finance needed to ensure long term security and management guaranteed.