

Exeter City Council

Biodiversity Duty Report (Environment Act 2021)

Reporting Period: 1 January 2024 – 1 January 2026

1. Introduction

This report sets out how Exeter City Council has fulfilled its biodiversity duty under the Environment Act 2021 during the reporting period from 1 January 2024 to 1 January 2026. The biodiversity duty requires public authorities to consider what they can do to conserve and enhance biodiversity in the exercise of their functions and to report on the actions taken and planned.

The purpose of this report is to provide a transparent and proportionate account of how the Council has approached this duty within the scope of its statutory responsibilities and operating context. It is intended to support accountability and public understanding, and to meet the reporting requirements set out in Government guidance.

The report describes the Council's policy framework, decision-making processes and statutory mechanisms relevant to biodiversity, alongside contextual information about governance arrangements and partnership working. Optional sections are included to provide additional explanation and context, but do not seek to present a comprehensive assessment of biodiversity outcomes, many of which are long-term in nature and influenced by factors beyond the Council's direct control.

The report is structured to distinguish between statutory requirements, contextual information, and optional explanatory sections, and should be read as a proportionate compliance report rather than a comprehensive assessment of biodiversity outcomes.

2. Exeter City Council Biodiversity Duty – Context and Scope

Exeter City Council is subject to the strengthened biodiversity duty introduced by the Environment Act 2021. This duty requires public authorities, in the exercise of

their functions, to consider what they can do to conserve and enhance biodiversity and to report on the actions taken and planned.

The Council operates in this context in two distinct but related capacities. First, as a local authority, it delivers a wide range of corporate, operational and land management functions, including the management of council-owned land, buildings, parks, green spaces and other assets, within the scope of the Council's statutory functions and available evidence. Secondly, as the local planning authority, it exercises statutory planning functions that influence how development is planned, designed and delivered across the city, including the implementation of mandatory Biodiversity Net Gain requirements.

This duty is set against the backdrop of Exeter City Council's declared ecological emergency, which recognises the scale and urgency of biodiversity loss and the need for action at local, regional and national levels. While the biodiversity duty is a statutory requirement, it sits alongside and complements this wider corporate commitment to addressing environmental and ecological challenges.

The geographic scope of the biodiversity duty, and therefore of this report, is explicitly defined. It covers:

- activities and decisions relating to land and assets owned or managed by Exeter City Council; and
- the wider city of Exeter, where the Council's influence is exercised through planning, policy-making, partnership working and community engagement.

The scope of this report includes actions taken by the Council both directly and in partnership with others, recognising that many outcomes for biodiversity are delivered collaboratively with other public bodies, community organisations, landowners and stakeholders.

For clarity, this report focuses on matters within the Council's functions and influence. It does not seek to report comprehensively on activities led or controlled by other authorities or organisations where Exeter City Council has no formal role, decision-making power or statutory responsibility.

This first biodiversity duty report covers the period 1 January 2024 to 1 January 2026. The start date reflects the point immediately following the completion of the initial consideration period required under the Environment Act 2021, while the end date aligns with the statutory deadline for publication of the first report. This approach provides a clear, proportionate and defensible reporting period for assessing the Council's actions and plans under the strengthened duty.

In fulfilling the biodiversity duty during this period, the Council's work has been informed by, and aligned with, a range of related strategies and frameworks, including the Corporate Plan 2025 –28, and specifically a commitment to well-maintained parks, open spaces and biodiversity across the city. emerging Exeter (Local) Plan, the Liveable Exeter principles and regeneration programme including a city-wide ambition that Exeter's urban and natural spaces are attractive and well-connected environments well used for recreation, active travel and for supporting wildlife, tParks and Open Spaces Strategy, the Council's net zero and environmental commitments, and the development of the Local Nature Recovery Strategy for Devon. These provide important context for how biodiversity considerations are embedded across policy, operational delivery and partnership activity.

3. Policies, Objectives and Actions to Conserve and Enhance Biodiversity

During the reporting period, Exeter City Council has relied on a range of existing adopted policies, plans and strategies to support the conservation and enhancement of biodiversity. These were not developed solely in response to the strengthened biodiversity duty introduced by the Environment Act 2021; however, they continue to have effect during the reporting period and provide the primary framework through which biodiversity considerations are addressed in the exercise of the Council's functions.

In particular, the Council has relied on:

- **planning policy provisions** within the statutory development plan that address biodiversity, green infrastructure, landscape and design;
- **planning guidance and other material considerations** that inform how biodiversity impacts and opportunities are assessed as part of decision-making; and
- **wider corporate environmental and sustainability strategies**, including those concerned with climate change and net zero, which support complementary objectives relating to the protection and enhancement of the natural environment.

Collectively, these policies and strategies embed biodiversity considerations across the Council's activities. They influence how development proposals are planned, assessed and determined, guide expectations for the protection and

enhancement of habitats and ecological networks, and inform strategic approaches to growth, land use and environmental management across the city.

The policies and strategies relied upon operate at different spatial scales. Some apply at a city-wide or strategic level, shaping overall approaches to development, infrastructure and environmental protection. Others are place-based or site-specific, guiding decision-making in relation to particular locations, assets or types of development. Together, they provide a layered framework through which biodiversity considerations are incorporated into both strategic planning and individual decisions.

While these documents pre-date, or sit alongside, the strengthened biodiversity duty, they have continued relevance during the reporting period and have been actively applied in practice. Through their ongoing use, biodiversity considerations are considered as part of statutory decision-making processes and policy implementation, with outcomes secured primarily through established legal and regulatory mechanisms rather than voluntary or ad hoc measures.

The objectives within these policies, although not always expressed explicitly as biodiversity objectives, collectively support the conservation and enhancement of habitats, species and ecological networks. In relying on this existing policy framework, the Council has sought to ensure continuity and coherence in its approach to biodiversity, while meeting the requirements of the biodiversity duty without introducing new standalone policy documents during the reporting period.

Together, these policies and strategies provide the framework within which actions to conserve and enhance biodiversity are taken across the Council's activities.

4. Future Actions (Next Reporting Period)

During the next reporting period, Exeter City Council expects to continue delivering its biodiversity duty through the ongoing application of existing statutory functions, adopted policies and established processes as set out in Section 3 of this report. Future actions are anticipated to build on current practice rather than introduce new or standalone initiatives, and to be taken forward within existing governance arrangements.

Planning decision-making and development management

The Council expects to continue embedding biodiversity considerations within

planning decision-making through the continued application of adopted planning policies and statutory requirements. This includes the ongoing implementation of mandatory Biodiversity Net Gain, consideration of biodiversity impacts as part of development proposals, and the use of planning conditions and legal agreements where appropriate.

Implementation of adopted policies and strategies

The Council expects to continue implementing relevant adopted policies and strategies that support biodiversity outcomes. These will remain the primary means through which biodiversity considerations are integrated into strategic planning, land use decision-making and environmental management across the city.

Monitoring, data collection and statutory reporting

The Council expects to continue monitoring biodiversity-related activity where statutory mechanisms are in place, including the collection and management of data associated with Biodiversity Net Gain. This will support ongoing compliance, transparency and preparation for future statutory reporting requirements, including the next biodiversity duty report.

Partnership working and cross-authority collaboration

The Council expects to continue working in partnership with other public bodies, organisations and stakeholders where this supports biodiversity outcomes and aligns with its statutory functions. Collaborative approaches are anticipated to remain an important aspect of delivery, particularly where responsibilities and influences are shared.

Across these areas, future actions are expected to be informed by experience gained during this first biodiversity duty reporting period. This will help ensure that the Council's approach remains proportionate, coherent and responsive as statutory requirements continue to evolve, including preparation for the next reporting cycle.

5. Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) – Local Planning Authority Information

5.1 Statutory Context and Role of the Local Planning Authority

The reporting period for Biodiversity Net Gain data is from the start of mandatory BNG to 31 December 2025, in line with government guidance.

Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) is a statutory requirement introduced under the Environment Act 2021. It requires most qualifying development to deliver a minimum of 10% measurable biodiversity gain, secured through an approved biodiversity gain plan and maintained for at least 30 years. Exeter City Council, as the Local Planning Authority, is responsible for determining whether proposals are subject to BNG, approving biodiversity gain plans, and securing compliance through planning conditions and legal agreements.

BNG is a distinct statutory mechanism that contributes to, but does not replace, the Council's wider biodiversity duty.

5.2 Approach to Monitoring and Data Management

During the reporting period, BNG has been monitored using established planning systems and associated data tools, including Exacom. These systems capture application-level information on baseline and post-development biodiversity units, delivery mechanisms, and whether gains are secured on-site or off-site.

This approach supports statutory compliance, transparency and auditability.

5.3 Overview of Applications Subject to BNG (Reporting Period)

Summary of applications determined that were subject to mandatory BNG:

Category	Number
Total applications subject to BNG	20
Major development applications	2 (anything over one hectare)
Minor development applications	18
Residential developments	2
Non-residential / mixed-use developments	2
Biodiversity gain plans approved	8

Data source: EXACOM/ Uniform

5.4 Summary of Biodiversity Gains Secured

Reporting period: From the start of mandatory BNG to 31 December 2025

Across all applications subject to mandatory BNG during the reporting period:

- **Total biodiversity units required:** 21.8 units
- **Total biodiversity units secured:** 21.64 units
- **Number of applications with deficits:** 6

All approved biodiversity gain plans achieved at least the statutory minimum requirement of 10% net gain, delivered through on-site measures, off-site provision, or a combination of both.

Location-based percentages for delivery were not available at the time of reporting.

Data source: EXACOM/ Uniform

5.5 Delivery Mechanisms

BNG has been secured through a combination of planning and delivery mechanisms:

- **Planning conditions** requiring approval and implementation of biodiversity gain plans.
- **Legal agreements** securing off-site habitat creation or long-term management where necessary.
- **Off-site habitat provision**, including use of habitat banks and third-party land where on-site delivery was not feasible.
- **Partnership working**, including collaboration with Devon County Council, Devon Wildlife Trust and private landowners to support off-site delivery and long-term habitat stewardship.

Where biodiversity units are linked to specific permissions, this is recorded in Exacom.

5.6 Future Monitoring and Reporting

Exacom will continue to serve as the Council's primary system for monitoring BNG delivery, supporting:

- ongoing oversight of habitat creation and enhancement,
- verification of compliance with approved gain plans and legal agreements, and
- future statutory reporting on BNG and the wider biodiversity duty.

This ensures a consistent and transparent evidence base to support long-term monitoring and future reporting cycles.

6. Information About Exeter City Council (Optional)

Exeter City Council is a district council operating within a two-tier system of local government, with Devon County Council responsible for a range of strategic functions relevant to biodiversity, including highways, education and the preparation of the Local Nature Recovery Strategy. Current governance arrangements are expected to remain in place until at least 2028, when the outcomes of the ongoing Local Government Review are anticipated to be implemented.

The city is a compact urban area with a tightly defined administrative boundary and faces sustained development pressure, reflecting its role as a regional economic centre. Within and adjacent to the urban area are river corridors, green spaces and environmentally sensitive sites that form an important part of the city's ecological network. These characteristics shape how biodiversity considerations are addressed through the Council's functions.

Exeter City Council manages a range of parks, green spaces and other land and assets that significantly contribute to the city's green infrastructure. However, it is not a major landowner across the city as a whole. As a result, the Council's ability to influence biodiversity outcomes relies significantly on the effective use of its statutory planning functions, the application of policy, and collaboration with others, rather than direct control of land at scale.

Biodiversity delivery in Exeter therefore operates within a multi-organisational context. The Council works alongside Devon County Council and other public bodies, as well as with landowners, community groups and other partners. In several areas, responsibilities for biodiversity planning and delivery sit beyond

the direct remit of the City Council, requiring coordinated approaches and shared evidence to support effective outcomes.

In addition to its own statutory functions, the Council operates within a wider framework of habitat mitigation and green infrastructure delivery led jointly with other authorities, including the strategic provision of Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace to address recreational impacts arising from new development.

This context helps explain the Council's emphasis on policy-led approaches, partnership working and statutory mechanisms such as Biodiversity Net Gain. It also provides important background for understanding how biodiversity considerations are integrated into decision-making, monitoring and reporting across the reporting period.

7. Top Achievements During the Reporting Period (Optional)

During the reporting period, a small number of key achievements can be identified that demonstrate how Exeter City Council has met its biodiversity duty in practice. These achievements are drawn directly from evidence presented elsewhere in this report and reflect the establishment and application of statutory mechanisms and processes rather than the measurement of ecological outcomes.

First, the Council successfully implemented the mandatory Biodiversity Net Gain requirement as part of its statutory planning functions. This included determining applications subject to the requirement, approving biodiversity gain plans, and securing compliance through planning conditions and legal agreements. All approved biodiversity gain plans met the statutory minimum requirement, establishing Biodiversity Net Gain as an operational and auditable component of planning decision-making during the reporting period.

Secondly, the Council established and applied monitoring and data management arrangements to support Biodiversity Net Gain delivery. Through the use of existing planning systems, the Council has been able to record, monitor and report on biodiversity gain requirements and approvals at application level. This has provided a clear evidence base to support statutory compliance, transparency and future reporting.

8. Consideration of Other Strategies (Optional)

In fulfilling its biodiversity duty during the reporting period, Exeter City Council has had regard to a range of other strategies, plans and frameworks that are relevant to biodiversity conservation and enhancement. These strategies operate at different spatial and organisational levels and have informed how biodiversity considerations are reflected in policy application, decision-making and partnership working.

As a district council operating within a two-tier system of local government, the Council's consideration of other strategies includes those prepared or led by other public bodies where responsibilities for biodiversity planning and delivery are shared. In particular, the development of the Local Nature Recovery Strategy for Devon has provided an important strategic context, setting out priorities for nature recovery at a county-wide scale. While Exeter City Council is not the responsible authority for the Local Nature Recovery Strategy, it has had regard to its emerging evidence base and objectives where relevant to its own functions.

The Council has also taken account of the statutory development plan and associated planning frameworks, ensuring that biodiversity-related considerations are integrated into planning policy application and decision-making. This includes alignment with broader approaches to green infrastructure, environmental protection and sustainable development, which support biodiversity outcomes alongside other planning objectives.

In addition, the Council's approach to biodiversity has been informed by wider corporate environmental and sustainability strategies, including those relating to climate change and net zero. These strategies provide complementary objectives and help to ensure that biodiversity considerations are not treated in isolation but are considered alongside other environmental priorities where appropriate.

Consideration of these strategies has been undertaken in a proportionate manner, recognising the different roles and responsibilities of organisations involved and the need to avoid duplication. Together, they provide an important context for how the Council has approached its biodiversity duty during the reporting period and how biodiversity considerations are embedded across policy, planning and partnership activity.

In exercising its functions, the Council has also had regard to strategic habitat mitigation strategies prepared collaboratively across South East Devon, including those relating to the provision of Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace to mitigate recreational pressure on internationally protected sites.

9. How Policies, Objectives and Actions Have Helped the Environment (Optional)

During the reporting period, Exeter City Council's approach to biodiversity has helped support environmental outcomes primarily through the application of statutory policies, established decision-making processes and recognised delivery mechanisms, rather than through discrete or standalone initiatives.

Biodiversity considerations are embedded within planning policy application and development management processes. Through these mechanisms, potential impacts on habitats and species are identified and considered as part of decision-making, with expectations for avoidance, mitigation and enhancement addressed through policy interpretation, conditions and legal agreements where appropriate. This provides a consistent framework for managing environmental effects associated with development activity across the city.

The Council's reliance on adopted environmental and sustainability strategies has also helped ensure that biodiversity considerations are addressed alongside related priorities, including climate change and wider environmental protection. By aligning these policy areas, biodiversity is considered as part of a broader environmental context rather than in isolation, supporting more coherent and joined-up decision-making.

Statutory mechanisms, including Biodiversity Net Gain, have provided a structured means of securing biodiversity enhancement as part of development proposals. While the ecological outcomes of such mechanisms are realised over the long term and are influenced by multiple factors, their application during the reporting period has established clear expectations and processes for environmental consideration and enhancement within the planning system.

Beyond planning, the Council's policy framework and partnership-based approach have supported environmental outcomes by influencing how land use, infrastructure and environmental assets are considered across different functions and organisations. Given the Council's role within a two-tier system of local government and its limited direct control over land, this policy-led and collaborative approach is a key means by which environmental considerations are integrated into decision-making.

Taken together, these policies, objectives and actions have helped create the conditions through which biodiversity and wider environmental considerations are incorporated into the Council's functions. While the environmental effects of these approaches are often cumulative and realised over time, they provide a

consistent and proportionate basis for supporting biodiversity conservation and enhancement during the reporting period.

10. Raising Awareness and Educating the Community (Optional)

During the reporting period, Exeter City Council has supported awareness and understanding of biodiversity-related issues primarily through its existing communication, engagement and partnership activity, rather than through the delivery of standalone education programmes.

Information about biodiversity, the natural environment and related initiatives is made available through established Council channels and is integrated, where appropriate, into planning processes, policy consultation and wider environmental communications. This helps ensure that biodiversity considerations are visible to residents, applicants and stakeholders as part of routine interactions with the Council.

Awareness-raising activity is also supported indirectly through partnership working. The Council works alongside other public bodies, community organisations and local groups whose activities promote understanding of biodiversity and environmental issues. In this context, the Council's role is often to enable, support or signpost activity led by others, reflecting the shared nature of responsibilities within a two-tier system of local government and the limits of the Council's direct remit.

The Council's approach to awareness and engagement has been proportionate to its statutory functions and resources, focusing on the provision of information and the integration of biodiversity considerations into existing engagement mechanisms. This approach recognises that improved awareness can support longer-term environmental outcomes, while acknowledging that changes in understanding or behaviour are influenced by a range of factors beyond the Council's direct control.

11. Monitoring and Evaluation (Optional)

During the reporting period, Exeter City Council has monitored activity related to its biodiversity duty primarily through existing statutory processes, established

systems and governance arrangements, rather than through bespoke evaluation frameworks.

Monitoring is most developed where statutory mechanisms require structured oversight. In particular, the implementation of Biodiversity Net Gain is supported by application-level data and associated monitoring processes, enabling the Council to track compliance with statutory requirements and to maintain an auditable record of decisions and secured measures. This provides a clear and proportionate basis for monitoring delivery within the planning system.

More broadly, the Council monitors the application of biodiversity-related policies through routine planning decision-making, policy implementation and reporting processes. This includes oversight of how relevant policies are applied in practice and how statutory requirements are met, rather than the measurement of ecological outcomes themselves. The Council recognises that many environmental effects are long-term, cumulative and influenced by factors beyond its direct control.

Information gathered through these monitoring processes is used to support transparency, inform internal review and contribute to statutory reporting, including preparation of future biodiversity duty reports. Experience gained during this first reporting period will help inform how monitoring and reporting arrangements are refined over time, within the context of available data, resources and evolving national guidance.

The Council's approach to monitoring and evaluation has therefore been proportionate and focused on process and compliance, reflecting the scope of its statutory functions and the practical limits of local authority monitoring in a two-tier governance context.

12. Biodiversity Highlights and Challenges (Optional)

Highlights

During the reporting period, several positive features of Exeter City Council's approach to biodiversity are evident. Biodiversity considerations have been embedded within statutory policy frameworks and planning decision-making, providing a consistent basis for addressing environmental issues across a wide range of functions and development proposals.

The implementation of mandatory Biodiversity Net Gain represents a significant milestone in the reporting period. The establishment of processes, systems and governance arrangements to support Biodiversity Net Gain has created a structured and auditable mechanism for securing biodiversity enhancement through the planning system, forming a clear and tangible element of the Council's response to the biodiversity duty.

The Council has also continued to operate within a collaborative, partnership-based framework, reflecting the shared responsibilities for biodiversity within a two-tier system of local government. This approach has supported alignment with wider strategic priorities and ensured that biodiversity considerations are not addressed in isolation from related environmental objectives.

Challenges

These challenges are common to many district councils operating within two-tier governance arrangements and are not unique to Exeter.

The Council's approach to biodiversity is shaped by several structural and contextual challenges. Exeter is a compact urban authority with a tightly defined administrative boundary and limited direct control over land at scale, which constrains the extent to which biodiversity outcomes can be delivered through land ownership alone. As a result, the Council must rely heavily on policy-led approaches, statutory mechanisms and partnership working.

Operating within a two-tier governance system also presents inherent complexity. Responsibilities for biodiversity planning, delivery and monitoring are distributed across different organisations, requiring coordination and alignment rather than direct control. This can influence the pace and visibility of biodiversity outcomes, particularly where actions are led by other bodies.

More broadly, many biodiversity outcomes are long-term and cumulative in nature, and their realisation extends beyond individual reporting periods. While statutory mechanisms and policy frameworks provide a means of securing enhancement and protection, the environmental effects of these approaches may only become fully apparent over time and are influenced by factors beyond the Council's direct control.

Taken together, these highlights and challenges provide important context for understanding the Council's biodiversity duty reporting. They reflect a proportionate and realistic approach to delivery within the Council's statutory remit and operating environment.

13. Conclusions and Next Steps

This report provides Exeter City Council's first formal account of how it has fulfilled its biodiversity duty under the Environment Act 2021. It sets out, in a proportionate and transparent way, how biodiversity considerations have been addressed through the Council's statutory functions, policy framework, decision-making processes and partnership working during the reporting period from 1 January 2024 to 1 January 2026.

The report demonstrates that the Council's approach to the biodiversity duty has been grounded in the continued application of existing policies, statutory mechanisms and established processes, rather than the introduction of new standalone initiatives. It also reflects the Council's operating context, including its role within a two-tier system of local government, the shared nature of responsibilities for biodiversity, and the long-term and cumulative character of many environmental outcomes.

Looking ahead, the Council expects to continue meeting its biodiversity duty through the ongoing application of these frameworks and mechanisms, informed by experience gained during this first reporting period. Monitoring and reporting arrangements established during this period will support transparency and accountability and provide a basis for the preparation of the next biodiversity duty report, in line with statutory requirements and future Government guidance.