



RIVERDALE ECOLOGY

Biodiversity Net Gain Report

Sheepwash Solar Energy Farm, Marden, Kent

February 2022

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background to Commission

Riverdale Ecology Ltd were commissioned by Statkraft UK Ltd to undertake a Biodiversity Net Gain calculation using the DEFRA Metric 3.0 and produce a biodiversity net gain report for a proposed solar farm development to the west of Marden, Kent.

1.2 Scope of Report

The purpose of this report is to establish the current biodiversity value of the site and to quantify the value of the habitat creation measures proposed as part of the Ecological Impact Assessment report (Riverdale Ecology, 2022) and the landscape design for the site. The report aims to establish:

- The baseline conditions at the site through classification of habitat type, distinctiveness, condition, connectivity and strategic significance of habitats present prior to development.
- Calculate the habitat units of existing habitats and the post construction landscaping plan including all mitigation, compensation and enhancement habitat elements.
- Demonstrate and quantify the net gain of onsite and offsite habitat creation measures detailed within the Ecological Impact Assessment, the Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment and the Landscape and Ecological Management Plan.

This report has been prepared with reference to best practice as published by the Chartered Institute for Ecology and Environmental Management (CIEEM, 2016 & 2021) and to British Standard 8683:2021 (BSI, 2021). This report provides recommendations for enhancement of the site for biodiversity in line with the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) (Department of Communities and Local Government, 2019) and best practice guidelines.

The calculations and report were undertaken and written by Danny Thomas CEcol, MCIEEM, Principal Ecologist at Riverdale Ecology Ltd. Danny has over 18 years' experience within ecological consultancy and as such is suitably qualified to undertake habitat surveys and net gain assessments. He is a Chartered Ecologist and has a BSc (Hons) in Ecology with Biology and an MSc in Environmental Sciences from the University of East Anglia.

1.3 Site Description and Project Overview

The Application Site is located in a rural setting to the west of Marden, a village in the borough of Maidstone, approximately 10km south of Maidstone in central Kent.

The Application Site is approximately 70 hectares in area comprising six connected arable fields bounded by hedgerows and trees, belonging to Little Cheveney Farm. The eastern site boundary is demarked by the Lesser Teise, a tributary of the River Beult. The northern boundary of the site is demarked by the Southeastern Railways main line to Dover. The southern and western boundaries are less defined, demarked by field boundaries and in part by Sheephurst Lane.

The Application Site is accessed from Sheephurst Lane to the south via existing farm access tracks.

The development proposal is for the construction of a solar energy farm with ancillary energy storage and electrical infrastructure including an operation centre, substations, internal access roads, security fencing and CCTV.

1.4 Acknowledgements

A desk study was undertaken of baseline data relating to protected species and non-statutory designated sites for wildlife conservation using information purchased from the Kent and Medway Biological Records Centre.

1.5 Relevant Legislation and Planning Policy

Environment Act 2021

The Environment Act 2021 was passed in November 2021. Biodiversity net gain follows on from the Government's aim in its 25 Year Environment Plan to "leave the environment in a better state than we found it". Broadly, "biodiversity net gain", as set out in the Environment Act, requires development to deliver at least a 10 percent improvement in "biodiversity value". While the Environment Act is not yet fully implemented, demonstrable delivery of biodiversity net gain is expected by many local authorities.

To achieve biodiversity net gain, proposals must follow the 'mitigation hierarchy' which compels planning applicants to avoid harm in the first instance, then mitigate or finally compensate for losses on-site, off-site or through a combination of the two solutions. Before commencing development, a developer will need to submit, and a planning authority will need to approve, a biodiversity net gain plan. This plan must include, amongst other matters, details of how the biodiversity value has been calculated, and how the net gain target will be achieved.

Biodiversity value must be calculated using the Government's biodiversity calculator otherwise known as the "Defra metric". According to the Environment Act, broadly speaking, biodiversity net gain is calculated by deducting "pre-development biodiversity value" from the estimated "post-development biodiversity value". The pre-development biodiversity value of a habitat on a site is calculated at the time of the submission of the planning application. A technical supplement that accompanies the Defra metric provides guidance to assist developers in assessing the condition of a habitat.

National Planning Policy

The National Planning Policy Framework (DfCLG, 2019) requires local authorities to avoid and minimise impacts on biodiversity and, where possible, to provide net gains in biodiversity when taking planning decisions:

"The planning system should contribute to and enhance the natural and local environment by protecting and enhancing valued landscapes and minimising impacts on biodiversity and providing net gains in biodiversity, including by establishing coherent ecological networks that are more resilient to current and future pressures."

To protect and enhance biodiversity and geodiversity, plans should:

"Identify, map and safeguard components of local wildlife-rich habitats and wider ecological networks, including the hierarchy of international, national and locally designated sites of importance for biodiversity; wildlife corridors and steppingstones that connect them; and areas identified by national and local partnerships for habitat management, enhancement, restoration or creation"; and,

"Promote the conservation, restoration and enhancement of priority habitats, ecological networks and the protection and recovery of priority species; and identify and pursue opportunities for securing measurable net gains for biodiversity."

When determining planning applications, local planning authorities should apply the following principles:

"If significant harm to biodiversity resulting from a development cannot be avoided (through locating on an alternative site with less harmful impacts), adequately mitigated, or, as a last resort, compensated for, then planning permission should be refused."

"Development resulting in the loss or deterioration of irreplaceable habitats (such as ancient woodland and ancient or veteran trees) should be refused, unless there are wholly exceptional reasons and a suitable compensation strategy exists"; and,



“Developments whose primary objective is to conserve or enhance biodiversity should be supported; while opportunities to incorporate biodiversity improvements in and around developments should be encouraged, especially where this can secure measurable net gains for biodiversity.”

2 Methodology

2.1 Extended Phase 1 Habitat Survey

A habitat survey of the site was carried out including any boundary features of interest. Habitats were described and mapped broadly in accordance with standard Phase 1 Habitat survey methodology (JNCC, 2010). Habitats were also assessed against Habitat of Principal Importance (HPI) criteria as set out by the JNCC (<http://jncc.defra.gov.uk/page-5706>).

The initial habitat survey was undertaken on 23rd June 2021 during the optimal period for botanical surveying but was updated during subsequent site visits in July, August and September with additional species and habitat condition details.

Scientific names are given for vascular plant species only, following their first mention, thereafter common names only are used. Nomenclature for vascular plants follows Stace (2010). Incidental records of birds and other fauna noted during the course of the habitat survey were also compiled.

The Defra Biodiversity Metric 3.0 utilises habitat types classified using the UK Habitats Classification methodology and habitats were translated from the Phase 1 descriptions into the UKHAB codes for use within the Metric. This was used to calculate the baseline biodiversity units.

2.2 Condition Assessment

Habitat condition was assigned following guidance from the 'Biodiversity Metric 3.0 habitat condition assessment sheets with instructions' document (Natural England, 2021) which accompanies the Biodiversity Metric 3.0. Assessment criteria were followed for each broad habitat type, to determine the condition of each habitat.

Habitat condition was assigned following a precautionary approach with existing habitats more likely to score a higher condition value than newly created habitats. This approach ensures that the required 10 percent net gain is achieved even in the event that on site habitat creation does not establish to expected quality within the designated time frame.

2.3 Ecological Connectivity

The ecological connectivity for habitat types was calculated using the guidance from the Biodiversity Metric 3.0 User Guide (2021). Scores for habitats with 'High' distinctiveness are deemed to have 'Medium' connectivity, whilst habitats with either 'Medium' or 'Low' distinctiveness are considered to have 'Low' connectivity.

2.4 Strategic Significance

The criteria within the Biodiversity Metric 3.0 were assessed by determining if habitat areas within the Application Site occur within any strategic locations for biodiversity, form part of a designated site for nature conservation or are identified within local plans such as Ecological Networks or steppingstone features.

The presence of the River Lesser Teise on the eastern edge of the site was considered to be a locally important feature providing connective habitat across the local landscape. As such, the existing habitats directly associated with the Lesser Teise were considered to have high strategic significance for the purposes of the baseline condition calculations.

2.5 Calculation of Biodiversity Units

This DEFRA Biodiversity Metric 3.0 (July 2021) was used to calculate the baseline conditions and post development conditions enabling an assessment of the percentage change in biodiversity units and hedgerow units as a result of the solar farm development. Biodiversity Net Gain Calculations were undertaken based on the 27899 - 050 Rev B - Proposed Solar Farm Site Layout, the Biodiversity Enhancement Plan and the AW0143-PL-002 Landscape Mitigation & Enhancement Plan.



2.6 Survey and Assessment Limitations

The data and conclusions presented here are an evidence-based assessment of the current status of the Application Site. Ecological surveys are limited by factors which affect the presence of plants and animals such as the time of year.

It should be noted that the accuracy of habitat area measurement is limited by the form of baseline data collection and resolution of development proposal plans. In this instance, baseline habitat areas have been calculated by cross referencing illustrative Habitats Plans with aerial imagery and CAD generated measurements derived from AW0143-PL-002 Landscape Mitigation & Enhancement Plan. Post-development habitat areas have been measured from the illustrative Development Framework Plan. In the absence of detailed planting plans, reasonable assumptions have been made with regards to the type/condition of habitats that could be created.

3 Results

3.1 Condition Assessment

Arable

The majority of the site comprises six large arable fields under the 'Cropland – cereal crops' definition. The fields were cultivated at the time of the survey with autumn/winter wheat and a broad bean crop.

Arable Field Margins

All the fields have a varying width of field margin which typically comprises rough semi-improved grassland with generally low species diversity and low frequency of flowering forbs. Tall herbs are locally abundant indicative of high nutrient soil. For the purposes of the net gain calculation the margins were categorised as 'Cropland – arable field margins tussocky' which reflects the relatively low biodiversity value of the existing grassland sward.

Hedgerows/Hedgerows with trees

Existing hedgerows, hedgerows with trees and treelines within the site total approximately 5.43km. The hedgerows are typical of agricultural field boundary hedgerows, subjected to long term management, and vary in their condition assessment due to the structure of the hedgerow, the species diversity and the number of gaps. Ground flora around the hedgerows is significantly influenced by the arable land use and support nettles and tall herb species indicative of high nitrification. All the hedgerows were considered to be in high or moderate condition with the exception of two sections of defunct hedgerow which failed to meet the criteria to be considered anything other than poor quality.

Woodland and forest

There is a strip of approximately 0.2 hectares of young woodland within the site forming a boundary between fields. The woodland comprises almost exclusively young self-set broadleaved varieties including hawthorn, ash, oak, field maple, blackthorn and other shrub species. The woodland was categorised as 'Other woodland, broadleaved' and in poor condition as it is yet to develop into mature woodland and thus lacks most of the important habitat characteristics of broadleaved woodland.

Heathland and Scrub

There are two small but distinct areas of scrub within the site. A narrow strip of bramble scrub on the northern edge of the site approximated at 0.1 hectares. In addition, willow scrub has developed around Pond 1 within the site, again approximated at 0.1 hectares.

Ponds (Priority Habitat)

There are four ponds within the site boundary: Pond 1, Pond 4, Pond 5 and Pond 6. Other ponds exist adjacent to the site boundaries but are not within the site. The ponds are largely overshadowed, and probably nutrient rich. Pond 4 and Pond 5 were confirmed to contain great crested newt eDNA so have higher value for supporting protected species. Taking a precautionary approach, the pond condition for all the ponds within the site was categorised as Moderate.

Offsite habitats

A neighbouring grassland field will support some offsite habitat creation measures. Much of the habitat creation is mitigation screening recommended in the Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment, but the grassland areas will be enhanced through creation of species rich wildflower neutral grassland and creation of at least one additional pond.

3.2 Strategic Significance

The site is not within any area of recognised strategic significance. Although, for the purposes of the assessment, the River Lesser Teise has been considered to have local habitat connectivity importance and as such the adjacent treeline is considered to be ecologically desirable but not within local strategy.

3.3 Baseline Biodiversity Unit Calculations

The Application Site area is taken to be 75 hectares in total for the purposes of the calculation. Based on the Biodiversity Metric 3.0 calculations the baseline for the onsite habitat total 160.92 habitat units and 45.54 hedgerow units.

The baseline habitat has been calculated based on the following broad habitat types:

Table 1: Summary of baseline habitat

Habitat Type	Area (hectares)	Distinctiveness	Condition	Baseline Units
Cropland	70	Low	N/A	140.00
Arable field margins (Tussocky)	4.5	Medium	N/A	18.00
Other woodland (Broadleaved)	0.2	Medium	Poor	0.8
Mixed Scrub	0.1	Medium	Poor	0.4
Bramble Scrub	0.1	Medium	Poor	0.4
Ponds (Priority Habitat)	0.1	High	Moderate	1.32

3.4 Habitat Creation Measures

Other neutral grassland

Wildflower grassland will be established across approximately 16 hectares of the site including a large meadow in the biodiversity enhancement zone on the western edge of the site, a wide strip on the eastern edge of the site and a large meadow in the southeast of the site, to the south of the existing footpath. The grassland will be established using a native meadow grassland seed mix such as Emorsgate EM3 – Special General Purpose Meadow Mixture or equivalent which provides a combination of five wild grass varieties alongside 24 species of appropriate native wildflowers for neutral soil types.

Modified grassland

Grassland will be established within the solar panel array to provide soil stability and create habitat for wildlife. The grassland will be established using a ryegrass/clover mix to established quickly and provide some floral diversity for invertebrates.

Other woodland (broadleaved)

Approximately 2.2 hectares of new deciduous woodland will be planted for biodiversity enhancement. The woodland will be planted in two blocks either side of the existing woodland area, approximately doubling the total woodland area. The composition of the woodland should aim to replicate the areas of semi-natural woodland adjacent to the site comprising oak *Quercus robur* standards with birch *Betula pendula* and alder *Alnus glutinosa* and an understorey of hazel, holly, field maple and hawthorn.

Additional woodland strips will be planted as part of the visual screening measures included in the Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment.



Pond creation

At least two new ponds will be created within the biodiversity enhancement zone with a combined surface area of approximately 250 sq m. The ponds will be created with a varied profile to provide different water levels and ensure water retention through the year. The new ponds will be planted with native aquatic and marginal plants such as brooklime *Veronica beccabunga*, water mint *Mentha aquatica*, water starwort *Callitriche stagnalis*, water forget-me-not *Myosotis scorpiodes*, water crowfoot *Ranunculus aquatilis*, yellow flag iris *Iris pseudacorus*, purple loosestrife *Lythrum salicaria*, marsh marigold *Caltha palustris* and lesser spearwort *Ranunculus flammula*.

Hedgerow Planting

Approximately 2.4km of new species-rich hedgerow will be planted on the site on the boundary between the solar farm and the biodiversity enhancement zone and a further 1.2km along the northern edge of the site between the Solar Farm boundary and the public footpath. Additional hedgerow planting will be included as part of the visual screening measures included in the Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment.

Any new hedgerow planting should include native species only utilising a minimum of five woody species within each 30m section. Species should comprise approximately 65% hawthorn with 35% being a mix of at least six other native hedging plants including field maple, blackthorn, hornbeam, hazel, dogwood, wayfaring tree *Viburnum lantana*, guelder rose *Viburnum opulus*, crab apple *Malus sylvestris*, spindle *Euonymus europaea*, dog rose, field rose *R. arvensis* and elder.

Gappy or defunct sections of hedgerow within the site will be enhanced through removal and replacement with new species rich hedgerow or alternatively undergo significant management to lay or coppice the existing structure and improve the hedgerow diversity with additional hedging species.

3.5 Qualitative Assessment of Net Gain Measures

A qualitative assessment of Biodiversity Net Gain was carried out to ensure that the scheme design delivers the best and most appropriate habitat measures which maintain and enhance ecological functionality of a site and delivers benefits for local biodiversity.

Table 2: Qualitative assessment table

Habitat Type	Ecological Value and Function	Impact	Notes
Cropland	Low – limited value to wildlife	Loss of Cropland	Conversion to grassland
Grassland (modified)	Low – provides some value for invertebrates and small mammals.	Creation of 50 hectares	Ryegrass and clover mix to be established in the solar array.
Grassland (other neutral)	Moderate – provides habitat for invertebrates, birds and small mammals.	Creation of 16 hectares	Species-rich wildflower grassland to be established



Habitat Type	Ecological Value and Function	Impact	Notes
Other woodland (Broadleaved)	Moderate – provides habitat for wildlife including badgers, birds, mammals, invertebrates and amphibians.	Existing woodland retained and protected	Creation of 3.5 hectares of woodland comprising both biodiversity woodland (2.2 ha) and visual screening (1.3 ha).
Mixed Scrub	Low – willow scrub around a pond offers some limited value as nesting and refuge habitat.	Loss of 50% scrub habitat	Scrub removal to allow more sunlight to reach the pond surface – removal of scrub represents enhancement in this case.
Bramble Scrub	Low – some value as nesting habitat for birds and provides a linear habitat feature in a strip along railway.	Loss of scrub	Replacement with species rich hedgerow.
Ponds (Priority Habitat)	High – breeding habitat for amphibians including great crested newts and invertebrates.	Existing ponds retained and protected.	Two new ponds to be created in biodiversity zone.
Hedgerow/Hedgerow with trees	High – provides extensive nesting habitat for birds, roosting, foraging and commuting habitat for bats. Foraging and sett creation for badgers.	Existing hedgerows to be retained.	Extensive new species rich hedgerow planting to extend the hedgerow network across the site and provide local benefits for wildlife as landscape scale commuting routes are improved.

3.6 Ecological Functionality

Ecological functionality will be maintained through retention and enhancement of the hedgerow network, with new hedgerow planting and significant areas of new woodland planting for biodiversity enhancement and visual screening. Approximately 16 hectares of wildflower grassland is being provided on the eastern and western sides of the solar farm to provide extensive habitat for invertebrates. These measures will ensure the retention of existing habitat resources for protected species (e.g. bats and great crested newt) and increase the extent and value of foraging, refuge and nesting resources for all wildlife.

3.7 Biodiversity Net Gain Calculation

A biodiversity unit net gain of **79.03 habitat units** representing a **51.04% biodiversity net gain**, was achieved following completion of the baseline and post-development biodiversity value. The majority of the net gain improvement was achieved through conversion of 16 hectares of arable cropland to grassland and creation of broadleaved woodland. That establishment of species-poor grassland within the solar array maintains the same unit score as arable cropland.

A unit gain of **17.89 hedgerow units** was achieved representing a **39.29% net gain in hedgerow units** across the site.



As such the development satisfies NPPF policy and meets targets for net gain set out in the Environment Act 2021 by exceeding the minimum net gain requirement of 10%. In fact, the biodiversity net gain achieved on site exceeds statutory targets by almost five times and provides far reaching biodiversity benefits observed at the local scale.

Table 3: DEFRA Metric net gain calculation headline results

Sheepwash Solar Farm, Marden, Kent		Return to results menu
Headline Results		
On-site baseline	<i>Habitat units</i>	160.92
	<i>Hedgerow units</i>	45.54
	<i>River units</i>	0.00
On-site post-intervention <small>(Including habitat retention, creation & enhancement)</small>	<i>Habitat units</i>	242.21
	<i>Hedgerow units</i>	63.43
	<i>River units</i>	0.00
On-site net % change <small>(Including habitat retention, creation & enhancement)</small>	<i>Habitat units</i>	50.52%
	<i>Hedgerow units</i>	39.29%
	<i>River units</i>	0.00%
Off-site baseline	<i>Habitat units</i>	2.26
	<i>Hedgerow units</i>	0.00
	<i>River units</i>	0.00
Off-site post-intervention <small>(Including habitat retention, creation & enhancement)</small>	<i>Habitat units</i>	3.10
	<i>Hedgerow units</i>	0.00
	<i>River units</i>	0.00
Total net unit change <small>(including all on-site & off-site habitat retention, creation & enhancement)</small>	<i>Habitat units</i>	82.13
	<i>Hedgerow units</i>	17.89
	<i>River units</i>	0.00
Total on-site net % change plus off-site surplus <small>(including all on-site & off-site habitat retention, creation & enhancement)</small>	<i>Habitat units</i>	51.04%
	<i>Hedgerow units</i>	39.29%
	<i>River units</i>	0.00%
Trading rules Satisfied?	Yes	



4 References

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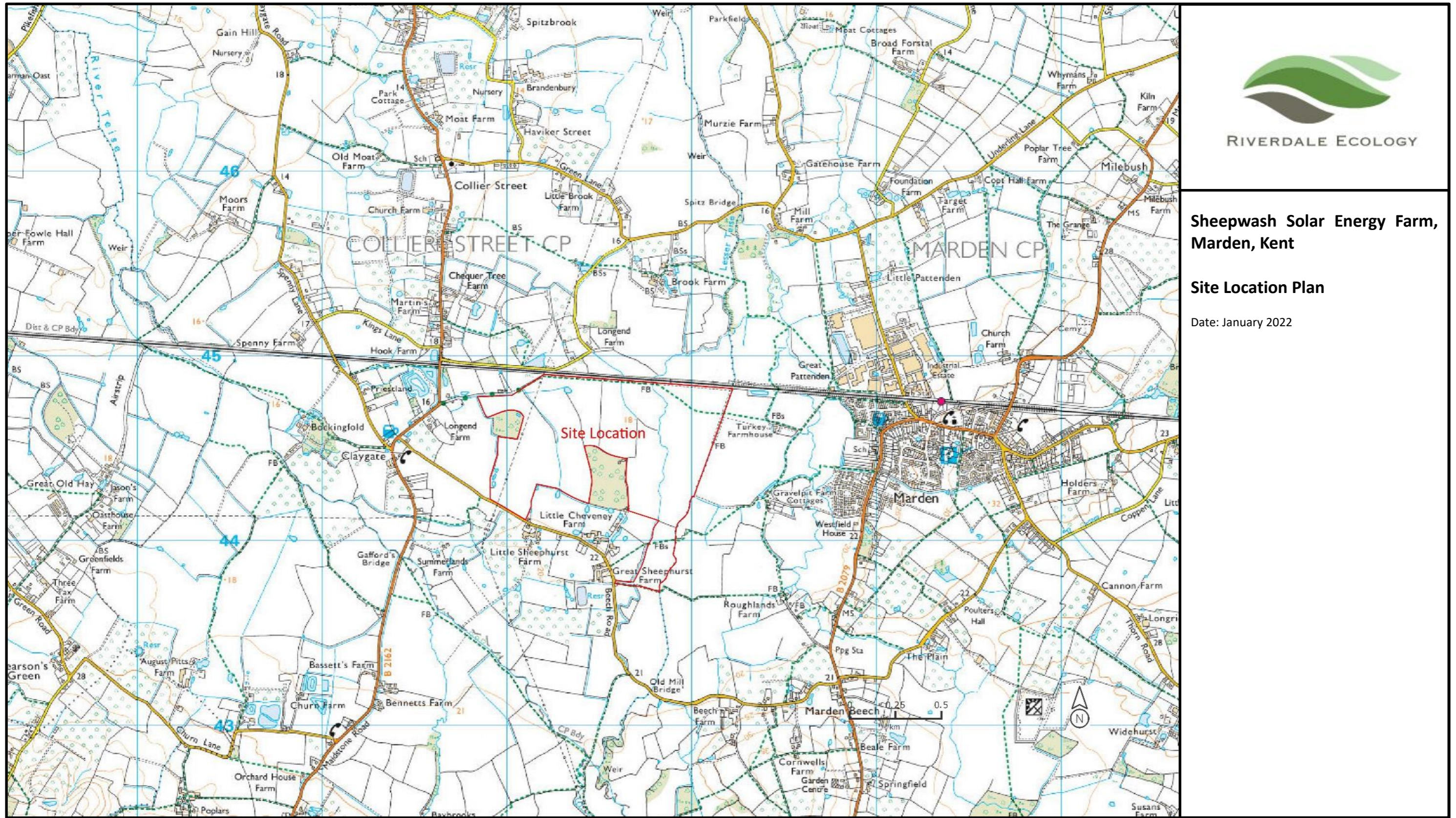
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Appendix 1: Site Plans



Figure 1: Site Location Plan



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**Sheepwash Solar Energy Farm,
Marden, Kent**

Site Location Plan

Date: January 2022

Figure 2: Phase 1 Habitat Plan

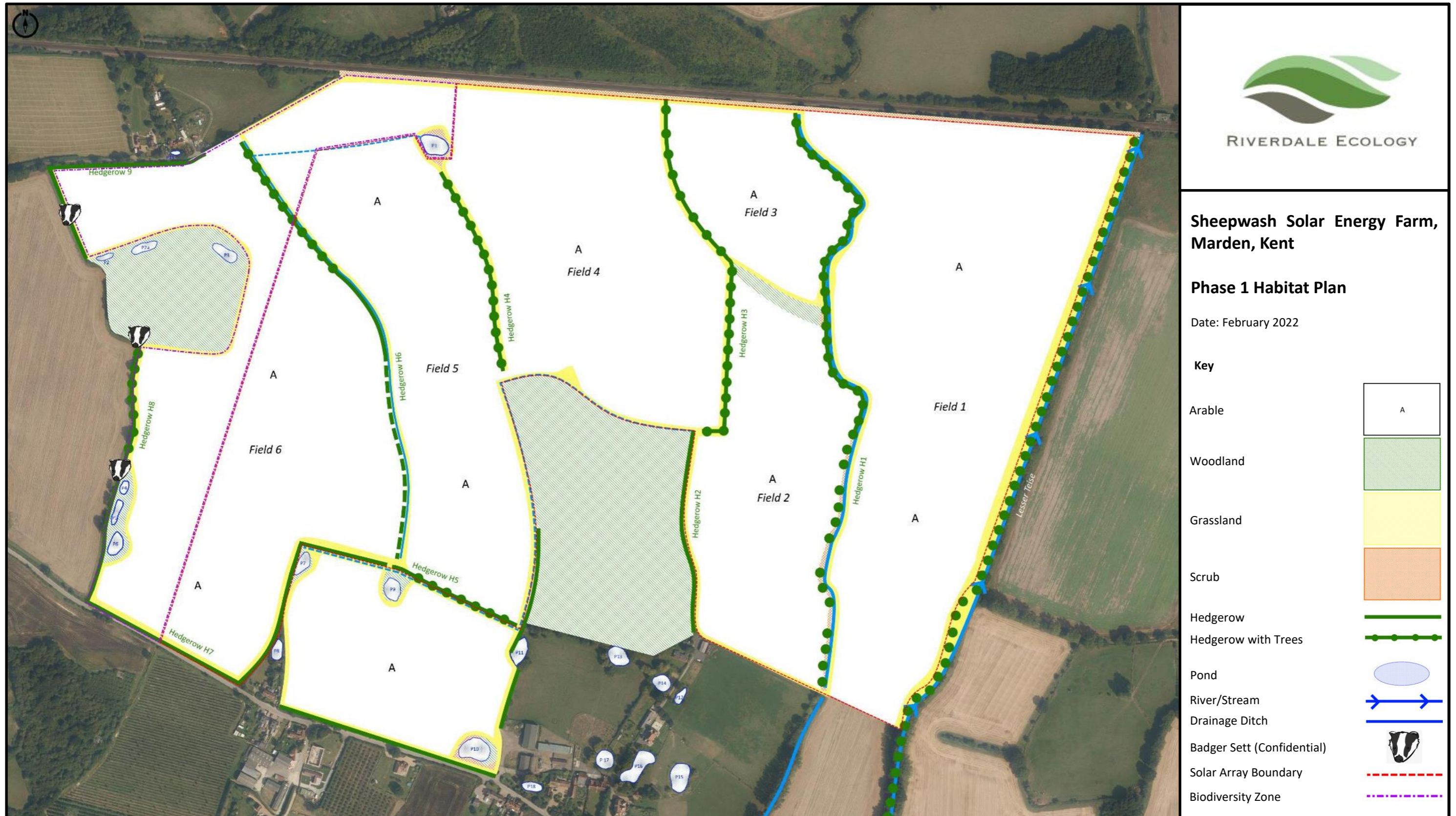
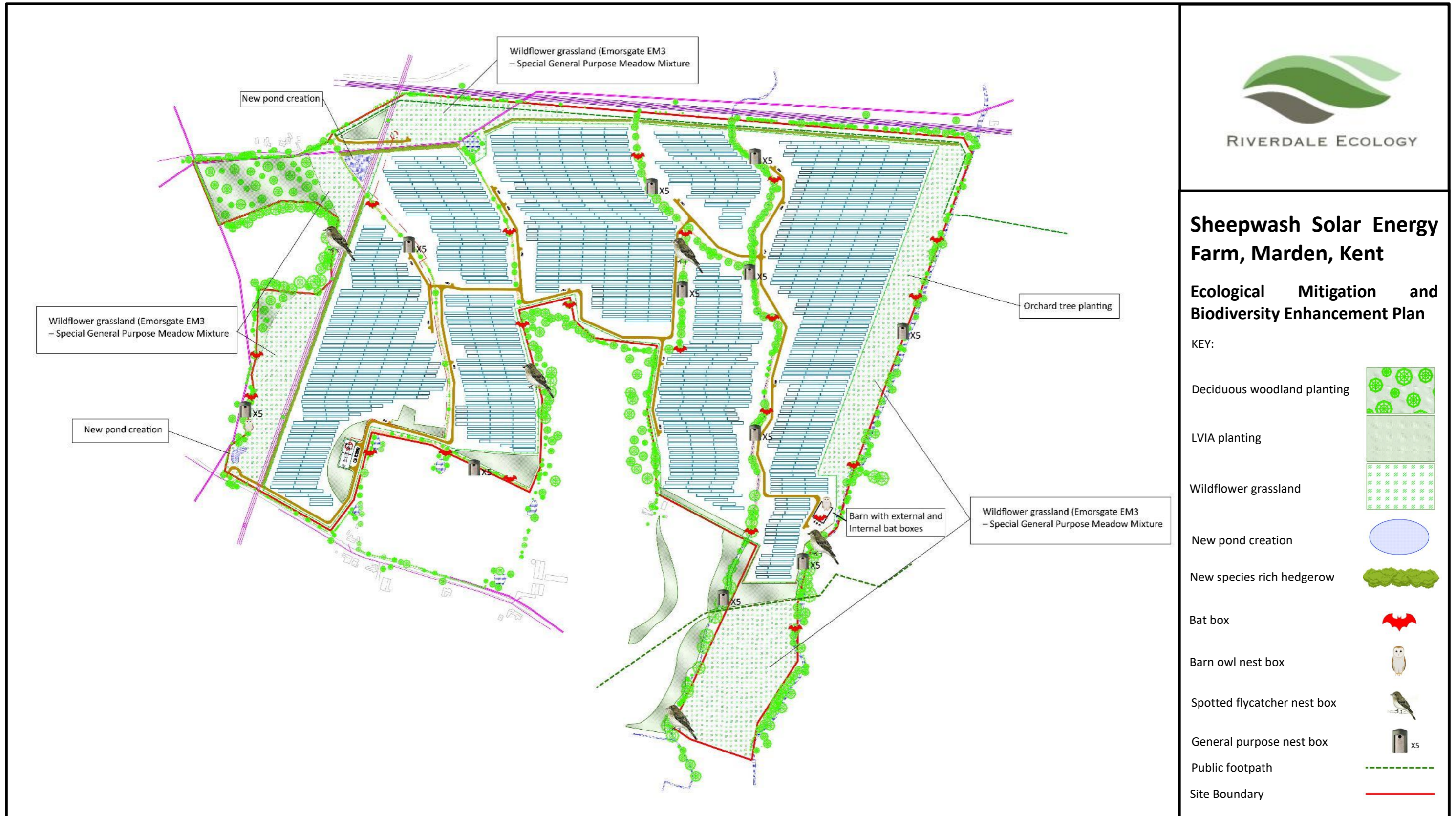


Figure 3: Ecological Mitigation and Biodiversity Enhancement





Appendix 2: DEFRA Metric Net Gain Calculation



BNG Measures (off site)

Sheepwash Solar Farm, Marden, Kent								
D-1 Off Site Habitat Baseline								
Condense / Show Columns			Condense / Show Rows					
Main Menu			Instructions					
Habitats and areas				Habitat distinctiveness	Habitat condition	Strategic significance	Suggested action to address habitat losses	Ecological baseline
Baseline ref	Broad habitat	Habitat type	Area (hectares)	Distinctiveness	Condition	Strategic significance		Total habitat units
1	Grassland	Modified grassland	1.13	Low	Poor	Area/compensation not in local strategy/ no local strategy	Same distinctiveness or better habitat required	2.26
2								
3								
4								
5								
			1.13				Total Site baseline	2.26

Sheepwash Solar Farm, Marden, Kent												
D-2 Off Site Habitat Creation												
Condense / Show Columns			Condense / Show Rows									
Main Menu			Instructions									
Post development/ post intervention habitats												
Broad Habitat	Proposed habitat	Area ha	Distinctiveness	Condition	Strategic significance	Temporal risk multiplier		Difficulty	Spatial risk multiplier		Habitat units delivered	
					Strategic significance	Standard or adjusted time to target condition	Final time to target condition/years	Final difficulty of creation	Spatial risk category			
Woodland and forest	Other woodland; mixed	1.13	Medium	Moderate	Area/compensation not in local strategy/ no local strategy	Standard time to target condition applied	30	Low	Compensation inside LPA or NCA, or deemed to be sufficiently local, to site of biodiversity loss		3.10	
Total Length		1.13										3.10



Summary Figures

Net project biodiversity units
(including all on-site & off-site habitat retention/creation)

<i>Habitat units</i>	82.13
<i>Hedgerow units</i>	17.89
<i>River units</i>	0.00

Total project biodiversity % change
(including all On-site & Off-site Habitat Creation + Retained Habitats)

<i>Habitat units</i>	51.04%
<i>Hedgerow units</i>	39.29%
<i>River units</i>	0.00%

Combined habitat retention and enhancement

	Habitats	Hedgerows	Rivers
Total area / length	76.13	5.43	0.00
Total units	163.18	45.54	0.00
Area / length retained	4.85	5.01	0.00
Units Retained	20.32	44.42	0.00
Area / length proposed for enhancement	0.00	0.42	0.00
Baseline units proposed for enhancement	0.00	1.12	0.00
Area / length lost	71.28	0.00	0.00
Units lost	142.86	0.00	0.00