

# Measuring Habitat Value

It is understood amongst policy makers and practitioners that there are challenges with consistently assessing the biodiversity value urban nature-based interventions. Determining the ecological condition and ‘value’ of habitats, such as grasslands or woodlands, has, historically, been difficult and often subjective.

To help with this a variety of tools (called metrics) have been developed which can be used as useful proxies for the value of a habitat. However, these are inherently simplistic and can be unrepresentative of ‘real-life’. The number of these metrics available has increased rapidly in recent years; however, comparisons between them have often not been undertaken.

RSK Wilding have therefore undertaken a detailed comparison of the three metrics most likely to be used in London to assess habitats, using proposed enhancement plans for the South Thamesmead Garden Estate as a basis against which to undertake this comparison:

- The **Defra Biodiversity Metric** (Defra Metric), required in most planning applications to assess Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG), and which uses habitat types and the ecological condition (wildlife value of habitat) as a measure of the biodiversity value of a site in what is called biodiversity units,

- The **Small Sites Metric** (SSM), a simplified version of the Defra Metric, intended for small-scale development sites only; and,
- The **Urban Green Factor** (UGF), required to measure adherence to London Plan Policy G5 (Urban Greening) and which uses the water permeability of a surface (so concrete and tarmac gets a low score whilst lawns get a higher score) as a measure for naturalness and therefore the extent of ‘natural’ habitats within an urban environment.



## The key findings of this work are:

- That the Defra Metric and SSM tended to score habitat enhancements lower than the UGF,
- That there is significant potential for variation in how habitat types can be assigned to a metrics habitat categories,
- That the framework of natural and semi-natural habitats on which the Defra Metric and SSM are based can be at odds with their use in urban environments
  - Urban habitats often have different characteristics to habitats in the open countryside and a natural focused metric may not fully capture the realities and practicalities of creating urban habitats and the biodiversity/cultural benefits that carefully selected cultivated plant varieties can provide,
- The SSM automates certain multipliers (including condition assessments) which may not permit accurate representation of real-world conditions. This may be a particular concern for urban sites that may often be of limited size and therefore suitable for SSM use
  - This could also result in inconsistencies in the application of the metric and BNG measurements been sites using the Defra Metric, where there is no automation and those using the SSM,
- The UGF, although not designed to do so, provided a suitable means of assessing change pre- and post-habitat interventions with the use of water permeability appearing, to be a reasonably effective, if slightly crude, proxy for biodiversity,
- The Defra Metric and SSM are more complex metrics than the UGF and therefore permit a more fine-scale assessment of habitats.
  - The lack of complexity within the UGF means it has limited potential to support habitat management decisions, although it was not designed to do this, and could potentially discourage high-quality design, implementation and/or management.

## In light of these findings the following recommendations were made to maximise the value that using these metric tools could offer:

- Where a site does not fall under Town and Country planning requirements, but has an urban greening dimension the use of both the Defra Metric/SSM and UGF should be encouraged to ensure a fuller measure of the biodiversity benefits being achieved,
- To engage with Defra on the fine-tuning of urban habitat condition assessment criteria and, if there is sufficient demand, the potential to create an urban focused version of the Defra Metric (in line with the small sites version) that could consider habitat value (potentially including appropriate cultivated plant species) to fully acknowledge to their unique urban landscape,
- Consider ground testing some changes to the UGF to enhance the direct accounting of biodiversity that, if effective, could be incorporated to the UGF when local plan updates allows, such as:
  - The addition of biodiversity specific considerations either as multipliers to the UGF or as a separate but related matrix,
  - The incorporation of a management practice element to the UGF to allow for distinctions between biodiversity and amenity style habitat management practices,
  - The addition of a garden surface cover type.
- The provision of additional policy guidance to landscape architects to allow a broader understanding of how their designs may be used to benefit biodiversity, support greater consistency in assignment of habitats to metric habitat categories and provide additional information that may support the more accurate assessment of achievable future habitat conditions.