



ARG UK Meeting
Great Crested Newt Licensing Reforms
26 January 2017
Roe Hill Hall
Briars Lane, Hatfield, AL10 8EY

Outcome 2: ARG UK position statement on GCN licensing reforms, January 2017

1. Background¹

“District level licensing is an alternative to the site by site great crested newt (GCN) licensing process which has been used for development up till now. It involves district wide survey of the distribution of GCN and assessment of impacts on GCN from all planned development in the district over the whole local plan period. GCN records and other environmental data are used to map zones which indicate where there are highest risks to the local conservation status of GCN and where GCN pose highest risks to development.

Avoidance and mitigation are secured by advice to the Local Authority (LA), based on the mapped zones. The district wide overview of GCN allows development of a conservation strategy which shows: where it is a priority to retain habitat in green infrastructure corridors as mitigation and improve habitat as compensation for development impacts; and where development can proceed with little or no risk to (or from) GCN.

Compensatory habitat is provided and managed by the LA at strategic locations and at a sufficient scale to address the likely impact of all planned development. This habitat is established on a time profile ahead of development, before the point at which development could have an impact on GCN. Wherever possible it will be located so that GCN will colonise it by natural dispersal.

Developer participation in district level licensing is voluntary (though in some cases LA’s may vary this approach). Participating development projects would be expected to make a contribution towards the LA’s compensatory habitat, according to the number ponds they may impact upon and the zone that they are in.

The local authority is entitled through an organisational licence from Natural England (NE) to authorise operations which may affect GCN on development sites. This authorisation is provided at the same time as planning permission.

Developers who participate in the pilot will be able to avoid the normal requirement for carrying out GCN surveys on their sites. Furthermore, as the compensatory habitat will itself ensure a net benefit to GCN and will be populated by natural dispersal, it is intended that developers who participate in the scheme will not be required to trap and translocate GCN from their sites”.

¹District licensing for GCN 1 page briefing internal and external 120117, Natural England, January 2017

2. ARG UK position statement

1. We accept that the current licensing and mitigation system could be improved. Current practice is driven by an unhelpful legal focus on individual newts rather than the long-term survival of populations and can result in an inefficient use of resources.

2. We welcome the opportunity to revise the existing system and especially the development of a more strategic approach to great crested newt conservation, but fear that central government's motivation is primarily reducing costs and perceived delays to development.

3. We believe that changes to the system should focus on conservation benefits through the following process, strictly in this order:

- a) Define the favourable conservation status for the great crested newt in each county
- b) Develop a conservation strategy for the species for each county
- c) Develop a county-wide strategy for great crested newt licensing based on the conservation strategy

4. There should be sufficient resilience in the system to cope with other factors including impacts of climate change, invasive plants/animals and disease.

5. There should be ongoing monitoring, and sufficient flexibility in the system to allow for possible changes in newt distribution over the course of time.

6. We do not believe that eDNA should be the sole means of monitoring, as it cannot provide information on population levels (just presence/absence), and can be unreliable. Monitoring effort needs to be robustly designed to have sufficient power to detect a reasonable change in great crested newt populations.

7. Sufficient safeguards should be put in place to prevent areas that have been used as compensation areas from undergoing land use changes in the long-term future.

8. Safeguards should be in place to prevent funds raised by this scheme being spent on council priorities that do not benefit great crested newt conservation.

9. We believe that it is important to distinguish between pilot projects that test administrative processes and those that test ecological outcomes (the latter are likely to take many years). This is critical in consideration of extending pilots to other geographic areas and protected species.