**Improving the environment through better regulation: expressions of interest sought**

Natural England is seeking to improve the way we work in partnership with local authorities through innovative and strategic approaches. As part of this we have developed the District Level Licensing scheme and I am seeking expressions of interest from Local Authorities to participate.

The scheme is a strategic approach, funded by developers, to mitigate the effects of development on great crested newts (GCNs) and to arrest the continuing decline of the species in a way which can be integrated with green infrastructure strategies and Local Plans. It is identified in the Housing White Paper as one of the tools for speeding up sustainable housing delivery. The Regulatory Policy Committee has endorsed our assessment that it would save about £200m in costs to developers and regulators as “extremely comprehensive”. In a survey of 291 organisations nationally, over 81% of developers and energy companies said that they would support this approach on the basis that it would reduce both costs and uncertainty.

The approach has been piloted in Woking Borough, and its Chief Executive, Ray Morgan, says “Woking Borough Council was glad to pioneer the first district licensing strategy for great crested newts in the UK. We have reduced costs, delays, risks and uncertainty for developers, enhanced the environment for the people of Woking and turned round the fortunes of a declining rare species. I would recommend other planning authorities to get involved in this innovative scheme”.

The scheme uses developer contributions to fund strategically planned habitat improvements for GCNs in the best areas within each district/borough, which is a more cost effective way of conserving GCN populations than the current approach of piecemeal mitigation within each development. Developers who join the scheme can obtain authority under the District Level Licence at the same time as obtaining planning permission, with the Local Authority providing a one-stop shop for authorisation. Developer contributions will come into Local Authorities and will cover the costs of the scheme, providing an income stream for improving the environment within your area. More details can be found on the attached flyer.

The benefits include:

* **For developers**: removal of high mitigation costs; removal of all post-planning permission delay from GCN licensing; removal of uncertainty; and freeing up of land from constraints within development sites
* **For local authorities:** improvement of your development offer, increased control over your development timetable, improved development viability, a funding stream from developers and management of the investment secured by licensing so that it can be focused on improvement of the local environment
* **For GCN**: enhanced conservation status

Natural England has obtained funding from DCLG to allow us to develop strategies within 150 Local Authority areas to enable District Level Licensing between now and April 2020. This will fund the great majority of the set-up costs so we estimate that Local Authority investment would be in staff time in the order of £8k.
We are now asking Local Authorities for expressions of interest so we can decide on priorities for the next two years. Therefore I should be very grateful if you would indicate to me your interest in principle in the scheme. This will not be a firm commitment from yourselves or Natural England to adopt the scheme in your area; we will also consider where the greatest impact will be in terms of GCNs affected by development and therefore the greatest benefits will be gained. Once we have drawn up our target list we will enter into detailed dialogue with your staff to discuss how this will work and agree on a way forward.

 I should be very grateful if you would respond to me*.*