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Pioneering Practice with Great Crested Newt District Level Licensing: Learning Through the Woking Pilot



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Five years on from commencing the country's first district level licensing (DLL) project – to develop and trial a new way to support great crested newts, working in partnership with Natural England – Woking Borough Council and project ecologists ADAS reflect on the Pilot's successes, learning and links to the wider DLL rollout, and consider the project's future.

Introduction

Great crested newts (GCN; *Triturus cristatus*) have been much maligned in the past for impeding development and, despite Europe-level protection, over those same years their numbers have significantly declined. There was a clear appetite for innovation to proactively deliver better conservation outcomes for the species, improve certainty and reduce costs for developments likely to impact upon GCN habitats.

As others have ably explained (Law 2016, Tew *et al.* 2018, Cameron *et al.* 2019), Natural England chose Woking, Surrey, as the first test bed for a new approach and the Woking district level licensing (DLL) Pilot project was born.

Informed by a baseline of 2015 pond surveys, project partners Natural England and Woking Borough Council (WBC) developed a GCN conservation strategy involving the upfront provision of compensation habitat. Natural England issued WBC with an organisational licence, enabling it to issue permits direct to developers. Developers can opt into this route as an alternative to traditional licensing, an opportunity offered through WBC's Natural Woking biodiversity strategy (WBC 2016a, 2016b). Developers must, however, first adhere to the 'avoid – mitigate – compensate' hierarchy.

From the outset, the Council saw the Pilot as an investment, providing upfront funding to support future development while delivering biodiversity benefits; aquatic and terrestrial habitat enhancement for GCN in a Woking location that provided the greatest opportunity to reconnect

GCN populations. A map of the site concerned is shown in Figure 1. DLL commits WBC to create and maintain this habitat for at least 25 years, but in practice its maintenance will be ongoing. As accessible Common Land and a Site of Nature Conservation Importance, this approach for the site aligns well with WBC's existing management responsibilities for the land and helps deliver and demonstrate its ongoing commitment to biodiversity and green infrastructure.

Compensation site design

The new habitat (strategic compensation) site design identified for Woking – to offset the level of impact on GCN likely to arise from planned development in Woking until 2040 – was based on data collected via environmental DNA (eDNA) to determine the distribution of the GCN populations within the borough. At the time this was considered an innovative approach (WBC 2016b). These eDNA data were to be used to understand better the potential future opportunities to improve connectivity of fragmented newt populations.

To deliver the compensation an area of Woking was identified, Westfield Common (Figure 1), which based on the data, supported three discrete populations of GCN. These were fragmented by minor roads and residential dwellings. An agreed design (the Improvement Plan; see ADAS 2016) was put together to meet both the requirement of the compensation and to deliver opportunities to reconnect the GCN populations. In doing so this would improve the Favourable Conservation Status (FCS) of GCN. The compensation works as per the design were completed in 2020, the project's fourth year.

Gauging conservation success

In relative terms the project is small compared to other DLL schemes that have been developed since. Woking saw a total of nine ponds created or restored by year 4 of the project. As a comparison, in total Natural England created or restored 386 ponds across their existing and newly launched DLL schemes in 2019–20 (Almond 2020). By the end of 2020, two (approximately 22%) of the Woking ponds restored and created became occupied, compared with 34% of Natural England's collective first-year monitoring results (Almond 2020). GCN pond occupancy is a key factor in meeting the FCS of any DLL scheme and the occupancy rates will not only vary between schemes but within schemes as well. The Woking project has been no exception. Population surveys between 2017 and 2021 showed that, where there was at least a moderate GCN population, with a peak count of 33, colonisation of connected new and restored ponds was relatively quick, within 1 year of habitat works. However, in areas where the population is very small, or where there are more issues relating to connectivity, there were no signs of occupancy within the first 3 years. However, in the fifth year since works began, surveys in 2021 have shown occupancy in one additional restored and one new pond, increasing the scheme's occupancy rate to four, or approximately 45%. GCN landscape design based on eDNA data and habitat suitability was

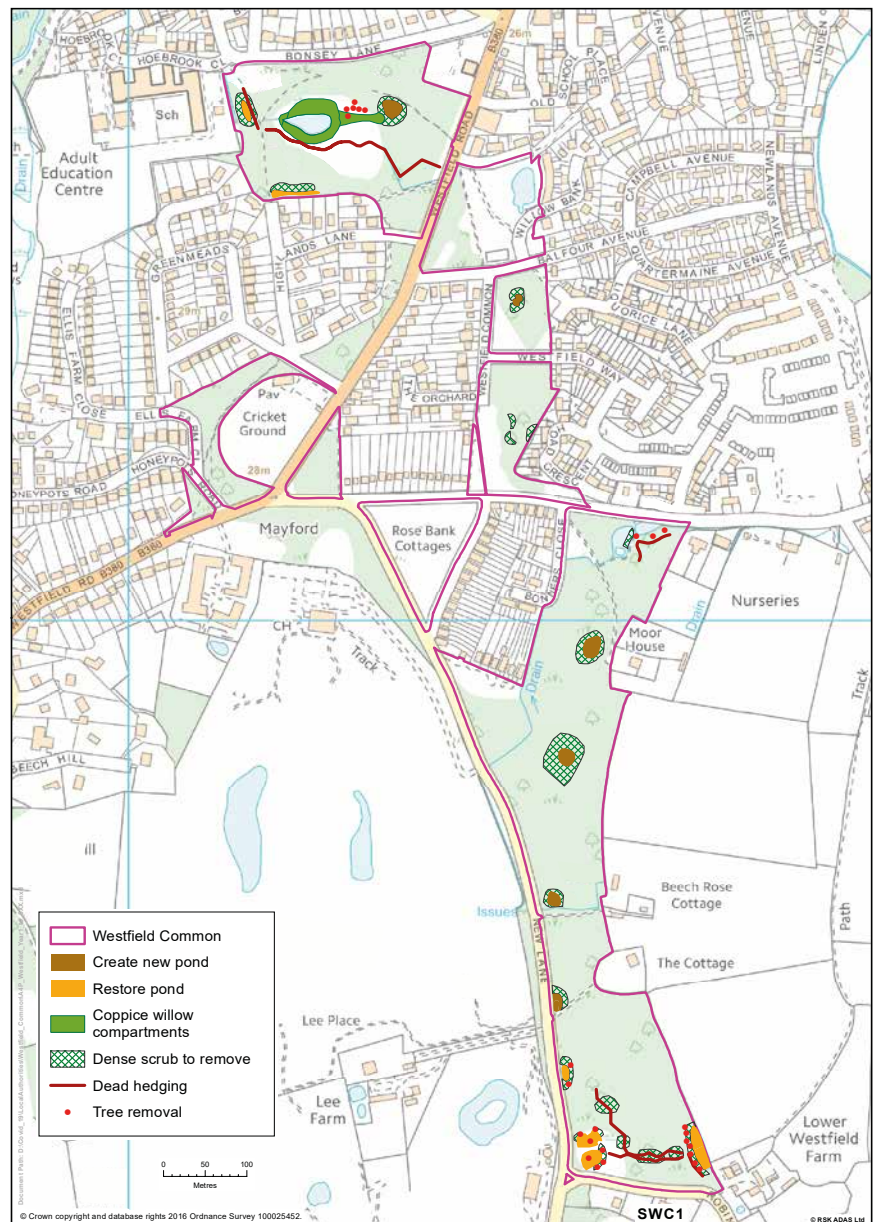


Figure 1. A map of the Woking Pilot compensation area, Westfield Common.

considered sufficient to provide an accurate picture of GCN throughout Woking Borough (WBC 2016b) and provide enough information to make the appropriate level of conservation decisions. While this may provide an overview strategy for the district this level of information is considered insufficient to determine time frames for future occupancy of new and restored ponds because of the unknown size of the source population. Therefore the focus, in certain situations, will be more on arresting the existing GCN decline rather than future pond occupancy in the first instance. Gaining a greater GCN population awareness within a scheme provides increased certainty over future pond occupation and focuses the

priorities on either range expansion or restoring known GCN ponds from being a sink to a source population.

Urban contexts and opportunities for connecting people with nature

GCN populations in more urban environments may be considered as a challenge and not such a priority for certain DLL schemes due to the potential threats and the limited opportunities for range expansion. However, in a more urbanised district these fragmented populations may be a significant contributor to the overall GCN distribution. In the Woking Pilot, the population enhanced (at Westfield Common) was in an urban environment

surrounded on three sides by residential development with only marginal connectivity to the wider landscape. There were many negative factors including neglect, household rubbish and high footfall. In these microenvironments, greater investment is required to protect ponds and work with local residents to achieve a positive outcome.

The Woking project has involved volunteers in delivering practical tasks and in population monitoring (see Figure 2; data are available from annual reports; ADAS 2017–2020). The Improvement Plan dovetailed habitat works with existing conservation volunteering overseen by Surrey Wildlife Trust. As well as benefiting human health and well-being, this engagement enables local residents to feel more involved in the project, building local capacity and providing a gateway into learning about ecology for the community, whereas more rural DLL schemes, with greater opportunities for range expansion, may have limited engagement opportunities.

GCN have had a lot of negative press and are often singled out as a species that requires policy change (UK Government 2017). Changing hearts and minds towards GCN is important in transforming our overall approach to wildlife: “simply put, humans don’t protect what they don’t know and value” (Hayhow *et al.* 2019). To date, DLL does not have a target to engage with local residents or volunteers; such a focus could encourage greater investment, particularly in urban districts where natural environments and GCN are likely to be more limited. Connecting the environment and people is important for reversing a general continued wildlife decline and could further encourage people to promote wildlife in their own gardens and larger landowners to be more proactive in supporting environmental initiatives.

In September 2020, WBC began its Planet Woking initiative. Following on from much earlier work, Planet Woking is dedicated to all things relating to climate change, sustainability and biodiversity and, through it, Woking is helping residents lighten their environmental footprint. The Planet Woking launch video was an ideal opportunity to share with residents what the Woking Pilot is about and



Figure 2. Volunteers and project staff, April 2019 GCN surveys. Photo: Woking Borough Council.

how they can make a difference to wildlife. The video can be accessed at <https://planetwoking.co.uk/>.

Strategic opportunities

One significant drawback of the Woking scheme is the inability to access third-party land to promote GCN habitat improvement works. The scheme is reliant on the land holdings of the Council. This has been significantly addressed by later schemes and WBC will look to such opportunities in the future. Based on the most recent Strategic Opportunity Area (SOA) map produced in 2020 by Natural England, it identifies 2515 ha of core and fringe GCN habitat of which WBC own 255 ha, or approximately 10%. In addition, the Council’s land ownership is fragmented, making the long-term viable option of connecting sections of the borough through DLL, using ecological green corridors, as identified in the SOA map, a challenge. However, even with greater access to more land there will always be a dependency on sympathetic landowners willing to cooperate in the scheme(s). Therefore, while a strategic landscape approach presents a baseline of what may be possible, in reality the design of future GCN habitat conservation works and connectivity may be due to luck or the ability to take local opportunities. Conservation covenants provide a possible future route to securing third-party landowner conservation for GCN; this again emphasises a need to engage with as wide a range of the public as possible to generate such opportunities and the social need in delivery of this type of DLL project.

Other wider benefits

Evidence in the recent past has shown a significant drop in the number of

ponds across our landscapes (Heath and Whitehead 1992), and observation has identified that many ponds are neglected. DLL has the potential to be a significant contributor to reversing this trend. The Woking project has been a great opportunity to restore and enhance an area of common land to support a greater range and diversity of habitats with an increase in features that support plants and animals. There has been a noticeable increase in both terrestrial and marginal habitats and an improved visitor experience has been achieved. Periodic negative issues that include invasive species, littering and unwanted behaviours like quad biking have been significantly addressed, reducing the associated risks to the future prospects of GCN.

GCN have in this instance been used as a keystone species on the back of which other wildlife will benefit. However, perhaps there is an argument that ponds should be the focus and act as a keystone habitat. In this way DLL might be more attractive to the whole of England and not just selected areas where a return of GCN can be seen due to their presence.

It is unequivocal that DLL will benefit biodiversity and it is fantastic to see a significant investment in so many ponds in places where previously such funding would not reach (for example see Figure 3) and which, based on the landscape design approach, will be delivered on the broad principles of “more, bigger, better, joined up” (Lawton *et al.* 2010). DLL is currently very focused on a single species and its roll out will be restricted to those areas likely to benefit from such a scheme, leaving some GCN populations in districts with small or isolated populations to continue to decline. There is potential that this will be



Figure 3. New pond establishing, created February 2019, Westfield Common. Photo taken August 2019. Photo: Woking Borough Council.

addressed under the Environment Bill and the roll out of the Local Nature Recovery Strategies, which will cover the whole of England. Alternatively, the existing DLL schemes could support less favourable areas for GCN where GCN returns might be limited but where there would be greater social engagement opportunities.

Future steps for Woking

The Woking Pilot has been informed throughout by the views of key stakeholders. We really appreciate the willingness of the organisations acknowledged below to share knowledge and constructive feedback about this and other DLL schemes. The Pilot will continue to build on this positive dialogue, underpinned by a shared commitment towards achieving FCS.

Over the next 25 plus years, the Woking site implemented under DLL will be managed to continue to support GCN populations in the borough and, as and when possible, additional areas will be brought into management. As we plan for the future, we are drawing on both our own learning and that across the breadth and variety of wider DLL experiences and we will develop the project where appropriate. An ongoing challenge remains the Pilot's relatively limited uptake of licences by developers, which is largely a consequence of low GCN numbers; hence the few instances of development on sites with GCN presence.

In this period of increased financial constraints on local authorities, WBC will need to identify how best to maintain the existing compensation landscape while continuing to expand the GCN habitat network. A related issue is the ability to access ecological expertise, as this particular DLL model does not provide for the employment of a GCN expert in the medium to long term.

Ecology today is going through an exciting time with a plethora of ideas, principles, policies and legislation to promote the field holistically, with DLL being just one. The greatest opportunities for nature will almost certainly be a combination of the various ideas presented, whether it will be by increasing the level of funding via private investors or creating greater opportunities for landowners to pursue a more biodiversity-rich agenda.

The provisions of the Environment Bill, including Biodiversity Net Gain, will accelerate efforts by all organisations to address climate change, and continuing mitigation measures such as provision of Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace (SANG) all promise to strengthen green infrastructure networks, in Woking Borough and elsewhere. Westfield Common is one of a number of proposed new SANG sites being allocated in Woking Borough so adherence to Natural England's SANG guidelines, GCN and other site management, conservation and access objectives will require careful alignment.

Woking DLL has been a pioneering scheme from which the multitude of later schemes, now operating across 163 (as of July 2021) English local authorities, have been able to adapt and evolve. This DLL has provided an opportunity to invest in conservation, benefiting nature, including GCN and the environment for the local community, which will have many benefits for the longer term.

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