

## **Briefing on District Licensing for GCN for the Protected Species and Planning Working Group for North East Planning Authorities, Newcastle, 8 March 2018**

### **National roll-out of the scheme**

Following the Woking pilot (<https://www.woking.gov.uk/environment/greeninf/newt>) in 2016, GCN district licensing is being rolled out nationally over three years from FY 2017/18 to FY 2019/20. The national roll-out is targeted at 150 planning authorities where GCN mitigation licensing casework was highest over a recent 4 year period (2013- 2016). It is expected to replace about 77% of site-based licensing casework. There is a degree of flexibility in the target authorities for year 3. As the target is set on past casework records, we recognise this may not reflect current and future threats to GCN from development, so if we become aware of districts with a combination of major development pressures likely to impact upon widespread GCN populations we could consider adding some of these in year 3 of the project, subject to resources being available. The target authorities, profiled between years 1 to 3, are shown on the attached map. Year 3 is indicative only and may change if other priorities come to light. Areas covered in year 1 (this year) include Kent, Cheshire and the south Midlands.

### **Objective**

Under district licensing, a conservation plan is developed across a local authority area (district or county), and local planning authorities or other bodies can then be granted an organisational licence to implement the plan. The plan assesses the impact of development in the district and identifies the best areas where habitat for newts can be improved to offset any effects. It aims to provide an increase in strategically planned, joined-up habitat across a whole district. This enables money to be spent where it will have the biggest conservation benefit. The approach gives developers greater certainty, reducing costly delays, than if they had to apply for a licence for very development individually. It also helps planning authorities to deliver housing and employment development where it is needed by reducing delays and uncertainties.

### **Policy context**

The scheme is part of the Government's 25 Year Environment Plan [A Green Future: Our 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment January 2018](#) as an innovative, strategic approach, part of embedding biodiversity net gain approaches within the planning system. It has been developed with support from the Amphibian & Reptile Conservation Trust and the Freshwater Habitats Trust, amongst others. The scheme is identified in the Housing White Paper [Fixing our broken housing market February 2017](#) as one of the tools for speeding up sustainable housing delivery, with a business case endorsed by the Regulatory Policy Committee

District licensing is intended a win-win for wildlife, business and people:

- better for wildlife: creates "bigger, better, joined-up" habitat which benefits populations of great crested newts and other biodiversity;
- better for business: reduces delays, uncertainties and associated costs for developers and planning authorities;
- better for people: helps ensure homes get built, with an improved environment for local communities.

### **Set-up phase**

The set-up phase covers surveying and data collection, population distribution modelling, risk and opportunity zone mapping, strategy creation, stakeholder consultation and production of documentation such as the district licences and legal agreements with licence holders. This phase is funded by the Ministry of Housing, Local Government & Communities (MHCLG) through Natural England.

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It funds a national programme run by Natural England. The set-up phase is intended to take one year, starting with surveys in spring (Q1), strategy production over Q2 – 3 and provision of licences by the end of Q4 (ie by the end of March).

### **Implementation phase**

After the set-up phase, once licences are awarded, implementation will be financed by contributions from developers participating in the scheme. The contributions will cover all costs including habitat provision and maintenance, monitoring & review, administration and other overheads. Developers will make a single contribution when joining the scheme for each development, on a scale which depends on the risk zone in which the development is located and the amount of habitat affected. Implementation is planned over a 25 year period based upon development allocations in Local Plans and predictions of windfall development. The strategies will form part of Natural England's advice to local authorities on strategic planning; the map of risk zones will enable authorities to avoid the most important areas for GCN in Local Plan allocations and decisions on development management. The strategic planning of habitat improvement for GCN can be integrated with local authority GI and biodiversity plans.

### **Target authorities in Northumbria Area Team**

Local authorities within the NE Northumbria Team area included in the target are:

- County Durham
- Northumberland
- North Tyneside District
- Darlington
- Hartlepool
- Newcastle upon Tyne District
- South Tyneside District

All these authorities are scheduled for year 3 (2019/20) so there may be some flexibility, as mentioned. Natural England wrote to the Chief Executives of target authorities in September 2017, asking for expressions of interest. Interest was received from County Durham, Darlington, Hartlepool and Northumberland.

### **Options for the implementation phase**

Natural England would like Local Planning Authorities to implement the GCN District Licensing Strategies and hold the licence. This would have the following benefits:

- One stop shop for developers seeking planning consent and authorisation under the GCN licence
- Integration with Local Plans to steer development away from GCN high risk zones
- Integration of habitat improvement with other LPA green infrastructure investment
- Income stream for local authority work in improvement of the natural environment
- Involvement of local communities in the management of the natural environment

There will be opportunities for LPAs to work with other partners to help deliver aspects of the strategy. For instance environmental NGOs, land owners, countryside management partnerships and environmental consultancies can help in finding land for habitat improvement, managing the habitat, monitoring & review, working with developers or other aspects of administration. Natural England will seek to involve stakeholders who might be able to help deliver strategies through the set-up phase. One example of a partnership which works successfully to restore ponds is the Norfolk Ponds Project. See <http://www.norfolkfwag.co.uk/norfolk-ponds-project/>

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In areas where local authorities are unwilling to implement the strategies and hold the licences Natural England will seek alternative implementation partners through the open market, as there may be a number of commercial companies, NGOs and other organisations who will regard this as a commercially viable opportunity as well as a worthwhile environmental project.

In 2017/18 a pilot project was set up by the NatureSpace Partnership (NSP), a consortium of the Environment Bank Ltd, Nature Metrics Ltd, the Freshwater Habitats Trust and Amphibian & Reptile Conservation Trust. It obtained district licences for seven local planning authorities in the south Midlands (South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse, Oxford City, Milton Keynes, Aylesbury Vale, Central Bedfordshire and Bedford Borough). NSP is offering to roll this model out to other areas where LPAs are interested. Details of this can be seen on the NSP website: <http://www.naturespaceuk.com/>

Natural England welcomes the interest in commercial opportunities offered by district licensing and considers that Local Planning Authorities will ultimately benefit from being offered a choice of delivery models.

### **Next steps**

Gareth Dalglish, Partnership Manager for the Programme, will be writing again to all target authorities in the near future to explain the roll-out, the profiling of LPAs across years 2 and 3, and the options for implementation. We will be seeking agreement from LPAs to implement strategies by 31 July (2018 for year 2 authorities, 2019 for year 3 authorities), so we have time to seek alternative implantation partners in areas where LPAs are not interested. A comprehensive brochure will accompany the letter, covering details of the programme, and Gareth will seek to set up meetings with LPAs over the coming months (though year 2 authorities will take precedence for now), alongside Area Team colleagues. These meetings will seek to explore both the DL scheme for GCN and the options to make progress with wider biodiversity net gain, as mentioned in Government's 25 Year Plan for Improving the Environment.

Gareth Dalglish  
7 March 2018