

Kent Reptile & Amphibian Group Position Statement regarding District Level Licensing for Great Crested Newts in Kent

30th May 2018

Natural England is planning to roll out a new method for mitigating the impacts of development on Great Crested Newts (GCN).

Kent is one of the pilot counties and the scheme is due to be implemented in 2018. Currently, the impact of development on GCNs has been dealt with on a case by case basis. Under District Level Licensing, developers will pay an up-front fee that will contribute to the creation of new GCN habitat within the same district. However, under District Level Licensing, no survey work or translocation of animals on or near the development site will be necessary.

In order to implement District Level Licensing, Natural England is defining the favourable conservation status of GCN nationally and in Kent. They are also developing a conservation strategy for GCNs in the county.

Publicly available information about the project from Natural England is minimal though a press release was issued in February 2017: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/national-roll-out-of-new-approach-to-great-crested-newt-licensing>

Nationally, Amphibian and Reptile Groups of the UK (ARGUK) released a position statement in 2017 which the Kent Reptile & Amphibian Group (KRAG) fully supports: <https://www.arguk.org/downloads-in-pages/resources/gcn-licensing-reform/320-arg-uk-position-statement-on-gcn-license-reformjanuary-2017-final/file>

However, as Kent is one of the counties where District Level Licensing is being piloted, KRAG feels that it is appropriate to comment on the situation in Kent where the pilot project is being led by Natural England.

- Since 2016 KRAG has attended 'Sounding Board' meetings and offered advice regarding how District Level Licensing could be implemented in Kent.
- KRAG and most of its external data providers have allowed Natural England to use all Kent amphibian data to assist with population modelling and have not charged for the use of this data. Natural England were unable to commit to extending this data sharing agreement and this terminated on May 27th 2018.
- KRAG is pleased to see that Favourable Conservation Status for GCN has been defined.
- KRAG supports the creation of a GCN Conservation Strategy for Kent. However, we believe that the proposed increase in the numbers of suitable ponds should be more ambitious.
- KRAG is worried that expert advice given at Sounding Board meetings by different sounding board members has often been ignored, particularly in the area of identifying zones where GCN are most at risk from development pressure. This may result in the risk zones identified as part of District Level Licensing not providing adequate protection for GCN populations. KRAG is concerned that the current GCN risk zones presently proposed by Natural England are not based upon sound ecological principles.

- KRAG are very concerned that the District Level Licensing scheme is being rushed and may be implemented before any compensatory habitat has been created.
- Although the value of compensatory payments from developers has not been published yet, we are concerned that these payments will not provide enough funding to create, manage and monitor adequate compensatory habitat or to implement the GCN conservation strategy.
- More detail is needed about how compensatory habitat will be managed and monitored.
- More detail is needed about how the GCN conservation status will be updated and monitored in the future and who will be responsible for ensuring that the targets of the conservation strategy will be met.

As a consequence of these concerns, KRAG believes that District Level Licensing will fail to contribute towards the conservation strategy targets and has withdrawn from future Sounding Board meetings.