

Great Crested Newt Pilot Woking Borough, Surrey

Woking Borough Council, Natural England, ADAS

BIG Biodiversity Challenge Award category: Client Award

Project overview

Woking Borough covers 6,400ha in north-west Surrey. About 25 miles from London, this urban-rural area is the test bed for an innovative new landscape-scale approach benefiting both Great Crested Newts and developers. A joint initiative of Woking Borough Council and Natural England, this £200,000 pilot commenced 2015 with a core team of four and the dual objectives of strengthening local GCN populations and reducing cost and delay for developers.

A district-wide survey and strategic overview, enabled by district licensing, informed the conservation strategy and project methodology now being implemented. In January 2017 the team completed the first of a five-year plan of habitat improvements at Westfield Common, designed and led by ecologists ADAS, in consultation with local residents and Surrey Wildlife Trust. More extensive improvements, including the creation of

new ponds, are planned for year two, whilst nearby sites are being explored as opportunities to enhance habitat connectivity.

What were the biodiversity conditions on site, prior to the enhancement?

Some areas of the Common have in recent years benefitted from the efforts of local conservation volunteers, with the support of the Council and Surrey Wildlife Trust, but many parts suffered neglect leading to a lack of woodland structure and degraded ponds, which are silted up and heavily shaded.

Were there any specific reasons that led to this project?

Traditional approaches to GCN and development are rigid and reactive, taking a narrow site-based focus to protection. This squeezes GCN in around schemes rather than putting their habitats first. Developers are required to carry out



Great Crested Newt laying eggs, Woking (ADAS)

season-bound surveys and to apply to Natural England for a licence before construction can begin. An alternative strategic approach was sought to deliver habitat improvement where it will most benefit GCN and support growth.

Developers can now rely on designated habitat improvement sites, proactively provided elsewhere in the Borough, to compensate for any adverse impacts on GCN.

What were the biodiversity measures taken?

The achievement of a net gain for GCN is an essential element of the pilot, enabling Natural England to simplify survey and licencing demands on development whilst ensuring all legal requirements are met. The project both enhances existing habitats and creates new habitats, all far beyond the Council's normal management regime for the local area.

Publicly accessible common land, Westfield Common is also a Site of Nature Conservation Importance, recognising its biodiversity value for a whole range of species including locally important assemblages of bats, birds and plants. The [five-year management plan](#) recognises this and is focused to complement the site management works that run in parallel by Surrey Wildlife Trust with the Friends of Westfield Common. Community engagement is integral, from stakeholder workshops during the projects' inception to revising habitat management proposals in light of residents' feedback.

Year one works have included woodland management, scrub clearance, laying dead hedges and desilting ponds. Felled timber has been set aside for reuse for signage and furniture.

Surveying will allow us to comprehensively monitor the site's ecology, particularly breeding GCN populations, over time. The early signs from expert and volunteer torch light surveys and egg searches this spring are positive, reflecting well on the works carried out so far.

The five year management plan is just a first step in a longer-term commitment



*Habitat improvements, Westfield Common, January 2017
(Woking Borough Council)*

(25 years+) to supporting GCN in Woking. Other sites near to the Common are being explored, to develop connectivity and tackle habitat fragmentation.

This project is just one of a number contributing to delivery of [Natural Woking](#), Woking's biodiversity and green infrastructure strategy, and Natural England is already rolling out this innovative new approach for GCN across the country, as described in the Government's [Housing White Paper](#) (see page 40).

How would you best describe the project?

Enhancement – moving beyond mitigation to seek net gains for GCN and the wider biodiversity.

Further information

This is a ground-breaking pilot, which offers huge potential to benefit Great Crested Newt populations, not just in Woking but throughout the UK, whilst at the same time reducing barriers to delivering the sustainable development essential to meet local housing and other needs.

The baseline surveys adopted a pioneering eDNA methodology to provide a unique picture of the distribution of GCN across the Borough.

Working with interested local residents and organisations such as Surrey Wildlife Trust, the Surrey Biodiversity Information Centre, Surrey Amphibian and Reptile Group and the Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Trust, has greatly assisted the project, enabling us to draw on a valuable pool of local knowledge. Also critical to the success of the pilot thus far is the input of professional ecologists ADAS and the in-principle and financial support of councillors and senior managers of the Council.

Woking Borough Council is developing a second project with Natural England, to support common species of bats. We want to support habitat protection, restoration and creation, accessibility and connectivity, to ensure sustainable populations of all key species over time, including the return of some lost to the area. These projects will also help facilitate the development essential for the Borough's future prosperity in a way that is in harmony with our environment.



Woking Borough Council, Natural England and ADAS colleagues visiting the site, February 2017 (ADAS).

What was your personal motivation for carrying out the enhancement?

The GCN pilot has been developed to make a really positive difference to the Borough we look after, to benefit our natural environment and local populations, wildlife as well as human. If the approach can also provide benefit for GCN elsewhere, this is all the more rewarding.