

Scout Hut at Hurst Village Hall
School Road
Hurst
RG10 0DR

GCN Habitat Assessment

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Report Quality Control Information	
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1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1.1** John Wenman Ecological Consultancy LLP was commissioned by Glyn Crocombe to undertake a Great Crested Newt (GCN) habitat assessment at Hurst Village Hall in Hurst to accompany a full planning application to be submitted to Wokingham Borough Council to build a new community hub building following the demolition of the existing scout hut.
- 1.1.2** The application site falls within a 'Red' GCN Habitat Zone and therefore the Council require a statement demonstrating how the proposals will safeguard against the risk of harming GCN. The aim of the GCN habitat assessment was to determine the suitability of the habitats for GCN on site and whether further survey and/or mitigation would be required for the proposals.
- 1.1.3** The survey methods comprise a desk-based study for GCN (including a TVERC data search), site walkover survey, and an impact risk assessment. There were no significant survey limitations.
- 1.1.4** The desk study revealed five ponds (Ponds 1 to 5) within 250m and three further ponds (Ponds 6 to 8) within 500m of the application site boundary that could potentially support breeding GCNs. The TVERC records revealed nine ponds with known GCN presence, five of which are within 500m from the site (this includes Ponds 4, 8 and 9, and two others not shown on OS mapping).
- 1.1.5** The site comprised a community hall, primary school and scout hut surrounded by amenity grassland with a few scattered trees and a tarmac car park i.e. terrestrial habitats of low value to GCN. A line of trees was present around the boundary of the grassland beyond a timber stake and wire fence. The development footprint is small (approx. 0.027 ha) and will impact managed amenity grassland (i.e. terrestrial habitat of negligible value to GCN). It is understood at the time of writing this report that the scattered trees and lines of trees on the boundaries will not be impacted by the future proposals.
- 1.1.6** The Natural England GCN Rapid Risk Assessment Tool was used to assess the risk of the development proposals adversely affecting GCN and the proposed works were considered highly unlikely to result in an offence.

- 1.1.7** In the absence of precautionary mitigation measures, there is a low risk that individual GCNs could potentially be injured and/or killed during the construction activities if a local population exists in the wider area. To avoid this, it is recommended that reasonable avoidance measures to minimise the risk of killing individual GCNs are implemented during the construction phase – as set out in **Section 6.3**.

2 INTRODUCTION

2.1 Project Background

- 2.1.1** John Wenman Ecological Consultancy LLP was commissioned by Glyn Crocombe to undertake a Great Crested Newt (GCN) habitat assessment at Hurst Village Hall in Hurst to accompany a future planning application to be submitted to Wokingham Borough Council to build a new community hub building following the demolition of the existing scout hut.
- 2.1.2** It is understood at the time of writing this report that the scattered trees and lines of trees on the boundaries will not be impacted by the proposals.
- 2.1.3** The application site falls within a 'Red' GCN Habitat Zone (see NatureSpace Impact Risk Maps) and therefore the Council require a statement demonstrating how the proposals will safeguard against the risk of harming GCN.

2.2 Site Location and Context

- 2.2.1** The site is a 0.042 ha plot with a school, village hall and scout hut located south of School Road, in a semi-rural area in the village of Hurst (central OS grid reference: SU 79537 73287).
- 2.2.2** The site is surrounded by a building yard and residential properties to the south, residential properties to north around a village green, open grassland and arable farmland to the east and west, with scattered trees and areas of priority deciduous woodland. There are several nearby waterbodies, the closest being approximately 148m to the southwest, 157m to the west and 191m to the east of the site boundary.

2.3 Report Objectives

- 2.3.1** The aim of the GCN habitat assessment was to determine the suitability of the habitats for GCN on site and whether further survey and/or mitigation would be required for the proposed development.

3 LEGISLATION AND POLICY

3.1 Relevant Legislation

3.1.1 In England and Wales, GCNs found in the wild are fully protected under the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981 (as amended) (WCA) and Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 (as amended); the regulations are commonly referred to as the Habitat Regulations and hereafter referred to as such. The Habitat Regulations refer to European Protected Species (EPS) and the GCN is an EPS. Although the UK left the European Union on the 31st January 2020 and is therefore no longer tied to European legislation, the Habitat Regulations have been retained in their current format.

3.1.2 The legal framework underpinned by the WCA and Habitat Regulations makes these specific actions an offence as follows:

- Deliberately kill, injure, capture or take a wild GCN;
- Deliberately, intentionally or recklessly disturb GCNs; in particular any disturbance which is likely to impair their ability to survive, to breed or reproduce, to rear or nurture their young, to hibernate or migrate, or to significantly affect local distribution or abundance;
- Damage or destroy a place used by a GCN for breeding or resting; and
- Intentionally or recklessly obstruct access to any place used by a GCN for shelter or protection.

3.1.3 The GCN is listed as a species of principal importance for the conservation of biodiversity (a.k.a. priority species) in England under Section 41 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act 2006.

3.2 Planning Policy

3.2.1 The biodiversity duty imposed through the Environment Act 2021 states that Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) must consider what action they can take to conserve and enhance biodiversity in England. Government planning policy, such as the ODPM Circular 06/2005, requires LPAs to account for

the conservation of protected species when considering and determining planning applications.

- 3.2.2** The ODPM Circular 06/2005 states that *'the presence of a protected species is a material consideration when a planning authority is considering a development proposal that, if carried out, would be likely to result in harm to the species or its habitat.'* This policy means that in instances where there is a reasonable likelihood of GCNs being present and affected by a development, surveys must be undertaken to inform a mitigation strategy to be agreed prior to granting planning permission.

3.3 Mitigation Licensing

- 3.3.1** The government's statutory nature conservation body, Natural England, is responsible for issuing European Protected Species (EPS) mitigation licences that would permit activities that would otherwise lead to an infringement of the Habitat Regulations. An EPS mitigation licence can be issued if the following three tests derived from Regulation 55 have been satisfied:

- (2)(e) – the derogation is for the purposes of *'preserving public health or public safety or other imperative reasons of overriding public interest, including those of a social or economic nature and beneficial consequences of primary importance for the environment.'*
- (9)(a) – there is *'no satisfactory alternative'* to the derogation; and
- (9)(b) – *'the action authorised will not be detrimental to the maintenance of the population of the species concerned at a favourable conservation status in their natural range.'*

- 3.3.2** LPAs have a statutory duty under Regulation 7(3)(e) of the Habitat Regulations to consider and determine whether these three tests are likely to be satisfied by planning proposals affecting EPS before granting planning permission. If an EPS mitigation licence is necessary, a licence can be sought once all the necessary planning consents have been granted. Natural England aims to issue a decision on licence applications within 30 working days of submission.

- 3.3.3** The District Level Licensing (DDL) scheme is an alternative approach to traditional mitigation licensing which authorises developments that adversely affect GCNs. Instead of relying solely on site-specific mitigation and

compensation, a 'Conservation Payment' can be made to fund a net increase in GCN habitat elsewhere. Please refer to the NatureSpace guidance for more details.

4 SURVEY METHODS

4.1 Desk Study

- 4.1.1** The Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre (TVERC) was commissioned to undertake a search of GCN records for land within a 1km radius of the site.
- 4.1.2** The DEFRA Data Services Platform was used to obtain geospatial datasets, such as GCN eDNA Pond Surveys for District Level Licensing and GCN Class Survey Licence Returns, for examination on QGIS. The Multi-Agency Geographical Information Centre (MAGIC) website was examined for nearby granted EPS licences; MAGIC was used in conjunction with Google Earth satellite imagery to identify ponds and assess the permeability of habitats within a 500m radius of the application site.

4.2 Field Survey

- 4.2.1** The application site was visually assessed for its potential to support GCNs, on the 20th November 2024 by Vicky Potts MCIEEM, registered under the Natural England GCN Survey Class Licence CL08.
- 4.2.2** GCNs require standing water for breeding and favour small to medium-sized ponds with surface areas ranging from 50m² to 250m². For larval development to take place and young newts to emerge from ponds, ponds must hold water until the end of August (Langton *et.al.* 2001).
- 4.2.3** GCNs require terrestrial habitats for feeding, movement from pond to pond and for hibernation. Habitats of greatest value to GCNs are those listed below that provide invertebrate prey and provide cover such as under logs or stones:
- Woodland;
 - Rough grassland;
 - Scrub;
 - Hedgerows; and
 - Waste ground.
- 4.2.4** Terrestrial habitats of highest value to GCNs are those rich in invertebrate prey, which provide cover during periods of cold and dry weather, such as under logs or stones for example. Open habitats, such as closely mown grassland, do not provide important habitats for feeding or shelter but can be

traversed by GCNs moving between more preferable habitats (English Nature 2001; Langton *et. al.* 2001).

4.3 Risk Assessment

- 4.3.1** A rapid risk assessment of the impacts to GCN was carried out using the Natural England Rapid Risk Assessment Tool. The Tool takes into account the impacts of the development on GCN and determines the likelihood of effects on populations in the absence of mitigation.

4.4 Survey Constraints

- 4.4.1** There were no significant survey limitations because GCN habitat assessments can be carried out at any time of year under any weather conditions and the application site was fully accessible.

5 SURVEY FINDINGS

5.1 Desk Study

5.1.1 The data search undertaken by TVERC revealed no GCN records for the application site. The GCN records returned records inside a 1km radius of the application site which are detailed in **Table 1** and **Figure 1** below.

Table 1. GCN records within a 1km radius of the application site (Source: TVERC).

Location	Grid reference	No. of records	Types of record	Most recent record	Distance from site boundary (m)
St Nicholas School	SU7969473523	1	Field record - female	27/05/2004-28/05/2004	195 NE
Ashingtons Pond	SU79657359	Details not provided	Field record	Spring 2002	247 NE
Hurst House, Hurst, Berks (Pond 4)	SU79177301	4	Field record – females	24/06/2001	285 SW
Orchard Cottage Pond (Pond 8)	SU79917363	Details not provided	Field record	Spring 2002	433 NE
Frying Pan Pond, Hurst, Berks (Pond 9)	SU79967364	Adults	Field record	2004	485 NE
Willow Cottage, Hurst, Berks	SU80137322	4	Field record – 2 males and 2 females	22/05/2004	552 E
Willow Cottage	SU801732	4	Field record – 2 males and 2 females	21/05/2004-22/05/2004	645 NW
Walden Acres Pond	SU801733	Details not provided	Field record	Apr-03	740 E
Hurst Lodge	SU804737	6	Field record – 2 females, 4 males	23/04/2002-24/04/2002	963 NE

5.1.2 No European Protected Species (EPS) mitigation licences have been granted for GCN within a 1km radius of the application site and no GCN

Class Survey Licence Returns are within a 1km radius of the site, the closest records are detailed in **Tables 2** and **3** below.

Table 2. GCN Survey Class Licence Returns within a 2km radius of the site boundary (Source: DEFRA).

Grid reference	Case Reference of Granted Licence	Licensable Period	Licensable Works	Distance (m)
SU787713	2015-14054-EPS-MIT	08/09/2015 - 31/10/2015	Damage & destruction of resting place	2000 S
SU787713	2014-718-EPS-MIT	16/05/2014 - 30/04/2015	Damage & destruction of resting place	2000 S

Table 3. Granted GCN EPS Applications within a 2km radius of the site boundary (Source: DEFRA).

Grid reference	Survey date	GCN presence	Distance (m)
SU782719	26/04/2014 - 22/04/2017	Confirmed	1.88km sw
SU784717	26/04/2014 - 22/04/2017	Confirmed	1.92km sw

5.1.3 MAGIC and OS mapping revealed that there are ten ponds that could potentially support breeding GCNS within 500m from the site boundary; 160m southwest (Pond 1), 167m west (Pond 2), 243m west (Pond 3), 285m southwest (Pond 4), 221 m east (Pond 5), 264m east (Pond 6), 443m southwest (Pond 7), 452m northeast (Pond 8), 485 m northeast (Pond 9) and 499m northeast (Pond 10) – as illustrated in **Figure 1** below.



Figure 1. Pond Location Plan.

- 5.1.4** The TVERC data returned GCN records in Pond 4, 8 and Pond 9 from surveys undertaken in 2001, 2002 and 2004 respectively. There are no records of GCN presence in Ponds 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7 or 10 within the last 10 years. There are also no GCN Class Survey Licence Returns or granted EPS GCN licence applications within 1km of the site.
- 5.1.5** The application site falls within a 'Red' GCN Habitat Zone (see NatureSpace Impact Risk Maps) – these zones contain suitable habitat and are the most important areas for GCN (except areas that are nationally important sites designated for GCNs).

5.2 Field Survey

5.2.1 The findings of the visual inspection of the site are described with photographs as follows:

5.2.2 The application site was a scout hut with formally managed grassland towards the north and west, and a car park, village hall and school towards the east (**Photographs 1 - 4**).



Photograph 1. Scout hut viewed from northeast.



Photograph 2. Scout hut viewed from north.



Photograph 3. Amenity grassland viewing southwest.



Photograph 4. Carpark viewing north.

5.2.3 Scattered trees were present amongst the grassland (**Photograph 5**). A line of trees was present around the boundary of the grassland (**Photograph 6**).



Photograph 5. Scattered trees amongst the grassland viewing north.



Photograph 6. Line of trees around the southern boundary.

5.2.4 A number of gaps were present underneath the prefabricated scout hut building and between paved steps at the western side of the building

(Photographs 7 & 8).



Photograph 7. Gap under the northern side of the scout hut.



Photograph 8. Gaps around the patio slabs on the steps of the scout hut.

5.2.5 A rotten tree stump was present amongst the grassland (**Photograph 9**). A pile of timbers was stacked along the southern side of the scout building, some timber remains from a bonfire were present amongst the grassland to the west of the scout hut and a log pile was present amongst trees in the western most corner of the site (**Photographs 10, 11 and 12**).



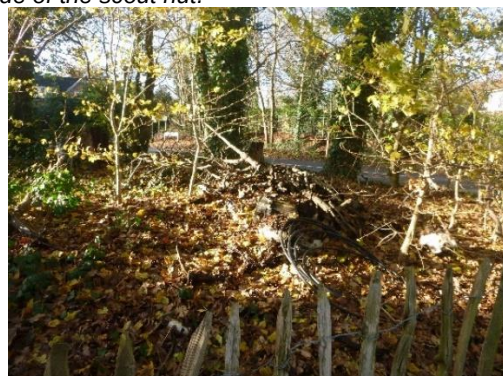
Photograph 9. Rotten tree stump.



Photograph 10. Timbers stacked to the southern side of the scout hut.



Photograph 11. Timber remains from a bonfire to the west of the scout hut.



Photograph 12. Log pile in the trees at the western corner of the site.

5.2.6 An offsite wet ditch was present along School Road along the northern side of the site (**Photograph 13**).



Photograph 13. Offsite ditch to the north of the site.

- 5.2.7** The grassland had a number of grasses and herbaceous species present including perennial rye grass (*Lolium perenne*), bent (*Agrostis sp.*), cocksfoot (*Dactylis glomerata*), dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale* agg.), creeping buttercup (*Ranunculus repens*), common daisy (*Bellis perennis*), dove's-foot crane's-bill (*Geranium molle*), common chickweed (*Stellaria media*), deadnettle (*Lamium sp.*) and cleavers (*Galium aparine*). A few scattered apple (*Malus sp.*) trees were present amongst the grassland.
- 5.2.8** A couple of small hedges were present in the car park including cotoneaster and a cherry (*Prunus sp.*) tree present at the entrance to the scout hut at the eastern end of the building and a hedge with dogwood (*Cornus sanguinea*), honeysuckle (*Lonicera periclymenum*) and bramble (*Rubus fruticosus* agg.) was present at the entrance to the grassland.
- 5.2.9** The line of trees beyond the timber stake and wire fence on the southern and north western boundary was dominated with beech (*Fagus sylvatica*), hazel (*Corylus avellana*), oak (*Quercus robur*), and field maple (*Acer campestre*), with rarely present holly (*Ilex aquifolium*) and spruce (*Picea sp.*). Nettle (*Urtica dioica*), bramble (*Rubus fruticosus* agg.) and cotoneaster was present along the ditch offsite.
- 5.3 Risk Assessment**
- 5.3.1** Based on the assumption that Ponds 1,2,3,5,6,7 and 10 support breeding GCN as well as the five ponds with confirmed GCN presence within 500m including Ponds 4, 8 and 9, the Natural England GCN Rapid Risk Assessment Tool was used to assess the risk of the development proposals adversely affecting GCN.
- 5.3.2** The development footprint is less than 0.1ha and the Tool indicates that the loss of or damage to 0.01ha – 0.1ha of land 100m – 250m from a breeding

pond and greater than 250 m from any breeding pond is highly unlikely to result in an offence – see **Figure 2** below.

Component	Likely effect (select one for each component; select the most harmful option if more than one is likely; lists are in order of harm, top to bottom)	Notional offence probability score
Great crested newt breeding pond(s)	No effect	0
Land within 100m of any breeding pond(s)	No effect	0
Land 100-250m from any breeding pond(s)	0.01 – 0.1 ha lost or damaged	0.01
Land >250m from any breeding pond(s)	0.01 - 0.1 ha lost or damaged	0.001
Individual great crested newts	No effect	0
		Maximum:
		0.01
Rapid risk assessment result:	GREEN: OFFENCE HIGHLY UNLIKELY	

Guidance on risk assessment result categories

"Green: offence highly unlikely" indicates that the development activities are of such a type, scale and location that it is highly unlikely any offence would be committed should the development proceed. Therefore, no licence would be required. However, bearing in mind that this is a generic assessment, you should carefully examine your specific plans to ensure this is a sound conclusion, and take precautions (see **Non-licensed avoidance measures tool**) to avoid offences if appropriate. It is likely that any residual offences would have negligible impact on conservation status, and enforcement of such breaches is unlikely to be in the public interest.

Figure 2. Natural England GCN Rapid Risk Assessment Tool.

6 DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Assessment of Habitat Suitability

6.1.1 The desk study revealed five ponds with GCN presence (including Ponds 4, 8 and 9) and seven ponds that could potentially support breeding GCNs (Ponds 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7 & 10) within 500m of the application site boundary. The closest pond was at St Nicholas School 195m from the application site and Ashingtons Pond 247m from the application site, a further three ponds fall between 250m and 500m from the application site, and therefore fall inside the core range of terrestrial habitat for these ponds with confirmed GCN presence.

6.1.2 The application site falls within a 'Red' GCN Habitat Zone – these zones contain suitable habitat and are the most important areas for GCN (except areas that are nationally important sites designated for GCNs). The application site was a scout hut, village hall and school, with car parking and garden habitats, including a formal amenity grassland, with scattered trees and a few shrubs. A line of trees was present around the southern and north western boundaries of the site. The scattered trees, grassland and scout hut offers terrestrial habitat of negligible - low value to GCN for foraging and shelter.

6.2 Impact Assessment and Required Actions

6.2.1 The development proposals involve the demolition of the existing scout hut and construction of a new community hub being built on an area of the grassland with a footprint of less than 0.1ha. The development footprint is small and will impact areas of shortly mown amenity grassland (i.e. terrestrial habitats of negligible - low value to GCN). The log piles on site, tree stump, underneath the scout hut and patio slab steps leading up to the scout hut provide sheltering opportunities for GCN. The scattered tree lines will not be impacted by the works.

6.2.2 The Natural England GCN Rapid Risk Assessment Tool was used to assess the risk of the development proposals adversely affecting GCN and it was considered highly unlikely that the proposed works would result in an offence – see **Figure 2** above.

6.2.3 In line with the guidance contained in the Tool and the impact assessment presented above, the nature and scale of the proposed development is

highly unlikely to breach legislation protecting GCN or their habitats.

However, in the absence of mitigation there is a risk that individual GCNs could potentially be injured and/or killed during the construction activities if traversing across the habitats on site or sheltering onsite. To avoid this, it is recommended that reasonable avoidance measures to minimise the risk of killing individual GCNs are implemented during the construction phase – as set out in **Section 6.3** below.

6.3 Reasonable Avoidance Measures

6.3.1 It is likely that any residual offences would have negligible impact on the conservation status of a local GCN population and the enforcement of such breaches is unlikely to be in the public interest. Therefore it is considered that a European Protected Species (EPS) mitigation licence or a District Level Licence would not be required to allow the works to proceed lawfully, but the following reasonable avoidance measures should be adopted to minimise the extremely low risk of harming individual GCNs:

Pre-commencement of construction activities

- A suitably licensed ecologist will provide a 'toolbox' talk briefing the contractors working on site about GCN identification, what to do if GCN are found and the reasonable avoidance measures to be adopted;
- Any removal of timber, deadwood, and leaf litter will be carefully searched by hand by a suitably licensed ecologist if required;
- The removal of the building foundation will be undertaken under the supervision of a suitably licensed ecologist who will check underneath the building for sheltering animals as it is being dismantled;
- The removal of stacked items and building should be timed to take place outside of the winter (late October through to February) to minimise the chance of disturbing newts sheltering beneath materials during the hibernation season and,
- The formal mowing of the lawn should be maintained prior to the commencement of site work to minimise the likelihood of GCN of being present during excavations.

During construction activities

- Any stored building materials or waste, such as bricks or debris etc., that might offer shelter for GCN will be kept raised off the ground on

pallets or on existing hard standing, and efforts should be made to process and remove from site as soon as possible;

- Excavation works will be avoided after dusk and any open excavations or trenches will be backfilled (after a check for GCN presence) or left with escape ramps to prevent GCN from becoming trapped; and
- If any extensive groundworks are required, a destructive search using a machine with a toothed bucket will be undertaken in the presence of a suitably licensed ecologist.

6.3.2 In the unlikely event that a GCN is found during the course of construction, works will stop immediately and a licensed ecologist will be called onto site to ensure the GCN is not harmed and provide further advice on how to proceed; work will recommence only once further written advice has been received.

6.3.3 The value of the application site to wildlife could be enhanced by adding features suitable for sheltering and hibernating GCN and other amphibians, such as creating rockeries and log piles. Areas of grassland which are allowed to grow tall and diversify should be created along the edges of the grassland to offer foraging habitat and shelter for amphibians and other wildlife.

7 REFERENCES

English Nature (2001). *Great crested newt mitigation guidelines*. English Nature, Peterborough.

Langton, T.E.S, Beckett, C.L., and Foster, J.P. (2001). *Great Crested Newt Conservation Handbook*, Froglife, Halesworth.