

5a Cricket Hill
Finchampstead
Wokingham
Berkshire
RG40 3TN

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 instructed by Lisa Lockhart to undertake a Great Crested Newt (GCN) habitat assessment at 5a Cricket Hill in Finchampstead, Berkshire.
- 1.1.2** The application site falls within a 'Red' GCN Impact Risk 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. 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 1 waterbody within a 250m radius of the application site boundary and 9 waterbodies within a 500m radius, that could potentially support breeding GCNs. TVERC hold no recent records for GCN within a 1km radius of the application site.
- 1.1.5** The site comprised a detached bungalow surrounded by recently unmanaged modified grassland, ornamental shrubs, paved patio, ornamental hedgerows and scattered trees - terrestrial habitats of negligible-low value to GCN. The development footprint covers less than 0.01ha and will result in an increase in garden habitat area following the removal of the rear extension. A search of MAGIC mapping showed no GCN records within a 1km radius of the application site.
- 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 very 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 instructed by Lisa Lockhart to undertake a Great Crested Newt (GCN) habitat assessment at 5a Cricket Hill in Finchampstead, Berkshire, to accompany a planning application to be submitted to Wokingham Borough Council seeking consent to raise and convert the roof to form a two-storey dwelling with the addition of a dormer window on the rear elevation and the removal of the existing rear extension.

2.1.2 The application site falls within a 'Red' GCN Impact Risk 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 property is a detached residential bungalow located on the southwestern side of Cricket Hill in Finchampstead, Wokingham, Berkshire (central OS grid reference: SU 79703 62892).

2.2.2 The property is within a suburban area bordered by similar properties with associated private gardens to the northwest and southeast along Cricket Hill. Open countryside comprising agricultural fields bordered by mature hedgerows and tree lines are situated 20 metres to the northeast beyond Cricket Hill and 130 metres to the south. Just over 115m to the south, there is extensive open countryside comprising open grassland and flooded gravel pits extending east and west along the Blackwater Valley. A parcel of woodland is situated approximately 200 metres to the southeast and a block of extensive deciduous woodland is situated approximately 500m to the west.

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 Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre (TVERC) were commissioned to undertake a 1km data search for Great Crested Newts.

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 7th July 2026 by Senior ecologist Vicky Potts MCIEEM and ecologist Jake Morgan ACIEEM.

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.
- 4.4.2** The TVERC data search did not cover a small section of land towards the south of the site as it is covered by Hampshire Biodiversity Information Centre (HBIC) however the county boundary is approximately 600m from the site and therefore is not considered to be a constraint to the survey.

5 SURVEY FINDINGS

5.1 Desk Study

5.1.1 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. In addition, TVERC hold no recent records of GCN within a 1km radius of the application site.

5.1.2 MAGIC and OS mapping revealed that there is one waterbody within 250m and nine waterbodies within a 500m radius of the application site boundary that could potentially support breeding GCN. The waterbodies include residential ponds situated approximately 180 metres to the west, 270 metres to the northwest, 430 and 450 metres to the northeast, and larger lakes situated approximately 300, 380 and 460 metres to the southeast, 320 and 390 metres to the south, and 440 metres to the southwest (refer to **Figure 1** below).

5.1.3 The application site falls within a 'Red' GCN Impact Risk Zone (see NatureSpace Impact Risk Maps) – these zones contain highly suitable habitat which are considered the most important areas for GCN.

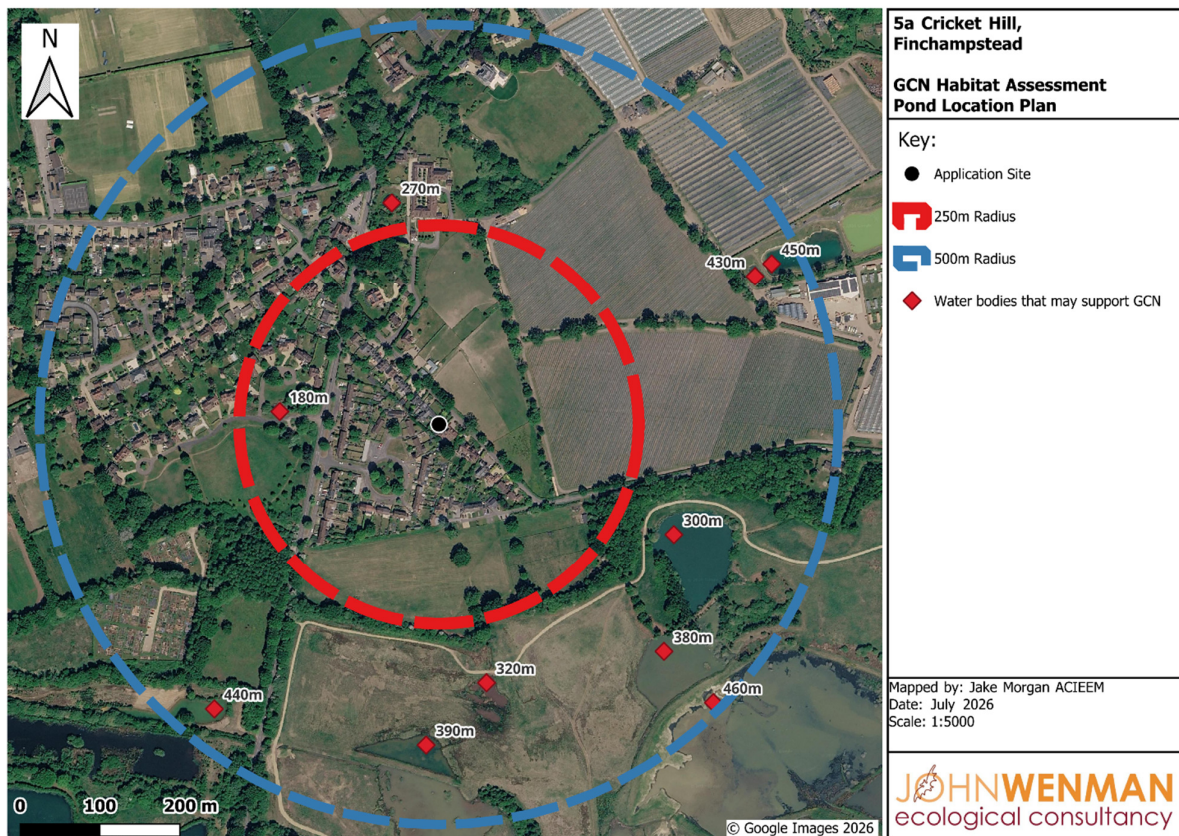


Figure 1. Pond Location Plan.

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 comprised a residential bungalow surrounded by typical garden habitats. A driveway and patio bordered by ornamental hedgerows and scattered trees connects the property on its front elevation to Cricket Hill (**Photographs 1 & 2**).



Photograph 1. Front driveway lined by ornamental hedgerows and scattered trees.



Photograph 2. Patio and hard standing across the front elevation of the property.

5.2.3 The front garden of the dwelling was recently unmanaged with a larger sward of grassland surrounded by ornamental shrub planting, bramble, hedgerows and scattered trees (**Photograph 3**). The rear garden was similarly recently unmanaged with a strip of grassland bordered by ornamental planting, scrub and a cypress tree line along the southwest fenced boundary (**Photographs 4 – 6**). Whilst the fence was sealed to the ground, loose bricks were scattered near the walls of the property (**Photographs 7 & 8**).



Photograph 3. Recently unmanaged front garden.



Photograph 4. Recently unmanaged rear garden with ornamental planting and scrub.



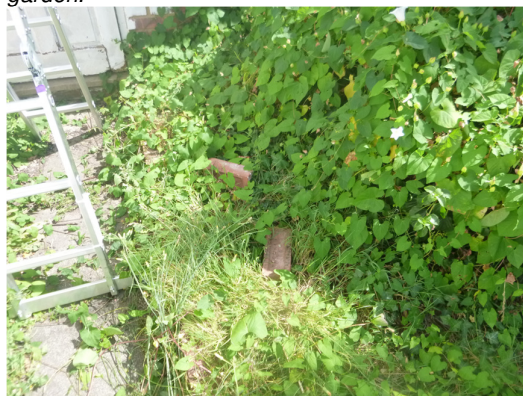
Photograph 5. Strips of scrub and ornamental planting within the rear garden.



Photograph 6. Line of cypress trees within the rear garden.



Photograph 7. Timber fence sealed to the ground within the rear garden.



Photograph 8. Loose bricks within the rear garden.

5.3 Risk Assessment

5.3.1 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 limited to less than 0.01ha and the nearest potential breeding pond is within 250m. The tool indicates that the works are 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
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)	0.001 - 0.01 ha lost or damaged	0.005
Land >250m from any breeding pond(s)	0.001 - 0.01 ha lost or damaged	0.0005
Individual great crested newts	No effect	0
Maximum:		0.005
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 application site falls within a 'Red' GCN Habitat Zone (see NatureSpace Impact Risk Maps) – these zones contain highly suitable habitat which are considered the most important areas for GCN. This is likely due to the nearby proximity of residential ponds to the west, north and northeast, and larger lakes to the southeast, south and southwest. However, only one of these waterbodies is within a 250m radius of the application site, situated 180 metres to the west.

6.1.1 The site is a residential property with garden habitats including ornamental shrubs and a lawn surrounding patio – all terrestrial habitats of negligible-low value to GCN. Whilst now unmanaged, the lawn was previously regularly mown.

6.2 Impact Assessment and Required Actions

6.2.1 The development proposals involve raising and converting the roof to form a two-storey dwelling with the addition of a dormer window on the rear elevation following the removal of the existing rear extension. As such, the footprint of the existing building will be decreased with continued management of the remaining garden habitats i.e. grassland, shrubs, hedgerows and scattered trees on-site.

6.2.2 Based on the assumption that the nearest waterbodies support breeding GCN, the Natural England GCN Rapid Risk Assessment Tool was used to assess the risk of the development proposals adversely affecting GCN. The Tool indicates that the small scale works are highly unlikely to result in an offence.

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 an extremely low risk that individual GCNs could potentially be injured and/or killed during the construction activities if traversing across the wider garden habitats on site. 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** The following reasonable avoidance measures should be adopted to minimise the extremely low risk of harming individual GCNs:

Pre-commencement of construction activities

- 6.3.2** The formal mowing of the grassland strip should be maintained prior to the commencement of site work to minimise the likelihood of GCN being present during excavations.
- 6.3.3** The piles of bricks on the site should be retained where possibly, if they are to be removed they must be removed carefully by hand and timed to take place outside of the winter (late October through to February) to minimise the chance of disturbing newts if they are sheltering beneath materials during the hibernation season.

During construction activities

- 6.3.4** 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 on the front driveway, and efforts should be made to process and remove from site as soon as possible.
- 6.3.5** In the unlikely event that a GCN is found during the course of the 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.

Post development enhancement opportunities

- 6.3.6** The value of the application site to wildlife could be enhanced by adding features suitable for sheltering and hibernating GCN, such as creating rockeries and allowing areas of grassland to grow tall and diversify.

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.