Sonning Court
Thames Street
Sonning-on-Thames
Berkshire
RG4 6UR

GCN Habitat Assessment

Report ref.: R3096_GCN_a

Report Quality Control Information	
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JOHN WENMAN ecological consultancy

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1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1.1 John Wenman Ecological Consultancy LLP was instructed by Sabeeta Ahluwalia to undertake a Great Crested Newt (GCN) habitat assessment at Sonning Court, on Thames Street in Sonning-on-Thames, Berkshire.

1.1.2 The application site falls within a 'Red' GCN Impact Risk Zone within the area covered by the Berkshire GCN District Level Licence 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 is 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, site walkover survey, and an impact risk assessment. There were no significant survey limitations. The desk study revealed five ponds within 500m of the application site boundary that could potentially support breeding GCNs.

1.1.4 The site comprised several buildings including the detached residential house, a detached garage, annexe and numerous outbuildings. The site featured a long driveway, patios to the west and north of the house, a swimming pool and tennis court. There was a large managed garden to the front and rear of the house with a frequently mown grass lawn, beds of introduced shrubs, hedgerow boundaries and scattered trees, i.e. terrestrial habitats of negligible - low value to GCN.

1.1.5 The development footprint is small and will only impact on paved patio to the rear of the house, around the existing pool and detached pool house, and a small area of introduced shrubs (i.e. terrestrial habitat of negligible - low value to GCN).

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 avoidance and 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 instructed by Sabeeta Ahluwalia to undertake a Great Crested Newt (GCN) habitat assessment at Sonning Court, on Thames Street in Sonning-on-Thames, Berkshire to accompany a planning application to be submitted to Wokingham Borough Council for the construction of a single-storey extension to the rear of the main house, following the demolition of the existing glass-roofed conservatory and single-storey rear extension, and extensions to the existing pool house.

2.1.2 The application site falls within an '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 detached two-storey property is located on the western side of Thames Street, in Sonning-on-Thames, Berkshire, approximately 5.3km to the north-east of Reading Town Centre (central OS grid reference: SU 75765 75766).

2.2.2 The detached house is in a leafy suburban area surrounded by residential houses and their respective gardens with connecting hedgerows and mature trees to the south and west, agricultural fields to the north and east and the River Thames to the north-west. In the wider area, there are several parcels of woodland and scattered trees - the nearest area of woodland being approximately 200 metres to the east of the site - open farmland and residential houses.

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 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 9th December 2025 by ecologist Meghan Porter-Smith and assistant ecologist Lauren Hayward (Qualifying members of CIEEM).

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 TVERC data search revealed 28 GCN records from at least 12 different sites within a 1km radius from between 2000 and 2022. The closest records are for a pond within a residential house approximately 350m to the south with a record from 2016. The most recent records were from a pond within a residential house approximately 530m to the south of the site, with 4 adults recorded in the summer of 2022. The most records were from Ali's Pond Local Nature Reserve (LNR), where a maximum count of 13 adults and eggs were recorded in the summer of 2008; a recent 2025 survey assisted by John Wenman Ecological Consultancy confirmed breeding GCN at the LNR.

5.1.2 Whilst no European Protected Species (EPS) mitigation licences have been granted for GCN within a 1km radius of the application site, one Great Crested Newt Class Survey Licence has been returned confirming the presence of GCN at a site approximately 650m to the south in 2015.

5.1.3 MAGIC and OS mapping revealed that there are five ponds that could potentially support breeding GCN within 500m of the site boundary. One pond is present within a residential garden 350m to the south of the site, three ponds are situated within the former Aquatic Research Centre approximately 360m to the north-east, and one pond approximately 450m to the north-west, on an area of land isolated from the property by the River Thames.

5.1.4 The application site falls within an 'Red' GCN Impact Risk Zone (see NatureSpace Impact Risk Maps) – these zones contain highly suitable habitat – the most important areas for great crested newts.

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 several buildings including the detached residential house, a detached garage, annexes and outbuildings and a pool house, with urban habitats including a long driveway up to the front of the house and garage, paved patio to the west and rear of the main house, patio surrounding the swimming pool and a tennis court in the north-eastern side of the site (**Photographs 1 - 4**).

Photograph 1. Front of house and driveway viewed from the south.

Photograph 2. Driveway leading to the front of the house viewed from the north.

Photograph 3. Tennis court to the north-east of the site.

Photograph 4. Swimming pool and detached pool house on eastern side of site.

5.2.3 There were large areas of frequently mown grassland to the front and rear of the site (**Photographs 5 & 6**). The mown lawn included species such as: fescue (*Festuca* sp.), Yorkshire fog (*Holcus lanatus*), creeping bent (*Agrostis stolonifera*), common bent (*Agrostis capillaris*), common ragwort (*Senecio jacobaea*), creeping buttercup (*Ranunculus repens*), yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*), mouse-ear hawkweed (*Pilosella officinarum*), sow-thistle (*Sonchus oleraceus*), spear thistle (*Cirsium vulgare*), dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*), speedwell (*Veronica* sp.) and dove's-foot crane's-bill (*Geranium molle*). Scattered fruit trees were present at the eastern side of the rear garden beside a small privet hedgerow (**Photograph 7**).

Photograph 5. Front garden lawn.

Photograph 6. North-western side of rear garden and boundary hedgerow.

Photograph 7. North-eastern side of rear lawn with scattered fruit trees.

5.2.4 There were large introduced shrub beds present to the front and rear of the house, that were actively managed, and with scattered mature trees (**Photographs 8 - 10**). Species present included: cherry laurel (*Prunus laurocerasus*), yew (*Taxus baccata*), viburnum (*Viburnum* sp.), buddleia (*Buddleja davidii*), fern (*Polypodiophyta* sp.), common ivy (*Hedera helix*), bramble (*Rubus fruticosus*), fig (*Ficus carica*), anemone (*Anemone* sp.), bracken (*Pteridium aquilinum*), rose (Rosa sp.), bay laurel (*Laurus nobilis*) and pampas grass (*Cortaderia selloana*). There was a strip of introduced shrubs along the wall between the pool house and the main house (**Photograph 11**).

Photograph 8. Introduced shrubs adjacent to the driveway to the front of the house.

Photograph 9. Paved patio steps at rear of the main house with actively managed introduced shrub beds.

Photograph 10. Introduced shrub beds to the rear of the main house.

Photograph 11. Introduced shrub bed beside the pool house.

5.2.5 There was a three tiered pond to the rear of the house, with koi fish present in the pond on the lowest level, that were surrounded by introduced shrubs and paving (**Photographs 12 & 13**). There was no vegetation present within the ponds, thus all on-site ponds were considered unsuitable for great created newts.

Photograph 12. Lowest pond with koi fish present, bordered by managed shrubs.

Photograph 13. Mid-tier pond with no emergent vegetation present and bordered by managed shrub beds.

Photograph 14. Top-tier pond, with no emergent vegetation present and bordered by shrubs.

5.2.6 There were scattered trees present within the site including a mature willow (*Salix* sp.) in the north-western corner of the site surrounded by common nettle (*Urtica dioica*) and ivy (*Hedera helix*), and a managed common privet (*Ligustrum vulgare*) hedgerow along the northern boundary (**Photographs 15 & 16**).

Photograph 15. Mature willow tree surrounded by nettles in north-west corner of site.

Photograph 16. Hedgerow along the northern boundary of the site.

5.3 Risk Assessment

5.3.1 Based on the assumption that the nearby ponds all support breeding GCN - 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 more than 250m from any breeding pond is highly unlikely to result in an offence – see **Figure 1** 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	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)	No effect	0
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:	0.001
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 1. 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 that could potentially support breeding GCNs within 500m of the application site boundary. The closest pond was present approximately 350m to the south of the site within a residential property. Three ponds are situated within the former Aquatic Research Centre approximately 360 metres to the north-east, and one pond approximately 450 metres to the west, within a residential garden on the western side of the River Thames. The ponds located within the former Aquatic Research Centre have good connectivity to the site with adjacent farmland and a line of trees to the east of the property, which are suitable sheltering and commuting habitat for GCNs. The other two ponds within 500m are disconnected from the site by urban habitat, major roads and the River Thames.

6.1.2 The application site falls within an 'Red' GCN Impact Risk Zone – these zones contain highly suitable habitat – the most important areas for great crested newts. However, the application site mostly comprised urban and managed garden habitats, that are of negligible to low value for GCN. The hedgerow boundaries do provide some suitable habitat for commuting GCN but the managed habitats of the site make it less suitable overall. The ponds on-site are considered unsuitable for breeding amphibians due to lack of emergent vegetation present within the ponds and the presence of koi fish.

6.2 Impact Assessment and Required Actions

6.2.1 The development proposals include construction of a single-storey extension to the rear of the main house, following the demolition of the existing glass-roofed conservatory and single-storey rear extension, and extensions to the existing pool house (see proposed drawings in **Appendix 1**). The development footprint is small and will only impact urban habitats including paved patio and introduced shrubs located to the north of the main house and surrounding the pool and pool house (i.e. terrestrial habitats of negligible value to GCN). The garden provided limited sheltering opportunities for GCN, but they could be present in the hedgerow boundaries, which will be retained and are situated approximately 60m from the area to 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 1** 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 contravening the legislation, 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 coverage under 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

- The formal mowing of the lawn should be maintained prior to the commencement of site work to minimise the likelihood of GCN colonising the site.

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 along the boundary of the site and creating a separate wildlife pond with no fish for GCN breeding opportunities.

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.

APPENDIX 1 – PROPOSED PLANS

Note

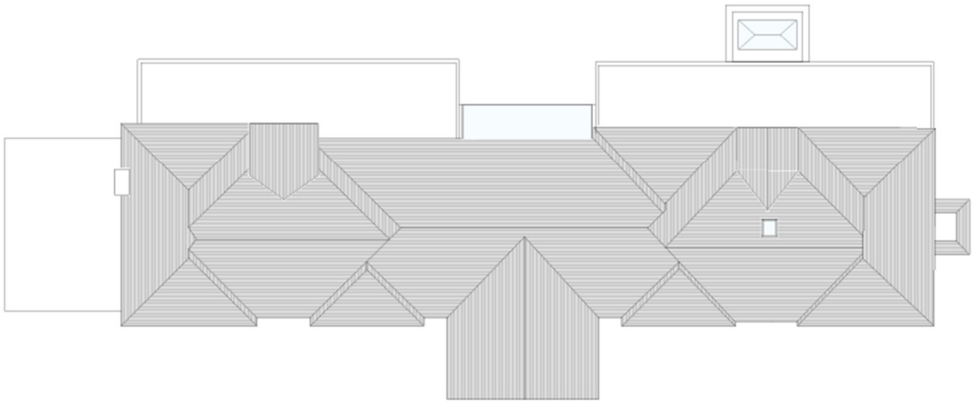
[redacted] Use figured dimensions only. All dimensions are to be checked on site and any discrepancies, errors or omissions are to be reported to the architect prior to commencement of works.

DRAWING KEY

EXISTING STRUCTURE RETAINED

PROPOSED STRUCTURE

PROPOSED EXTENSIONS



PROPOSED ROOF PLAN

Rev	Notes	Date	By

ALL DIMENSIONS APPROXIMATE

SCHEME DESIGN SUBJECT TO STRUCTURAL ENGINEER /SERVICES ENGINEER & PLANNERS COMMENT

Planning

BB PARTNERSHIP
CHARTERED ARCHITECTS

Studios 33-34, 10 Hornsey St, London, N7 8EL
Tel 020 7336 8555 — e-mail — architect@bbpartnership.co.uk

Client
Bobby Athwanlia

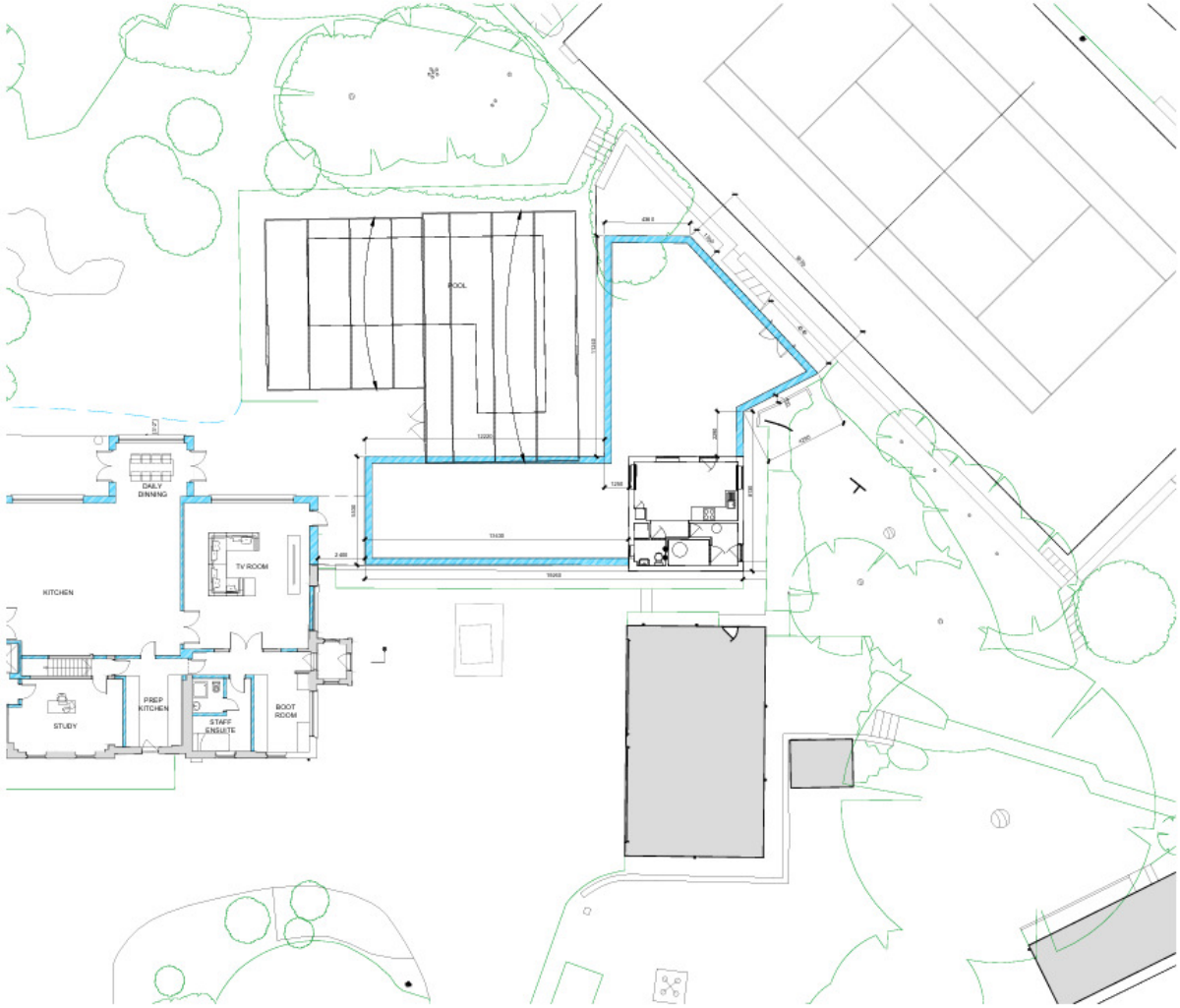
Project
Sonning Court
Sonning-on-Thames, Berkshire
RG4 6UR

Drawing
Application 1
Proposed Roof Plan

Date	Scale	Drawn by
SEPT'25	1:100 @A1	ML
drg.no.		Revision
BBP0730_202		-

SCALE BAR 1:100

S:\LT BBP 0726-0750\BBP 0730 - Sonning Court\Drawings | previously proposed\Sheets\BBP0730_202 Proposed Roof Plan.dwg



Note

[redacted] Use figured dimensions only. All dimensions are to be checked on site and any discrepancies, errors or omissions are to be reported to the architect prior to commencement of works.

DRAWING KEY

EXISTING WALLS RETAINED

PROPOSED WALLS

ALL DIMENSIONS APPROXIMATE

SCHEME DESIGN SUBJECT TO STRUCTURAL ENGINEER / SERVICES ENGINEER & PLANNERS COMMENT

Draft

BB PARTNERSHIP CHARTERED ARCHITECTS

Studios 33-34, 10 Hornsey St, London, N7 8EL

Client: Bobby Ahluwalia

Project: Sonning Court, Sonning-on-Thames, Berkshire RG4 6UR

Drawing: Contained Drawings Proposed Gym Plan

Date	Scale	Drawn by
SEPT'23	1:100 @A1	ML
drg no.		Revision
BBP0730_550		-