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Reshaping Great Crested Newt Licensing for Conservation Gain

Figure 1. Great crested newt. © Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Trust. Photo credit: Chris Dresh.



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Strategic licensing for great crested newts (*Triturus cristatus*) is designed to streamline licensing within planning and improve conservation outcomes. This article explores the first 5 year evaluation of NatureSpace's district licensing and Natural England's district level licensing schemes, discusses the underlying principles to success and reflects on lessons learned for future strategic approaches.

Introduction

Strategic licensing for great crested newts (*Triturus cristatus*; GCNs) was borne out of concerns that existing site-based species licensing wasn't delivering for development or biodiversity. The licensing process was considered cumbersome, and outcomes for GCNs appeared poor despite

considerable financial input and effort. Whereas some individual mitigation projects had good success, site-by-site delivery resulted in inconsistent outcomes, with no strategic overview of habitat recovery, frequently poor monitoring and reporting and little evidence of conservation gain for the species (Lewis *et al.* 2017).

The strategic approach was enabled by new European Protected Species licensing policies in 2016 that permitted greater flexibility in the application of licensing tests, provided that net gain could be demonstrated for the species (for details on these policy changes see Pouget and Heydon 2019, Natural England 2022). This included policies to facilitate landscape-scale delivery of bigger, better, more joined up habitat, in line with the Lawton principles (Lawton *et al.* 2010). The schemes also relied on technological improvements that facilitated development of more accurate predictive mapping software for spatial conservation planning and eDNA techniques for wide-scale GCN occupancy surveys.

In response, several national pilots were developed by different groups to test the principles of strategic licensing exploring different potential models. The two schemes that proved to be viable and have grown are NatureSpace Partnership's district licensing (DL) and Natural England's district level licensing (DLL) (Tew *et al.* 2018, Cameron *et al.* 2019). The challenge was to create a more streamlined process for developers and planners while funding a landscape-scale recovery strategy for GCNs that would actively contribute towards improving conservation status.

The two schemes operate slightly differently in practice (Table 1) but are based on the same overarching principles set out in the GCN district level licensing framework (Natural

Table 1. Key differences between NatureSpace DL and Natural England DLL.

NatureSpace District Licensing	Natural England District Level Licensing
Organisational licence held by Local Planning Authority, administered by NatureSpace Partnership	Individual licences granted to developers on site basis
Authorisation alongside planning	Licence gained post-planning
Planning conditions to specify (1) adherence to site impact plan and (2) any mitigation requirements	No specific planning conditions (post-planning) or mitigation
Aquatic and terrestrial compensation	Aquatic compensation
Single habitat delivery body: Newt Conservation Partnership (NCP)	Multiple habitat delivery bodies

England 2019). Baseline surveys of GCNs feed into habitat suitability modelling, generally at county level, using the most up-to-date modelling techniques. The maps are statistically robust and verified via consultation with national and local experts. Landscape modelling removes the need for site-based surveys and identifies the most suitable areas for expansion of GCN habitat, forming the basis for delivery of spatial conservation strategies (Tew *et al.* 2018, Cameron *et al.* 2019). Currently, as of 2026, the NatureSpace DL scheme operates across 70 planning authorities, mostly in central and southern England, whereas Natural England's DLL operates across an additional 150 planning authorities in England.

Scheme evaluation

Both schemes are underpinned by a robust monitoring and evaluation framework that sets out a 25 year compensation pond monitoring schedule, feeding into annual reporting, strategic reviews and evaluation (Horgan *et al.* 2024). NatureSpace and Natural England published their first full evaluations at the end of March 2026 (Crees *et al.* 2026, Fitzroy *et al.* 2026), drawing on monitoring and licensing data since the schemes' launch and targeted stakeholder surveys to assess outcomes and impact in two key areas:

1. environmental and ecological outcomes

2. efficiency and effectiveness for developers and local planning authorities (LPAs).

We briefly review the key outcomes from the evaluations and highlight how they link to the regulatory principles that underpin both schemes.

Ecological outcomes

Increased compensation delivery

Together the schemes had delivered more than 4800 created and restored ponds by the end of February 2026; this includes ponds allocated to licenced development, provisionally allocated to development sites awaiting planning and a 'supply' for future development (habitat delivery occurs ahead of development impact). There had been an overall net increase of over 1000 ponds when compared with those specifically allocated to licenced developments. Delivering a long-term net increase in GCN habitat is a foundational principle of strategic licensing, designed to improve on the no-net-loss principle of standard mitigation licensing, and is achieved in several ways.

Firstly, the schemes have a high 4:1 (gain-to-impacted) compensation ratio, with four ponds provided for every pond estimated to be occupied by GCNs lost, a substantial increase on the 2:1 compensation ratio under mitigation licensing. Under both schemes, surrounding suitable terrestrial habitat is made available to newts when the pond is delivered and NatureSpace

“ National pilots were developed to test the principles of strategic licensing and explore different potential models. The two schemes that proved to be viable are NatureSpace Partnership's district licensing and Natural England's district level licensing. ”

Partnership DL also actively creates and restores terrestrial habitats.

Secondly, DL/DLL operates under the Conservation of Species and Habitats Regulations 2017 (as amended) and so embeds key legal tests and environmental principles. These include: (1) no detriment to Favourable Conservation Status (FCS), (2) a clear purpose for the development – Imperative Reasons of Overriding Public Interest (IROPI) and (3) No Satisfactory Alternative (NSA). This must be demonstrated at each organisational licence application to Natural England under NatureSpace Partnership DL, and at each individual development level under Natural England DLL (Natural England 2019). The schemes also adhere to guiding principles and policy requirements including the mitigation hierarchy, the precautionary principle and the polluter pays principle. The most important areas for GCNs are avoided (developments cannot be licensed in the highest-risk zone within each scheme) and, under the NatureSpace Partnership DL, some mitigation is required for high-risk red zone developments. In addition, sites

resulting in potential impacts to, for example, range or long-term prospects may require *in situ* or alternative compensation measures. Individual desk-based assessments of impacts (utilising site survey data from the developer when available) calculate both compensation requirement and proportionate cost to the developer.

Thirdly, compensation must be delivered ahead of development impacts to address losses proactively rather than retrospectively, preventing irreparable harm (e.g. loss of species range or distribution). Ponds and terrestrial habitat take time to mature so this ensures compensation is available to developers when it is needed.

Finally, the schemes have strong financial underpinnings to guarantee delivery of habitat and long-term outcomes. Developer monies are ring-fenced, meaning they can only be spent on the schemes, securing habitat creation as well as 25 years of monitoring and management, longer than any mitigation projects deliver under mitigation licensing. Under the NatureSpace scheme landowners are paid from an asset-locked fund held

and managed by the Newt Conservation Partnership (NCP), a community benefit society, to manage habitats under legal agreements which secures long-term outcomes. The NatureSpace Partnership DL scheme is further secured by a NERC Act 2006 agreement between Natural England as the regulator and NatureSpace Partnership and the NCP to ensure robust delivery. Under Natural England's DLL, local delivery partners are funded by Natural England to conduct monitoring and maintenance to ensure long-term outcomes.

High-quality habitat

It is vital that long-term compensatory habitat is sufficient in both quantity and quality. Compensation pond monitoring follows an agreed schedule outlined in the shared Monitoring and Evaluation Framework for both DL/DLL schemes. Ponds undergo four Habitat Suitability Index (HSI) assessments and eDNA surveys within the first 5 years and then at least four more times over the 25 year period, as well as an additional contingency survey if required, with evidence of pond existence required in



Figure 2. Natural England compensation pond, north-east Essex. © Natural England. Photo credit: J. McNaughton FWAG East.

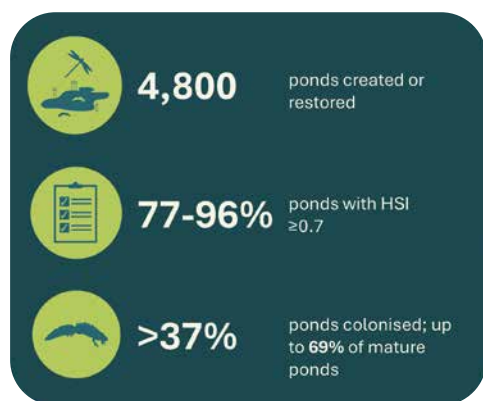


Figure 3. Key outcomes from the 5 year evaluation.

Figure 4. (Right) Aerial photo of NatureSpace pond network created in Staffordshire. © NatureSpace Partnership. Photo credit: Tom Winter.



the intervening years. Ponds must achieve an HSI score of ≥ 0.7 or have evidence of GCN occupation over a rolling 5 year period to be considered successful. Pond failure can also occur due to hydrological or other issues. In either event ponds must be replaced. However, the pond failure rate is extremely low across both schemes at 3% or less.

Most ponds reach the high quality required, with 77–96% achieving an HSI score of ≥ 0.7 in the 2025 monitoring season (see Figure 3), which included very young as well as mature ponds. Pond delivery draws on significant expertise, with each area under the Natural England scheme having dedicated local providers, whereas NCP is the sole compensation habitat provider for NatureSpace, led and staffed by local officers from Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Trust (ARC) and Freshwater Habitats Trust (FHT). Specialist providers, backed by NGO expertise, ensure greater consistency in the delivery of high-quality ponds than was possible under site-by-site approaches.

Understanding how amphibians move around and colonise new ponds has been an ongoing challenge to their conservation, but for the first time strategic licensing records annual monitoring data at landscape scale over long timeframes. Data so far demonstrate that GCNs are rapidly finding and using the ponds. Across both schemes over 37% of all ponds had been colonised at least once in 5 years, rising to at least 69% of ponds

when only mature ponds (over 4 years old) were considered. Annual data show that the likelihood of GCN colonisation increases each year with pond age.

GCNs live in interconnected metapopulations where individuals move around networks of connected ponds, rather than always using the same pond for breeding. DL/DLL therefore builds networks of ponds (three on average but potentially up to 12) at a range of depths, shapes and sizes to provide a diversity of habitats for newts (see Figure 4 for an example). Site occupancy rates reached as high as 90% in the latest 2025 monitoring season, higher than individual pond occupancy, demonstrating how newts utilise a landscape of ponds and habitats, rather than all available ponds.

Strategic landscape-scale habitat delivery

Compensation pond location is guided by Strategic Opportunity Area (SOA) maps, which combine GCN records and suitable modelled habitat with development and landscape barrier information to identify the most suitable areas for newt expansion. Both schemes use these maps to locate compensation ponds close to existing records and ponds, where populations can most easily expand. The high gain site occupancy rate indicates that this approach is increasing connectivity for this mobile but dispersal-limited species. In addition, the evaluations found that average occupancy of compensation ponds was higher than for background ponds in most regions, likely reflecting

both better pond quality and improved connectivity to the wider landscape.

Despite taking a more strategic landscape approach, local delivery of habitat is vital to ensure local nature recovery, balance regional losses and gains and provide equity for local communities. Both schemes operate via clusters of LPAs, usually reflecting county-level regions. Preferential hierarchy of compensation delivery is within the same LPA, then the wider region. Within the evaluation nearly half of LPAs confirmed that they were incorporating DL/DLL compensation sites into their regional biodiversity targets, including Local Nature Recovery Strategies, with numbers higher for LPAs that had participated in the scheme longer. DL/DLL therefore has an active, ongoing role contributing towards local nature recovery that both schemes will continue to monitor and support.

Efficiency and effectiveness for developers and LPAs

Developers and LPAs were surveyed as part of the evaluation to assess whether strategic licensing had met its additional aims of simplifying and speeding up licensing within planning. Most developers agreed that DL/DLL was quicker and provided greater certainty than mitigation licensing, with 95–97% of respondents confirming that they would consider using the schemes again. Analysis of licensing data confirmed that strategic licensing was being used more frequently, with six to eight times the number of new licences

granted under DL/DLL than under standard mitigation licensing. A majority of LPAs also agreed that DL/DLL reduced the administrative burden and accelerated GCN licensing, improving the licensing process overall.

DL/DLL streamlines licensing in several ways. Landscape-scale surveys funded by the schemes produce easy-to-use impact risk zone maps that clearly show where development risk to GCNs is highest, improving certainty and knowledge base. This reduces consultation times for LPAs and removes the requirement for season-dependent newt surveys, so that developers can access the schemes any time of year.

Under the NatureSpace model the LPAs themselves hold the licence, with NatureSpace administering the scheme on their behalf. Licence documentation guarantees that the development can be covered alongside other planning considerations, while authorisation under the licence can occur at the same time as planning permission, saving further time for the developer.

Both DL/DLL usually covers the entire red line planning boundary and the lifetime of a development (or a simple renewal process under Natural England DLL), so there is no need to reapply if there are minor changes to the mitigation plan, development schedule or timings, or within the site plan. Therefore, DL/DLL provides additional certainty and time-saving for developers. Comparison of licensing data confirmed that DL/DLL licences were far less likely to require modification than under standard mitigation licensing.

Conclusions

Strategic licensing has fundamentally reshaped the way licensing intersects with conservation spatial planning, with DL/DLL being the first landscape-scale conservation strategy funded by developers and enabling landscape-scale impacts to be more properly accounted for. Extensive monitoring and evaluation have demonstrated that strategic licensing can provide better local conservation outcomes while retaining robust legal and regulatory safeguards, improving the licensing and planning processes for developers and planning authorities. This approach

works especially well for GCNs because of their specific autecology; similar approaches for other species would require careful research and design to ensure successful ecological outcomes.

There were several areas for reflection from the evaluation. Developer feedback indicated that certain parts of strategic licensing could appear complex, such as around costings and process. There is a balance to achieve between delivering robust environmental and planning safeguards and minimising complexity for scheme users. Both NatureSpace Partnership

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and Natural England continue to adapt their processes to try and achieve the best outcomes for newts and planning.

At the time of writing the UK Government is developing the Nature Restoration Fund, including Environmental Delivery Plans, to provide voluntary strategic approaches for managing defined environmental impacts on a protected site or species, such as nutrient pollution and GCNs. Environmental Delivery Plans, which are being led by Natural England, are building on lessons learned from DL and DLL.

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