

Experience in great crested newt mitigation: guidance for ecologists



1. Aims of this note

- To help ecological consultants to assess their skills and experience levels before applying for a development licence as an appointed ecologist.
- To guide ecologists when assessing the skills and experience levels of accredited agents or assistants employed on mitigation schemes.
- To guide referees when writing references on behalf of the ecologist.

Developers need to be confident that ecologists they appoint have relevant experience.

Preparing a great crested newt mitigation scheme requires a range of skills to ensure that a proposed activity can proceed lawfully and without adversely affecting the favourable conservation status of the newts. Proposals inevitably vary in complexity and in their potential impacts on newts. It is the responsibility of the ecologist to ensure that he/she has the relevant skills and experience to carry out the work required for each application.

The first requirement for assessing the impact of a proposed activity on a great crested newt population is a survey. A sound survey, including an assessment of all available evidence, will enable any impacts to be accurately assessed. It is also crucial in subsequent mitigation planning

A consultant ecologist will need to have sufficient knowledge and practical experience of newt ecology and habitat requirements to analyse the survey data and assess the impacts of a proposed activity on the newt population, both at site level and in a wider perspective. This is crucial for the subsequent design and implementation of appropriate and proportionate mitigation measures.

Avoidance measures and/or mitigation plans for a particular scheme must be clear, achievable and discussed fully with planners and developers. A sound understanding of the planning system and construction industry is therefore essential to avoid misunderstandings and to ensure the delivery of realistic and proportionate mitigation schemes.

2. Skills and experience required

2.1. Ecological consultants

(a) Essential skills

The following table identifies the skills and experience required to successfully carry out a mitigation scheme. A new applicant should satisfy Natural England that he/she has achieved at least the minimum standard for each skill by providing brief, written evidence based on the guidance in the second column. Ecologists who have not held a development licence in the last three years are also expected to provide evidence of their more recent great crested newt experience using this table as a guide.

| Skills and experience | Evidence |
|---|---|
| Identification of all widespread UK amphibians (all life stages) and working knowledge of survey methods (egg search, torch, net, bottle trap, pitfall and refuge). | Held own survey licence for at least three years. At least 3 seasons of surveying; to include surveys at a minimum of five great crested newt breeding ponds. Give details of any courses attended. |
| Understanding of great crested newt ecology. | Understanding of newt ecology from field experience, literature and attending conferences. |
| General knowledge of pond ecosystems and pond conservation. | Knowledge gained from field experience, literature and conferences. |
| Working knowledge of the great crested newt Habitat Suitability Index (HSI). | Determination of HSI values at a minimum of 10 sites. |
| Understanding of impact assessment for great crested newts. | Work on, or study of, method statements for at least three licensed projects. |
| Working knowledge of Local Authority planning, EPS legislation and licensing process:- assessing the risk of committing an offence, avoidance measures, planning mitigation strategies that will be effective, pragmatic and proportionate. | Work on at least three licensed great crested newt projects. Familiarity with the <i>Great crested newt mitigation guidelines</i> and licence application template. |
| Planning and implementing effective great crested newt habitat creation, enhancement and management including both pond creation and terrestrial habitat work. | Involvement in significant habitat works on at least three licensed great crested newt mitigation projects within the last five years. |
| Planning and implementing effective great crested newt capture and exclusion projects | Involvement in capture and exclusion works on at least three great crested newt mitigation projects within the last five years |

Occasionally, it is evident that although an applicant can demonstrate all of the above, he/she submits an application that is substantially below the

standard required. In such cases, we may decide the applicant does not demonstrate adequate application of experience.

(b) Additional skills

Natural England expects appointed ecologists to have the following skills but does not need supporting evidence:

- Welfare of amphibians during survey and mitigation.
- Communication skills, to allow effective liaison with planners, developers, landowners and others.
- Organisational and report writing skills.
- Flexibility and problem-solving skills, to deal effectively with unexpected challenges.

2.2. Employing accredited agents and assistants

Accredited agents and assistants do not need the same level of skills and experience as an appointed ecologist. Employment as an accredited agent or assistant can be viewed as training to becoming an appointed ecologist on a development licence. An accredited agent is expected to have a wider experience than an assistant who should work under the supervision of the appointed ecologist or the agent. The appointed ecologist should decide on the necessary level of supervision, depending on the significance and complexity of the task. Constant on-site supervision is not necessary for simple tasks. It is the responsibility of the appointed ecologist to ensure anyone they employ as either has the appropriate skills and experience. Natural England does not require evidence for accredited agent or assistant, but as a guide, each should have the following key skills:

Accredited agent key skills

- Identification, survey under own licence.
- Understanding of newt ecology
- Basic knowledge of legislation and licensing process
- Understanding of welfare issues
- Record keeping
- Understanding of great crested newt Habitat Suitability Index
- Understanding of implementing mitigation schemes
- Good working knowledge of construction practices

Assistant key skills

- Identification and survey methods
- Welfare issues
- Basic knowledge of newt ecology
- Basic knowledge of construction practices
- Record keeping
- Basic knowledge of implementing mitigation schemes

3. Gaining experience

The following are examples of ways of obtaining experience in working with amphibians and great crested newts in particular:

- Attend training courses, such as those run by the Institute of Ecologists and Environmental Managers (IEEM), Field Studies Council (FSC), The Herpetological Conservation Trust (HCT), the Wildlife Trusts (WTs)
- Work as an assistant or accredited agent on a variety of mitigation schemes
- Work as a volunteer for a local Amphibian and Reptile Group, Froglife, The Pond Conservation Trust, a County Wildlife Trust or another conservation organisation

4. Refereeing appointed ecologists

Two references are needed for ecologists who have not previously held a great crested newt licence for a mitigation scheme or been an appointed ecologist under the current licensing procedure.

References need not be lengthy but should contain sufficient, specific information to support the ecologist's experience in relation to the proposed scheme.

In general, a referee should hold relevant great crested newt licences (e.g. survey and development) and have worked on mitigation projects with the new appointed ecologist, or be able to vouch for their competence. A brief outline of the referee's own great crested newt experience should be included and the length of time he/she has known the new appointed ecologist in relation to work with great crested newts.

As mitigation schemes vary in complexity, the referee should be satisfied that the new appointed ecologist has the necessary skills for a range of projects. Adequate survey experience, including experience of bottle and pit-fall trapping to ensure high welfare standards, is particularly relevant.

If the referee has worked with the appointed ecologist on other mitigation projects, brief details of the mitigation methods and level of responsibility held by the appointed ecologist are needed. It may be that the appointed ecologist has worked as an assistant or accredited agent under other licences and has gained experience in areas such as project management or the designing of mitigation schemes. This information would be welcomed together with EPSL reference numbers.

If the appointed ecologist, has attended any relevant training courses these should also be mentioned.

Further reading

English Nature, 2001. Great crested newt mitigation guidelines
<http://naturalengland.communisis.com/naturalenglandshop/docs/newt1.pdf>

Oldham, RS, Keeble, J, Swan, MJS & Jeffcote, M, 2000 Evaluating the suitability of habitat for the great crested newt (*Triturus cristatus*).
Herpetological Journal: 10(4): 142-155

Gent, A.H., & Gibson, S.D., eds. 1998. *Herpetofauna Workers' Manual*.
Peterborough, Joint Nature Conservation Committee