

Our ref: 22941-10

13th April 2012

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VIA EMAIL ONLY

Dear Chris,

Woodcroft Farm – Great Crested Newt Habitat Suitability Indices

Background

WSP Environmental (WSPE) were commissioned on 28th March 2012 by Grainger plc to assess the habitat suitability for great crested newts *Triturus cristatus* of the chalk depressions at Woodcroft Farm (hereafter referred to as the Site). These features are deep below ground (up to 100m) solution features within the chalk, which are covered by a clay cap. From the ground surface these features appear as depressions above areas where the ground is progressively sinking into solution features.

The extended Phase 1 habitat survey (WSPE, 2011) identified these as having potential to hold water during the Spring; and therefore, of potential to support great crested newts. Partial presence/likely absence surveys were completed for one of these depressions by Epcad in 2002, the remainder were dry (Bioscan, 2009).

Great crested newts are fully protected under the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2010 (as amended), with additional protection in relation to disturbance afforded under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended). The species is protected from killing and injury, from disturbance whilst occupying places of rest or shelter, and places of rest and shelter used by great crested newts are protected from damage and destruction. In addition, as a legally protected species their presence would be a material consideration within the planning system (ODPM circular 06/2005); and because they are listed as a species of principal importance under the NERC Act 2006, local authorities are required to have regard for this species when carrying out their duties.

Three chalk pit depressions were identified within the Site during the Phase 1 habitat survey (P1-3 see Figure 1); with a further two located within the field to the north of the Site (P4-5). In addition, there is a very small (approximately 2.5 x 1m) garden pond located within the curtilage of the Woodcroft Farm farmhouse (P6).

No other mapped ponds were identified within 500m of the Site using OS 1:25,000 maps. All the chalk depressions within the Site were dry at the time of the Phase 1 habitat survey (7th July 2011) and remained dry on all subsequent survey visits (dormouse and hedgerow surveys) to the Site during the 2011 summer season, with the final visit occurring on the 9th November 2011. Water was present within the depression (P2) within the central field during a site visit on the 24th January 2012, but the remainder of depressions were dry.

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A site visit to assess the suitability of these depressions and the garden pond to support breeding populations of great crested newt was completed on the 2nd April 2012 by Rosie Hall AIEEM, consultant ecologist with WSPE (Natural England great crested newt survey licence number 20114289). Any depressions containing water were assessed for their suitability as aquatic habitat for great crested newts using the Habitat Suitability Index (HSI) (Oldham *et al* 2000 further modified by NARRS 2008). The HSI is a simple model to provide an informed view of the value of a site to support breeding populations of great crested newt, which involves assessing water bodies based on ten habitat parameters that are known to influence breeding populations of great crested newts. A score between 0 and 1 is assigned to each parameter, based on field observations. An overall Index is calculated from these parameters, which assigns the water body to a suitability category: poor, below average, average, good or excellent. Habitat Suitability Index calculations are included in Appendix A.

Results

Depressions P1, P3, P4 and P5 were all dry; whilst shallow water was present within P2, covering approximately 7m x 2m (maximum depth 10cm) and within a shallow depression in the field adjacent to this, covering approximately 2m x 2m (maximum depth 5cm). The garden pond (approximately 2.5m x 1m) contained water; it is likely the owner fills this pond to maintain water levels.

P1

Depression P1, within the northwest field, was dry, with bare ground, leaf litter and some nettles present at the base of the depression. Horses have access to this depression. As this depression has been consistently dry from the beginning of July 2011 until the beginning of April 2012 it is considered unlikely to be a pond and hold sufficient water throughout the breeding season (March to July) to support a population of great crested newts. In addition, Bioscan (2009) states presence/absence surveys of this pond for great crested newts were completed by Epcad in 2002; though with a reduced number of visits as the water dried up part way through the season; no newts were found during this survey and Epcad concluded *'the water body was unlikely to hold water for a sufficient portion of the year to support a viable population'* (Bioscan, 2009). Bioscan state this depression did not contain water during their site visit on the 18th September 2009. A combination of historic data and the results of this survey indicate this chalk depression is predominantly dry. In addition, it lies within the centre of a close grazed field, which offers limited opportunities for foraging or shelter and therefore of limited value to great crested newts as terrestrial habitat.

P2

Depression P2 contained a shallow puddle of water (approximately 7m x 2m, maximum 10cm deep, majority 5cm deep) at the time of survey; which is extensively horse poached. The area of standing water is less than half the size it was in January 2012 (18m x 6m) and it is considered likely that the pond dries out completely during the spring and summer months (it was dry from 7th July 2011 to 9th November 2011). Terrestrial habitat surrounding this comprises close grazed horse pasture, with the exception of a ring of mature oaks immediately surrounding the pond, with a small amount of minor dead wood (branches) present on the ground. Overall, this terrestrial habitat is poor, offering limited foraging and refuge opportunities for great crested newts. A habitat suitability index of 0.24, poor, was calculated for this pond, both on the 24th January and 2nd April 2012 survey visits. This depression was recorded as dry during Bioscans' site visit in September 2009 and also when Epcad surveyed the Site in 2002 (Bioscan, 2009). Overall, this pond is considered of poor suitability to support a breeding population of great crested newts, and when standing water occurs this is only present for a limited period during the breeding season.

In addition, a slight depression within the grazed field immediately west of P2 also contained standing water at the time of survey; this is approximately 2m x 2m in area and heavily horse poached. This had a HSI score of 0.28, poor. This is an ephemeral water body which is not present during the summer.

P3

Depression P3, behind the barn, was dry. The base of this depression comprises bare ground. This depression was also dry in September 2009 and was not considered in 2002 (Bioscan, 2009). Terrestrial habitat immediately east of this depression is of moderate suitability, comprising tall ruderal bounded by a hedgerow, however it is very limited in extent and isolated within grazed pastures. Buildings and hardstanding lie to the west. As this depression has been consistently dry from the beginning of July 2011 until the beginning of April 2012; it is considered unlikely to be a pond and hold sufficient water throughout the breeding season to support a population of great crested newts.

P4

Depression P4, the northern depression in the field beyond the northern Site boundary was also dry. This depression is deep (estimated 4-6 metres maximum), and fenced from the surrounding grazed field. The base of this depression comprises a build-up of leaf litter, with some nettles, it is shaded by scrub growing on the depression sides. The vegetation on and around the base of this depression suggests it is unlikely to hold water at any point. This, in conjunction with the fact no water has been observed within this depression suggests it is well drained and does not form a pond.

P5

Depression P5, the southern depression in the field beyond the northern Site boundary was also dry. This is shallow and has a number of elder and hawthorn shrubs rooted within it; suggesting it does not hold water at any point. This, in conjunction with the fact no water has been observed within this depression suggests it is well drained and does not form a pond.

Garden Pond (P6)

The garden pond is very small and likely filled by the householder. A lined pond approximately 2.5m x 1m in size it is devoid of any vegetation. The pond has steep sides, a shelf and then a deeper central section, it is estimated it is approximately 45cm deep in the centre. Lying within the garden it has a brick surround and is surrounded small planted beds, including a well-tended vegetable garden. These are separated by gravel and slab pathways. An area of ruderal vegetation and a hedgerow is present beyond the garden, but this is isolated within close grazed pasture. This pond had a HSI score of 0.54, below average. Great crested newts tend not to colonise small garden ponds, therefore, with the absence of other suitable water bodies within 500m it is considered this pond is unlikely to support a breeding population of great crested newts.

Conclusions

The Site is predominantly close grazed pasture; whilst hedgerows dominated by mature oaks are present; grazing occurs to the hedge bases, limiting the cover available to great crested newts at ground level. Whilst the Site is not unsuitable for great crested newts, the current management, comprising intense pony grazing limits its value as terrestrial habitat.

No ponds have been identified within 500m of the Site boundary, depressions previously identified for further investigation (P4-5) have been found not to hold water, and historic survey data and the result of this survey indicate that the majority of the chalk depressions within the site (P1-3) either do not hold water or are dry for the majority of the year. Whilst the garden pond scored a HSI above 0.5, this is still of below average suitability and as an extremely small pond is considered unlikely to support a population of great crested newts in isolation.

Overall, a combination of limited, short term, or no water retention within the depressions present on the Site, low quality terrestrial habitat due to the current management regime, and a lack of other water bodies within 500m of the Site mean the Site is unlikely to support a population of great crested newts. On this basis no further survey is recommended, and it is not considered that great crested newts pose a constraint to the Proposed Development.

Yours sincerely



Rosie Hall

Consultant Ecologist

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Enc. Figure 1 – Location Plan, Appendix A – HSI calculations

References

Bioscan (2009) Woodcroft Farm, Wecock, Hampshire, Ecological Appraisal (report no. E1570R1).

HMSO The Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2010

HMSO Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended).

HMSO The NERC Act (2006)

Oldham *et al* 2000 further modified by NARRS 2008 Great crested newt habitat suitability index

Appendix A : HSI calculations 2nd April 2012

Chalk depression in central field - P2

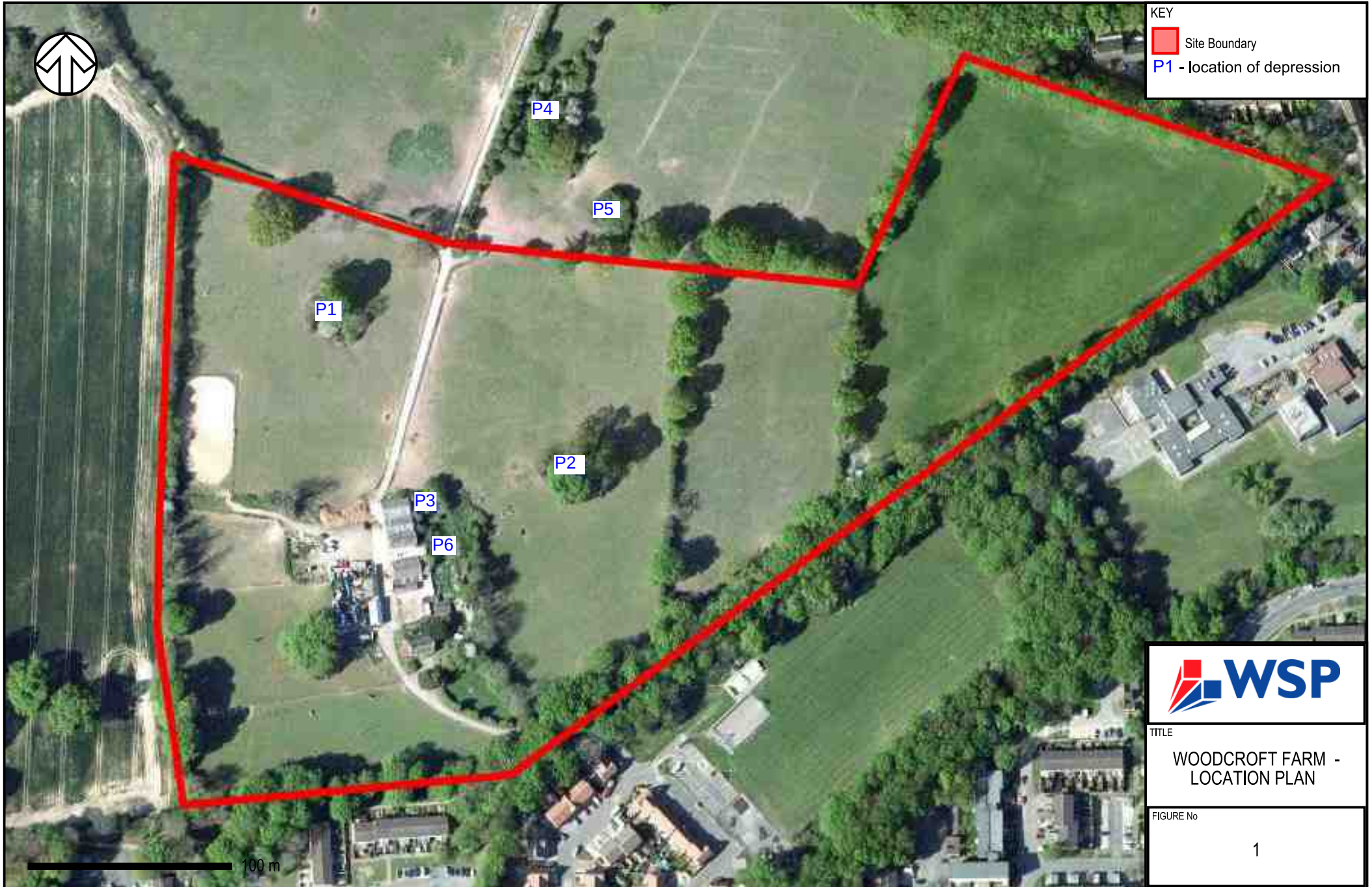
Geographic Location	1
Pond Area	0.05
Permanence	0.1
Water Quality	0.01
Shade	0.2
Fowl	1
Fish	1
Pond Count	0.7
Terrestrial Habitat	0.33
Macrophytes	0.3
HSI score	0.24
HSI category	Poor

Slight depression in central field west of P2

Geographic Location	1
Pond Area	0.05
Permanence	0.1
Water Quality	0.01
Shade	1
Fowl	1
Fish	1
Pond Count	0.7
Terrestrial Habitat	0.33
Macrophytes	0.3
HSI score	0.28
HSI category	Poor

Garden pond (P6)

Geographic Location	1
Pond Area	0.05
Permanence	0.9
Water Quality	0.33
Shade	1
Fowl	1
Fish	1
Ponds within 1km	0.7
Terrestrial Habitat	0.67
Macrophytes	0.3
HSI score	0.54
HSI category	Below average



KEY

 Site Boundary

 P1 - location of depression



TITLE

WOODCROFT FARM -
LOCATION PLAN

FIGURE No

1