

Newts to get new home after special licence granted

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Network Rail's Eastern region has been granted a special licence to safely relocate the UK's largest native newt species — an industry first which is designed to protecting the creatures from engineering work.

The new initiative will see specialists build large-scale habitats for great crested newts to move to when railway upgrades disrupt their existing homes. Network Rail says this balance will allow the amphibians to thrive in a safe environment and in turn reduce any delays to engineering work.

The licence was granted by Natural England following a successful trial on the Midland Main Line Upgrade last year. It has now been extended to the entire **Eastern region**, which encompasses places like Newcastle, York, Leeds, Sheffield, Derby, Peterborough and East Anglia.

Usually found in grassland, scrub, ponds and woodland; the great crested newt is a protected species. They can sometimes be impacted by essential improvement, maintenance or safety-related work on the railway. This brand-new licence will allow teams within the Eastern region to relocate newts where necessary, keeping them out of harm's way and, in the process, helps to create acres of vibrant new ponds and habitat.

Hamish Critchell-Ward, Environmental Manager for Network Rail's Eastern region, said: "This is a significant win for sustainability across the region. Our lineside habitats are a valuable asset that need management and protection in order to improve biodiversity and create an environmentally friendly railway that's fit for future generations.

"This licence will help us strike the balance between helping lineside wildlife to thrive, whilst allowing essential railway upgrade work to get underway. It's great that Natural England have been so supportive of this initiative, and we're really looking forward to working with our partners at NatureSpace in an approach that's more streamlined and results in more habitat creation."

The project is being carried out in collaboration with NatureSpace – an organisation dedicated to working with conservationists, industry experts and developers to understand, grow and protect the great crested newt's habitat.

Dr Tom Tew, NatureSpace CEO, said: "We are delighted to help Network Rail expand their Organisational Licence for great crested newts so that it covers the whole Eastern Region Network. The Licence provides a quick and simple option that both ensures newts are conserved and allows critical rail work to proceed without delay. It's not generally known but the rail-side vegetation can provide really important terrestrial habitat for newts, and so it's great to see major infrastructure providers embracing their environmental responsibilities and delivering conservation gain for our endangered species – we hope others will follow Network Rail's example."

Duncan Brown, Operations Manager for District-Level Licensing at Natural England, said: "The expansion of the Network Rail Organisational Licence removes the need for individual licence applications for routine works, and will fund habitat creation along a significant part of the rail network. The largest-scale licence of its type, this has been developed with Network Rail and NatureSpace to deliver habitats at the landscape scale and benefit this iconic species."