

Reptile Mitigation Scheme

**Demolition and redevelopment of an
existing bridge, including the provision of
landscaping and associated development at
Onllwyn.**

(Planning Application Ref: P2024/0011)

February 2024

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 GCRE Limited are working in partnership with the local authorities of Powys County Council (PCC) and Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council (NPTCBC) in order to construct the proposed Global Centre of Rail Excellence (GCRE), a purpose-built testing and certification facility for rolling stock, infrastructure and new rail technologies including a test track.
- 1.2 A key part of that scheme is the replacement of the Onllwyn Bridge. This scheme is subject to a separate stand-alone planning application. As part of the information required to inform the Local Planning Authority and statement on how any potential reptiles within the area will be protected to prevent harm has been requested.
- 1.3 The Onllwyn Road Bridge Scheme, hereafter referred to as 'the Proposed Scheme', is located within the wider Onllwyn Coal Washery site ('the Site') and comprises the redevelopment of the existing bridge which carries Onllwyn Road over the historic Neath and Brecon railway line, as well as habitat management and landscaping of approximately 0.97 hectares of potentially suitable reptile habitat in the surrounding vicinity of the bridge.
- 1.4 The following scheme outlines the steps that will be taken in order to ensure no animals are harmed as part of the replacement bridge construction.

2.0 Presence of Reptiles

- 2.1 Common species of reptile (adder, grass snake, common lizard and slow worm) are protected against intentional killing and injury under Schedule 5 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended). There is no requirement for a licence where development works affect common species of reptiles. However, where reptiles are present, they must be protected from any harm that might arise during development works through appropriate mitigation.
- 2.2 Several Surveys have been undertaken between 2022 and 2023 and have confirmed the presence of reptiles in the area although within the boundary of the Onllwyn Bridge Application. An average of one animal (common lizard) has been observed during the surveys, despite areas of vegetation being identified as suitable habitat. This has identified the area as having a 'low population'.
- 2.3 On the basis of specialist knowledge and experience working with common species of reptiles, and on the assumption that the Method Statement outlined below is adhered to, it is considered highly unlikely that the proposed works will result in an offence under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended).

3.0 Reptile Mitigation

- 3.1 The 'site' is less than 1 hectare in area and split by the existing Onllwyn Road and Bridge. The area where translocation will take place is identified on Plan 1 attached. It is the intention of GCRE Ltd that the translocation of reptiles will be carried out by suitably qualified and trained experienced ecologists (ECOW).
- 3.2 Three different approaches will be used to ensure that areas can be safely cleared in advance of construction works. These include:
 - Trapping and Translocation
 - Habitat Manipulation and

- Hand search and Destructive search

(Plan 2 attached shows the areas where these different approaches will be used).

3.3 Receptor Area

- 3.4 Once trapped any reptiles will be relocated to the neighbouring area of the Gorsllwyn Meadows SINC. (Receptor Area – See Plan 3). The receptor area has already benefited from early improvement / mitigation enhancement works through the installation of Hibernaculum and Wet areas / Scrapes for future translocation works associated with the wider GCRE scheme.
- 3.5 Due to the low population numbers expected in from the Onllwyn Bridge area and the fact that any reptiles are likely to be part of the same metapopulation then translocating to here is not considered to be detrimental to either population.

3.6 Trapping and Relocation Method (Compartments F1-F4)

Fencing

- 3.7 Semi-permanent reptile fencing will be used as part of reptile mitigation, to create a barrier to prevent reptiles from entering or re-entering areas of the Site that will be impacted by construction activities. The extent of land where trapping will take place is indicated on Plan 2 along with the reptile fencing locations.
- 3.8 The reptile fencing can be installed from February / March, subject to ECoW watching brief and suitable weather conditions.
- 3.9 Perimeter fencing will be installed at a minimum 10m offset from the footprint of planned earthworks, haul routes, and cable diversion routes (offset to allow movement of machinery and personnel, to be determined with contractor input).
- 3.10 A construction auditing process will be in place to check on any reptile fencing installed through the construction period, with the aim of identifying any damage and / or the requirement for fencing repairs.
- 3.11 The exclusion fence will be constructed from UV-stabilised plastic and will have a minimum height above ground of 60 cm with approximately 25 cm buried in the ground.
- 3.12 The fencing will be installed to the manufacturer's specification and will be positioned to allow reptiles to climb out of the trapped area but not climb into it.
- 3.13 These are subject to refinement with Contractor input. The approximate extent of the fence line is shown on Plan 2, any minor variations will be determined by the ECoW in consultation with the Contractor.
- 3.14 Unless required in targeted locations to maintain reptile welfare, the receptor site will not be fenced, to allow reptiles to disperse into the landscape surrounding the Site, whilst they are protected from construction impacts by the construction-phase perimeter fencing.

Artificial Refuges

- 3.15 Artificial refuges will be positioned within the exclusion area as follows:
- Refuges will consist of squares of roofing felt and corrugated metal or roofing sheets measuring approximately 1 m x 0.5 m; and
 - At least 50 refuges per hectare will be used. The exact number of refuges required will be based on the finalised area of land to be subject to the trapping and relocation method. Additional

refuges may be introduced if the ECoW determines they are required.

Capture Programme

- 3.16 The number of days that trapping and relocation of reptiles will be carried out, as is recommended here, and is based on:
- Adopted industry standard guidance (Herpetofauna Groups of Britain and Ireland (1998), Evaluating Local Mitigation / Translocation Programmes: Maintaining Best Practice and Lawful Standards. HGBI Advisory Notes for Amphibian and Reptile Groups (ARGs))
 - Additional consideration of Natural England's Technical Information Note TIN10237 and
 - Professional experience of working with common reptile species and of completing mitigation on similar sites.
- 3.17 Trapping and translocation of reptiles will be completed for a minimum of 30 days. After 30 days initial capture effort in suitable weather conditions, capture will then continue until there are 5 days with no reptile captures or observations, under suitable conditions. Within 1 month of date of the conclusion of the trapping and translocation details of the findings shall be submitted to the Local Planning Authority.
- 3.18 The decision to continue trap and relocation methods will be reviewed if reptiles are still being recorded after 60 days.
- 3.19 The recommendation to conclude reptile trap and relocation methods will be agreed between the LPA's Ecologist and Project Ecologist if reptiles are still being recorded after 60 days. They will consider a range of limiting factors, such as short periods of poor conditions, lulls in activity following longer periods of poor conditions, and possible reptile dispersal within the trapping areas during the trapping period.
- 3.20 Two-weeks after refuges are placed on the Site, capture and relocation of reptiles will commence, with checks completed by a suitably qualified and experienced ECoW. Capture will be undertaken when reptiles are active between April and October, in suitable weather conditions, as follows:
- Site visited between the hours of 07:00 and 18:00;
 - Air temperature between 9°C and 18°C;
 - Little to no wind or precipitation; and
 - Generally, hazy or intermittent sunshine or bright sunshine early in the day.
- 3.21 April, May and June will likely be the key months for capture of reptiles. The summer months are likely to be less successful due to high temperatures. If reptile captures are still taking place during September, the intensity of effort will be increased, to complete reasonable effort before the onset of hibernation.
- 3.22 Reptiles go into hibernation during cold weather, typically during the months of November to February, and the hibernation period could extend beyond or commence in advance of these months depending on the weather conditions. Reptiles are at increased risk of harm if disturbed during hibernation and therefore trapping and translocation, or hand or destructive searches will not be undertaken during this time.
- 3.23 Refuges will be checked on days of suitable weather during the capture period, aided by use of a noose and hand net.
- 3.24 Multiple visits per day may be completed to optimise periods of good weather and high reptile activity. Immediately after capture, reptiles will be placed in a small closable box lined with vegetation

to provide a soft base, for transportation to and release at the nearby receptor site.

- 3.25 The time between capture and release at the receptor site will be minimised, with 4 hours as a maximum time for reptiles to be kept before release.
- 3.26 Care will be taken during transport in especially high or low temperatures and reptiles must not be released in cold weather; captures will be retained overnight by the Project Ecologist and / or ECoW if temperatures fall suddenly.
- 3.27 During the translocation, the species, sex, life stage and capture and release locations will be recorded for all reptiles caught.
- 3.28 Reptiles will be released into the receptor site near suitable cover for them to immediately hide within.

4.0 Maintenance of Exclusion Fencing

- 4.1 To ensure that reptiles are kept out of the exclusion area once the translocation is complete, the semi-permanent reptile exclusion fence will be retained and maintained around the boundary of the site for the construction period. (See Plan 4).
- 4.2 During the translocation period, the reptile exclusion fencing will be checked on any day that trapping occurs. Once the translocation is completed, the reptile exclusion fencing will be checked regularly for any signs of damage by a suitably briefed individual (the ECoW will provide a briefing to any persons responsible for this task).
- 4.3 This will be undertaken weekly throughout construction, and daily where construction works are taking place directly adjacent to the exclusion fence. Any breaks in the fence will be repaired at the earliest opportunity (and within 24 hours of noticing to prevent any reptiles entering the construction footprint. Where practical fencing will be protected using secondary barriers such as Heras Fencing.
- 4.4 The Construction Contractor will ensure that core members of the site team are trained in how to install and repair the reptile exclusion fencing. Materials to complete repairs will be stored on Site to ensure these are available to complete repairs. All damage and repair works will be recorded, and information provided to the Project Ecologist and / or ECoW.
- 4.5 Consideration must be given to protecting the exclusion fence (with Heras or other fencing) to prevent accidental damage from construction vehicles.

5.0 Habitat Manipulation (Reduction) (Compartment H1)

- 5.1 All works will be carried out during suitable conditions (as detailed in Paragraph 3.20 above)
- 5.2 Habitat Reduction Suitable habitat within the capture area will be cleared throughout the capture period to concentrate the reptiles in certain areas, making it easier to achieve successful captures.
- 5.3 The extent and timing of clearance will be determined and supervised by the Project Ecologist and / or ECoW. Following the completion of the capture programme, the remaining vegetation will be hand searched by an ECoW and then strimmed to approximately 15 cm (where habitat allows).
- 5.4 Following the initial cut, any piles of wood, brash and rubble within the working area will be dismantled by hand and immediately removed from the working area. Any reptiles uncovered will be captured by the ECoW and relocated to the closest receptor site.
- 5.5 A hand-search will then be undertaken by the ECoW of the vegetation prior to a second cut to ground level. Any reptiles uncovered will be captured by the ECoW and relocated to the closest receptor site.

6.0 Final Destructive Search (All compartments including D1 – D4)

- 6.1 A final destructive search will be employed after completion of the Habitat Reduction and Trapping and Relocation approaches. However destructive searches will be employed as the only approach in compartments D1, D2, D3 and D4 (See Figure A-6) due to steep topography, vegetation type and / or ground conditions make them unsuitable for any other approach.
- 6.2 The final destructive search and a topsoil strip will be undertaken with the ECoW present to monitor, advise, and search for reptiles before commencing construction activities within the exclusion area.
- 6.3 Destructive works i.e. topsoil stripping and stump grinding within the exclusion area will not be undertaken during the hibernation period as these activities risk harming hibernating reptiles.
- 6.4 The Project Ecologist and / or ECoW will determine when these activities must stop. Any remaining reptiles found during the hand search and destructive search will be captured and released into the nearest receptor site.
- a destructive search will be carried out at least two days following completion of Habitat Manipulation to allow any reptiles sheltering in the soil to relocate to adjacent habitats. Artificial refuges placed at the edges of the working area to provide shelter to displaced reptiles will also be checked and any reptiles will be caught and released into the nearest receptor area;
 - For the trapping and relocation method, a destructive search can be completed immediately following the conclusion of search efforts;
 - During the destructive search process, potential reptile refuges remaining within the working area, such as logs piles, stones, rubble, bricks, etc. will be carefully moved, dismantled and inspected for the presence of reptiles by the ECoW;
 - Following this, an excavator shall be used to carefully remove remaining vegetation, tree stumps, and the top 100-150 mm of topsoil with a toothed bucket. The ECoW will capture any reptiles exposed during this process. Any reptiles recovered will be relocated to the nearest receptor site;
 - The extent of destructive search, precise depth of the bucket to excavate soil, and where spoil will be deposited to check for reptiles will be determined on site by the ECoW;
 - Machinery, such as excavators, will not be tracked over undisturbed ground within the working area until approved by the ECoW.

7.0 Reporting & Monitoring

- 7.1 A short monitoring report will be produced following each year of the monitoring that will detail the results of the monitoring and any management recommendations. These reports will be presented to the relevant local planning authorities.
- 7.2 Monitoring of the Receptor Area will take place as part of the wider site Monitoring and Management with surveys being undertaken to approved methodology in the first, third and fifth year following relocation.
- 7.3 A programme of management for the Receptor area will also be introduced to increase the carrying capacity of the area for reptiles.

8.0 Completion of Works

On completion of the works the exclusion fences will be removed to allow reptiles to return to the newly created habitat where this is suitable.