

Bats in Churches Workshop: summary of responses

The following is a summary based on all the feedback from the table discussions of each of the five questions we asked during the May 2016 workshop. The questions discussed are in bold, followed by the summary of responses and, underlined, a quote or phrase from the feedback forms that captures the overall tenor of the replies.

Q1: With the right support, is it possible for large bat populations to roost in churches without having significant impacts; how?

With the right support e.g. help with costs of appropriate mitigation and on-going cleaning, it is possible for bats to use churches but it depends upon: their number, species, location, behaviour, scale of activity.

It is not possible in buildings that are actively used by the community for a wide range of purposes, including serving food and drink, where bats leave debris, mess and damage fabric. The presence of bats can also scare people. Bats also have a significant impact when buildings need repairs, both in terms of timing and cost of works, even if they are not a problem in the main body of the church.

There are some solutions but more research is needed into different levels of intervention. The cost, especially if the methods don't work, is prohibitive and it is very hard to get permission to make modifications (because of both bat and building protection regimes). Early surveys to understand the wider landscape issues are essential before bespoke solutions are designed for specific situations.

The key to getting the right support is good communication. Case studies and best practice on the web, advice from qualified experts, joined up thinking between all those involved and positive relationships between churches and local bat groups.

The answer to this has to be 'yes' because it's too hopeless to say 'no'.

Q2: Where large numbers of bats are present, are worship and/or other community activities being disrupted? If so, how?

Worship, community activities, weddings and funerals, basic hospitality, work with children, welcoming visitors are all very difficult or impossible where bats are present. They put a huge strain on the congregation because of the need to find volunteers and/or pay for professionals to clean, monitor, remove fouled coverings and deal with damaged historic fabric. This has a major impact on morale and is a physical strain, especially in buildings without water supplies or electricity.

Bats can limit the range of activities that can be offered and restrict the use of the building by the wider community because of the smell, concern about hygiene, unwillingness to serve food and drink in such an environment and fear of risk to health.

Our organ is unplayable. The Rector had to comb droppings out of her hair

Q3: Where large numbers of bats are present in churches, are the content and fabric of these buildings being damaged? If so, how?

It doesn't take a large bat population to cause damage. Major areas of concern include entry points, roof voids and irreparable impacts on wall plaster and paintings, tombs, memorials, floor tiles, brasses, organs, woodwork, seating, carpets, fabrics including hangings and altar linen. There are also problems in timing and funding essential repairs.

Our grade I mediaeval building is irreplaceable but bats can breed

Q4: Are there enough professionals and/or volunteers with the right knowledge to help manage the impact of bats in churches? If not, what could be done to address this?

Professional ecologists are in demand and good ones are expensive. There are issues about the cost of surveys and on-going advice. Bat volunteers are not always available, don't all keep up to date with research and often don't understand how church buildings are used, funded or managed. More training is required so ecologists and volunteers are sensitive and skilled enough to be flexible about what they propose and understand that works in churches take a long time to specify and get authorised, during which process the bat issues might change.

Advice given by bat volunteers is passed up through a long chain (BCT, NE, contractors) and the advice they give on site isn't always the advice that is formally issued. There are frustrations for both parties because of this - better communication is essential.

Dioceses where there are bats should have bat advisors (as in Chelmsford) and should arrange training at local level for both congregations and bat volunteers to improve communication and understanding.

Church Architects are not asked about their knowledge of bat behaviour and legislation when appointed to do Quinquennial Inspections or specify works. They need more training so they can plan projects at appropriate times of the year and schedule with time for necessary engagement with ecologists and bat volunteers. This would greatly reduce the tension between all parties.

There is a lack of understanding about licensing; much clearer information is needed.

More awareness of the Helpline. Case studies and a web portal. Training and Communication

Q5 What next?

There was unanimous support for the proposed partnership project and encouragement for a re-submission to HLF. The key areas of feedback were:

A. The project

1. Value of a national project

- A national approach is needed to avoid inconsistencies in how things are handled in different parts of the country.
- The project should pull together basic data about bats, ecologist and volunteers: numbers, location, contact details alongside information about what is happening in different places.
- The project mustn't just focus on bat well-being but heritage and people too.
- Sort out the worst problems first.

2. Funding of the project

- Why only the HLF? More money should come from Government.
- This is an expensive long term project; are there options to develop on a community/regional basis?

3. Dissemination

- The project needs to train bat volunteers, architects, builders and other professional bodies not only in the current legislation but also the outcome of research to ensure the dissemination goes on after the project funding ends.
- The information from the conference needs to be shared as widely as possible

4. Importance of the partnership

- Partnership approach impressive and essential but needs to consider other professional links too.
- Vital that there are good links between national bodies and local groups.
- Consider even wider issues e.g. infrastructure around churches and planning issues e.g. barn conversions and habitat change.
- Training of local authority staff, NE, HE and other partner agencies is vital.

B. Other things to consider building into the project or developing separately

1. Dioceses and DACs

- All DACs should have an ecology adviser but all members should be trained so they understand issues and options.
- Where morale is low it is hard to convince people that mitigation is possible so early support and education is necessary to give them confidence to try.
- Mentoring and twinning should be encouraged so churches with similar problems or previous experience can help one another.

2. Churches in their communities

- The interest of church buildings as historic and antiquarian places needs to be promoted e.g. church trails.
- Get non-church goers interested and engage them as they may have skills or interests or be willing to learn.
- Contact local bat groups and help them to understand how the building is used and the really vulnerable areas

3. Providing resources to help churches

- Develop a pack of resources to give to churches as soon as they realise they have bats. This should give all the information needed e.g. health, monitoring, how to clean the building using materials that are safe for the fabric, the people and the bats.
- Provide a simple crib-sheet for people who know nothing about bats and a flow chart to explain where to go when.
- Provide more publicity for the help that's available e.g. the helpline and how to contact local bat groups
- Best practice, case studies, advice need to be on the internet and the websites need to be interlinked.

4. Improving the relationship between bat groups and churches

- BCT and bat groups need to understand church buildings and their use.
- Churches need to feel that bat volunteers and ecologists are sympathetic to their concerns, not totally bat-focused.
- Who should churches contact if they have a problem?
- More public experience of bats, in hand, cameras, and detectors is needed to break down barriers.

5. Legislation and levels of protection

- Do all species need equal levels of protection; is a more proportionate approach needed?
- What level of impact on the bat population does NE feel it must defend?
- Defra requires dead bats to be submitted but there is never any feedback. Churches need that so they know about health and disease issues.
- What are Class Licences? Much more explanation is needed, quickly.
- Class licences where only some people are allowed to apply may be illegal; the point of a licence is the content not the applicant.
- Can't the existing licence system be used more pragmatically rather than inventing a new one?

6. More research

- Health issues are still a concern; there needs to be research into the droppings and urine.
- What do bat boxes need to be like to make them more attractive than churches?
- Are bat boxes effective in the longer term?
- Do free-standing bat boxes work?
- More follow-up of bat surveys and monitoring of research sites so we know what works.

7. Volunteers

- More training for volunteers especially Bat Roost Visitors.
- More quality control over the advice volunteers offer.
- More volunteers are needed to increase numbers and national distribution of properly trained people.
- Volunteers need professional management to encourage and keep up standards.

Surprised that people don't know about the helpline or where the bat groups are.
What is going on in churches other than church services?