

**From:** Bat Groups  
**Sent:** 03 March 2021 11:28  
**Cc:** Steve Lucas; claudia gebhardt  
**Subject:** Special Edition Bat Group Bulletin: Update on National Bat Helpline & Handling of Bat Care Related Calls Summer 2021

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**This email has been sent to bat group contacts only.**  
**Please forward this information to others in your group.**  
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Dear bat group member,

Thank you to all of you who have responded to [our appeals](#) (and [crowdfunding](#)) to support the work of the National Bat Helpline, we are very grateful for your continued support. Even with the generous help of bat groups to our appeals for the Helpline, we are aware we have a wider funding gap to address, and we need to ensure that the service we provide is sustainable in the long term. The financial situation continues to be challenging for us (as it is for many people and organisations).

This update is to share our thinking about how we will have to change the way the Helpline operates, specifically around the handling of bat care related enquiries. Building on the success of the Out of Hours service (which has been running every year since it was first piloted in 2004), we will be making greater use of volunteers on the Helpline this summer. We will also be running a consultation exercise with bat carers and bat groups about the way we handle bat care calls in future years.

**The National Bat Helpline**

BCT has taken calls from those who were interested in, concerned about, or have encountered bats since our beginning in the 1990s. Initially calls were answered by staff as part of wider duties but as the awareness of BCT’s work increased so did the call volumes and today we have seven permanent Helpline staff who are supported in the busy summer seasonal by temporary staff and, out of hours, by volunteers (with back-up staff support).

Our incoming enquiries can be broadly split into the following categories:

- Natural England casework
- Bat care
- Other (including crime and disease risk management)

Enquiries (including those relating to bat care) reach the Helpline via the phone, through emails, an online submission form on our website, and occasionally in the post.

Whilst the Natural England casework is delivered under a paid contract, the scope of this service (and the associated funding) has reduced in recent years. The most recent contract renewal in 2019 has also required the successful contractor to assist in income generation for the service. That same year, the Defra contract for rabies disease risk management work was not renewed, although the Animal & Plant Health Agency continue to contract BCT for promotion and support of the rabies passive surveillance programme.

To meet the increasing demand and financial challenges that we face, the Helpline needs to make long term and sustainable expenditure reductions across all work areas. We have made significant plans to achieve this, including improving processes, call direction, and online resources, but the main obstacle now is the future for handling bat care related enquiries, an unfunded but very important area of our work, which uses a significant proportion of

Helpline resources (we estimate these enquiries take over 1000 hours of staff time in an average year). Beyond appeals it has proven difficult to find funders to support this area of BCT work.

### **The Approach for 2021/22**

We have been undertaking an internal review of how we currently handle bat care related enquiries, with the aim of saving costs related to running the Helpline. Specifically, we have been exploring what the alternatives are to BCT dealing with bat care enquiries as we do now via the Helpline, recognising the benefits of this work, including important education opportunities. Work is underway at BCT looking at non-staff related costs, but the only way we can significantly reduce costs on the Helpline is to reduce staff time. Therefore, our focus has been to reduce workload to reduce expenditure on Helpline salaries (through some voluntary reduction in staff hours and by recruiting fewer seasonal staff this summer).

The alternatives to BCT staff dealing with bat care enquiries as we do now can be broadly grouped into four approaches:

1. Volunteer call handlers along the lines of the current out of hours service.
2. Regional/bat groups helplines take bat care calls instead of the BCT Helpline.
3. Public details get passed direct to carers via an online system.
4. Carer numbers made available direct to the public via an online system.

Options 2. to 4. would require consultation with bat groups and bat carers, capacity within bat groups, and appropriate technology to be in place. We plan to run a consultation this year to get your thoughts and input on these options. More details about this will follow over the coming months.

As an interim solution, we are working to implement option 1. by having an in-office hours volunteer service (IOH) to handle bat care calls, as an expansion of the existing out of hours service (OOH). Once this service is in place, we will undertake the necessary consultation and planning exercises to explore the other options for future years.

It is worth noting that we may end up continuing with option 1. if this year is successful, but equally we may move to one of the other options, depending on the results of the consultation and our experiences this summer. Whatever the final position, we need to have the Helpline working on a model that is financially sustainable.

### **In-Office Hours Project**

Our approach for this project is as follows:

- Recruit and train volunteers alongside the Out of Hours project – volunteers can take daytime &/or evening 'shifts' (we will be starting volunteer recruitment this week)
- Trained OOH & IOH volunteers take bat care calls, using an online system to record and submit records. Any cases that need escalating for roost related advice will be transferred to Helpline staff to takeover. During OOH (but not IOH), volunteers will give initial crime advice, as they usually would for this project.
- BCT staff will provide back-up support for volunteers on each shift.
- A volunteer management system will be used to efficiently manage the recruitment, shift assignment, updates, and rota.
- We intend to launch both OOH & IOH on Monday 17<sup>th</sup> May to allow adequate preparation time. We will run until at least mid-September but may continue IOH onward depending on the costs vs benefits – this will be decided later in the year.
- For a full year, there will be 1211 'shifts' for volunteers to cover, taking 8000+ calls. We anticipate a pool of at least 150 volunteers will be required for a full year (without beginning recruitment for the OOH this year, we already have over 50 people interested), but plan to recruit 100 in our initial recruitment drive this month, with another planned for autumn, should we continue IOH into winter.
- Five remote training sessions are planned for April & May.
- IOH project will be coordinated by Ele Johnstone, Senior Bat Advisor, alongside her existing coordination of the OOH project, due to the significant overlap between the two.

We will be in contact again over the coming months with details of the bat care calls consultation exercise. In the meantime, please do look at the details for the IOH/OOH volunteer recruitment when these are shared.

Thank you again for your ongoing support.

A PDF version of this special edition bulletin will be available shortly on the BCT website at: <https://www.bats.org.uk/resources/resources-for-bat-groups/special-edition-bat-group-bulletins>

Best regards,  
Lisa

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