

# Bat Advice Service contract summary

## Background

The main purpose of the Bat Advice Service is to protect bats by reassuring people affected by them, and to advise on timing and methods for proposed minor repair and building maintenance works (such as timber treatment, replacement of missing roof slates/tiles) where a bat roost is present.

Natural England's Bat Advice Service has been contracted out, in various forms since 2004 and the Bat Conservation Trust (BCT) have covered various regions in this time. Since 1 January 2013 BCT has been the sole national contractor for Natural England's Bat Advice Service.

## Who does what in the Bat Advice Service?

### Natural England

Natural England is responsible for providing specialist advice on bats to householders and others, like places of worship. This is in support of Natural England's statutory obligations under the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981 (as amended) and the Conservation of Habitats & Species Regulations 2017 (as amended).

Natural England's wildlife advisers are responsible for providing non-standard advice on complex cases.

Volunteer Bat Roost Visitors (VBRVs) volunteer on behalf of Natural England, who are responsible for their registration and licensing, and for providing:

- Induction
- Health & safety / welfare guidance and training
- Approval and payment of expenses
- Appropriate Personal Protective Equipment and safety equipment
- General support.

All volunteer related enquiries should therefore be made to Natural England via [batvolunteers@naturalengland.org.uk](mailto:batvolunteers@naturalengland.org.uk).

### The Bat Conservation Trust

Natural England has a contract with BCT who deliver the Bat Advice Service on Natural England's behalf. This advice is provided through the National Bat Helpline and through visits arranged by BCT and carried out by the network of VBRVs. BCT staff issue advice letters and emails to householders, places of worship, etc. following roost visits, subject to approval, where required, by Natural England.

## Volunteer Bat Roost Visitors

VBRVs are Natural England's most skilled and specialist volunteers. They carry out roost visits on behalf of Natural England, at the request of BCT. As Natural England volunteers they are required to carry out the VBRV role according to the expectations set out in the Natural England Volunteering Promise and to comply with the terms and conditions of the VBRV Class Licences.

VBRVs provide information and reassurance to roost owners and provide information and propose recommendations about the bat roost to BCT by completing and promptly submitting a Roost Report Form. This information enables BCT and Natural England to provide the roost owner with the correct and timely advice. VBRVs do not provide formal advice to the roost owner although they may discuss their proposed recommendations with the roost owner, making clear that the formal advice comes from Natural England via BCT and may sometimes differ slightly from the VBRV's initial recommendations.

## The role of Helpline staff

The National Bat Helpline operates Monday-Friday 9.30am - 4.30pm (excluding public holidays) when calls are dealt with by paid BCT staff. During the peak season it also operates at evenings, weekends and public holidays (6pm – 10pm on weekdays and 10am – 10pm on weekends and bank holidays). During these out-of-hours periods, calls are answered by BCT volunteers and the line is for emergency calls (i.e. grounded bats and bat crime) only.

The Helpline can be contacted on 0345 1300 228 or via [enquiries@bats.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@bats.org.uk).

Helpline staff assess cases on an individual basis. They use their experience and discretion to determine whether a VBRV visit is required:

### Roost visit required

Helpline staff select and contact the most appropriate VBRV according to the location, specific circumstances and volunteer experience. They always inform the caller that roost visits are carried out by experienced volunteers not paid staff and that this is reflected in the availability of VBRVs. See below for details of the roost visit process.

### Roost visit not required

Helpline staff will provide verbal advice and/or direct the caller to other sources of information. In some situations a generic advice letter, email or leaflet may be sent e.g. for bats in living areas, rodent control, loft insulation and non-chemical cluster fly control. Callers outside of England will be directed to the appropriate statutory nature conservation organisation

## Activities requiring a European Protected Species (EPS) licence

Helpline staff may judge that proposed activities are likely to result in offences being committed and may therefore require an EPS licence. They then direct the caller to engage an ecological consultant (with bat experience) to commission further survey work and to consider the need for a licence.

## Complex cases

Some proposals - even those not requiring an EPS licence - are beyond the remit of the advice service. In such situations the advisor directs the caller to engage an ecological consultant. If, during the course of an initial visit, a VBRV determines that the proposed work is too complex or require multiple surveys which would be beyond the volunteer remit, they should inform BCT who can direct the enquirer to an ecological consultant.

## What's in the contract?

### Domestic properties

Covered by advice service:

- Issues/nuisance caused by bats, e.g. smell, noise.
- Person(s) with health concerns, or who are stressed or frightened by bat presence.
- Pest control in the vicinity of a roost.<sup>1</sup>
- Minor repair and maintenance works to an existing structure. Including repairing small areas of damage to a roof, and chimney repair.
- Multiple bats in a living area.
- Grounded bats where it is reasonably anticipated a roost is present and is about to be or has been disturbed, or baby bats found requiring return to roost.<sup>2</sup>
- Requests to exclude/remove bats.
- Planned or imminent building maintenance works not requiring planning permission or other controls, where timing of the works may cause disturbance to bats and where it is thought a visit could persuade the householder to stop works and time any disturbing activity to when bats are absent. This includes those requiring Listed Building Consent, if the listed building has a known roost.
- Planned or imminent building maintenance works not requiring planning permission or other controls to small sheds and garages where these are on the dwelling premises and not used for commercial purposes.
- An initial visit may be organised for more complex works, such as full re-roof, in emergency cases where there is an immediate risk to bat welfare, for example where bats have been accidentally disturbed during works.

<sup>1</sup> For rodent control, an advice leaflet may be issued without a visit subject to the most restrictive timings for works (Spring/Autumn timings only). For cluster flies, a non-chemical advice leaflet may be issued.

<sup>2</sup> Returning a bat directly to its roost requires the expertise of someone with bat handling experience, knowledge of bats and their roosts, and have an up to date rabies vaccination. They should also have a licence if going into a bat roost or placing ladders next to a bat access point or similar which may potentially disturb bats in the roost or as they exit the roost during the vulnerable maternity season. For these reasons Natural England would not advise that roost owners or anyone without a licence be asked to attempt to put pups back in a roost. This should be done by an experienced VBRV.

Not covered by advice service:

- Large multi-occupancy buildings.
- Outbuildings, barns (unless already converted to a residence) etc. including all those used for commercial purposes.
- Works involving planning permission.
- Where complex works or those requiring lengthy surveying or potentially requiring a European protected species (EPS) licence are planned.
- Presence/absence survey for listed building consent.
- Loft conversions or extensions, even if these do not require planning permission e.g. porches.
- Conversion of uninhabited buildings into dwellings.
- Complex works.
- Education or PR, e.g. visits to identify species / extent of roost where there are no works planned or no issues.
- Domestic premises used for business purposes.
- Welfare / bat care cases except those found in course of building works.

## Places of worship

Covered by advice service:

- Nuisance situations inside the place of worship:
  - problems with droppings and urine
  - damage to furniture, fittings or artefacts
  - noise
  - phobias
  - health and safety concerns
  - where bats are repeatedly accessing the building during services
- Minor roofing works, flashing repairs and other minor repairs (including those requiring listed building consent) where disturbance can be avoided through timing of works and where continuing ecological function is maintained.
- Some complex works (e.g. reroofing one section of a church, major repointing, pest control and emergency cases where there is an immediate risk to bat welfare, for example where bats have been accidentally disturbed during works), including those requiring listed building consent, may receive an initial VBRV roost visit to assess the situation only. The additional professional ecological advice necessary for complex works is not included in the advice contract and must be obtained from an ecological consultant (see 'not covered' list.). Such visits are to be arranged at the discretion of BCT where there is obvious benefit in doing so.

Not covered by advice service:

- Additional advice required for complex works after an initial roost visit by a VBRV to assess the situation (e.g. reroofing one section of a church, major repointing; works likely to exceed our timings). These complex works are considered to be outside of remit of the Bat Advice Service because they are likely to require additional professional ecological advice (for instance, lengthy and/or complex surveying programme; supervision of works, or an EPS licence application). This advice must be obtained from an ecological consultant.
- Some complex works (e.g. re-roofing multiple sections of the church, extensions and demolitions) will not qualify for an initial visit. This advice must be obtained from an ecological consultant.
- Education or PR, e.g. visits to identify species/extent of roost where no works are planned or issues.
- Requests to exclude bats (outside remit as non-dwelling building) or significantly alter the roost. Initial visit permitted to help resolve issues but an ecological consultant is required to take matters further.
- Complex lighting changes and where it is possible that lighting could impact upon the bats; an initial visit may be permitted to assess whether lighting is likely to impact upon the roost.
- Places of worship sold for redevelopment or former places of worship which are no-longer used for this purpose.

## Other public buildings, e.g. schools, hospitals<sup>3</sup>

Covered by advice service:

- Nuisance situations: droppings, urine or bats in public areas e.g. classrooms and hospital wards.

Not covered by advice service:

- Building maintenance/works.
- Pest control.
- Bats in non-public areas, e.g. offices, circulation and plant (boiler/electrical/mechanical) rooms, unless there is an immediate danger to the bats.

## Trees<sup>3</sup>

Covered by advice service:

- Initial assessment of bat potential for trees in domestic gardens and within the curtilage of places of worship.

Not covered by advice service:

- Detailed investigation of roosting features.
- Trees in non-domestic gardens.
- Cases where additional professional ecological advice will be required (for instance, lengthy and/or complex surveying programme; supervision of works, or an EPS licence application).

<sup>3</sup> Visits to other public buildings and trees are considered a lower priority for the service and can only be arranged subject to volunteer availability and in more restrictive situations. These cases will more likely to be dealt with through a call and signposting.

# Police accompanied roost visits

Police forces may occasionally contact the Helpline to request the presence of a licensed bat worker in order to help investigate alleged bat crimes. Although not officially in the remit, Natural England has agreed that VBRVs can carry out these visits under Natural England's self-insurance, if the Helpline alerts the relevant volunteer support advisor at NE first.

VBRVs should:

- Only attend if they are happy to provide information to the police at a possible bat crime site.
- Be aware that cases may go as far as a prosecution and they could be asked to provide a statement detailing what they have seen and recorded at the site and the conclusions they came to from that visit.

It is possible that in some cases, a case could go to court and the VBRV could be asked to give their evidence, so they should be prepared to do this if required.

## Roost visit process

The following is an overview of the roost visit process:

### **1 BCT contacts VBRV to request a visit.**

BCT provide details of the case to VBRV, including any health & safety risks/issues identified in the conversation with roost owner. BCT will flag urgent enquiries and potential exclusions to the VBRV.

(If VBRV wishes to undertake a visit which has been arranged via another source, e.g. householder, etc. contacting a local bat group, they must contact BCT first to obtain a reference number for the visit – without this the visit is not covered by Natural England's self-insurance).

### **2 VBRV arranges a convenient time for the visit with the householder, etc.**

This should be within a couple of days of the initial request, even if the visit date is some time in the future.

### **3 VBRV undertakes roost visit.**

Ideally this will be within a week of the initial request. BCT will flag urgent enquiries to the VBRV.

### **4 Roost report form returned to BCT.**

Following the visit, the VBRV should complete and return the most up to date version of the roost report form to BCT (via [roostreports@bats.org.uk](mailto:roostreports@bats.org.uk)) in a timely fashion. Old versions should not be submitted.

## **5 BCT prepares an advice letter or email based on the report.**

BCT aims to turnaround urgent cases within two working days and non-urgent cases within five working days.

## **6 Advice letter checked with Natural England's Wildlife Adviser and VBRV (as required and requested).**

Natural England aims to check letters within five working days. It is helpful when VBRVs complete their letter checks as quickly as possible and within two working days. If no response is received from the VBRV within this time BCT may have to send the letter without waiting for comments so as to avoid delaying the advice to the roost owner.

## **7 BCT sends the letter to the householder, etc.**

Preferably sent by email (if available); otherwise by post with most urgent cases sent first class.

## **Exclusions**

Potential exclusions or requests for exclusions will be flagged with the VBRV when a visit is allocated by a member of Helpline staff. Where exclusion of bats is proposed, all other options should first be considered. The process outlined in the VBRV Guidance note 'Exclusions – process overview' should be referred to in these cases.

## **Not covered by the advice service**

The Helpline can only provide advice in circumstances covered by the contract as outlined above but does also receive calls about issues which should not receive a roost visit. Churches especially often present situations which fall outside the remit of the contract because of their size and complexity, and the scale of proposed works.

When calls are received about such issues, Helpline staff direct the caller to other information sources including ecological consultant directories and local bat groups.

Many VBRVs are also members of local bat groups and/or are ecological consultants, so may be involved in responding to these issues. However this is not in their capacity as a Natural England VBRV and the VBRV licence does not cover them. The VBRV licence covers only the VBRV, solely for official activities (i.e. roost visits) undertaken under the Bat Advice Service.

## **I still have questions**

If you are a VBRV and would like more information about any aspect of the contract or your role within it, please contact Natural England (**not** BCT) via:

[batvolunteers@naturalengland.org.uk](mailto:batvolunteers@naturalengland.org.uk)