

Bats and Churches

There are 17 species of bats in the UK, of which 13 have been recorded within the Dioceses. Many species have declined significantly, and some are now critically endangered. Reasons for their decline include reduction of their insect food and foraging habitats through urbanization and changes in agriculture, and loss of roosts for breeding and hibernation. Almost all of the UK species have been found roosting in buildings, where some of our activities may cause problems for them.

Churches often provide an ideal habitat for bats, with little disturbance. There are many gaps and crevices in timber and stone work that can be used for roosting, with variations in temperature allowing bats to be present in the church all year round, using suitable warm spaces for breeding in summer, and cold (but not freezing) sites for hibernation. Many churches provide roosts for two or more species.

Bat species discovered in local churches:

- Common Pipistrelle
- Soprano Pipistrelle
- Brown Long-eared
- Whiskered
- Natterer's
- Daubenton's
- (LRBG, 2006 data)



Bats and the Law

Bats and their roosts are protected by law, which means it is illegal to disturb, kill or injure them, or to damage, destroy or obstruct access to a bat roost, whether intentionally or recklessly. As bats tend to return regularly to favoured roosts, it is important to remember that roosts are protected whether the bats are present or not.

The presence of bats does not mean that operations such as building work, roofing and other repairs, floodlighting or timber treatment cannot take place, but Natural England should be consulted, before work starts, to obtain advice. This will ensure that bat conservation and church maintenance move forward hand in hand to provide the desired outcome for both, since well-maintained churches are essential to bat conservation as well as of benefit to the whole community.

Other concerns arising from the presence of bats can also be addressed through consultation and discussion with Natural England.

How the consultation process works

As soon as any work is planned, Natural England should be contacted by a representative of the church (for instance Church warden, architect, vicar or Parochial Church Council). To ensure sufficient time for surveys and provision of advice, it is important that church representatives contact Natural England as early as possible. Waiting until quotations have been finalised and a faculty has been granted could result in delays, with implications for financing and timing of the work.

In order to determine how bats use the church, what species are present, and how the proposed work may affect them, Natural England will arrange an initial survey by a trained volunteer bat roost visitor (BRV). Assessment of bat access and roost sites in a church, together with the impact of any proposals, may involve several visits. Depending on the type of work being proposed, an emergence survey (usually at dusk, but possibly also at dawn) may be needed to discover how bats leave and enter the church.

Surveys from October to April are likely to be inconclusive, as bats are hibernating or inactive during that period, so Natural England may request additional survey work in spring or summer. Following their visit, the BRV will send a roost report to Natural England, making recommendations, such as the method and timing of work to avoid harm to bats. Natural England's advice, based on these recommendations, will seek to safeguard bats and their roosts. Natural England will always work with the PCC to provide timely advice wherever possible.

Work should not begin until Natural England's advice has been received, and all parties are satisfied it can be implemented. It is very important that this advice is followed closely, including contacting the BRV before work begins, since failure to do so could result in the work being unlawful.

There are several trained volunteer bat roost visitors in the Dioceses who are usually able to carry out initial surveys of churches, and Natural England offer this service to PCCs without charge. However, limitations on availability of BRVs, and the time of year, mean that the full survey and provision of advice could take some time. If for any reason the voluntary survey system is deemed inappropriate, Natural England may recommend that the PCC employs an ecological consultant.

Bats need churches

In our modern world, where many lofts are being converted, wooden soffits and fascias replaced with plastic, and agricultural buildings are being lost, churches are a sanctuary for bats, which may have used particular churches for hundreds of years. Natural England is keen to work with PCCs to provide advice and guidance, while Bat Groups can provide records and survey data. The value of the volunteers' time (as well as that of Natural England) may be accepted as a contribution to match funding in grant applications.

Further information

1. Natural England

A booklet called 'Focus on Bats' can be downloaded from www.naturalengland.org.uk

a) Coventry Diocese

5 St Philip's Place, Colmore Row, Birmingham, B3 2PW Tel. 0121 352 5050

b) Leicester Diocese

The Maltings, Wharf Road, Grantham, Lincs, NG31 6BH. Tel. 01476 584800.

2. Leicestershire and Rutland Bat Group

c/o Brock's Hill Visitor Centre, Washbrook Lane, Oadby, Leicester, LE2 5JJ.
Tel. 0116 2720444.

3. The Bat Conservation Trust

Their website www.bats.org.uk is a good source of information concerning bats.