

Press release: Bats and churches to benefit thanks to National Lottery

The Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) has approved the development stage and initial funding of £3.8million for the 5 year “Bats in Churches” partnership project, bringing together wildlife and heritage conservation and church organisations to save bats and protect churches.

The ground-breaking project will:

- trial and perfect new techniques to enable bats and church congregations to live together
- build up professional expertise and volunteer skill to share the best solutions with hundreds more churches
- bring together church communities and bat enthusiasts to create a shared understanding and appreciation of England’s historic places of worship and our rare flying mammals

Natural England’s Chairman, Andrew Sells, said:

This is a splendid result for both congregations and bats, who have shared churches for centuries but not always happily. We’ve been working very hard for a number of years with our partners to find ways to help bats and people coexist peacefully in these beautiful, historic buildings. This funding will allow us to capitalise on that good work and find innovative new ways of resolving the conflict. It will provide a lasting legacy for these wonderful churches and the people and bats that rely on them.

The project will provide help and support to places of worship across England where large bat populations can sometimes have a negative impact on historic buildings and the communities who use them.

HLF’s CEO, Ros Kerslake, said:

We welcome this unprecedented co-operation between church leaders and bat conservationists. It’s a positive move forward and should provide a practical solution to what has become a national problem.

Bats in Churches’ is being made possible thanks to National Lottery players’ money. The legacy of our £3.8m investment will be a major step change in how this issue is approached in the future. Local communities who work hard to look after and use their churches, precious bat populations and historic church buildings are all set to benefit. The most immediate outcome is developing proposals for 100 churches in England to put in place solutions to protect

resident bat populations whilst preventing further damage to the buildings.

The UK has internationally important populations of bats, which are at risk, because of decreases in woodland where some species hunt for insects, conversion of barns, loss of natural roosting sites and changes in farming practices. Due to significant historical declines in bat populations in the UK, all bats have been protected under British law since 1981. Churches can be important sanctuaries for bats for maternity roosts and hibernation.

Whilst small bat populations can occupy parts of a church without disturbance, in other cases bats can pose severe financial and social problems for congregations. At a time when churches are increasingly becoming community hubs with a diversity of events and uses, bat droppings can restrict activities, damage historic artefacts, cause hygiene issues and put strain on the volunteers who look after these beautiful buildings. In rare cases large bat roosts have even caused churches to close.

Rt Hon Sir Tony Baldry, Chair of the Church Buildings Council, said:

This grant should help us better manage bats in churches. We are not opposed to bats, they are intriguing creatures and part of God's creation, but they can do enormous damage in churches. I am delighted that this innovative project can now go ahead.

The partnership includes Natural England, Church of England, Bat Conservation Trust, Historic England and the Churches Conservation Trust.

Julia Hanmer, Joint Chief Executive of the Bat Conservation Trust said:

Bats have suffered massive population declines and churches provide important safe spaces for nine species to shelter. We are delighted that with this funding from HLF, church communities and bat workers can together play a significant role in supporting these vulnerable and fascinating species, whilst at the same time protecting historic medieval church buildings and opening church doors to wider communities.

Deborah Lamb, Deputy Chief Executive of Historic England said:

We welcome every opportunity to help congregations that work hard to care for church buildings, providing public space for community activity and a wonderful treasury of historic monuments, brasses, woodwork and craftsmanship. This project will offer practical help to those coping with the additional challenge of living with bats and encourage volunteers who are interested in bats to discover more about local churches.

Crispin Truman OBE, Chief Executive of the Churches Conservation Trust said:

Our national collection of 350 churches is home not only to great architecture, history and exquisite medieval art, but also to important natural resources including precious species of bats. The relationship between the two has not always been harmonious so we are delighted this project which celebrates both, has been awarded funding from the Heritage Lottery. It will enable us to better protect churches and their inhabitants, as well as supporting the communities who care for historic churches so that both can thrive.