

Press release: Flying success for Bats in Churches project

A groundbreaking project led by Natural England to help churches that host large bat roosts has been granted £3.8 million of funding by the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF).

This new round of funding will help deliver a five year partnership project, bringing together wildlife, heritage conservation and church organisations to save bats and protect churches for future generations.

The UK's bat population has suffered significant historical decline which is why they are protected by UK law. Loss of natural habitats means some bat species have been forced to find safe havens in buildings including historic churches.

Many church communities live harmoniously with bat roosts. However, in some cases bats are causing irreparable damage to historically significant church monuments and memorials as well as impacting upon the people who use the buildings.

Recently approved techniques and a new licence developed by Natural England to permit necessary work will be used to improve both the natural and historic environment and to support the people who care for them.

The Bats in Churches project will:

- Find practical solutions to enable 102 of the most severely impacted church communities to reduce the impact of bats on the church, without harming them
- Create a new network of fully trained volunteers who can undertake bat surveys and support congregations who have bat roosts at their church
- Train professional ecologists and historic building specialists in new techniques and build knowledge to improve their advice to congregations
- Collect and collate up-to-date data from over 700 churches across England, helping to build a specialist knowledge base of bats and their use of churches
- Strengthen local communities so people value and engage with their local natural and historic built heritage

Natural England is working in partnership with The Church of England, Historic England, Bat Conservation Trust and Churches Conservation Trust to deliver this ambitious and innovative project.

Natural England Chairman, Andrew Sells, said:

England's bat population has suffered historic decline which has forced many to find refuge in some of the nation's historic churches.

The funding announced today will give great impetus to the partnership of heritage, wildlife and church organisations which aims to resolve conflicts. Together these groups are demonstrating astonishing passion and drive in working together to save these wonderful animals and protect cherished churches across the country.

Ros Kerslake, Chief Executive of the Heritage Lottery Fund, said:

Places of worship and nature are both priorities for us, but they don't always coexist harmoniously. Finding ways to solve this problem is beneficial to bats, churches and their congregations and is a really good use of National Lottery players' money.

Kit Stoner, Chief Executive of the Bat Conservation Trust, said:

We are absolutely delighted with the news that HLF will continue to fund the Bats in Churches project. This means we can build on the collaborative and innovative approach we have taken so far in finding sustainable ways to support churches with large bat roosts in a way that will benefit bats and people.

Church and conservation communities can continue to work together to protect historic medieval church buildings, artefacts and bats.

Protecting our natural and historical heritage will create a lasting legacy that will benefit present and future generations.

Deborah Lamb, Deputy Chief Executive at Historic England, said:

Volunteers caring for historic places of worship face a great challenge. When they also have to share the building with bats the situation can be overwhelming.

I am delighted that the Heritage Lottery Fund has agreed to support the Bats in Churches partnership so we can apply the outcome of a decade of research to places that need help. This should make life easier for everyone who uses or loves historic churches that host bats.

Peter Aiers, Chief Executive of the Churches Conservation Trust, said:

I love churches, iconic buildings of England and I love bats, however, humans and bats are not always happy pew fellows!

Many of the CCT's historic churches have co-existed in harmony with bats for a long time. We want that to continue, but we also rely on volunteer support to keep our churches open and used by the community.

Increasingly volunteers find it a struggle to look after a church with large numbers of bats. This project is critical to our understanding of how we can support them and better look after our heritage, and we are delighted that the HLF has decided to back this creative partnership project.

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

Bats are part of God's creation and this project will enable churches to maintain their primary role as Places of Worship whilst ensuring the sustainability of both our historic and natural heritage.

Dame Caroline Spelman, Second Church Estates Commissioner, said:

This ground-breaking partnership project means that at long last churches will be empowered to tackle the issues that have caused tension between churches, communities and bats leading to benefits for all involved'