



Out of Hours Report

2017



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1. Overview

The National Bat Helpline is run by the Bat Conservation Trust (BCT) and receives over 12 000 enquiries (during office hours) each year. A large proportion of these enquiries (56.7% in 2017) relate to bats in need of assistance (grounded, injured, orphaned etc.).

Year round, the Helpline operates 9am-5:30pm Monday to Friday, excluding bank holidays. However, bats can be found at any time of day and during the months of May to September (when bats are most active and likely to get into trouble) the Helpline experiences its highest call numbers. To ensure that emergency advice is available when the Helpline is closed, an Out of Hours (OOH) Helpline operates. This OOH service is manned by volunteers who advise members of the public when bats need rescuing and regarding bat crimes.

In 2017, 38 volunteers participated in the OOH service, answering emergency calls from their homes during evenings, weekends and bank holidays between 1 May and 30 September. Comprehensive training and ongoing support was provided, with a member of Helpline back up staff (BUS) allocated to each voluntary shift for additional support and to take over particular cases. During peak times (June- September), two volunteers covered the Helpline at a time to help manage the increased call volume.

Weekday shifts ran from 5.30pm to 10:30pm, with weekend (and bank holiday) days split into two shifts; the first ran from 9am to 4pm and the second from 4pm to 10:30pm. Volunteers took a break of at least 30 minutes during each of their shifts and covered an average of 7 shifts each over the season.

Overall in 2017, 298 shifts were covered by volunteers totalling an incredible 1933 hours donated, including training.

2. Recruitment

This year's OOH volunteering opportunity was advertised through the BCT website, various BCT email bulletins and via social media. A new poster was developed which was sent to a number of universities for sharing with students via emails and notice boards. Several previous and newly recruited volunteers also shared the adverts with their local network.

Out of the 78 people who expressed an interest in volunteering, 43 signed up to participate in the OOH season. Two people were experienced enough to volunteer without the need to attend a training day, having previously participated in OOH for at least 3 consecutive years, leaving a total of 41 volunteers due to attend a training session. Four people did not turn up on the day(s), which left us with a bank of 40 trained volunteers to begin. One volunteer decided not to go ahead with OOH volunteering, and a further volunteer decided not to continue a few weeks into the summer.

As the training took place across three dates in spring, volunteers had a staggered start to allow sufficient time for the rota to be put together after each training day. Volunteers began on OOH from 1 May, 8 May or 1 June depending on which training session they had attended.

3. Training

Training days were held by the OOH Project Coordinator (Hannah Van Hesteren) and OOH Project Assistant (Hannah Ryan-Leah) in Manchester and London. Each day ran from 10:30am until 4:30pm,

with lunch and travel costs covered by BCT for volunteers. On arrival at the training, volunteers received a detailed OOH Volunteer Manual to take home with them, and access to an online volunteers area which houses further training and resources.

Training days were informal and discussion was encouraged. The day included a presentation as well as interactive learning tools. For example, we scheduled time for exercises which allowed volunteers to try out the technology and role plays to practice what had been learnt in a supportive environment.

The following topics were covered:

- An introduction to BCT and the OOH project
- The OOH volunteer role and responsibilities
- Shifts (how they work)
- Type of calls and how to deal with them
- Bat care & rabies advice
- Bat Crime
- Non-emergency calls
- An introduction to the technology (electronic forms and Google maps)

At the end of the day, volunteers were asked to sign the volunteer agreement, return any expenses forms and provide feedback. Excerpts of our excellent training feedback can be found below;

"Really informative & fun. I don't have much prior knowledge of bats and now I'm really interested. Think both Hannahs worked well as a team & made it really interesting"

"Lovely! Delivered relaxed and fun presentations & despite the long day kept us interested & well looked after"

"Both Hannahs were very informative with all the information provided"

"Tutors were really passionate and very informative! Happy to answer our 1000s of questions, felt very comfortable and I have already learnt loads!"

4. Phones

An online system is used to control the times at which incoming calls are diverted to a volunteer's phone, which is manipulated on a daily basis by Helpline staff. This system diverts calls to a phone of the volunteers' choice and automatically prevents calls from reaching volunteers after 10:30pm. Phone diversions operated as follows:

Week days- Phones were diverted to the volunteer(s) at 5.30pm and then automatically re- diverted to BCT's After Hours system at 10:30pm. This system gives callers the opportunity to leave voicemails for staff to pick up during office hours or advises that they call again at 9am the following morning if it was an emergency.

Weekends- Phones were transferred to morning volunteer(s) at 9am and then transferred to the afternoon volunteer(s) at 4pm on Saturdays, Sundays and bank holiday Mondays. Again, calls were automatically diverted to BCT's After Hours system at 10:30pm every evening until the phones were diverted to either a morning volunteer or the BCT Helpline (depending on day) at 9am the following day.

Typically, on week days, BUS were able to input the relevant volunteer phone number(s) at any point during the working day, ready for the automatic transfer at 5:30pm. On weekends and bank holidays, staff would manipulate the phones remotely via the internet at the exact times these were required.

Auto-attendants

It is important to filter any calls coming through on the Out of Hours Helpline, so volunteers only receive emergency calls relating to injured or grounded bats and bat crimes. Any other calls should be dealt with in office hours by Helpline staff.

During OOH hours, those calling the Helpline heard a message explaining the service. They were then encouraged to either press 1 to leave a message to be picked up in office hours (non-emergency calls) or press 2 or 3 to speak with one of two volunteers. In May when call numbers were low, there was only one volunteer per OOH shift, so callers were only given the options between pressing 1 or 2 depending on their needs.

When pressing 2 or 3, callers would hear audio which re-iterated how the OOH service works and briefly advised how to properly contain a bat. Callers were advised to always handle a bat with gloves, and to visit the BCT website for more information. To help anyone who had a bat in need of assistance, the audio also advised that injured or grounded bats could be taken a local vet or wildlife hospital if callers were unable to reach a volunteer, or if it was at a time when the service was not operating.

Volunteers making calls

Occasionally it was necessary for volunteers to make outgoing calls during their shifts, for example to bat care contacts or their BUS. BCT will reimburse any associated charges to OOH volunteers if an itemised bill is submitted.

5. Technology

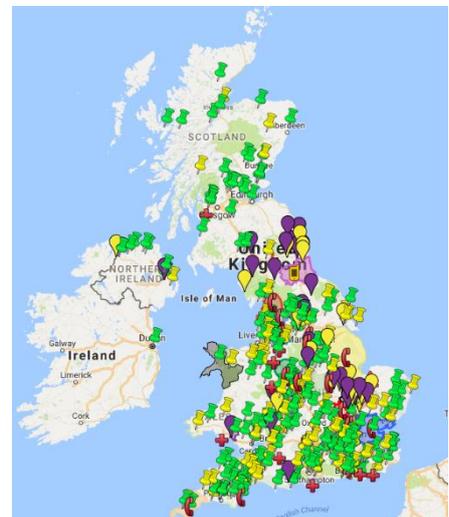
Online Volunteer Area

New in 2017, OOH volunteers were given unique accounts with access to an online volunteers' area. This housed additional training resources, the rota, a news area, important contact details and most importantly the electronic forms.

As it is vital that accurate records are kept for each call we take on the Helpline, volunteers were encouraged to record call details on an electronic form. This detailed form prompted volunteers to record the required information and allowed volunteers to flag any particular follow up that would be required from Helpline staff. Details from electronic forms were then automatically imported to the Helpline's database at 9am every working day. Feedback suggests this form has worked better than in previous years, however there are improvements to be made. Due to changes to the current host of this website, we will also be required to move the online area which also allows for various improvements to be made.

Google Maps

In order to access the contact details of relevant bat care contacts, OOH volunteers were given access to an interactive Google Map which hosts the information. Volunteers were able to compare the location of callers with local contacts and access relevant information about each contact. This map is updated at the end of every working day by Helpline staff.



An example of the Bat Care Network Google Map used by volunteers. Each pin represents a different care contact.

6. Volunteer support

BCT appreciate and highly value OOH volunteers and aimed to encourage an environment of support and volunteer empowerment throughout the season. Alongside the training day, volunteers were offered ongoing support and training throughout the season.

The OOH Project Coordinator and Project Assistant were available for support during office hours throughout the entire season. Each OOH shift also had an OOH BUS allocated for support on the day. Volunteers often contacted OOH BUS for reassurance, to check advice, for guidance with any technology issues or for any other forms of OOH support that were required.

Volunteers also received regular updates from the OOH Project Coordinator throughout the season which included feedback, reminders, updates to any advice and a reminder of shifts. During national Volunteers' Week (1-7 June 2017), volunteers received a daily message of thanks from appreciative Helpline staff as well as social media shout-outs. Volunteers were also sent a weekly OOH Newsletter (OOH News) which included fun and interesting OOH related bat care stories, encouragement and thanks from the BCT Staff. Volunteers given the option to unsubscribe from OOH News.

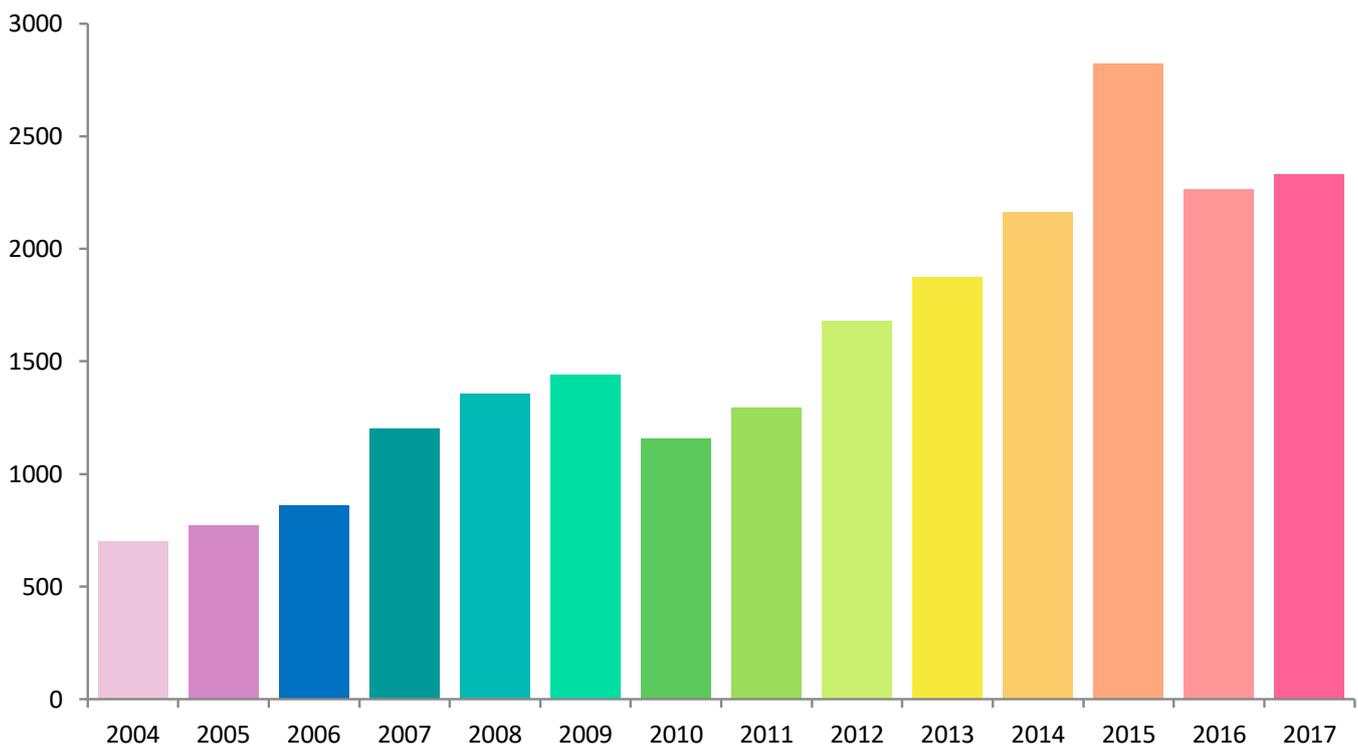
According to feedback, the supportive environment was valued by volunteers and is also evidenced by the 95% volunteer retention throughout the season.

7. Calls taken

Total number of calls

Volunteers handled a huge 2334 calls in 2017, making it the second busiest season since OOH began in 2004, as seen below. There appears to have been a general upward trend in call volumes since the beginning. Perhaps weather, an increased awareness of the OOH service (BCT currently has over 109 000 followers on Facebook and 38 000 on Twitter) and an increased capacity to take calls (with more volunteers recruited every year) has contributed to this rise.

Total number of calls taken across the years

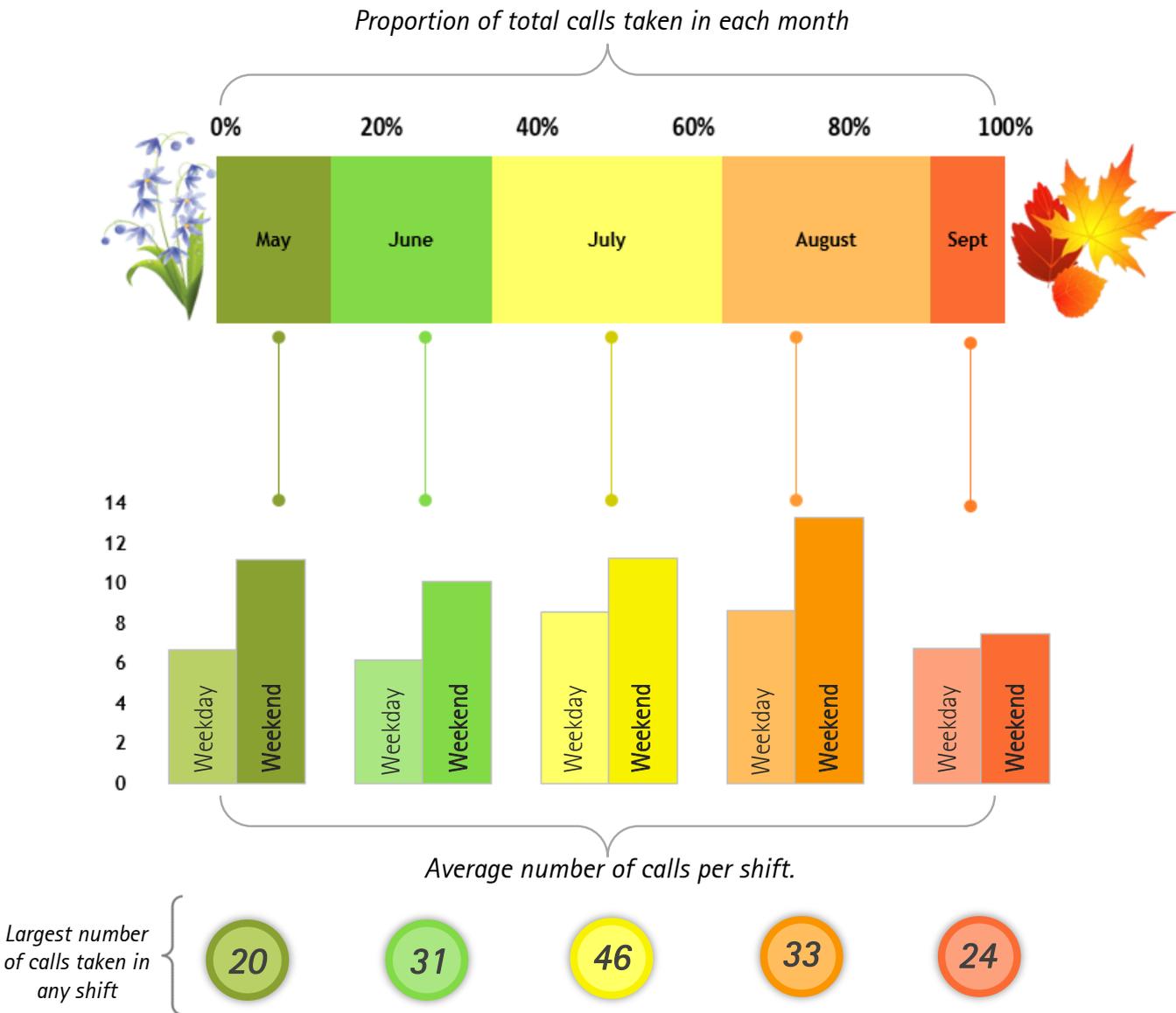


Calls per month

2017 saw the busiest May we've ever had, perhaps due to an early start to the maternity season with the first wild bat pups found on 24 May. Call numbers returned to normal levels from June onwards, with July and August being the busiest months of all. The graphic below shows how the total number of calls was distributed across the months in 2017 and is very much in line with previous years. Busier OOH shifts are anticipated in the middle of the season as this typically coincides with a rise in baby and juvenile bats finding themselves in mischief and requiring rescue.

We use average call numbers to decide when to move from one volunteer per shift to two. In 2017, we erred on the side of caution and had two volunteers per shift from 1 June right through to 31 August and two per shift on weekends in September. The average number of calls on a week night was lower than that of a weekend when the shifts ran all day.

The highest number of calls taken over a single day in 2017 was in July when two volunteers took 46 calls between them.



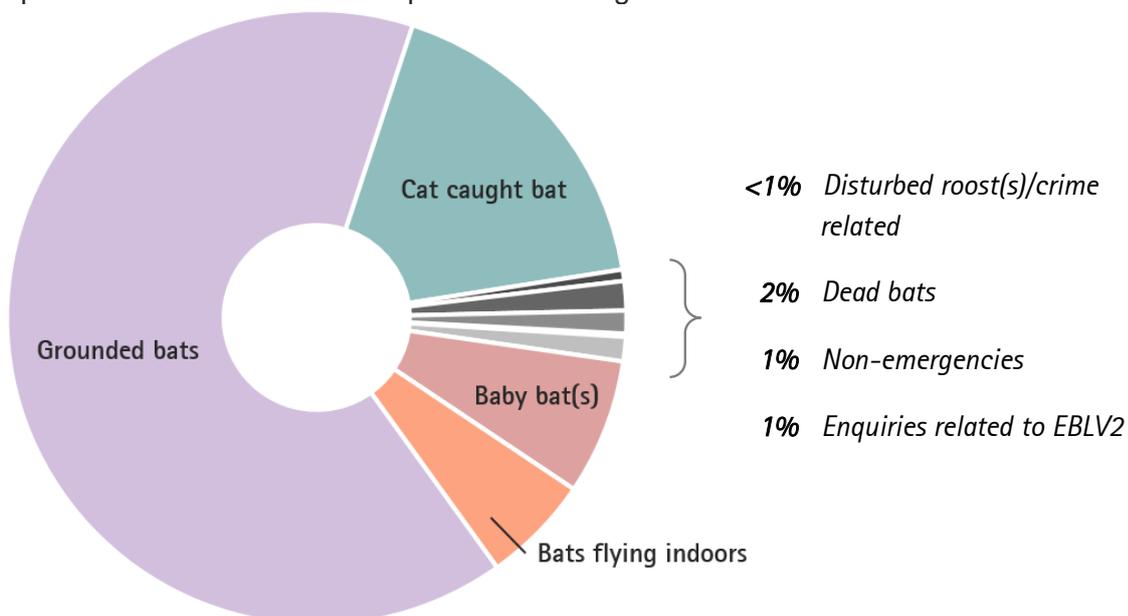
Subject of calls

The majority of the calls we take are about bats in need of some kind of care or assistance. Grounded bats made up almost 65% of our OOH calls and included injured bats and bats grounded or landed outside, in houses and in other buildings. It is not always possible to tell why bats have been found grounded or landed but it may be the result of exhaustion, dehydration or injury. Cats are also major predators of bats and can cause long lasting injuries or septicaemia if not quickly rescued. Baby bats, otherwise known as pups, occasionally get lost or abandoned by their mother and cannot survive very long without proper care. Healthy bats capable of strong flight can also occasionally find themselves flying indoors, usually if windows or doors have been left open on fine nights or inexperienced juveniles get lost on their maiden flight.

In any case, when bats are not behaving the way we'd expect a healthy bat to (flying strongly outside in the dark, or safely tucked away in their roosts), OOH volunteers will assess the best outcome for the bat and advise the caller. Sometimes it is possible to advise that healthy bats are released outdoors, however most often OOH volunteers will advise that the bat is securely contained in a box before putting the caller in touch with a local voluntary care contact from the Bat Care Network. If there is no volunteer care contact available, members of the public are advised to take the bat along to a local vet.

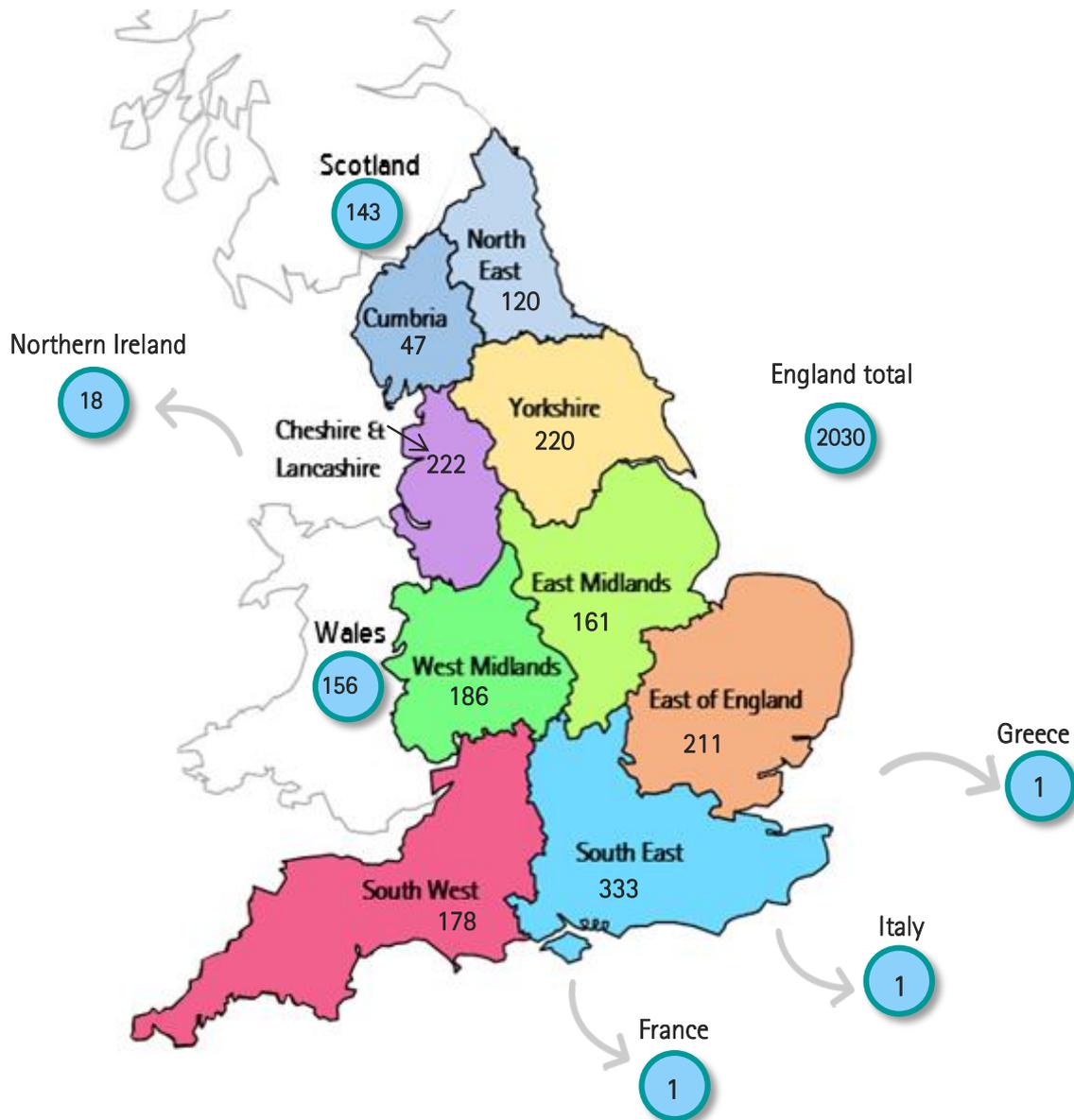
A small number of callers have found a bat that has died. If the caller is happy to comply, OOH volunteers advise on how to store the bat short term and a 'dead bat pack' is sent to the caller in the post during office hours. This facilitates a passive surveillance scheme carried out by the Animal and Plant Health Agency which monitors the prevalence of a very rare type of rabies, European Bat Lyssavirus 2 (EBLV2), in dead bats submitted to the scheme. Very rarely, frightened or injured bats may bite or scratch when being handled and therefore everyone who may come into contact with a bat is advised to wear gloves due to the very low risk of EBLV2. OOH volunteers give initial advice in instances where callers have been bitten or scratched and then the BUS takes the case over. Similarly, OOH volunteers give initial advice if there is a potential for a bat to have come from overseas, and then the BUS takes over. These sorts of cases made up only 1% of calls on OOH in 2017.

A small proportion of OOH calls relate to bats that have been accidentally disturbed in their roosts, for example during building work, and reports of potential bat crimes. Helpline staff advised on 9 potential bat crime cases that were reported during OOH, and 5 cases where bats had been accidentally found during work. OOH volunteers are trained on how to handle these calls and more information is available to callers online or when calling back the Helpline in office hours. Similarly, callers with requests for general information, advice about their bat roosts or planning and development for example are advised to call the Helpline back during office hours.



Where the calls came from

As seen on the map below, most of our OOH calls came from England with some calls from other areas of the UK and the occasional call from overseas. As a UK based charity, we are limited in the advice we can give to international callers, but do try to put the caller in touch with a bat charity based in the country they are calling from where possible.



8. Information sent

Many callers to the OOH Helpline are interested in receiving further advice, or a 'thank you' from BCT. OOH volunteers include the request for any extra support in their data collection and any resources are sent to callers (by email where possible) during office hours by the Helpline staff. For positive callers, we include information about bat ecology, how to encourage bats and how to get involved with BCT via membership, donation or volunteering. The OOH volunteers inspired a lot of support for BCT as a result of their work and we had a number of new members and donations made by callers after engaging with the service.

9. Volunteer feedback

Volunteers were invited to provide feedback throughout the season and an open line of communication between the OOH Project Coordinator and volunteers was always present in case any concerns arose. Midway through the season, volunteers were invited to provide any suggestions they had on improvements that could be implemented immediately. This feedback was largely excellent and no major concerns were raised. 100% of volunteers who responded felt adequately supported by both the OOH Project Coordinator and BUS. A final opportunity to provide feedback on areas including technology, logistics, training and support was offered to volunteers when the season had finished. This feedback is used to help design the structure of the 2018 season and identify any areas which require improvement. A summary of the main points is below.

- ✿ 100% of respondents think volunteering for OOH was a worthwhile experience
- ✿ 94% of respondents would consider volunteering for OOH again
- ✿ 94% of respondents would recommend volunteering for OOH to a friend
- ✿ 100% of respondents provided excellent feedback regarding the quality of support offered to them by the OOH Project Coordinator and BUS.
 - *BCT intend to support an online platform (probably via social media) where volunteers can connect with one another in 2018*
 - *An optional one-to-one catch up will be offered to each volunteer mid-way through the 2018 season.*
- ✿ Feedback on the volunteer manual was generally excellent. Some suggestions for improvements were made.
 - *Improvements for the pack are planned for 2018, including organising the training by caller type for ease of access to volunteers.*
 - *A digital version of the training manual will be made accessible to volunteers.*
 - *Improvements will be made to the clarity of training surrounding dead bats, baby bats, calls from vets and suspected bat roost disturbances.*
- ✿ Occasional issues reported with the phones being properly connected to the volunteers.
 - *BCT intend to change phone providers before OOH 2018 begins*
- ✿ The electronic forms used by volunteers have seen a general improvement from previous years with some issues regarding the speed of the website and occasional freezing.
 - *BCT are currently re-building the electronic form on another platform which we hope will address these issues.*
 - *The Online Volunteers Area received excellent feedback and will be expanded for 2018.*
- ✿ 94% of respondents felt that the number of calls was 'about right' and the majority of respondents were happy with the way that OOH 'shifts' were allocated. Some respondents found the length of shifts were too long.
 - *A new 'shift' pattern for volunteers will be discussed and potentially trialled for 2018*

10. Acknowledgements

BCT would like to thank all of our volunteers who took part in the project in 2017. The OOH service is an extremely important part of BCT's work; one which we could not provide without the dedication and support of the volunteers involved.

We would also like to thank Defra whose funding contributes significantly to the project.

*For more information about taking part in the Out of Hours project please
contact the BCT Helpline*

Telephone: 0345 1300 228

Email Hannah at: outofhours@bats.org.uk