



Out of Hours Report 2016



©Peter Crome, edited BCT

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You'll find photographs and outcomes of actual calls that came through the Out of Hours Helpline this summer, as provided by the voluntary bat rehabilitators following the Out of Hours referral.

Introduction

The Bat Conservation Trust (BCT) runs the National Bat Helpline, consisting of permanent and seasonal staff to answer a wide range of bat enquiries during office hours (9am to 5.30pm Monday to Friday excluding bank holidays). In 2016, the Helpline received 12,152 enquiries during these hours and represents an increase of 1% from the 2015 figures (11,908). A large proportion of these enquiries (5,537) related to a bat being found in need of assistance (grounded, injured, orphaned etc.). In the height of the summer season this now means that the Helpline can help with an average of 300 bats per week.

Bats can be found by members of the public at any time of day, and during the months of May to September, when bats are most active, the Helpline experiences its highest call numbers. To ensure that emergency calls (bat care and bat crime) are dealt with when the main Helpline is closed, an Out of Hours Helpline (OOH) is in operation. This OOH service is manned by volunteers with training and support provided by BCT Helpline staff. The OOH service started in 2004 and is funded by DEFRA.

In 2016, 28¹ volunteers (30 were recruited but unfortunately two had to drop out prior to the season commencing) participated in the OOH service, staffing the BCT phone line from their homes during week day evenings, weekends and bank holidays between 3rd May² and 30th September 2016. Training was provided prior to the season commencing³ and back-up was provided during each of these shifts by a member of BCT Helpline staff (12 including permanent and seasonal members).

Following on from previous years' feedback about volunteers struggling with call volumes at the height of summer, a new system has also been piloted. Rather than just one volunteer per shift throughout the OOH season, this system involved two volunteers covering the same shift during peak months. The aim was to split calls between the two and therefore reduce each individual's call volume. This was a success and more information can be found in the corresponding sections below.

The OOH weekday shifts ran directly after office hours from 5.30pm to 10:30pm and then from 8am to 9am the following day⁴. Weekend days were split in two: the first operated from 9am to 4pm and the second operated from 4pm to 10:30pm. This would be followed again from 8am to 9am the following day. Bank Holidays were also split in this way. Back-up staff (BUS) changed the numbers over to each volunteer as required and were on call for any advice, or to be passed over specific cases.

Overall, with the two volunteer per shift system in place, 240 shifts were covered this year (compared to 191 in 2015 where only one volunteer manned each shift). From this figure, 140 shifts were on weekdays and 100 over the weekend. Seven full shifts/days were unfortunately not covered by any volunteers, due to changes in their availability and BUS being unable to find emergency cover. Both the BUS and volunteers undertook their shifts on a rotational basis, with BUS averaging 16 shifts and volunteers nine. In total, approximately 2,390 hours⁵ were contributed by volunteers over the course of the OOH season.

¹ For various reasons the number of volunteers declined throughout the OOH season so that by the end of the season only 23 volunteers were still actively part of the OOH project.

² Due to the 1st May falling on a Sunday and the next day being a bank holiday, the OOH service began on Tuesday 3rd May where staff could test the service effectively prior to it becoming active.

³ In 2016 an additional training session was trialled in May, with volunteers joining the service in June.

⁴ Due to work and family commitments the 8:00 – 9:00 morning shifts were not always covered and the volunteer was instructed to leave a message on their voicemail asking the caller to call back after 9:00 when either the office was open or another volunteer was on duty.

⁵ 135 week day shifts covered (6 hours each) and 100 weekend day shifts covered (15.5 hours each). This does not include times the phone was not covered (79.5 hours) or the training days (6 hours per attendee). This also assumes that every volunteer undertook the one hour 8-9am morning shift which did not always occur. However, volunteers did also mention spending time after the shift ended in closing cases and logging calls.

1. Recruitment

This year, the OOH service opportunity was advertised through the BCT website, various BCT bulletins and BCT's social media. Requests were also sent directly to local bat groups and bat associated social media pages to share and promote the opportunity to a wider audience. Several previous volunteers had also shared the adverts with their local universities and friends.

Out of the people who expressed an initial interest in volunteering (56 in total) for 2016, 34 confirmed they would attend the OOH training days. However, seven of these volunteers did not show up on the day. This left 27 volunteers attending training sessions, with another three returning volunteers opting to not attend a training session but still assisting due to their years of service⁶. Out of these 30 overall volunteers, 25 were due to start the season from May with five starting in June (four following the third training session in May and one returning volunteer who started later). Two of the volunteers did not subsequently undertake any OOH shifts due to changes in personal circumstances and a further five were unable to complete the OOH season; leaving 23 volunteers at the end of the season.

2. Training

For the first time, in addition to the usual two, a third training day took place for OOH volunteers. The three days were held by members of BCT staff to explain advice procedures and ensure everyone was confident in handling calls. Two training days took place in April, one in Manchester (attended by 12), and one in London (attended by 11) with volunteers starting the OOH service in May. The third training session, again in London took place in May (attended by 4) with volunteers joining the service in June. Each day ran from 10:30am until 4:30pm; lunch was included and travel costs reimbursed.

For new volunteers and those who hadn't completed consecutive seasons, attending a training day was a mandatory requirement as advice is subject to change year on year. However, for those who had volunteered for two consecutive seasons or more, an optional 'opt out' clause was provided if they had gained adequate experience previously. These individuals received a phone call to run through major changes in procedures or advice as well as an OOH Volunteer Handbook incorporating all necessary material by post. These handbooks were provided at each training day.

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)
- A discussion about Natural England casework and the Out of Hours Helpline.

'Thanks from East Lancashire Bat group to those who volunteered yesterday. 2 bats got help via the helpline that would most likely have had to wait until Monday to be taken to a vet if the finders hadn't been able to speak to volunteers'

The day also included several practical sessions; role plays, group discussions, electronic call recording practice and using Google Maps. At the end of the day volunteers were asked to sign the volunteer agreement and fill in an expenses form if they so wished.

Training was also given to members of BCT staff in order to equip them to serve as BUS to the volunteers; being available throughout the shift for general queries as well as being able to take over more complex cases (e.g. bat bites, bat crimes, and illegal landing cases). Once the season had commenced, call records were reviewed by the OOH Project Coordinator on a daily basis and feedback was provided to volunteers where necessary. A conference call was held mid-season in order for volunteers to discuss tips and issues regarding their OOH shifts with the Project Coordinator.

⁶ It was concluded from this season that volunteers who have undertaken a number of shifts on consecutive seasons may opt out of attending future training days. Training material will be sent prior to the season commencing for a chance to review and ask questions.

3. Technology

An automated system is used to control the times at which incoming calls are diverted to a volunteer's phone. This system stops diverting calls to the volunteer between 10:30pm and 8am. As the volunteer changes from day to day, the number is manually inputted into the system by the BUS. This system can be operated from any internet-connected computer without the need to access BCT's remote server. For two volunteers on the same shift, this process is repeated twice.

Phone diversions operated as follows:

- On a week day the phones were transferred to the volunteer at 5.30pm and then automatically transferred back to the office Helpline number the next morning at 9am. Between 10:30pm and 8am⁷, calls were automatically diverted to a messaging service.
- On a weekend shift the phones were transferred to the volunteer at 9am on the Saturday morning and then transferred to a second volunteer at 4pm on the Saturday afternoon. This process was repeated for the Sunday. Calls were then transferred back to the BCT office at 9am Monday morning. Calls were automatically diverted to a messaging service between the hours of 10:30pm and 8am⁷.

At the weekend, diversion of the calls from one volunteer to another (or two if it is the peak months and two volunteers are manning the same shift) was undertaken remotely via the internet by a member of BCT staff (usually the BUS for the shift). This had to be carried out at 9am and again at 4pm, whereas for weekday shifts the change could be made at any time during the working day.

Auto-attendants:

Those calling the OOH Helpline heard an auto-attendant message giving two to three options depending on the time of season: 1) press 1 to leave a message for non-emergency calls, or press 2 (or 3) to speak to a volunteer if the call was an emergency. Whilst this made the message longer it was important to help reduce the number of non-emergency calls the volunteers received.⁸

Callers were also advised to always handle a bat with gloves, and to visit the BCT website for more information. Between 10:30pm and 8am, the caller was only given the option to leave a message, but was advised to call back after 8am for emergencies. To help anyone who had a bat in need of assistance, an alternative option was provided on the message about taking the bat to a local vet or wildlife hospital if they were unable to reach a volunteer on duty or if it was at a time when the service was not operating.

Homeowner Prefix System:

Occasionally it was necessary for volunteers to make outgoing calls to either phone callers back or to call the BUS. Volunteers could either charge outgoing OOH calls to BCT by using a PIN when dialling (available for BT landlines), or submit an itemised bill to BCT for call charge reimbursement.

Electronic forms:

Volunteers were able to record call details onto internet-based electronic forms which could then be uploaded straight onto the BCT database the next morning. Being able to automatically upload call details meant there was more time available for the OOH Project Coordinator to give feedback on the advice provided by volunteers. Moving forwards, a new electronic form and interface is being designed, and will be in place from the 2017 season. This form should make it easier for the volunteers to input and search through call records, and for the Coordinator in their subsequent processing.

⁷ Due to work and family commitments the 8:00 – 9:00 morning shifts were not always covered and the volunteer was instructed to leave a message on their voicemail asking the caller to call back after 9:00 when either the office was open or another volunteer was on duty.

⁸ Out of Hours volunteers were not expected to deal with non-emergency calls and therefore, for any that did slip through, the volunteer could simply advise that the caller contact the main Helpline during office hours.

4. Call numbers

In 2016, the total number of calls received through the OOH service was 2,266. This is the second highest on record, falling below 2015 which received 2,824 calls from the May – September duration. This equates to a 20% reduction in calls when compared to last year, but still an increase of 5% from 2014 (2,163) and 21% from 2013 (1,876). Though overall this year received less calls than 2015, the months of May and July still reached the highest call volumes on record. Figures 1 and 2 help to illustrate the comparisons between OOH year by year, and month by month.

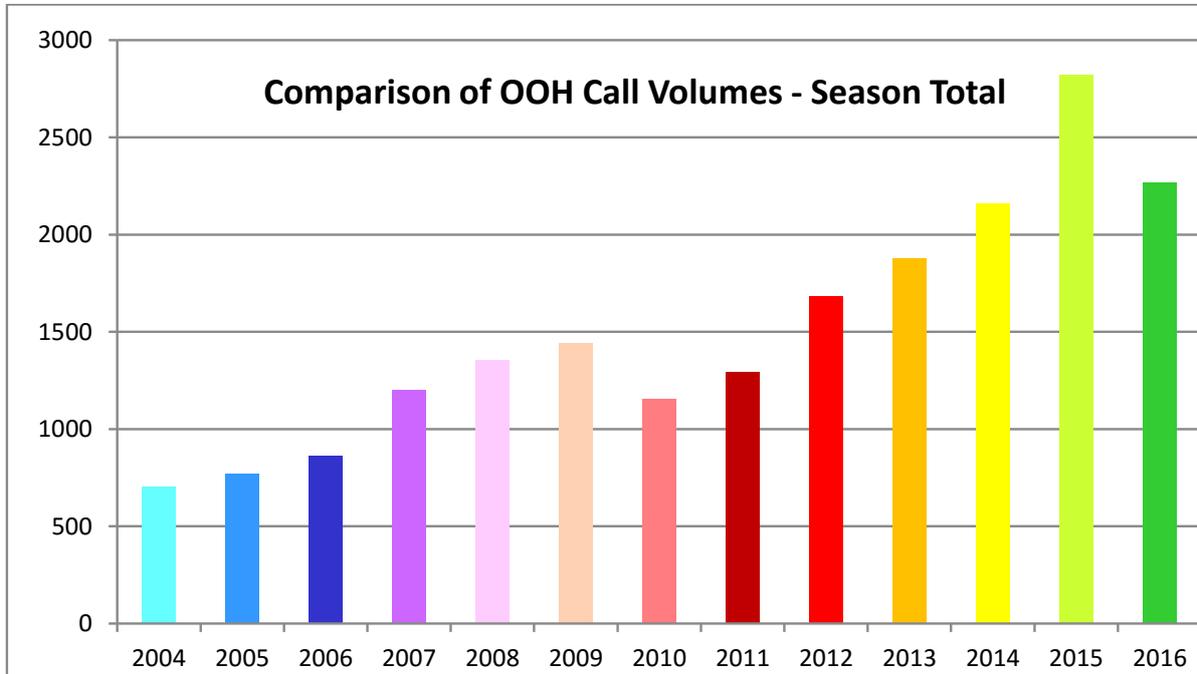


Figure 1: Annual totals across the years.

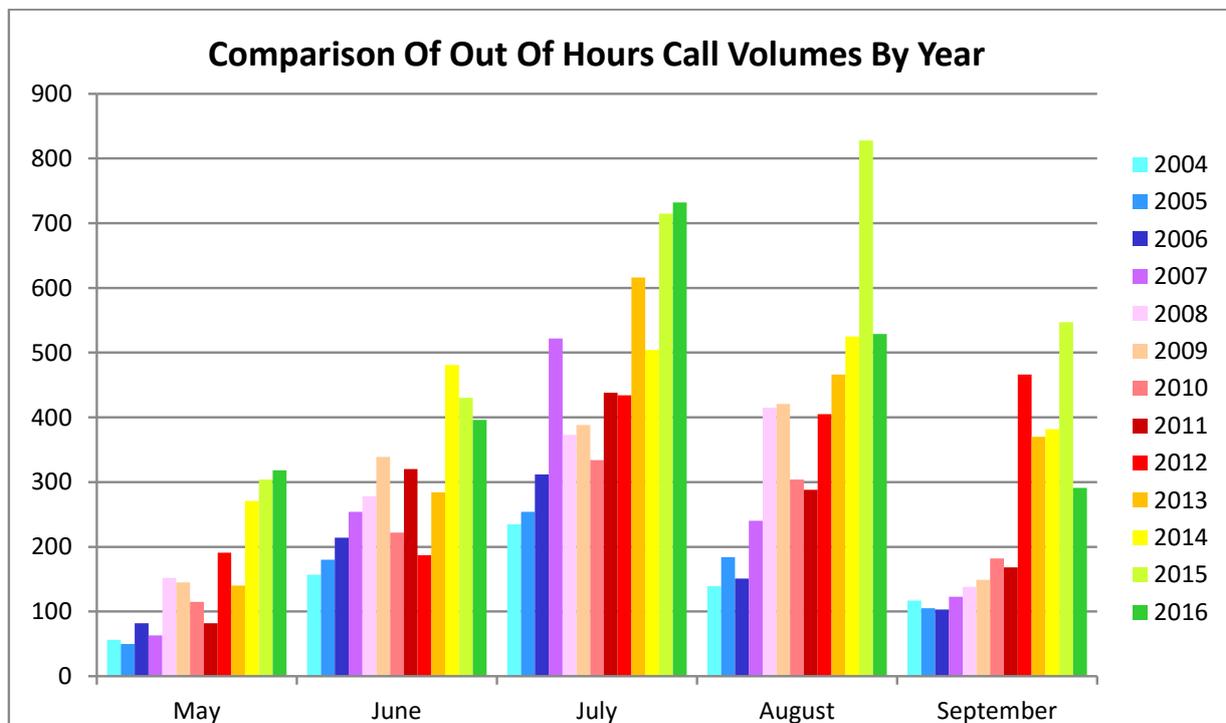


Figure 2: OOH monthly totals across the years

It is possible that the increased changeability of weather conditions during 2015's summer caused a higher peak call volumes. The greater temperature variations may have resulted in juveniles becoming grounded after their first flights, with bats in general being caught out by fluctuating periods of weather and potential lack of insect prey. A number of those associated with bat rehabilitation noted baby bats being discovered later on that summer in addition to an increase in those appearing to have suffered from a lack of malnourishment than normally experienced at that time. In 2016 however, milder conditions were experienced with those same contacts observing a return to the typical bat maternity period and associated trend of bats being found in need of assistance. Because UK species have a seasonal cycle the probability of weather affecting national figures is high and something to monitor closely especially with predicted climate change affects.

Taking the last three OOH years, each has received over 2,000 calls, and since 2004 the service has experienced an upward trend of call volumes. Other factors, excluding weather, could also be affecting this increase, such as an increased awareness alongside better access to the available advice. After rescuing a bat and finding help, individuals may pass on their experiences and this establishes a positive snowball effect, whilst advances in social media could likewise have had a significant impact. BCT currently has over 100,000 Facebook, 35,000 Twitter and 3,000 Instagram followers; creating a large audience for which information can be shared and in-turn provides a quick resource for how help can be obtained. With all factors taken into consideration, it looks set for this trend to continue into the future, combined with the occasional spike after a summer of high fluctuating weather.



Figure 3 illustrates the percentage and distribution of the OOH calls received over the season from 2016. From 2013 and before, the similar pattern of rising steadily and peaking in July, before steadily decreasing can also be seen. UK bats generally form maternity roosts and become active around May, this activity increases and by July they have their babies. It isn't unusual then to find that the number of bats in need of assistance also follow this pattern. During 2014 and 2015 however, the distribution of calls did not follow this pattern with August being the busiest month in terms of bats being found. Again this could illustrate a factor such as weather causing a slight alteration in the bats' life cycle and subsequent difficulties.



Figure 3: Percentage of total OOH calls received each month in 2016.

Like previous years, the majority of OOH calls were received over the weekends (see Figure 4). The highest number of calls taken over a single day this year was 74 (16th July), compared to 58 in 2015 (2nd August) and 48 in 2014 (31st August). This increased figure, and even average calls for both weekends and weekdays, highlights the importance of moving to a two volunteer per shift system during the peak months. Since the two volunteer per shift system came into play during June, when daily volumes were on the up, the average call per day taken by an individual volunteer decreased when compared to 2015. Again for 2014, the average calls decreased, despite 2016 receiving a higher call total. It is evident therefore that having another volunteer on shift helped reduce the number of calls an individual received, and subsequently any potential stress.

2016	May	June	July	August	September
Total weekend calls for month	178	212	410	272	115
Highest number of weekend calls	27	32	74	46	32
Average weekend	19.8	26.5	41	30.2	14.4
Total week day calls for month	140	184	322	257	176
Highest number of week day calls	11	14	20	22	20
Average week day	7	8.4	15.3	11.7	8

Figure 4 (above): OOH total and average calls for the weekend and weekday each month.

Figure 5 details the number of calls received per region. In England, the South East region received the most calls (16%), followed by the South West (13%) and then jointly East of England with Cheshire and Lancashire (9%). 80% of the 'Other' category incorporates calls from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, with the others being of international origin. With the BCT Bat Care Network covering the whole UK, the 'Other', category.

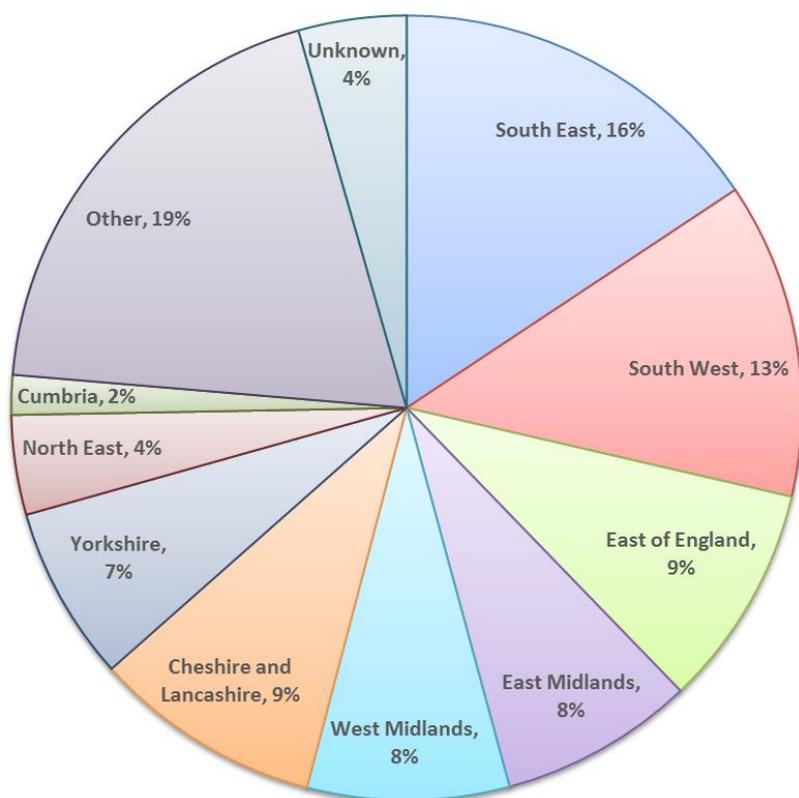


Figure 5: The percentage of calls received per region throughout the 2016 OOH season.

The regions above incorporate the following:

- South East** – East & West Sussex, Kent, Hampshire & Isle of Wight, London, Thames and Chilterns
- South West** – Cornwall, Devon, Somerset, West of England, Dorset, Wiltshire, Gloucestershire
- East of England** – Essex, Hertfordshire, Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Suffolk, Norfolk
- East Midlands** – Lincolnshire, Nottinghamshire, Leicestershire, Northamptonshire, Derbyshire
- West Midlands** – Herefordshire, Worcestershire, Warwickshire, Staffordshire, West Midlands, Shropshire
- Cheshire & Lancashire** – Cheshire & Lancashire/Greater Manchester/Merseyside
- Yorkshire** – North, East, South & West Yorkshire
- North East** – Northumberland, County Durham
- Cumbria** - Cumbria

5. Subject of calls

When recording a call there are 42 possible call subjects to choose from on the Helpline database. Since the OOH service is for emergency calls, the overall number of subjects recorded during the 2016 OOH season was far fewer. For these OOH statistics all the call subjects have been grouped into nine categories as these best reflect the call types taken.

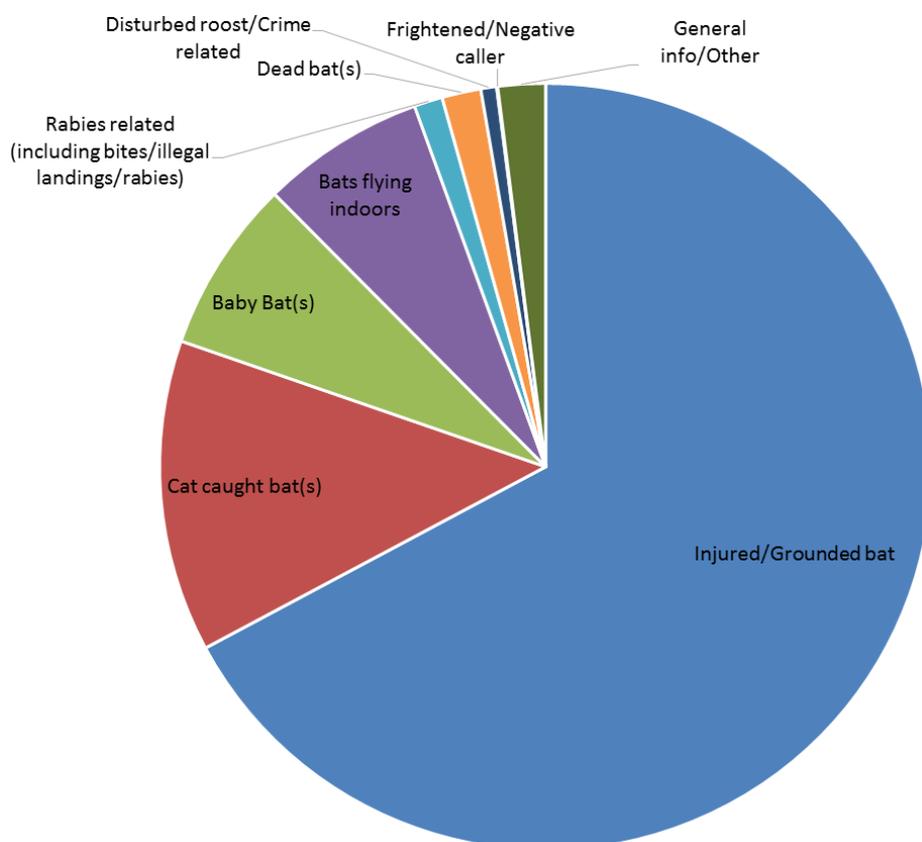


Figure 6 (left): Call subject distribution across the whole OOH season 2016.

As expected, the largest proportion of calls in 2016 were those relating to injured or grounded bats (67.2%) and remains similar to the 68.6% recorded in 2015. The proportion of baby bat related calls appears relatively low (7.3%), however, it should be noted that any grounded bat found during the summer was given the same treatment, regardless of whether it was an adult or a baby. Staff and volunteers were instructed to only record a call as a “baby bat” if they were quite certain that this was the case (e.g. the bat was described as being furless/with short fur and obviously smaller in size than an adult bat of any species).

After “injured/grounded bat”, the second most common subject was “cat caught bat(s)” (13.2%), followed by “baby bat(s)” (7.3%) and then “bats flying indoors” (6.9%). In 2016 the overall percentages were all fairly similar to those recorded over summer 2015, with 2014 also following a comparable pattern. The total percentage of bat care calls (i.e. those which involved initial bat containment advice being given and being passed on to a bat care contact/advised to take to a local vet) is 87.6%; this is calculated from a combined total of injured/grounded bats, baby bats and bats caught by cats, which is to be expected given that the purpose of the OOH Helpline is to provide support in these emergency situations. In 2015 this figure was 86.7%, with 2014 recording 83%.

6.9% of calls were regarding “bats flying indoors” and the remaining call subjects (“rabies related”, “dead bat(s)”, “disturbed roost/crime related”, “frightened/negative caller” and “general info/other”) represented less than 2% of total calls each. Again this is similar to that experienced in previous years.

On the following page is a list of each of the nine categories and the typical calls experienced in addition to the advice usually provided.

Injured/Grounded Bat

This category is made up of all call types involving a bat in need of care which has not been clearly identified as a baby bat and also includes bats found hanging on a wall or exposed outdoors. This is the most urgent situation relating to bats in which members of the public find themselves, which is reflected in the fact that the majority of calls taken during the OOH season fall within this category. This has been recorded as the case for the past 6 years where we have undertaken this analysis. 1,522 calls were taken during the 2016 season.

In this situation advice is given about how to contain the bat safely (bearing in mind the very small rabies risk), then if possible, the bat finder is referred to a local voluntary bat care contact for further advice and guidance.

Unfortunately, there are not enough bat care contacts to cover all locations in the UK, and due to their voluntary nature may not always be available to help. As a back-up option, the Helpline and OOH provide the alternative of taking the bat to a local vet. This ensures the caller is given enough options to hopefully get the help required.

Baby Bat(s)



*Juvenile soprano pipistrelle in care.
©East Lancashire Bat Group*



Baby bat in the process of being rehabilitated following a rescue. ©East Lancashire Bat Group

As mentioned this category only includes bats that are easily identifiable as babies (pups). Calls are also not recorded as a baby bat until the first *confirmed* baby bat is reported to BCT, i.e. by a Natural England Volunteer Bat Roost Visitor or voluntary bat care contact. In 2016, the first report of a baby bat born in the wild was of a soprano pipistrelle on 10th June, discovered in Bristol. These are urgent cases as the baby bat will not survive long without special care and attention. Though baby bats found are commonly orphaned, it is possible for experienced vaccinated volunteers to sometimes reunite a baby with its mother in a following evening, depending on whether a roost is known and how quickly it can occur.

Cat caught bat

Due to increased bat activity from April through to October there is greater scope for cat attacks. Like the above "injured/grounded bat" category, this category where a cat has been involved has remained the second highest call type for the past 6 years. In 2016, 298 calls occurred where the cat was clearly implicated (i.e. a cat has been found with a bat), with 2015 receiving 381. These cases are also treated with the utmost priority considering the potentially severe injuries or subsequent infection inflicted following a cat attack.

Alongside the containment advice, and especially if it is not the first occurrence of its kind at the caller's location, we endeavour to send a copy of BCT's 'Cats and bats' leaflet to the cat's owner to further advise on responsible cat ownership. One such way is by keeping a cat inside an extra hour at dusk, or in all night during the vulnerable bat maternity period to reduce the chance of this scenario.

Bat(s) flying indoors

This subject relates to bats flying inside both dwelling houses and non-dwellings (e.g. warehouses, shops, offices, churches, etc.). While recorded separately, these two subjects were combined into one category, as regardless of whether the bat was seen flying in a dwelling or non-dwelling, the advice given to the general public remained the same. In total, there were 156 calls of this nature in 2016. These calls usually arise because of a combination of warm weather (resulting in windows being left open in the evening and throughout the night) and inexperienced juvenile bats learning to fly.

These can be quite difficult calls to deal with since distressed callers often expect someone to rush to the scene and remove the bat. In practice, there is little more to be done than to contain the bat in the room in which it is found then, come the evening, open all windows and doors to the outside, dim the lights and allow the bat to find its own way out. It can be difficult for this to be taken on board, but the majority appreciate the help and understand the voluntary nature of those associated with bat care, alongside the reasons for why they cannot simply rush round to help. Sometimes a bat may have been seen flying, but has subsequently disappeared out of view. The same advice is given but to check around 'high and low' areas in case the bat has taken shelter within crevices inside the interior of the building.

Bats found within warehouses and other such buildings can be difficult to assist considering these structures are large with many potential bat hiding places. Advice is given as above; leaving doors or windows open so the bat can make its own way out that evening.

"I had a pipistrelle brought to me by the finders tonight who were very impressed with the helpline. They couldn't believe how good the advice was from start to finish!" East Lancashire Bat Group

Frightened/Negative caller

Calls of this nature occasionally come through to the OOH Helpline if a member of the public is extremely distressed and needs reassurance; a situation which is normally prompted by a sighting of a bat or report that there is a bat roost in their house or close by. A larger proportion of calls may require some reassurance about bats and their safe containment, but are usually logged with differing subjects after the caller has been comforted by the provided advice. Volunteers are able to provide the caller with immediate reassurance, and if necessary, BCT can follow up the case during the next working day, including organising a roost visit to the property to provide additional reassurance when required. In rare cases where the caller is extremely phobic of bats and may be repeatedly calling the OOH Helpline, the caller may be referred to a BUS. Like 2015, only one case was recorded in this category in 2016. This case was dealt with appropriately, with a roost visit being arranged during office hours to help reassure the caller over their apparent bat phobia.

Dead Bat(s)

This is considered a non-urgent call type and so the details of the caller are passed onto BCT the following morning to be dealt with. In most cases, the BUS who is following up the case will contact the caller to send out a dead bat rabies testing pack so the bat can be sent to the Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA) lab for EBLV testing. In unusual circumstances (e.g. the caller has a roost in their property in England and has found a large number of dead bats), a Natural England roost visit may also be organised or the caller referred to their Statutory Nature Conservation Organisation if outside of England.

Dead bat calls usually include:

- Dead baby bats (starved, etc.),
- Bats that have died because they have been trapped without food and water,
- Cat attacks,
- Calls from vets requesting permission to euthanise,
- Grounded or injured bats found outside.

Rabies related (including bat bites/scratches and illegal landings)

All callers who may have come into direct contact with a bat are given information about EBLV/rabies in a non-alarmist way as per BCT policy. However, these calls may not be recorded in this category as they are more likely to come under the 'grounded/injured' bat or 'roost' related categories. Instead this category records calls where there was potential for a bite or scratch to have occurred in addition to potential foreign bats that have entered the country in shipping containers etc. (and thus pose a potential disease risk).

Calls in this category are passed on to the BUS for immediate follow-up. For bat bites, callers are advised to wash the bite/scratch area thoroughly with soap and water and to seek medical advice from their GP. If the bat is still available, it is collected by a nearby bat care contact and the APHA is informed of the incident.

For illegal landings, where a foreign bat is discovered, BCT will consult APHA and Trading Standards and discuss the most appropriate outcome for the bat involved. In total 38 rabies related calls were taken in 2016.

Disturbed roost/Crime related

The majority of the bat crime calls that are taken on the Helpline relate to roost offences (damage, obstruction or destruction), or to a bat(s) which has been disturbed. During the OOH season it is necessary to distinguish between 1) a potential crime that may/may not happen in the future, and 2) offences that have already happened or are in progress.

To lessen the load on the OOH volunteers, members of the public are asked through the automated message alongside online posts to phone through only with urgent queries. Queries relating to planning and development (where members of the public are concerned about the possible impact of development work on local bat populations) are considered to be less urgent than calls which relate to a bat crime that has already happened or is happening at the time of the call. The former are asked to call BCT back in the morning and the latter are dealt with straight away; usually to be passed on to the BUS on duty. The BUS provide advice to the caller as to how they may report a crime to the police and if appropriate may liaise with the police themselves and report the case to BCT's Conservation Wildlife Crime Officer.

Two call subjects, 'disturbed roost' and 'crime related', have been combined as any instance of disturbing a roost or harming an individual bat is considered a criminal offence. However, a case is only recorded as being "crime related" when there has been direct police involvement, in order to make it easier to filter out these cases when necessary. In most cases, "disturbed roost" relates to situations where the builder/ roost owner is the caller and accidental disturbance has occurred, e.g. during building works. Although still criminal offences, cases of this nature are not usually reported to the police as, where the disturbance was unintentional and the roost owner cooperative, Natural England (via BCT office staff) can advise on the best course of action to protect the roost without any need for police involvement. In 2016, 15 disturbed roost/crime related (i.e. not including planning & development) calls came through to OOH, down from 31 in 2015 and 24 cases received in 2014.

General info/other

This category is for those enquiries which were non-urgent but came through to an OOH volunteer anyway. Whilst the automated Helpline message mentions that the OOH service is for emergencies only (finding a bat or reporting a bat crime) occasionally other enquiries do still come through. The volunteers are trained to kindly refer the caller back to the Helpline during office hours where staff can assist them more freely.

Roost visits

For English counties, BCT (contracted by Natural England) also offers a free roost visit service (relying on licensed Volunteer Bat Roost Visitors). OOH volunteers are not expected to deal with

roost visits (due to the level of work required), and such enquiries are rarely considered emergencies outside office hours. However, like previous years, some emergency calls that came through the OOH service required roost visits by way of follow-up (e.g. re-occurring problems with bats entering the living area and so a visit was arranged to help solve each scenario). Organising the roost visit was postponed until the office was next open and dealt with by BCT office staff.

Eight of the OOH calls in 2016 ended up requiring roost visits for further advice to be given. It is possible that some of the general enquiries which came through resulted in roost visits at a later date, but those individuals were informed to call the Helpline during office hours and so those roost visits were not logged through the OOH system.

6. Information sent

As part of the National Bat Helpline service, additional information is sent to callers who are interested or seeking further advice. This service was also available to those who called the OOH Helpline; once call data had been inputted onto the database the Helpline was then able to send out any further information during office hours.

For those callers who requested more information, a generic letter was created which included basic information about bat ecology alongside how to encourage bats into their area and how to get involved further (membership/donating/volunteering for NBMP and OOH). The Helpline staff, alongside OOH volunteers ask for email addresses where appropriate, for example, a caller who had a positive experience in helping to rescue a bat. During the summer, a mail-out is sent to all those who have provided an email address. The email they receive is a 'thank you' note to thank them again for helping a bat in need of assistance, whilst offering further information and additional ways to support bat conservation.

The positive attitude and advice provided by the OOH volunteers can be illustrated with the number of donations made and memberships subsequently taken up by bat finders who contacted the service to seek advice. 14 BCT membership subscriptions were attributed to an OOH call, compared with 13 in 2015. A number of callers also followed up in providing positive feedback about the overall service and expressing gratitude for the OOH volunteer who helped them after discovering a bat. In 2016, several volunteers became involved with OOH after rescuing a bat and experiencing the service themselves in 2015, and it is hoped that this experience will encourage others to do so in the future.

7. Volunteer feedback

Volunteers were asked to complete an online feedback questionnaire at the end of the 2016 season (15 volunteers responded). The conference call held with some of the volunteers (4 volunteers participated) in the middle of the season also gave opportunity to gather feedback at the height of the busy months.

Resources feedback

The feedback regarding the OOH training folder was that it was very comprehensive and covered all the training needs. Comments from returning volunteers highlighted that the addition of photographs and altering of key sections made it an easier version to read than in previous years.

Several volunteers in 2016 struggled with aspects of the electronic form. Comments were made about the time each form took to complete, with several others losing forms once saved and finding it difficult to locate the 'next page' document. To solve these issues, a whole new form browser is being created for this next season onwards. The new form will minimise the 'clutter' around the page, making it easier to identify the features required and create a more aesthetically pleasing user interface. The form is being trialled by several volunteers from last season and will be in place prior to the next season commencing.

In 2016, the Bat Care Network map was uploaded each working day to the OOH Google account. It remains difficult for volunteers to calculate distances quickly (needing to bring up a new tab) but unfortunately, this is beyond the control of the Bat Conservation Trust.

Support staff

All the volunteers that completed the end of season feedback questionnaire reported that they were pleased with the level of communication received from the OOH Project Coordinator and BUS. The use of social media (a dedicated Facebook Group) also enabled the volunteers to be supported by each other, though this group was not for seeking advice but merely a place to share experiences.

Shift allocation

Volunteers reported that they were happy with the number of shifts they were given, though a couple did report the occasional shift where call volumes were extremely high and that they found the weekend shifts longer than they would prefer. The trial of the two volunteer per shift system proved a success however, with the returning volunteers acknowledging a reduction in individual call volumes when comparing to previous years. New volunteers also expressed gratitude for this system being in place, with the trial period providing feedback into how this system can improve moving into next season. Several volunteers were also unable to cover the 8:00am – 9:00am aspect of weekday shifts due to work commitments.

OOH experience feedback

100% of volunteers felt sufficiently supported throughout the season. Issues did arise on occasion (see above sections) but overall the experience seems to be that of contentment and satisfaction in being able to help out those who have found bats. From 2016, the service recruited more volunteers and put the two volunteer per shift in place during busy periods. However, as several volunteers still experienced shifts with too high a call volume, BCT plans to further recruit more volunteers for the 2017 season. The two volunteers per shift system will remain alongside the third training session. It is hoped that this will again reduce the number of calls coming through to individual volunteers.



OOH Volunteer John Burns covering a shift during 2016. Photo by his son at home.

8. Volunteer Feedback & Thanks

BCT would like to thank all of our volunteers who took part in the project in 2016. 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 give a special thanks to Debbie Harwood, who covered the most shifts over the season. Debbie covered an incredible 29 shifts and the project wouldn't have been as successful this year without her additional support. Another special mention goes to Peter Cornish, who has now volunteered for the past 6 years, and undertook 20 shifts in 2016. Again, the service couldn't have operated as successfully without his support.

The two volunteer per shift system gave more opportunity for volunteers to have more shifts if they chose to and therefore gain more experience than in previous years. Five further volunteers (John Burns, Katy Hillman, Mark Fox-Smith, Taryn Stack and Molly Jones) covered 10 or more shifts each.

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

Finally, thank you to Kit Wood for again setting up and managing the OOH Facebook group. Like in 2015, volunteers reported that this improved their experience of OOH in 2016.

Volunteer Testimonials

“As a new and inexperienced volunteer for the OOH Helpline this year, I was very apprehensive as the start of the season approached. The training was really thorough and the manual an absolute blessing. It helped that I had rescued a grounded bat last summer, as a naive member of the public, and after a call to the BCT I was so impressed by the speed of a 'bat ambulance' coming to my house, and then waving off the little pipistrelle to a weeks' recovery in a 'bat hospital', to his final healthy release back into my garden, that I wanted to become involved. That experience also gave me empathy with callers who were nervous or knew very little about bats, and I was able to reassure them and encourage them. As the OOH season continued, I started to gain confidence and increasing knowledge, and was grateful for the back-up staff, who were always available to check things over. At times it has been funny, friendly, interesting, frustrating and often very busy, but every call has been different and it is great to know that there are so many kind and caring people all over the UK, and also that you can help to make a little bit of a difference too. I would love to do it all over again next year!” Helen Knight

“I was delighted to have so many people call to ask about how to look after bats they found. The training BCT gave me helped me deal with all the questions. People really are lovely wanting to know how to look after the bats they find. Thank you, and looking forward to next year.” Clare Greenhalgh

*“I have enjoyed being on 'the bat line' very much. I hope to return to help out again next year”.
Suzanne Boutcher*



Photograph taken by a volunteer of the thank you pack issued to those who completed the OOH season.

For more information about taking part in the Out Of Hours project
please contact the BCT Helpline:

Tel: 0345 1300 228

Email: enquiries@bats.org.uk