

# VOLUNTEERING IMPACTS



A report highlighting recent work undertaken by Chester Zoo to better understand the impact of volunteering in zoological collections across the UK.

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# CONTENTS

Summary ..... 4

Measuring the impact of volunteering ..... 5

Who volunteers in zoos? ..... 6

Volunteering in zoos, aquariums and wildlife collections across the UK ..... 8

Health and wellbeing ..... 9

Knowledge and skills development ..... 13

Personal development ..... 17

Connection with people ..... 21

Support and training ..... 24

Conclusion ..... 25

Recommendations ..... 26

Thanks ..... 27

SUMMARY

In the last Community Life Survey commissioned by the Cabinet Office, forty one per cent of people interviewed said they had volunteered formally at least once in the last year and twenty seven percent at least once in the past month. With roughly one in three of the adult population of England volunteering on a regular basis, volunteers represent an invaluable resource that creates a huge economic and social value for our society. Volunteering is an integral part of UK society but it is clear that the true impact and benefits are still to be fully understood. Such personal engagement needs to be better qualified and quantified to realise the full impact and release the full potential of volunteering.

This research and report focuses on the self-reported impact of volunteering in zoos, aquariums and wildlife collections that often goes underestimated. The report looks at the impacts of volunteering on individual health, wellbeing and personal development.

The outcome of the analysis of the data demonstrated that overall, volunteering with these collections has a positive impact on wellbeing and personal development and that volunteering played a significant role in the lives of the participants. With many zoos, aquariums and wildlife collections hosting a wide variety of volunteers, collectively we play a key role in realising and sharing these impacts of volunteering.

Key Findings:

- Volunteering in zoos supports mental and physical health by providing stimulation, something to do and exercise, as well as routine and structure.
- The social aspect of volunteering is highly valued among volunteers across all collections. It provides the opportunity to be socially connected therefore buffering the effect of loneliness and social isolation.
- Volunteering within such dynamic surroundings takes people out of their own environment, helps them to gain perspective and broaden their outlook.
- The additional benefits in terms of positive outcomes for volunteers are the feel good factor of making a contribution towards conservation and wildlife, and being appreciated and valued for what they do.

MEASURING THE IMPACTS OF VOLUNTEERING

Evaluation of the impact of volunteering was carried out between November 2016 and March 2017 using a version of the NCVO Volunteer Impact Toolkit. The aim of the research was to understand how volunteering experiences in animal collections benefit the individual, in order to inform future development and increase understanding of the benefits of zoo-based volunteering programmes.

This research has been undertaken to provide a snap shot of volunteering across the UK to better understand and articulate the value of volunteering in zoos, aquariums and wildlife collections across the UK. This included collaboration with zoos, aquariums and wildlife collections across the UK examining the role of volunteering and the social, personal and health benefits it has.

To assess the impacts, a survey was designed that was based on the impact evaluation toolkit produced by the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO). The final design used both qualitative and quantitative questions to measure the following variables:

- Satisfaction with support, management and training
- Human capital (personal development, skills development and health and wellbeing)
- Economic capital (access to training and employability)
- Social capital (friendships and contacts, sense of trust in others and participation in other local activities)
- Cultural capital (sense of identity, religious faith and culture, leisure and the environment)
- Demographics

The survey was delivered to participants via an online approach (using Survey Monkey software) and a survey invitation was sent to each individual volunteer's email address. Paper versions were also available upon request. Volunteers across 25 collections in the UK were invited to complete the survey and 524 responses were received from a total of 19 collections.

Table 1: NCVO Volunteer Toolkit Capital Breakdown  
(Taken from the NVCO impact toolkit)

<b>Human Capital</b>  <i>People's knowledge, skills and health</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Increased personal development, such as growth in confidence and self-esteem</li><li>• Increased transferable skills, such as IT, public speaking and teamwork</li><li>• Improved health and wellbeing</li></ul>
<b>Economic Capital</b>  <i>Benefits or costs with financial value</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Increased access to training for which they would otherwise have to pay</li><li>• Increased employment prospects and future earning power</li></ul>
<b>Social Capital</b>  <i>More cooperative relationships between people</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• New friendships, contacts and networks</li><li>• Greater involvement in local activities</li><li>• Enhanced sense of trust in others and greater frequency of working with others to solve problems.</li></ul>
<b>Cultural Capital</b>  <i>A sense of one's own identity and understanding of other's identity</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Better understanding of one's own identity</li><li>• Increased expression of one's own values through cultural and leisure activities</li><li>• Greater appreciation of others</li></ul>



# WHO VOLUNTEERS IN ZOOS?

From the participants who were surveyed there is no significant average age of volunteers across zoos in the UK, however our results show substantial input from those age 20-24 and those age 64-68. The youngest of the respondents was 15 years old and the oldest 84 years.

Data from the Community Life Survey (2016) shows that rates of volunteering by people in the 16-25 age group have been increasing substantially in recent years, a trend which may be reflected in the large input from that age range in our survey.

Typically there is strong belief that retired people make up a large majority of those who volunteer, but our data suggests that this is closely followed by those who are employed.

Table 2: Summary of respondents

		Count	Column N%
What is your gender?	Female	316	73.3%
	Male	115	26.7%
Do you consider yourself to have a disability?	No	357	83.8%
	Yes	41	9.6%
	Prefer not to say	28	6.6%
How long have you been volunteering with this organisation?	Less than 6 months	105	20.5%
	Between 6 months and a year	84	16.2%
	A year or more	327	63.2%
How often do you volunteer with this organisation?	Very occasionally	6	1.2%
	A couple of times a year	13	2.5%
	One or two days a month	116	22.4%
	One day a week or more	382	73.9%
Are you currently	Currently not working	50	11.6%
	Employed	141	32.8%
	Retired	152	35.3%
	Self-employed	25	5.8%
	Student	50	11.6%
	Prefer not to say	12	2.8%

	Mean	Median	Minimum	Maximum
Volunteer age	46	48	15	84

Volunteer from Chester Zoo





# VOLUNTEERING IN ZOOS, AQUARIUMS AND WILDLIFE COLLECTIONS ACROSS THE UK

As in many organisations that work to promote environmental conservation and species awareness, volunteers in zoos play a vital role in aiding the diffusion of conservation values and supporting staff with animal husbandry. Volunteers also support fundraising efforts and general administration as well as other specialised roles.

Understanding how and to what extent the volunteers value their experiences, including their interactions with other volunteers and what they perceive as a benefit to themselves, will help establish a role for zoos in promoting social, well-being and personal benefits among these dedicated individuals.

While volunteers are trained to provide services for collections that encourage wildlife conservation, this research project approaches the volunteers' experiences as they themselves grow, develop, learn and become advocates for wildlife. This growth occurs through the dedication of the volunteers, many hours of training, thousands of conversations with visitors to the zoo, hands on experience and being immersed in a social world in and outside of the zoo, all focused on wildlife conservation.

From information gathered from the collections themselves, there are around 1500 individual volunteers but the numbers are likely to be considerably more. With over 100 BIAZA (British and Irish Association of Zoos and Aquariums) collections this report looks into a small number of these.



# HEALTH AND WELLBEING

The term 'wellbeing' is considered to be multi-dimensional. Described by Defra (2007)<sup>1</sup> as "a positive physical, social and mental state; it is not just the absence of pain, discomfort and incapacity. It requires that basic needs are met, that individuals have a sense of purpose, and that they feel able to achieve important personal goals and participate in society".

The New Economics Foundation have identified five evidenced-based actions to improve wellbeing: Connect; Be Active; Take Notice; Keep Learning; and Give (Nef, 2008)<sup>2</sup>. Nef suggested that if each of these 'Five Ways to Wellbeing' were built into daily routines, health and wellbeing would be enhanced.

This research looked into a variety of wellbeing indicators and how volunteers have scored their increase in wellbeing over their time volunteering. There is strong evidence to suggest that the volunteers value the impact on their general wellbeing, highlighting the role the zoo can play in offering opportunities to embed all Five Ways to Wellbeing into their daily lives.

Volunteering provides opportunities to follow the Five Ways to Wellbeing. In particular, the social contact aspect of helping and working with others can have an effect on volunteers' overall psychological wellbeing. People are most likely to volunteer because they want to make a difference, and this in itself can have a positive outcome on their health and wellbeing<sup>3</sup>. Personal satisfaction, self-esteem and sense of fulfilment have the capacity to grow, and studies have shown that volunteering can improve health especially if coping with an illness<sup>4</sup>.

Figure 1: 5 ways to wellbeing  
taken from [www.fivewaystowellbeing.org](http://www.fivewaystowellbeing.org)



<sup>1</sup> DEFRA, 2007. *Measuring societal wellbeing in the UK*. London: Office for National Statistics. <sup>2</sup> NEF, 2008. *Five ways to wellbeing: A report presented to the Foresight Project on communicating the evidence base for improving people's well-being*. London: New Economics Foundation (NEF). <sup>3</sup> Bixler, R.D., Joseph, S.L. and Searles, V.M., 2014. Volunteers as products of a zoo conservation education program. *The Journal of Environmental Education*, 45(1), pp.57-73. <sup>4</sup> Bragg, R., Wood, C., Barton, J. and Pretty, J., 2015. Wellbeing benefits from natural environments rich in wildlife: A literature review for The Wildlife Trusts. University of Essex.





'It has increased my confidence, reminding me of all the things I'm capable of after a period of ill health and leaving a bad work environment'

Volunteer from RZSS

'Volunteering has helped me build my self-esteem back up after a difficult time'

Volunteer from Isle of Wight Zoo

'It has helped me to increase in confidence and improved my physical and mental wellbeing, helping me to determine with complete confidence the career path I wish to take in the future'

Volunteer from New Forest Wildlife Park

'Volunteering has had a huge beneficial effect on my mental health and self-esteem. I feel it is a major part of my identity and it has been most useful to me in finding paid work in a field I am passionate about'

Volunteer from RZSS

'I'm signed off sick with my mental health and volunteering is giving me some confidence back. The animals are therapeutic, and the staff are so understanding and supportive if I can't come in on a day because of my illness'

Volunteer from Dartmoor



There is strong evidence across all collections that volunteers have experienced increases in general health and wellbeing. There are many different factors which form part of someone’s overall wellbeing, and there are strong indications that confidence, self-esteem and motivation impact significantly on wellbeing.

71% of those surveyed reported that their confidence had either ‘increased’ or ‘greatly increased’ since they started volunteering and 67% and 70% reported the same increases for self-esteem and motivation respectively.

These encouraging findings indicate that zoo-based volunteer programmes around the UK are playing a part in increasing wellbeing.

Volunteering in zoos provides a unique environment and often involves volunteering outside and doing hands-on work.

48% of volunteers surveyed marked increases in their fitness levels and 48% also reported increases in their general physical health and wellbeing.

*‘It has honestly been a fantastic opportunity for me and one I love to do. It is so different from my normal 9-5 role’*  
Volunteer from RZSS

*‘For young people starting out, this organisation helps them to become more confident and to work in a team whilst doing and learning about something that is very worthwhile’*  
Volunteer from Shaldon



Mean level of self-reported increase  
(1 = Decreased greatly - 5 = Increased greatly)

# KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

This area embraces a range of skills, attitudes and knowledge relating to working with other people. It includes teamwork - working together to achieve common goals; leading and organising projects and activities; working with different kinds of people, for instance across age differences; negotiation and dealing with conflict; and active listening - understanding other people’s views and ideas.

Working side by side with others from very diverse backgrounds, helps to develop interpersonal skills. Through volunteering, participants learn how to handle not only different types of people but also different situations<sup>5</sup>. Volunteers have the opportunity to learn the value of diversity, strong communication, mutual respect, shared planning, cooperation and working towards common goals<sup>6</sup>. Communication forms a vital part of many if not all of the volunteer roles across the collections. Many of the activities require volunteers to communicate and this is a skill which can improve over time.

Communication skills and zoo-based work were identified as key areas of skills development through volunteering. Many volunteers stressed the benefits of working together and their comments highlighted various aspects of teamwork, including getting things done, developing trust and making friends, supporting and helping each other through challenges and working through disagreements.



<sup>5</sup> Wu, H., 2011. Social Impacts of Volunteerism Report. Points of Light Institute.  
<sup>6</sup> Baillie Smith, M. and Laurie, N., 2011. International volunteering and development: Global citizenship and neoliberal professionalisation today. Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers, 36(4), pp.545-559.





Mean level of self-reported increase  
(1 = Decreased greatly - 5 = Increased greatly)

These results show a positive impact on skills in general, specifically communication, teamwork and more detailed vocational or job related skills.

60% of volunteers reported increases in their communication skills, 49% in team work related skills and 56% in vocational or job related skills.

During the research we have not been able to identify which skills directly fall under vocational or job related skills. However, volunteers often report skills which can be used in pursuing zoo related careers.

'The park itself is an amazing place to be and the people are brilliant to work with. I have been able to take part in many different jobs and tasks as well as increase my confidence and boost my independence and team working skills'

Volunteer from Lake District Wildlife Park

'They give volunteers a chance to learn and have hands on training experience on a level that very few other organisations would at an early stage'

Volunteer from Dartmoor Zoo

'My volunteering enables me to use the skills I required during my career, and I hope I make a difference to the zoo'

Volunteer from Shaldon



The volunteers surveyed repeatedly stressed that volunteering had increased their self-confidence, self-esteem and self-belief, which is referred to earlier in the report. Their comments, however, reveal how far this is intertwined with developing skills. In particular, increased self-confidence seems to be strongly linked to improved communication skills, particularly among those who indicate that they were previously shy, nervous about meeting new people or socially isolated.

Volunteers commented on gaining an increase in knowledge and the frequent opportunities to learn about species and conversation. Although the survey wasn't designed to look in depth into the levels of knowledge gained, it does identify that volunteers are learners themselves alongside as the more traditional learning stakeholders with which we engage, such as school groups, families and zoo visitors.

'[I'm] learning so much about the animals at the zoo, especially learning from other volunteers with a wealth of knowledge'

Volunteer from ZSL London

'Volunteering has given me a new insight into the local zoo and a wealth of information'

Volunteer from Africa Alive

'For young people starting out, this organisation helps them to become more confident and to work in a team whilst doing and learning about something that is very worthwhile'

Volunteer from Shaldon

'I now have the opportunity to learn more about the animals, and play some aspect in giving them a high quality of life'

Volunteer from Isle of Wight Zoo

'I was really shy and nervous about volunteering but my confidence has gone up so much it's allowed me to be better at talking to visitors and better at presentations at university'

Volunteer from Chester Zoo

# PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

Human capital, and specifically personal development, embraces a range of skills, attitudes and knowledge related to an individual's sense of identity and their ability to manage themselves. It covers qualities and skills such as self-awareness, self-confidence and self-esteem (covered in earlier sections); setting goals and identifying how to achieve them; communicating effectively in different mediums; and solving problems and making decisions. The broad term of 'self-management' includes a range of skills and attributes, such as self-discipline, anger and stress management, managing time effectively, patience and adaptability.

Volunteering creates the sense of self worthiness and instils self-esteem which is an important part of personal development<sup>7</sup>. It gives the very important feeling of being needed.

Volunteering provides a great counter balance for those who have a busy lifestyle, especially those with a demanding job<sup>8</sup>. In some cases it can help put things in perspective and result in appreciating and understanding other environments and people<sup>9</sup>. For volunteers across all collections it's a real opportunity to share their passion and enthusiasm for conservation, and make a contribution towards something worthwhile.

Volunteers from across the collections felt their role has helped them develop more purpose and direction in their lives. It's also given volunteers a sense of pride and identity. The research highlights a range of benefits to personal development including the feeling they are making a useful contribution and having something to look forward to.

Many of the volunteers surveyed also stress the experiential learning provided through volunteering, the 'learning by doing', which reinforces their sense of their own abilities. Some of their comments explicitly contrast this with previous expectations of failure. Another theme which emerges strongly is their sense of other people believing in them. As a result of their volunteering, they feel good about helping others, and therefore better about themselves, and believe they are valued by other people.

<sup>7</sup> Casiday, R., Kinsman, E., Fisher, C. and Bamba, C., 2008. Volunteering and health: what impact does it really have. *London: Volunteering England*.  
<sup>8</sup> Rochester, C., Paine, A.E., Howlett, S., Zimmeck, M. and Paine, A.E., 2016. *Volunteering and Society in the 21st Century*. Springer.  
<sup>9</sup> Van der Werff, E., Steg, L. and Keizer, K., 2013. The value of environmental self-identity: The relationship between biospheric values, environmental self-identity and environmental preferences, intentions and behaviour. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 34, pp.55-63.





Mean level of self-reported increase  
(1 = Decreased greatly - 5 = Increased greatly)

In addition to the positive wellbeing outcomes which encompass confidence, self-esteem and motivation there are other aspects of personal development which have increased for the volunteers.

A huge 88% of volunteers reported that their sense of making a useful contribution had increased during their time volunteering. This was also echoed with increases in their willingness to try new things (76%) and having something to look forward to in life (73%).

For a small number of volunteers, volunteering has provided a means of turning their lives around and surpassing people’s usual expectations. These individual testimonies highlight the potential for zoos to further engage with people who face barriers to participation elsewhere.

*'I have loved it so much. It changed my life for the better'*  
Volunteer from National Marine Aquarium

*'As someone coping with a bereavement, volunteering has helped me a lot with the healing process, it's a two way gain. I help the organisation and they help me to feel better about myself and life – overall'*  
Volunteer from Banham Zoo

*'I have had so many doors shut in my face because I have autism. I wasn't allowed to get into university and people don't want to give me a job. The zoo has given me the time to get good at talking to people and learn new things. No one has ever done that before'*  
Volunteer from Chester Zoo

*'It has become a part of who I am'*  
Volunteer from Welsh Mountain Zoo

*'It has given me a new focus in life and helped me through personal issues. It's a massive part of my life now'*  
Volunteer from Whipsnade

*'I really enjoy the feeling that I have done something useful with my time and made a real contribution to society and had a positive impact on somebody's life'*  
Volunteer from Chester Zoo



## CONNECTION WITH PEOPLE

We think of social capital as the links, shared values and understandings in society that enable individuals and groups to trust each other and so work together. Human and social capital don't exist in isolation. The two are linked in complex ways and, to some extent, feed into each other.<sup>10</sup>

While some people are naturally outgoing, others are shy and have a hard time meeting new people. Volunteering gives the opportunity to practice and develop social skills, particularly as it involves regularly meeting with a group of people with shared interests.

People who feel connected are those that experience a sense of belonging, a sense of being part of a relationship with others. In a highly mobile society, where friends and loved ones may live hundreds of miles away, this need often goes unmet. People are left with feelings of isolation, dissatisfaction, and loneliness.<sup>11</sup> A sense of identification with a volunteer group can meet this need and can result in healthier, happier individuals. Volunteers who feel a positive sense of connection with the staff and volunteers of their organisation will tend to feel good about the experience.

The social aspect of volunteering plays a huge role in the volunteer programmes we researched across the UK. Volunteers describe feeling proud to be a part of the zoo and feel appreciated and valued as a member of the team. It shows that volunteering in these collections provides a routine and structure to people's day and week.

According to the data there were numerous social benefits to volunteering, particularly in relation to friendship networks and the support this provides. It is evident that dedicating their time as a volunteer helps individuals make new friends, expand networks, and boost their social skills.

<sup>10</sup> Keeley, B. 2007. *Human Capital: How what you know shapes your life*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

<sup>11</sup> Nazroo, J & Matthews, K. 2012. *The impact of volunteering on wellbeing in later-life*. WRVS, Cardiff.



Friendship is an important part of society and 82% of the volunteers surveyed said their range of friendships had increased or greatly increased since they started volunteering.

60% of volunteers surveyed said their feeling of being included and not alone had also increased or greatly increased. 61% of volunteers reported that their support and information networks have increased or greatly increased.

Volunteering within the surveyed collections promotes social integration, enhances the social networks of volunteers and increases their access to social support. Finally, engaging in volunteering might directly provide a social role that gives meaning and purpose in life. Indeed, given their altruistic nature, volunteering roles may be more valued than other roles, both by the individual undertaking the role and by those they interact with. Engagement in socially valued roles is likely to enhance identity and self-esteem positively, providing a sense of worth and status.



'I love how everyone has made me feel so welcome and it's like a family'

Volunteer from the International Bird of Prey Centre

'The feeling of knowing that I'm part of a team I can trust and rely on and that I finally have a place that I belong'

Volunteer from ZSL Whipsnade

'I now have many close friends who are zoo keepers from around the world'

Volunteer from Paignton/ Newquay

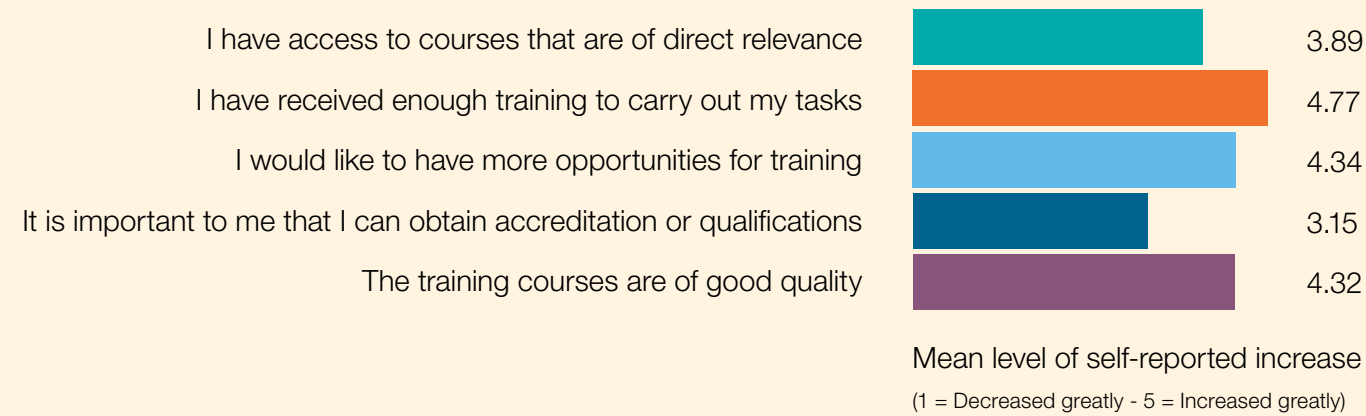
'Having a sense of belonging and pride in the organisation'

Volunteer from RZSS

SUPPORT AND TRAINING

The importance of staff with the skills to nurture, support and challenge volunteers to develop through volunteering was evident from the feedback. While this role was frequently undertaken by a member of staff with multiple responsibilities, it is the ability to provide personal support to volunteers and the commitment to helping them develop, rather than any particular job title, which helps volunteers to flourish. A large proportion of the feedback paid tribute to the support they had been offered from members of staff, particularly those who coordinate the volunteers.

86% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that they feel they are valued and 87% agreed or strongly agreed that they get support when they need it.



CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine the impact of volunteering on volunteers within zoos and other animal collections around the UK, with the specific aim of assessing the extent to which volunteering impacts on well-being, personal development and social skills.

On its own, the one off nature of this analysis provides a strong foundation of evidence that volunteering within these animal collections is having a range of positive impacts on volunteers.

Volunteering in zoos has wider benefits than simply increasing the operational capacity of zoos to deliver their conservation, education and research activities. There are significant positive self-reported impacts on the volunteers themselves, specifically in relation to increases in human and social capital and for young volunteers.

Further research into the specific benefits to volunteers, and the factors within the design of volunteer programmes that lead to them, could enable zoos to develop their volunteer recruitment and programmes to enhance these benefits.

Tracking volunteer participants over time would allow collections to better quantify the impact over a longer period.

These findings are critical in informing how we support our volunteers across all collections and how we nurture these essential attributes when establishing and supporting new volunteer roles and programmes.

Understanding and articulating the many impacts that emerge from the process of volunteering is of considerable importance if these are to continue to flourish. This research has been able to add some important perspectives on this subject, most notably;

- The research has identified a range of personal and social skills that volunteers acquire through volunteering. In particular, these focus upon increased self-confidence and self-esteem, improved communication skills, and the ability to work with other people more effectively. Many volunteers also developed a range of practical skills related to their specific areas of volunteering.
- The research found that volunteering can affect people's lives at a range of levels. Some volunteers provided powerful evidence about how volunteering has provided an opportunity to turn their lives around.
- This research has shown that there is a wider wellbeing and social benefit too.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

The research has highlighted a number of best practices which volunteers value and often praise.

**Organisational commitment and understanding**

- ensure high-level, strategic buy-in
- ensure suitable levels of funding and resources are invested
- ensure volunteering is recognised as a cost-effective, but not cost-free, activity
- ensure the unique attributes of volunteering and the value it adds is promoted by all staff

**Volunteer support**

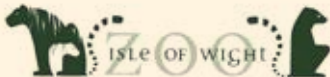
- ensure sufficient training is provided to prepare volunteers in their role
- in public interpretation roles, adequately communicate the learning process and how volunteers should engage and interact with visitors
- introduce new volunteers to staff and other volunteers
- ensure line managers and volunteer supervisors are available to volunteers when needed
- make sure any personal issues are dealt with professionally, sensitively and confidentially, and that there are procedures in place for resolving problems
- provide non-obligatory opportunities for volunteers to get together socially

**Relations between staff and volunteers**

- develop volunteer roles that add value and ensure there is sufficient delineation between staff and volunteer roles
- create informal opportunities for interactions between staff and volunteers

# THANKS

Many thanks to the following collections and their volunteers for their support during the research



Calderglen Zoo



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Volunteer from RZSS

