

## 1. Introduction by Zoo Manager

The Zoo is many things to many people, but has core functions that include;

- Conservation
- Education
- Welfare
- Scientific Study
- Research and care of Native Species and habitats
- Community activities

### Conservation

The Zoo is involved in 61 local or global captive breeding programs, and has a long history of supporting a number of “in-situ” conservation projects including species native to Northern Ireland including;

- Barn Owls
- White tailed Sea Eagles
- Red Squirrels

From Asia, the Zoo supports conservation projects for;

- Asian elephants
- Visayan Warty Pigs
- Francois Moloch Gibbons
- Tree kangaroos
- Red Pandas

Other species include Madagascan and African Primates including Sifaka, Lemurs, and Lowland Gorillas and South American primates ( Brazil and Colombia)

Zoos such as Belfast Zoo do important work in terms of education and captive breeding programmes.

Many of the resident animals came to Belfast Zoo for welfare reasons. Belfast Zoo is a retirement home for elephants, including one female which belongs to the German Government. She had been badly treated by a German circus, and was living in terrible conditions before being cared for by dedicated staff at Belfast Zoo who have cared for both her physical and psychological needs. The original Sea Lion group came to Belfast Zoo from the Californian Marine Rescue Sanctuary as they had all been blinded from shootings by local fishermen. One of the original group lived in Belfast Zoo for 23 years.

Belfast Zoo has always provided placement opportunities for students involved in animal related studies and other students involved in environmental studies. The Zoo has traditionally supported activities for people with long-term employment issues, as well as people with disabilities and learning difficulties. In the period September to November 2016 the Zoo provided around 50 placement opportunities.

Native Species - The Zoo has had a very proactive native species group for many years. We have our annual native species weekend and work closely with many local groups, trusts and government bodies (NIEA, Ulster Wildlife, NI Bat group, Belfast Hills, Ulster Museum etc.)

The zoo has helped to rehome injured hedgehogs and re-homed confiscated red squirrels and Barn owls. The zoo through donations has helped with surveys of wild Barn owls providing educational material and nest boxes. The zoo is part of the Red Squirrel Forum and through this organisation working with other interested partners has been able to release Red Squirrels back to the wild. We are privileged to have one of only two junior bat clubs in the UK based at Belfast Zoo; this is run by the NIbat group. We have many exciting native species projects with Bees coming in 2017.

Research - The Zoo has always encouraged academic research both locally and globally, and in the last three years there has been 26 animal related research projects conducted at Belfast Zoo.

## **2. Discussions related to presentation by V4**

### **Recognising the wider value to multiple organisations (and potential funding partners)**

- a) Tourism Northern Ireland / Visit Belfast etc.
- b) Local businesses
- c) Education sector

### **Future Vision**

A Zoo to be proud of and which offers the highest possible standards of animal welfare. Making a major contribution to the wider Belfast Agenda

### **Financial requirements**

- a) A Zoo that is affordable and sustainable, and is capable of generating enough income to fund a re-investment programme to deliver the Future Vision
- b) Connected to the City Offer
- c) Accessible for transport
- d) Very low secondary spend at present
- e) Benchmarks indicate relatively low numbers of visits for Zoo of this size with low income generally
- f) Benchmarks show high levels of operating costs (staffing as %age of income etc.)

### **Need to get the balance right between;**

- a) Welfare
- b) Research and Conservation
- c) Education
- d) Visitor experience (excitement, entertainment and value for money)

### **Operations that provide opportunities for**

- a) Volunteers

- b) Students (schools to post graduates)
- c) Research

### **Zoo facilities that have;**

- a) Improved attractions for facilities
- b) Features which appeal to teenagers
- c) An experience which is constantly improving and changing to ensure it remains attractive for repeat visits by local people

### **Customer comments**

Generally, very good reports of customer experience (Trip Advisor etc.)

Frequent adverse comments about;

- a) the steepness (for young children etc.)
- b) poor catering facilities
- c) empty enclosures (perception)
- d) poor signage and interpretative materials
- e) need for more guides / volunteers
- f) need for investment generally
- g) poor public transport to Zoo

Frequent positive comments about;

- a) Friendly staff
- b) Value for money – low admission fees
- c) Some very rare species

### **Improvement ideas**

- Better internal transport – up the hill and around the Zoo – like the old train
- Marketing the benefits of the hill – tremendous views over the zoo landscape
- Important to recognise that a successful Zoo requires a constant programme of investment and improvement (refreshing the offer every year)
- More "experiences" – keeper for the day etc.
- Better programming of feeding times (higher visibility for visitors)

### **Welfare considerations**

- Need to recognise that not everyone agrees with keeping exotic animals in captivity
- Some argue that the Zoo should evolve into a facility that only keeps native European species and is re-focused on returning animals to the wild and protecting species which are endangered in the region
- Welfare and conservation must be of the highest possible standards
- Need to demonstrate level of activities in programmes that relate to species in their natural habitats

### **Floral Hall**

- Eyesore in current condition – at the entrance to the zoo for all to see
- Fantastic facility with real heritage and cultural significance to Belfast

NOTES from members' workshop – Belfast Zoo

- In need of major investment
- Can be a highly valuable asset to the Zoo in the long term
- With major investment, could provide first class facilities for conferences, celebrations and events