

26 June 2017

Belfast Zoo to hold first sensory day!

On 30 June 2018 Belfast Zoo will hold its first ever 'sensory day'! This new event will allow visitors on the autism spectrum (or with other sensory requirements), their family and friends to enjoy a 'zooper' day out in a stress-free environment.

The zoo will open an hour early, at 9am, to allow visitors to enter before the busy crowds which peak at lunchtime. Early opening will allow families to explore the sights and sounds of the zoo in a calm and relaxed atmosphere, without the typical noise and crowds that can be challenging for children and adults with sensory needs. If visitors can't make it to the zoo for early opening, and there is a queue in the visitor centre on arrival, visitors with sensory requirements can enjoy a fast track queue system throughout the day.

There will be fun for all the family as visitors can visit their favourite animals at feeding time, learn about species biology at touch tables and find out more about the animals the zoo cares for and the work they do at the keeper talks. The enchanting kingdom of Hullabaloo will be brought to life with live action storytelling and a selection of puppets, props and scenery with Mr Hullabaloo's interactive children's theatre, suitable for children with sensory requirements. The zoo will also be joined by the team from Mini Explorers for interactive, animal-themed sensory play. Visitors who require some 'quiet time' can avail of a calm dark den with sensory lighting, or take time out in quiet zones found throughout the zoo.

Zoo manager, Alyn Cairns, explains "We are committed to providing a family-focused experience that is supportive and enjoyable for visitors with sensory needs. The zoo is not only a vital educational resource for children but it is

also a fantastic day out and a great opportunity to create memories as a family. We want to play an active role in making inclusivity the norm in Northern Ireland and to making the zoo a welcoming day out for everyone.”

Alyn continues “Following the success of the ‘quiet hours’ that we ran in 2017, the zoo team completed Autism Awareness training with Autism NI which allowed us to identify other ways to improve the zoo experience and inspired the development of a range of other resources, aimed at supporting families during the planning process and during their visit. Not only did this training drive the decision to run a sensory day but it also led to the creation of a downloadable visual guide which has received great feedback. This guide is designed to let visitors know in advance what they can expect from their trip to the zoo and plan accordingly to minimise any potential stress. However, this is just the start of our plans and we will continue to make improvements. We look forward to welcoming everyone to the zoo for our first ever sensory day.”

For more information on accessibility at the zoo visit www.belfastzoo.co.uk/accessibility, email events@belfastzoo.co.uk or call 028 9077 6277.

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Notes to editors

- Belfast Zoological Gardens is owned and operated by Belfast City Council.
- Belfast Zoo is open daily from 10am, last admission is 5pm and the zoo closes at 6pm.
- Belfast Zoological Gardens is a recognised World Host visitor attraction.
- Belfast Zoo aims to provide a ZOOPER experience for everyone. You can find out more about the zoo's accessibility at www.belfastzoo.co.uk/accessibility.
- Belfast Zoological Gardens has recently received the TripAdvisor Certificate of Excellence.
- Visitors can enjoy a ZOOPER day out at Belfast Zoo with:
 - a daily schedule of animal feeding times;
 - visitor photography base camp;
 - a visit to all of the latest zoo babies;
 - the chance to support the conservation work that Belfast Zoo carries out.
- You can now keep up to date with Belfast Zoo news at:
 - www.belfastzoo.co.uk
 - www.facebook.com/belfastzoo
 - www.twitter.com/belfastzoo

For further information, contact:

Cathy Galway, Marketing officer
galwayc@belfastcity.gov.uk
028 9077 6277 ext. 207

Niamh Donnelly, Marketing assistant (industrial placement student)
donnellyn@belfastcity.gov.uk
028 9077 6277 ext 229