



ZSL Zoos and Conservation Careers Conference 2024

Follow Up Information



Thank you for attending the ZSL Zoos and Conservation Careers Conference 2024.

Enclosed here you will find some useful follow up information to help you with the next steps on your career journey.

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Recorded Talks from the 2024 ZSL Career Conference

Recordings of careers talks from the 2024 ZSL Careers Conference can be found on YouTube through the links below. Click the section title, or specific talk, to navigate straight to that person's talk.

1. *What about Zoo-* Animal Care and Veterinary Sciences Panel

d. [Conor Darke](#) [Zookeeper](#)

a. [Jim Mackie](#) [Behaviour & Training Officer](#)

c. [Stefan Saverimuttu](#) [Veterinary Officer](#)

b. [Q&A](#)

2. *Where the wild things are* – Conservation Science Panel

a. [Annabel Hughes](#) [Research Assistant](#)

b. [Fergus Campbell](#) [Sustainable Finance Advisor](#)

c. [Heidi Ma](#) [Postdoctoral Research Assistant](#)

d. [Q&A](#)

3. *Getting into the Industry* – Senior Manager Panel Q&A

[Full Panel Discussion](#)

Bonus Talks from our Previous Careers Conference

Animal Care	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Aquarist •Curator of Mammals •Evidence Based Animal Care Manager
Veterinary and Wildlife Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Veterinary Officer •Veterinary Nurse •Wildlife Veterinarian
Wildlife Conservation & Science	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Research Fellow •Sustainable Business Project Analyst •PhD Student •Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Specialist
Alternative Conservation Careers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Learning Officer •Horticulturalist •Engagement Officer

Key helpful links

How to become a Zookeeper	Find out more on our ZSL Careers Pages	<u>Click here</u>
Apprenticeships at ZSL	Find out more about apprenticeships at ZSL	<u>Click here</u>
BIAZA	The British and Irish Association of Zoos and Aquariums – a great place to look for jobs, volunteering and work experience opportunities.	<u>Click here</u>
How to become a Vet	Find out more on our ZSL Careers Pages	<u>Click here</u>
Day in the Life of A Veterinary Nurse	Here about what the ZSL Vet Nurses get up to in their day-to-day	<u>Click here</u>
RVC Gateway Course	The Royal Veterinary College run an excellent gateway course to support student who want to study Vet Med but might not otherwise meet the entry requirements	<u>Click here</u>
RVC Veterinary Nursing	Find out more about the RVC’s Vet Nurse courses	<u>Click here</u>
ZSL MSc in Wild Animal Health	ZSL runs two world-class specialist MSc courses, in collaboration with the RVC. Wild Animal Health is aimed at qualified veterinarians looking to move into wildlife veterinary	<u>Click here</u>

ZSL MSc in Wild Animal Biology	Our second MSc is run alongside Wild Animal Health, aimed at wildlife researchers interested in learning more about wild animal health and conservation	Click here
PhD Research at the IoZ	Find out more about postgraduate study in ZSL's Institute of Zoology	Click here
ZSL Citizen Science Opportunities	Get involved with ZSL's conservation work	Click here
ZSL Fellowship	Become one of ZSL's Fellows, a community of thousands shaping the future of conservation	Click here
The ZSL Youth Advisory Board	Find out more about the work of ZSL's Youth Advisory Board	Click here
Volunteering at ZSL	All you need to know about volunteering with ZSL	Click here

Places to look for experience

Animal Care	Veterinary	Conservation and science
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Local aquariums - The local sites of large conservation charities like WWT, National Trust or the RSPB - Small, local grass roots organisations. Doing something local will connect you to conservation and gain an insight into wild ecology. - Animal Rescue Centres - Cat and dog rehoming centres - Local veterinary practices - Farms - City Zoos - Stables - Dog Kennels 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Local veterinary practices - Equine and farm animal vets- often only take students over 18 years for insurance reasons. - Farms generally, especially to get lambing and dairy experience - Horse riding schools - Animal rescue shelters (for pets or wildlife) - Dog kennels 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Local wildlife groups- sometimes the best opportunities are with a small group of people managing a tiny woodland on the edge of a city. - Local bat groups, amphibian/reptile groups, or botany groups if you want survey skills. - Local wildlife rescue centres - Your local ecological records centre (every part of the country has one) to get data handling and administrative experience. - Search online for remote jobs tagging camera trap images/footage to work on identification skills, or writing for different website or blogs. - Create your own opportunities. Social media is a great way to find and engage with communities of people interested in wildlife - Even just starting your own nature-themed blog counts as really valuable science communication experience.

Key Career Questions

These FAQs have been compiled through questions asked at both the February & October 2024 Careers Conferences, answered by speakers and careers staff. If you have any further questions we can help with, do get in touch at workexperience@zsl.org

Animal Care

Q1 For someone that doesn't have any formal experience in animal care, where would be the best place to start?

If you want to get into the animal care industry, the most important thing you can do is to get some practical, hands-on experience under your belt. Many zoos have volunteer roles you can do but this doesn't just have to be in zoos. Look at animal rescue centres, dog and cat shelters, even pet shops, as all will provide you with some transferable practical experience.

Q2 What qualifications do you need to get into the animal industry? Do you need a university degree?

You don't need a university degree to get into the animal care industry, practical experience is arguably a more important thing to seek. However, you could get this through an animal care course at college or a university degree in animal management. Look out for courses that can provide this hands on experience. If you don't want to go to university, you can train on the job, through a [keeper and aquarist apprenticeship](#) or a [DMZAA](#).

However, if you want to go into other more science focused roles in the animal industry, like welfare research, nutrition or behaviour, a degree and post graduate study is becoming more and more valued.

Q3 What A-Levels might you need for these roles? Do you have to have science? Would a college course be enough?

To get onto a Zookeeper and Aquarist Apprenticeship, like the one run at ZSL, the only prior qualifications required are Level 2 (GCSE) Maths and English. What's more important is some practical experience in animal care. One way to gain this is through an animal care course at college, which you will typically need at least 3 GCSEs, including Maths and English, to access.

To study animal care or management at university, science A-Levels can be useful.

Q4 What apprenticeships would you suggest to get into the animal industry?

ZSL runs a Level 3 Zookeeper and Aquarist Apprenticeship with Capel Manor, which trains you in all the key skills needed to work in animal care. Apprentices learn how to assist and adhere to the animal department's best practice protocols and procedures in relation to animal husbandry and welfare as well as providing everyday care and husbandry of the animals within the collection.

Q5 What skills or characteristics are useful in an animal care role?

There are so many useful skills! Being adaptable, practical, observant and determined are all things that will help in an animal care role.

Also, there are many skills people don't expect to be useful but are vital when working in zoos, such as: visitor engagement, presentation skills, communication, computer skills, budget management, customer service & supervisory skills. Knowledge on how to use DIY equipment, such as drills and saws can be vital in animal care when working on enclosures.

An understanding of the role of a modern zoo and what organisations they work with will also be helpful.

Q6 In CV's and covering letters, what would stand out most?

Make sure your application is clear, concise and tailored to the job you're applying for. Diverse experiences and a wide range of skills also helps make someone stand out - make sure you include any vocational qualifications that could help in the role, such as scuba diving, as well as that key practical hands on experience with animals. Explaining your understanding of the role of a modern zoo can also make a candidate stand out.

Q7 What is the best way to get good work experience and CV skills without breaking the bank?

This is definitely challenging and a barrier many face. Part-time jobs in pet shops or farm parks or any similar animal organisations can be a perfect way to gain experience in work. Another tip is to make sure you are taking the widest view possible on what could be helpful experience, in terms of types of organisations, but also where you're looking. For example, our keeper Luke looked for internships abroad and ended up doing an MSc at the University of Padua while working abroad, which was more affordable and adaptable around work than a UK based alternative.

Q8 Is it possible to specialise in more than one species of you are interested in multiple groups?

Jobs in animal care tend to be focused on one particular species group - for example, at London Zoo, roles may be on one of the following teams: Ectotherms, Tropical Birds, Penguins & Flying Birds, Hoofstock, Small Mammals or Primates & Predators. However, across your career, you can move between teams to apply your transferable skills and learn more specifically about the care of different groups.

Q9 What roles within the animal care sector are more accessible, if zookeeping often requires you to have high physical fitness?

Working as a zookeeper can be a very physically demanding job, with many tasks requiring a certain level of stamina and physical fitness. For example, it requires you being on your feet for much of the day, moving wheelbarrows of animal waste or equipment around, and lifting a certain amount of weight. Depending on the animal section, roles will require different abilities. For example our hoofstock teams tend to deal with more animal waste than other teams, our small mammals team need to be comfortable getting into small enclosures to clean them out, and our invertebrate keepers need to be able to tolerate working in warm, humid conditions for much of the day. The specific physical requirements of the role should be outlined on the job description – if they're not, reach out and ask.

There are also plenty of animal care supporting roles that are more accessible than zookeeping. Animal behaviour and training roles, zoo-based research roles, animal nutrition officers & animal move coordinators are all roles that support the care of our animals but are less physical.

Beyond animal care itself, there are a huge number of more accessible roles within zoos and conservation to consider, including: conservation education, enclosure design, science communication, marketing, events and many more. Many of these jobs also include flexible working, enabling some days worked from home.

Q10 What is job security typically like? (Short term positions, temporary, etc)

Many keepers at ZSL have worked here for years. However, commonly many of the entry level or starter jobs can be fixed term - for example, our apprenticeship is a two-year fixed term contract. If you already have experience, you may be able to apply for a temporary seasonal contract, as many of

these are recruited each year. These are both great places to start as often many move from these roles into permanent positions.

Q11 Is there money in the zoo industry?

Though the pay in animal care sector isn't high compared to other industries, the job satisfaction achieved from caring for incredible species and playing a key role in their conservation makes up for this for many people in the sector. Zookeeper roles at ZSL may range from around £17,000 starting salary up to around £40,000 for a team leader.

Q12 How would you find ethical organisations to work with?

BIAZA is the professional body representing zoos and aquariums across the UK and Ireland. Members to BIAZA are dedicated to achieving the highest standards of animal care, to conserving the natural world through research and conservation and to education and inspiring their visitors. If an organisation is a member of BIAZA, you can be comfortable that it is committed to these goals.

Q13 Any advice for those who have taken career breaks or are older career changers looking to get into animal care and conservation?

Career breaks or coming to the sector later in life can certainly be challenging, particularly when trying to gain relevant experience if you're working full time in a different career. However, there are no such things as wasted skills. Whether it is customer care or having time off to look after your family - you will have all the more to contribute. Don't underestimate what you can offer that other (maybe younger) candidates may not be able to – dealing with challenging situations, managing crisis, a mature and calm approach or experience with supervising staff...

Q14 How relevant is a masters degree to becoming an animal behavioural specialist?

Due to competition for roles and need for specialist training/skills, it is increasingly important for applicants to any zoo science role (including behavioural specialist) to have a postgraduate qualification. Some zoos will require a PhD for specialist science roles.

There are a range of taught (MSc) and research-focussed (ResM/MRes) options that cater to a range of specialist interests available, depending on how specialist you would like to become. N.B. although animal behaviour is the most common type of zoo research carried out, roles focussing specifically on this subject within the UK are rare, so as an entry level opportunity it may be sensible to investigate more generalist research opportunities initially.

Q15 What sort of zoo-based research positions are available? How do you go about getting into one?

There is a lot of variety of zoo research roles, depending on the size/scope (mission statement etc.) of the zoo in question. Every zoo in the UK must have a named member of staff responsible for zoo-based research, though often this is integrated into another role e.g. head keeper, curator etc. However the number of research-specific roles is increasing, as the strategic and conservation importance of research in zoos is recognised.

Where zoos have research roles, they may be generalist across all areas of zoo science; or in larger zoos you may have more specialist roles e.g. nutrition, behaviour & welfare etc.

Our advice is to build skills through formal training (academic degrees), but also through research experience e.g. research assistant roles, volunteering, publishing student research projects etc. It is also helpful to engage with zoo research networks within your zoo community e.g. the BIAZA Research Committee is active and provides resources and runs events throughout the year like their annual conference to share projects and experiences. www.biaza.org.uk/research

Q16 How would a student in university go about getting permission to do independent research in a zoo?

The best route is to contact your nearby zoo(s) where it will be practical for you to carry out your project, or speak to lecturers and potential supervisors at your university to see if there are already existing research relationships with a zoo in place. All zoos will have some form of process for enquiring/applying to carry out a project, and may be able to provide you with a list of research questions or topics of most interest to them (these are the subjects to apply to do, as they are most likely to be impactful and get zoo support). For example, ZSL has a webpage which provides our Zoo Research Policy and Project Application Form; as well as an email address to submit the application to.

It may also be useful for you to consider research priorities highlighted by zoo associations e.g. BIAZA, to determine which areas will be of most value to the zoo community (and most likely to produce impactful research).

Animal Care - College Progression Routes

Land-based colleges (and some other colleges) offer many different animal-related qualifications for 16-18 year olds and adults. Whatever your current qualification level, there is a course for you!

Level 1 Vocational Studies

Entry Requirements:
3 GCSEs at grades 9-1 ideally including Maths and English.

Level 2 Animal Care

Entry Requirements:
3 GCSEs at grades 9-3 ideally including Maths and English and a keen interest in animal care.

OR

Level 1 Vocational studies

Level 3 Animal Management

Entry Requirements:
4 GCSEs at grades 9-4 including maths and English and a keen interest in animal management.

OR

Level 2 Animal Care

Foundation Degree (FdSc) Animal Management

Entry Requirements:
Vary between colleges but usually include Level 3 Animal Management OR A-levels in related subjects (e.g. science).

AND

GCSE English and maths at grade 4 minimum

Land-based colleges around north London include:

- **Capel Manor College** (Enfield)
- **Oaklands College** (St Albans)
- **Shuttleworth College** (Bedfordshire) - student residential accommodation available + work experience at Whipsnade Zoo

Trainee Keeper Routes – on the job training

At ZSL – Keeper & Aquarist Apprenticeship

- Run by ZSL and Capel Manor College
- Two-year, full-time contract
- Level 3 Apprenticeship with 20% off the job training
- Might include: assisting with preparing animals' meals, cleaning and maintaining exhibits or helping out with animal husbandry in other areas.
- Essential entry requirements:
 - 16+
 - Level 2 English and Maths (pass at GCSE level)
 - **Practical experience working with animals**
 - Willingness to learn
 - Ability to demonstrate initiative

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Not needed for some seasonal roles, but often required to progress...

At other collections – The DMZAA

- Run by BIAZA & Shuttleworth College
- Two-year, carried out while in full time employment
- Level 3 Diploma in Management of Zoo and Aquarium Animals, run through self-directed distance learning.
- Covers: assisting with preparing animals' meals, cleaning and maintaining exhibits or helping out with animal husbandry in other areas.
- Essential entry requirements:
 - 16+
 - Level 2 English and Maths (pass at GCSE level)
 - **Practical experience working with animals**
 - Willingness to learn
 - Ability to demonstrate initiative

These two qualifications are equivalent. ZSL was part of the development of the apprenticeship, aimed at bringing zookeeping in line with other industries.

Veterinary Care and Wildlife Health

Q1 What is the difference between a vet nurse and a vet officer?

Just like with doctors and nurses in human medicine, veterinary officers/surgeons and veterinary nurses are both highly valuable professions with different roles and responsibilities.

Vet officers will diagnose and treat ill or injured animals, and the vet nurse will support this work and be responsible for providing the ongoing care or treatment for the individuals.

If you are more interested in problem solving and have a very scientific mind, a vet officer role may be the way for you, where as if you are more interested in nurturing, caring and rehabilitating animals, vet nursing may be the route you take. However, vet nurses will also be skilled in undertaking diagnostic tests, medical treatments and minor surgical procedures, under veterinary direction.

Q2 Can I get into veterinary medicine at uni from a Level 3 Animal Management BTEC?

The only route into veterinary medicine is to study a vet med degree. Many universities will accept a L3 Animal Management qualification as an entry qualification, as an alternative to A Levels or other qualification, but you will also require a number of hours of work experience to apply. This varies between courses, but is typically around 70 hours in a veterinary practice and 70 hours outside of this working with animals.

Q3 How do you become a Zoo Vet? Do most Vets working in zoos start out in general practice?

Zoo veterinarians achieve the same training to undergraduate level as all vets, focusing mainly on domestic animals, followed by registering with the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons. After this, they need to continue training in order to specialise in exotics and zoological medicine, through placements and voluntary work in the sector.

However, it is recommended that all zoo vets start off by working in a general practice for a few years to really establish their core skills and learn how to compare and contrast different animal species.

Q4 What qualifications do you need to do vet nursing and how long is it?

There are a number of ways you can get into veterinary nursing. You can either:

- Do a foundation degree or full undergraduate degree in veterinary nursing at University
- Study a Level 3 Diploma in Veterinary Nursing at College
- Carry out a Veterinary Nursing Level 3 Advanced Apprenticeship whilst in a practice.

Find out more about these routes through the [National Careers Service Website](#).

Q5 Is it possible to become a vet without chemistry a level?

If you want to become a veterinary officer/surgeon, chemistry can be really important to understand the scientific aspect of the Vet med degree course. However, if veterinary nursing is more your interest, not all routes necessitate chemistry, though it can help.

Q6 Do you have any advice for getting voluntary work in a veterinary practice?

We strongly recommend turning up in person at a vet practice to ask for volunteering experience, as this proves that you are interested and committed. You can even take a cover letter and copy of your CV to leave with them to further show how serious you are. Make it clear that you are happy to help in any way - a lot of the early experience involves cleaning, but being willing to do this makes people more likely to let you observe the fun bits like consultations and surgery.

Q7 What advice do you have for getting into zoo residency programmes?

All you can do is build your skills and keep applying. Any experience you can get working with zoo animals will be great, even if this is as a keeper volunteer or seasonal zookeeper. If you can find a job at a practice that services a small zoo, or has an exotics specialist on the staff, that's even better.

Outside of that, publications and conference presentations are a big selling point, even if it's not zoo/wildlife related.

Q8 What is a good way to get experience working with zoo animals as a veterinary student?

Part time zookeeping or working at a wildlife hospital doing husbandry can all be really valuable.

Don't underestimate the value of gaining experience working with birds and reptiles, even small 'common' species, as these skills and ways of thinking are all transferable to more iconic 'zoo' animals.

Most importantly, as a vet student the thing that is going to benefit you the most in getting to do clinical work with zoo animals is making sure your clinical skills are as honed as they can be, so no time working with domestic animals is wasted!

Q9 What's the best way to get into conservation as a new vet med grad? What job positions should I look for?

If you want to work as a vet in conservation, your best bet is to work first in a vet practice (possibly exotics or a wildlife hospital if you can, but small animals, equine or farm would all be fine) for at least 6-12 months to develop your basic surgical and medical skills. Then you may need to volunteer in a wildlife rescue centre or conservation project to start building experience.

Many people also do a postgraduate qualification such as Wild Animal Health or Conservation Medicine to then develop their skills and how they would apply to working with wildlife.

Just a warning that you may need to be patient if you are looking for a wildlife veterinarian job in the UK - you tend to only see up to five positions per year. However if you are willing to relocate, especially to the USA, that will give you more opportunities.

Conservation

Q1 What are the key skills that are important in conservation?

1. Stakeholder/relationship management and perspective: the ability to see a situation from multiple different angles. You might intuitively understand why and agree with the reasons for a project being undertaken, but how might the landowner/local community/council/certain protestor groups (etc.) feel about it? Being able to bring people from different teams, backgrounds, organisations, and sectors, onboard to the same idea - and making them all feel heard - is vital.
2. Communication: the ability to talk to different stakeholders as well as being able to communicate your findings to a broad audience, especially through digital media such as blog posts or social media; distilling the science to its core messages. Even being able to communicate your own skills/experience/interests on a CV can put you ahead of the rest in terms of getting a job initially.
3. Critical thinking: identifying biases and addressing them, this will always improve the quality of your work.
4. Survey skills: having any survey experience at all is a great start. Look into volunteering or survey shadowing with your local bat group, amphibian/reptile group, or botany group (almost everywhere has one if you look hard enough!)
5. Some surprising skills can come in handy too. Professor Sarah Durant wishes she'd learnt earlier how to fix a broken down vehicle (which can be a common occurrence during field work!). Alison Debney, our Conservation Lead for Ecosystem Recovery, says that digital skills can be surprisingly

useful – photography, blogging, web design and social media skills can be a real asset when communicating their work.

6. The skills currently at most demand in the sector include quantitative skills like coding, computational modelling and computer analytics, as these have a great deal of transferability across many parts of the sector. Additionally: social sciences, due to the increasing focus on working with people; economics, looking at finance and how to incorporate biodiversity value; technology, and how to create new technologies to support large scale conservation impact.
7. For field work in the UK, a driving license can be necessary to get to and from otherwise difficult to reach areas.
8. Knowing how to use specific systems like GIS (Geographic Information System – used to create, manage, analyse, and map all types of data) and R (statistical analysis software) can help your CV stand out too.

Q2 Any advice for someone doing a subject like psychology at uni but interested in moving into conservation?

Conservation is increasingly becoming multi-disciplinary, for example psychologists have an extensive knowledge of human behaviour which could be used in conservation when designing questionnaires to assess the wellbeing of Indigenous and local communities. So sell what you already know (scientific rigor, experimental design, social science etc) when applying to job, and find ways to evidence your passion for conservation through volunteering and reading up on conservation (books, news websites etc).

Additionally, employers are often more interested in the academic skills you learnt during a degree than your subject knowledge. Doing a degree in any scientific subject (and even plenty of arts subjects) will teach you how to research a topic, write a report, interpret and analyse data, etc. These skills can outweigh simple subject knowledge, which you can develop yourself through research and reading.

Q3 Any advice for someone who is career changing as a mature student? Particularly from something not wildlife related?

You will have a huge number of transferable skills that could be extremely valuable in conservation - seek out jobs that meet your current skill set and experience. Are you well suited to fundraising, AI/tech, marketing, HR, IT, retail, corporate partnerships etc? We tend to think of conservation simply as field work (setting up camera traps, talking to communities, putting collars on elephants...) but there is a huge amount of work that goes into projects for years before any of those activities take place, and it requires a huge team of people with lots of different skills.

Also, increasingly we're seeing companies advertise for 'sustainability' or 'corporate social responsibility' or 'ESG' roles, due to the market and reputational risks of not running a sustainable business – if you are business/finance orientated then this may be a route to go down.

Q4 How do you deal with the difficult parts of your job, of watching the effects of climate change and continuing conservation efforts despite that?

If anything, that is motivation to keep on going! There are plenty of conservation success stories out there to draw inspiration from too, but they might require a bit more searching.

As a conservationist, you are a small part of a much larger movement for which we all must be advocates. No one person can save the world, but each of us have the power to contribute to a larger movement.

Q5 What's the best way to start learning and gaining experience in surveying/wildlife/fieldwork in the UK?

Get some volunteering in with local survey groups. These are not always advertised well, or at all, so try getting in contact with people and asking how you can help. Organisations like Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Trust, Bat Conservation Trust, People's Trust for Endangered Species & The Mammal Society could be good websites to look at for opportunities or contacts.

In terms of courses, there are loads of free online courses for species identification, GIS, and basic coding skills for data analysis. There are also paid for courses on more specialised or vocational skills like bat survey techniques/laws/etc. and thermal imaging. Spending a little bit of money on more in-depth courses like this can show that you are really dedicated to a career (and will complement hands-on learning), but its not essential! And keep an eye out for discounts that come up frequently.

Finally, consider getting a first aid qualification if you want to work in a fieldwork role as few people do this and it can make you a really useful addition to a team.

Conservation is not just about biology!

A conservation biologist might work on:

Computation and maths to build predictive models



The relationship between people and wildlife



The value of nature to the economy



Working with law enforcement agencies



Emerging disease and wildlife health



Studying an animal's natural history in the field



Liaising with government officials about policy changes



What skills are needed to be a conservationist?

Related skills and subjects:

Computation and maths to build predictive models

Computer science, coding

The relationship between people and wildlife

Sociology, psychology

The value of nature to the economy

Economics, business

Working with law enforcement agencies

Law

Emerging disease and wildlife health

Epidemiology, veterinary

Studying an animal's natural history in the field

Biology, ecology, conservation

Liaising with government officials about policy changes

Politics, law,

What type of conservation biologist do you want to be...?

See our accompanying documents for outlines of our volunteering roles & tips for CVs, cover letters and interviews.