

5 Year Report

British & Irish Association of Zoos & Aquariums
Elephant Welfare Group

May 2016



1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Scope of the report:

This report focusses solely on the welfare of elephants in captivity in the UK¹. It does not engage in debate over the potential conservation, education or research roles of those elephants, or the wider implications of such debate.

The Elephant Welfare Group (EWG) is a multi-stakeholder group, formed in 2010 in response to concerns (particularly Clubb & Mason, 2008, Clubb et al., 2009 and Harris et al., 2008) about the welfare of elephants in captivity in the UK. The British and Irish Association of Zoos and Aquariums (BIAZA), having convened an Elephant Welfare Group, was tasked by the Government Animal Welfare Minister, Lord Henley, to extend and administer the EWG with the remit to *“drive forward a programme of improvements, encourage co-ordination, develop and share husbandry advice and good practice, and monitor progress. I should say that such is my concern about the welfare of elephants in UK zoos that I have not ruled out the option of looking at the scope for phasing out the keeping of elephants in the UK in the future if there is little or no evidence of improved welfare.”*

Harris et al. (2008), a multi-stakeholder commissioned report, highlighted foot health, gait, excess weight and stereotypic behaviour as the main indicators of poor welfare. Clubb and Mason (2002) had already highlighted the issues of reduced longevity and poor reproduction. Methodologies described by Harris et al. (2008) were not conceived for regular use by elephant keeping staff. Furthermore, as a result of the difficulty proving any statistically significant causal link between welfare concerns and housing or husbandry, the Zoos Forum recognised that *“the results were, for the most part, not such as to provide a basis for the formulation of clear and firm advice about steps necessary to tackle the problems identified. There is therefore a need to develop guidance where it does not exist already”*. Thus, these methodologies have not been adopted by the EWG. Further explanations follow in Section 3 below.

The EWG has been working, through four (now five) subgroups, on welfare concerns relating broadly to health, nutrition, reproduction and behaviour, in recognition of the findings of Harris et al. (2008). BIAZA has also carried out management and facility audits and drawn in the pre-existing BIAZA EFG, comprised of elephant keeping staff, to assist with keeper training and dissemination of information. The EFG is the key link between the EWG and those who undertake the daily care of elephants. Importantly, systems developed by the EWG in conjunction with the Elephant Focus Group (EFG), and external researchers, are all achievable and repeatable by elephant keeping staff.

Healthcare, foot care and locomotion:

The EWG has developed standard scoring systems, validated where possible with current resources, for foot health and locomotion. Both systems have practical application for elephant keeping staff and are easily repeatable and recordable for ease of long term monitoring. They have been trialled by the EFG and are now being implemented by some zoos. These studies undertaken on behalf of

¹ For the purposes of community inclusiveness and establishing an environment enabling positive change for the welfare benefit of UK elephants, the BIAZA member Dublin Zoo has been included in this report. The group at Dublin comprises eight animals, representing approximately 10% of the total UK and Irish population. However, of those eight, three are infants and have not been included in any studies. We have endeavoured to indicate where the inclusion of Dublin elephants may have given some bias to reported results.

the EWG (Vanlerberghe, 2012 & Turner, 2012) suggest that the status of UK and Irish elephants' feet and locomotion is better than previously recorded, although the methods are not directly comparable.

Feeding, nutrition and body condition:

Research undertaken (Partington et al., 2012) suggests there is a degree of over-feeding, and that the majority of elephants are above ideal body condition, but that the situation is better than previously recorded: A majority of individual elephants scored by both Harris et al. (2008) and then Partington et al. (2012) appear to have decreased towards an ideal score, although the methods are not directly comparable. General use by zoos of this body condition scoring system will allow us to drive and monitor progress towards best feeding practices (as described by BIAZA Elephant Management Guidelines), and more elephants reaching and maintaining ideal body condition.

Social and reproductive management:

A comprehensive study by the EWG demonstrates that reproductive failures (such as failure to conceive and infant mortality) in the European population are associated with social structures and management of reproductive opportunities.. The behaviour of the individual, and the social grouping, has more impact on reproductive success than do physical or physiological factors. Elephant endotheliotropic herpes virus (EEHV) is responsible for the majority of deaths in Asian elephant calves.

Behaviour and Abnormal behaviour:

The EWG has developed and validated a tool to allow zoos to assess and monitor behavioural indicators of elephant welfare. This tool was designed to be practical, rapid and easy for keepers to use, and was developed with input from elephant keepers from across the UK. Regular use of this tool should allow us to assess and monitor welfare and progress for each elephant. In addition, the EWG made an evidence-based assessment of resources of importance to elephants to inform husbandry and management guidelines, with key input from elephant keepers, zoo veterinarians, managers and curators from across the UK.

Dissemination through the Elephant Focus Group:

The EFG has, to date, run 15 elephant schools attended by 80 different keepers from collections in the UK since the inception of the EWG, in coordination with the EWG. We believe this represents the most comprehensive keeper training programme within Europe.

BIAZA management and facilities audit:

The audit questions were based on the requirements of the BIAZA 2010 Management Guidelines. Not all the requirements directly impact on the welfare of elephants, but may do so indirectly (e.g. implementation of staff training) or may facilitate the assessment of welfare (e.g. the provision of cameras to record behaviour overnight). This audit of compliance is thus a mechanism to *“develop and share husbandry advice and good practice, and monitor progress”*, as required by Lord Henley.

Collections were audited against the BIAZA Elephant Management Guidelines following the previous audit in 2010. The lowest level of compliance has risen from 71% to 85%, with an average of 92% across all elephant holders. This reflects a significant investment on the part of zoos to try and improve the facilities for, and management of, elephants in their care.

Future Work:

- Work to date has produced robust scoring systems addressing the difficulties identified in the methodologies of Harris et al. (2008). These scoring systems are now being implemented across a range of elephant facilities and their effectiveness will be evaluated.
- The EWG recommends that a) these scoring systems are embedded in the professional guidelines and in legislation to enforce their implementation, and b) an online database is established to allow collation of such data to provide an evidence base for welfare changes.
- The EWG recognises there is still work to be done to engage with all elephant holders to encourage changes needed to improve welfare. Low levels of uptake of some scoring systems are of concern as this is fundamental to the ability of the EWG to monitor change over time. Such discussion has led to the establishment of a separate subgroup (Implementation) although the EWG has no legal status to enforce uptake.
- Each subgroup has identified next research steps to be taken in order to expand the evidence base for further recommendations.
- The EWG recognises that some changes beneficial to the welfare of elephants in the UK will, inevitably, take longer to realise than the 10 year lifespan of the group. It is likely also to take longer than 10 years to demonstrate positive changes in some areas, due to the long-lived nature of the species. Thus, established programmes of improvement and monitoring must be designed to endure and evolve beyond that time.