

### Good advice, Northumberland

Maxine Bradley from the non-profit family-run zoo offers helpful advice for any Northumberland-based tourism business:

- Take action, adapt to change and build momentum
- Have a backup plan to cater for the lack of people
- Invest in social media and an online presence
- Communicate with your customers – social media is where people are
- Invest your time and energy back into the business
- Reinvest finances to freshen up your offering
- Remember the reason you started in the first place
- Keep going – it's harder to start again if you stop

Across the country, the COVID pandemic has adversely affected the tourism and hospitality sector. Visit Northumberland has championed real stories from businesses who have adapted, pivoted and triumphed to inspire others. Discover more Northumberland tourism businesses that have delivered a #goodjobnorthumberland.

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# Good job Northumberland Country Zoo





# It was so scary. We even thought about giving up.

**“We’d just built a huge restaurant café. We were about to double our staff. We’d already invested in snow leopards for our conservation programme and another £100k outlay was on the cards. We were gearing up to hit 120k visitors, so we spent all of our money knowing we would recoup it back and more in the summer. And then Easter didn’t happen.”**

Maxine Bradley’s plans for Northumberland Country Zoo were crushed as the realities of the pandemic hit in April 2020. As a non-profit family-run attraction, everything they made went straight back into running the zoo. But without people, there was no income.

“You don’t realise how much you rely on the public – it was so stressful.”

To compound her problems, furloughing staff wasn’t an option when the welfare of the animals literally depended on them. And with no financial support available, some of the toughest battles Maxine and her family faced were with themselves.

“A million jobs needed doing and animals needed looking after in so many ways. We worried about not having enough food for the animals. Some zoos were even considering euthanasia, because you can’t just send your animals elsewhere when everyone was in the same boat.







We had all of our staff relying on us for their livelihoods – we didn't want to let anyone down.

#### **Keep going**

But Maxine and her team didn't give up, and they found that the inspiration to keep going was the whole reason they started the zoo in the first place.

"We don't do it for the money. We're here to make a difference and change perception towards the environment. The people of Northumberland are amazing. They have nowhere else to learn about these animals, so we wanted to carry on and inspire them with what we do."

#### **The response**

With the public away Maxine and her team responded by making changes to how the

business had previously operated.

"We had to limit numbers and manage visitors. We had to split people into groups for distancing. So we put an online booking system in place which was great. Also, we had to diversify. We started doing social media stuff. I mastered them but had no intention to. Soon we had 70K Tik Tok followers. People can comment on the videos, meaning we still keep in touch, just not face to face. And we joined Cameo, an app where celebs can send you a personalised message – we put Ralph our racoon on there. If I can put up videos every day and gain more followers, it'll be a good little side earner."





We know we've done a good job when we've made a difference, when a school gets involved in conservation, or if someone visits us with a poor perception of zoos and we can change that and inspire them to love nature. That's why we are here.

#### **Good advice**

Although more cautious since the pandemic, Maxine insists that sitting around waiting for things to happen isn't good enough. They've learned that adapting to change, taking action and gaining momentum are key for any tourism business.

"You must have a backup plan if there are no people. Invest in social media and an online space. That's where people are. We are more on the map now than ever. It's always changing and investment is very important. Everything we took last year, we reinvested to give people new experiences, new animals, things they haven't seen before to keep people coming back. Just keep going – as soon as you stop, it's hard to get going again."

#### **Good job**

With plans to expand the 27 acres and annual visitors expected to exceed 200k in the next two years, Northumberland Country Zoo has come a long way since gaining its Zoo Licence in June 2015. But for Maxine, doing a good job is not defined by commercial success.