Our Special Friends

Promoting, preserving and providing the power of animal companionship

Volunteer Handbook

Welcome to Our Special Friends

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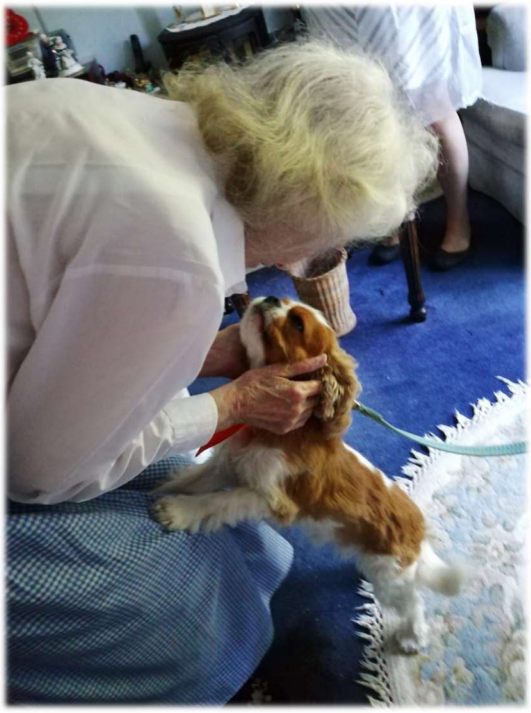
None of what we do would be possible without the ongoing commitment and support from our volunteers. Our eclectic mix of volunteers all bring individual skills and qualities enabling us to respond to the ongoing need for animal companionship support services in the area, providing invaluable support to those who need it most.

There are so many ways in which our volunteers can help. From dog walking to data input, animal visits and admin, to name but a few. We are continuously growing and identifying new areas that we need help with. We endeavour to support our volunteers to develop their confidence and skills, so if there is an area you would like to try out please let us know.

Whatever brought you to Our Special Friends, we are committed to ensuring you feel valued and supported throughout your time with us. So, if you have any questions or concerns please do get in touch with our Volunteer Support Manager for further information.

Thank you for joining the team and I look forward to meeting you.
Bin Johnston
Chief Executive

What we do



Founded in 2012, by Belinda Johnston MA VetMB MRCVS, Our Special Friends (OSF) recognises the overwhelming need for, and value of, the therapeutic bond between domestic animals and humans, improving wellbeing for all involved. Through a range of animal companionship support services, we help those wanting to find a companion animal or who need practical help with their existing companion. We also provide a volunteer visiting regularly with their own animal and support owners facing difficult decisions.

'Our Special Friends saved me worrying and helped me immediately in looking after my dog and bird. They saved my life.'

Animal-Assisted Activity

Often referred to as AAA, animal-assisted activity enables volunteers to visit vulnerable individuals, in their home, with an accompanying pet. New volunteers are supported in their initial match meeting and OSF provide a complete pet check to ensure all involved are safe.

Dog Walking

There is always a significant need for dog walking and accompanied dog walking. It is imperative that dogs receive regular exercise to enhance their wellbeing through such enrichment activities. It is often the case that our clients can provide a caring environment at home, but need help with daily exercise. This is where our volunteers do a great job! We encourage accompanied dog walking where possible to promote health and wellbeing out of their home.

Fostering and Adoption

Our Special Friends' volunteers help provide a safe and secure environment for individuals' pets during times of crisis. Volunteers offer a range of services including: short-term fostering, transport to veterinary care and, where reuniting

is not possible, permanent foster homes. We also support clients who are looking to adopt a new companion animal by helping them to define their 'ideal' match and accompanying them on the adoption journey.

Advice and Practical Support

OSF supports clients in other ways too, such as bereavement support (the loss of a pet for many being as significant a trauma as losing a relative), financial help with veterinary costs, advanced care planning to give peace of mind, being a listening ear when they need someone to talk to, supporting difficult decisions and signposting to other organisations that can help. Being founded and run by a vet, combined with an eclectic and valuable mix of skills offered by our volunteers, we can help support clients' understanding of their pets' health and welfare issues too.

We liaise with community nurses, care staff, GPs, mental health, vet practices, behaviourists, rehoming centres, other charities, friends, family and neighbours amongst others to create a local support network that recognises the importance of the human/animal bond.

In whichever way you are able to help, we thank you!

Our Volunteers

Our volunteers come in all shapes and sizes, human and four-legged! We welcome individuals from various backgrounds, with a range of skills, who are committed to supporting the power of animal companionship.

How you can help:

Helping in the community

Our volunteers are at the forefront of our service delivery. Many of these tasks are highlighted above, including dog walking, transport and pet care etc.

'Our Special Friends was the first thing I became involved…and my volunteer work has gone from my initial step moving forward with my life, to something that is definitely keeping me going. Because of my volunteering I now feel much better and I am in a position to actively look for a new job'

Fundraising

We are part of a challenging sector, whereby funding is limited and hard to come by. We are inspired by our volunteers to find innovative ways to fundraise. Tasks could include being part of a core fundraising team, collection tin management and attending events.

Spreading the word

Our volunteers use the power of their voice to spread the word, and raise awareness, of the importance of what we do. We give talks to local groups in our area, educating them about the importance of our work.

Helping in the office

We have a small staff team, based in Newmarket, who benefit hugely from the support and skills of volunteers. There is always something to do whether it be remotely or in office. Any help is welcomed and we encourage our volunteers to pop in and see us when they are in the area.

Getting the most from volunteering

What you can expect from us

We will:

- Value and respect you
- Ensure you know your role and are fully prepared for tasks
- Offer training to support you to fulfil your role
- Support your safety whilst volunteering
- Offer a variety of ways to meet the team and discuss your role
- Always appreciate you!

What we expect from you:

We expect you to:

- Be part of the OSF team and follow our ethos
- Understand our values and behaviours and follow accordingly
- Show kindness and respect to everyone
- Take part in core training and engage in additional opportunities where possible
- Keep in contact and update us on how you're doing and any concerns or feedback that you have.

How we'll support you

What will my induction be like?

Our Volunteer Support Manager will have contacted you after receiving your application, and assessed suitability, to arrange an interview. Following satisfactory references and DBS check, volunteers are nearly ready to be matched. We have requested that you sign our volunteer agreement and received a photo of yourself, and pet (if AAA). A vet check and behaviour check for AAA dogs is completed to check suitability of any AAA animals. You will be provided with an ID badge and accompanying materials to take with you for your first meet.

You will be added to our Google group where information is sent by email to volunteers and will receive our volunteer bulletin – Monthly Paws.

Induction evenings are held on a quarterly basis. It is at these meetings that you will be given a full introduction to the charity, any further materials needed and the opportunity to meet the team and ask questions.

What support will I be offered and who should I contact?

We want to ensure you feel well supported at all times throughout your volunteering journey with us. In areas where we have a lead volunteer, we encourage you to maintain a supportive and open relationship with them. You can also contact Frances (Volunteer Support Manager) for any questions regarding pastoral care and your volunteer journey. For case related/service delivery queries please contact Gemma (Animal Companionship Practitioner) or Bin (Chief Executive/Practitioner). Our office is also open 8:30 – 17:00 should you wish to give us a call.

Will I be given any training?

We want you to feel confident, and well equipped, to carry out your role. Our induction training covers key areas essential for you to do so. These include: Introduction to OSF and safeguarding

We will also offer a selection of additional training which we recommend you attend, dependent on your role.

Essential Information

Volunteering Agreement

We ask that all our volunteers read and sign our Volunteer Agreement to confirm that they will adhere to our key policies and procedures. This document also includes our Consent Form which will ascertain your preferences for data sharing.

Media

We encourage you to take photos whilst volunteering and we often find a picture certainly captures the essence of what we do. Please email these over to us (original size) and remove from your device when you can. We often use Whatsapp groups to communicate between all of those involved in a case and photos can be shared safely here.

As a volunteer, you are representing Our Special Friends in your community. Although we would like you to be involved in promoting our work to people in your local area, getting the right messages across can be tricky. Please do not share any photos on your personal social media and contact us directly if you are approached by the media. You will have been invited to the Our Special Friends community Facebook group. Here, we share information and updates from us, and encourage you to use the platform as a means of communicating with each other.

Expenses

All volunteers can be reimbursed for travel and expenses incurred through OSF activities. Please contact the office for a copy of the Volunteer Expenses Form, along with your timesheet, which needs to be submitted to the OSF Volunteer Support Team on a monthly basis. However, as a charity, if volunteers are able to waive these expenses, it would be very much appreciated.

Gifts and Boundaries

The personal receipt of bequests, cash and/or substantial gifts in kind from clients or families is not acceptable. Those wanting to give a gift can be advised to

donate to OSF using a donation envelope, by ringing the office with a debit/credit card or by other means (there are now many ways to donate via the OSF Website, please do encourage them to look at the site). In the event of a donation being given a signed and dated receipt is required. A small box of chocolates or a thank you card is perfectly acceptable, however please inform the Volunteer Support Manager or another member of the team.

It's important that all volunteers and staff members maintain clear boundaries. This means making sure that what you say and do is within the limits of your role. If you are unsure as to where these boundaries lie then please contact Frances and ask. We would much rather you approach us than continue with risk.

Health and Safety

OSF will ensure compliance with the Health & Safety at Work Act 1974. It is OSF's duty to provide you with a safe working environment. It is your duty to take reasonable care for the health and safety of yourself and the other people who may be affected by your activities. It is important to meet our statutory duties and responsibilities under the Act. If you have any concerns, always discuss at the earliest opportunity with the Volunteer Support Manager.

Equality and Diversity

Our Special Friends is committed to being a diverse and inclusive charity. We aim to demonstrate support for all of our volunteers, valuing each individual's contribution regardless of any protective characteristics e.g. age, gender identity, sexual orientation, partnership status, disability, nationality, race, or beliefs. We are committed to providing equal opportunities to our volunteers and to taking steps to ensure our volunteers are protected from discrimination.

Please see **our website** for our equality and diversity policy.

Data Protection and Confidentiality

In your role you may have access to personal information on our clients, staff members or other volunteers. You must only use this data when necessary, and

dispose of it securely when you are finished using it. We will always make sure we keep your details safe and secure too.

Your role as a volunteer is a very important one and its confidentiality is vital. If you have any concern or worry about a client you are visiting, the golden rule is SHARE IT with us. A volunteer should never have to take on sole responsibility about information or a situation they are concerned about.

If you are at all uncertain please get in touch and we can make an informed decision. We would rather have you relaxed about your volunteer role.

Any sensitive information that you come across while volunteering, including details about our clients, families, supporters and our work, must be treated as strictly confidential. However, if you have any concerns at all, especially about the safety of a client or their family, please do not keep it to yourself. Let us know in confidence and we will take steps to help.

Safeguarding

Our Special Friends (OSF) has a legal duty to protect all those supported by its work and will ensure that it meets its safeguarding responsibilities. By working jointly with other agencies/authorities OSF aims to safeguard and promote the welfare and wellbeing of the person/persons at risk.
OSF will not investigate individual safeguarding cases itself, but will refer all safeguarding cases, initially to the designated person within the charity, who in turn will immediately notify the relevant agencies.

Please see **our website** for our Safeguarding adults and children policies. Further safeguarding information and training will be given - hope that you will make every effort to attend.

Recording information

Volunteer Logs

We encourage you to keep your own log of what you do and when, whether in a phone or paper diary. This is useful if we ever need to locate your record and helps to ensure your safety.

You will be given Volunteer Logs to show the activity you carry out on behalf of OSF. If you have a regular task, please do not feel you have to complete a log each time. As long as we are aware of what you do, and when, then that is sufficient. However, if you are claiming expenses, you will need to continue with volunteer logs and send them in monthly.

Emergency Procedure

In the event of an emergency involving the client, volunteers are required to:

1. Call 999
2. Not move or lift the client
3. Call the OSF office as soon as possible
4. Keep calm and remain with client until further assistance arrives

We realise not all of your questions will be answered by this handbook. If you have any feedback, suggestions or queries, please contact the OSF office.

Leaving Our Special Friends

We know volunteers will not stay with us indefinitely and no one should feel under pressure to stay – we want all our volunteers to have a positive experience from start to finish. If you would like a break from volunteering or feel it is time to move on, please have a chat with Frances who will explain what happens next.

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Registered Charity No. 1156778