

<b>Committee(s):</b>	<b>Date(s):</b>
Epping Forest and Commons Committee	8 <sup>th</sup> July 2013
<b>Subject:</b> Epping Forest Visitor Services Activities	Public
<b>Report of:</b> Superintendent of Epping Forest SEF 19/13	For Information
<p><b><u>Summary</u></b></p> <p>This report summarises the achievements of the Visitor Services teams during 2012/13 and outlines the broad objectives and operational priorities for the coming financial year.</p> <p><b>Recommendations</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• That this report be received</li> </ul>	

## **Main Report**

### **Background**

1. Following a decision in May 2012, the annual Visitor Services Programme is now presented to your Committee, as opposed to the Epping Forest Joint Consultative Committee. The report summarises the 2012/13 activity and sets out the aims and objectives for the Visitor Services Team, together with an operational programme for the 2013/14 financial year.

### **Current Position – 2012/13 Performance**

2. There are seven key areas that drive the Visitor Services Team focus:
  - i. Delivering an information service to Epping Forest visitors through four Forest Visitor Centres
  - ii. Providing memorable visits through complimentary retail activity
  - iii. Providing Life Long Learning sessions
  - iv. Entertaining visitors to Epping Forest through the management and hosting of Forest Events.
  - v. Interpreting the significance of Epping Forest through exhibitions and publications such as Forest Focus and the Events Diary
  - vi. Developing a communications presence for Epping Forest through publications, the City of London Website, Press Release/Statements and Social Networking platforms such as Twitter.

- vii. Developing wider public participation in formal sport, especially football at Wanstead Flats and golf at Chingford.
3. In delivering the above, Visitor Services Priorities are as follows:-
- a. Health and Safety of all
  - b. Visitor Experience
  - c. Heritage, Education and Learning
  - d. High Quality Events
  - e. Positive internal and external public
  - f. Income Generation
  - g. Sustainability
4. **Operating the Forest Centres** : The Visitor Services Forest Centres Team provided an information service for Epping Forest visitors from three building which increased to four during 2012/13 :-
- a. The View, Chingford which opened in July 2012 as Epping Forest's 'flagship' visitor centre with 220 square metres of exhibition space; dedicated learning facility; retail area; toilets and viewing deck.
  - b. Queen Elizabeth's Hunting Lodge (QEHL) Chingford, situated adjacent to The View, built in 1543, and specifically protected under the Epping Forest Act 1878, the lodge has been managed as a visitor attraction since 2001.
  - c. The Epping Forest Visitor Centre, High Beach, a purpose built building located close to Queen's Green which opened in 1991
  - d. The Temple at Wanstead Park built in 1765 and renovated in 1996 to provide visitor facilities. The Temple opened as a visitor attraction in 2006.
- The View and QEHL open seven days per week, while the High Beach Visitor Centre and The Temple are currently open on weekends and Bank Holidays only.
5. The four Visitor Services buildings received 85,943 visits from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2012 – 31<sup>st</sup> March 2013. The View had 31,122 visits, the QEHL had 25,777 visits (not including booked educational groups that totalled a further 3,675) the Visitor Centre at High Beach received 17,310 visits and the Temple received 11,734 visits.
6. The Visitor Centres are also responsible for income generation from retail activity and income has grown in the last four years. 2012/13 has been the team's most successful year with income breaking the £60,000 threshold for the first time ever.

7. **Delivering Life Long Learning Sessions**

- a. Demand for Learning sessions continues to increase and two Information Assistants were recruited in 2012 that have a specific responsibility for delivering Learning Sessions. These staff report directly to the Forest Centre Officer for Lifelong Learning.

Learning sessions have been as follows –

Year (April – March)	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
Sessions	97	123	118	132	141

\* Year 2010 saw a slight dip as we had to close for a 10 day period to allow unacceptably noisy building work to take place at the Chingford Hub site.

- b. These figures include all learning sessions, such as the Discovering Epping Forest Modules, Gun Powder Sessions and Sensory Sessions.
- c. The Lifelong Learning Officer also hosts a Teachers Forum where approximately 20 local teachers meet on a quarterly basis to discuss educational issues.

11. **Public Events:** Visitor Services leads on numerous events each year which include outdoor theatre events, family learning events, guided walks, cycle rides and exhibitions. Visitor Services also play a supporting role in advertising and promoting many further events led by our close partners such as the Forest Keepers, Friends of Epping Forest, Field Studies Centre and others.

Year (Jan – December)	2009 / 10	2010 / 11	2011 / 12	2012 / 13
Visitor Services Events	66	65	60	52
Total Events	210	185	232	259

12. Whilst it is pleasing to see generally a year on year increase in the amount of events staged at Epping Forest, events provided by Visitor Services have seen a 14% decrease. This reduction reflects an emphasis on staffing the increased Visitor Centre provision, together with the additional commitment of the daily opening of The Temple during the Olympic and Paralympic

Games. Visitor Services still contribute one event per week on average throughout the year; with the events focused on school holiday periods.

13. In addition to the events programme, weekly Health Walks are led by Information Assistants every Thursday morning from Bury Road Car Park.
14. 2012/13 also saw the introduction of a full programme of Temporary Exhibitions, held at The View in the dedicated Temporary Exhibition space. The Forest Centres team also held the first formal evening events 'Past Time and Tipple' where visitors paid a £10 entry fee and received a glass of wine on arrival.
15. **Communications** : The Visitor Services Communications team produced –
  - a. Three editions of the 'Forest Focus' visitor publication with a total print run of 21,000. (7k per edition)
  - b. One annual 2012 Events Diary highlighting events run by all the main Epping Forest organisations. Print run of 15,000.
  - c. Subject specific leaflets.
  - d. Forest Signs including stock signs such as 'Beware Cattle' seasonal signs for dog control during ground nesting bird season; fungi picking etc. and site specific signage.
  - e. Football Season Handbook.
16. **Digital Services:** 2012 /13 saw the launch of the City of London's new website which includes a substantially improved Epping Forest section. Epping Forest is proving to be the most popular page for the Open Spaces Department with circa 30,000 visits per month. In addition to regular Press Releases, the Communications Team also maintain a presence on the Social Networking site 'Twitter' that provides the opportunity to post short messages on key news and subjects. The Website was updated on a weekly basis and the number of Twitter 'Followers' has grown to 870.
17. **Developing Football and other sports:** Your Committee provides 44 football pitches and 3 separate Sports Pavilion at Wanstead Flats. The Grounds Staff now report into the Head of Visitor Services as does the Football Development Officer. The vacant position of Football Services Assistant that reports into the Football Development Officer is currently being delivered via an external partnering contract.
18. The Football Development Officer worked towards achieving all targets in the Football Development Plan and has set goals including ensuring full usage of the football pitches, development of female football, increasing the amount of qualified coaches and referees through formal training and examinations and assisting any disability groups through formal and informal football. Wanstead Flats also hosts a weekly 5km 'Parkrun' event.
19. **Volunteers:** All Visitor Services staff recognise the value that suitable Volunteers bring to the Department. The Visitor Services teams maintain an active volunteering scheme which includes:
  - a. Retired teachers that assist with the planning and implementation of the Family Learning and Outdoor Theatre Events.

- b. Volunteers that assist us with our Heritage work with the London Metropolitan Archive.
- c. Volunteers that provide cost saving operational cover at our four Visitor Centres.
- d. Volunteers that provide additional sport support at Wanstead Flats and Chingford Golf Course.
- e. Volunteers that assist with the weekly Health Walks that are provided on a Thursday morning from Bury Road Car Park.

## Proposals

- 20. As well as continuing to deliver the areas set out above the following changes will take place in 2013/14
- 21. **Forest Centres** – The Visitor Centre operating schedules will continue as per the pattern established towards the end of 2012. Particular attention will be focused on ‘The View’ through the development of more regular events and temporary exhibitions at the centre. Improvements to the monitoring of visitors through integrated counting devices and improvement of the retail facility are planned. In particular, following analysis of the Electronic Point of Sale (EPOS) data for the first year of trading (to July 2013) and the results of an Internal Audit Review, the implementation of formal income targets for the retail operation will be developed.
- 22. The Visitor Centre at High Beach was due to be operated by a private or third sector partner following a Tender process that took place in January and February 2013. The tender process was unsuccessful in identifying a suitable tenant for the building. The facility has remained open as a Visitor Centre on weekends and Bank Holidays, only with the building closed during weekdays. A further paper on future operating plans is scheduled for presentation to your September Committee.
- 23. **Road Signage** - Signposting to the Visitor Centres, and overflow car parking arrangements, using Essex County Council (ECC) approved ‘White on Brown’ Tourist Signage, remains a priority, especially for the A104, A112 and A1069 routes. ECC maintains a 40,000/annum visitor threshold for signage approvals which ‘The View’ will reach during 2013/14. The application and approval process is expected to take several months and depending on timescales interim AA signs may be commissioned.
- 24. **Delivering Life Long Learning Sessions:** Learning Provision will be delivered by the Forest Centre Officer (Life Long Learning) with the assistance of two Information Assistants and is expected to increase to beyond 150 sessions subject to the adoption of the Review of Learning which is expected to be presented to your Committee in November 2013.
- 25. **Public Events:** Visitor Services will continue to provide a varied programme of events including 3 Outdoor Theatre Events, 12 Family Learning Events during all Half Term Holidays, and various exhibitions at The Temple and will continue to manage weekend events.

26. **Producing Forest Interpretation:** The Visitor Services Communications team will produce:
- a. Three editions of the 'Forest Focus' visitor publication with a total print run of 21,000. (7k per edition)
  - b. One annual 2013 Events Diary highlighting events run by all the main Epping Forest organisations. Print run of 15,000.
  - c. Four subject specific leaflets.
  - d. Forest Signs including stock signs such as 'Beware Cattle' seasonal signs for dog control during ground nesting bird season; fungi picking etc. and site specific signage.
  - e. 12 monthly 'LEAFlet' staff newsletters
  - f. Football Season Handbook 2013/14.
27. **Digital Services:** Further work will be undertaken to improve the Epping Forest section of the City of London's website including the uploading of short video clips to support various interpretive objectives. The commitment to regular Press Releases will be maintained in conjunction with a Social Networking Improvement Plan to increase communications work through 'Twitter'.
28. **Promotional collaboration** - Visitor Services are also playing an integral role in assisting Epping Forest District Council with the launch and support of [www.visiteppingforest.org](http://www.visiteppingforest.org). This is a piece of partnership working between 15 local businesses such as the Royal Gun Powder Mills, Lee Valley Regional Park, Epping Forest District Museum (EFDC) and others to try to drive tourism to the Epping Forest district. With the Tour de France due to visit the area in 2014, this is an important piece of collaborative work between similar minded organisations and has been welcomed by all. Your Committee has committed to provide financial support of £3,000 to help with administration; attendance at a variety of Trade Fairs with these organisations and bi-monthly coordination meetings hosted by EFDC.
29. **Developing Golf:** 2013/14 will also see the launch of the formal Chingford Golf Course recovery plan, which is the subject of a separate report to your Committee. The intention is to improve levels of public play through the introduction of a loyalty scheme which will be designed to bring the course back into profit within 3 years.
30. **Developing Football:** The role of the Football Development Officer will be considered by your Committee in September with regards to plans to continue to increase participation at Wanstead Flats, further developing summer events and working with clubs to ensure they continue in this difficult economic climate. 2013/14 should also see investment in the region of £220,000 being made for the Capel Road Sports Pavilion through the Additional Works Programme.
31. **Volunteers** - Visitor Services remain committed to providing roles for volunteers and securing the necessary infra-structure such as relevant training, communication and desk space to allow the volunteers to develop

their skills. The role and volume of Volunteers working with the Forest Centres team will be the subject of particular review during 2013/14.

32. **Visitor Attraction Quality Assurance Scheme (VAQAS)** – The Visitor Services Team will be again applying to retain VAQAS quality assurance certification for all Visitor centres at Epping Forest. The Places of Interest Quality Assurance Scheme (PIQAS) will also be considered with regard to formalising visitor returns to Tourism England.

### **Corporate & Strategic Implications**

33. The proposal, if approved, supports the following themes of the Community Strategy:

- A Vibrant and Culturally Rich City

34. Additionally the proposal supports the following aim of the Open Spaces Business Plan:

- Providing high quality, free, accessibly Open Spaces for the benefit of London, its environs and the nation.

### **Implications**

35. **Finance** – The Epping Forest Visitor Services programme is met through the Epping Forest Local Risk budget supplemented by income from retail activity.
36. **Legal** – Sections 7(1) and 9 of the Epping Forest Act of 1878 places a duty on the Conservators to provide Epping Forest as an open space for public recreation and enjoyment. The provision of the Visitor Services programme is considered to be part of this duty.
37. **Human Resources:** The Visitor Services Staffing Structure is set out in Appendix 1.

### **Conclusion**

38. The Visitor Services section plays an important role in helping to provide safe, informative and memorable visits to Epping Forest through the operation of four Visitor Centres; Life Long Learning sessions; Forest Events; publications such as Forest Focus and the Events Diary and the interpretation of the significance of Epping Forest through exhibitions.
39. The Visitor Services teams also continue to develop a communications presence for Epping Forest through various publications, the City of London Website, Press Releases and social networking platforms such as Twitter.
40. Finally, Visitor Services will continue to develop wider public participation in formal sport, especially football at Wanstead Flats and golf at Chingford Golf Course.