

Committee(s):	Date(s):
Epping Forest and Commons Committee	13 January 2014
Subject: Epping Forest Visitor Services Activities	Public
Report of: Superintendent of Epping Forest	For Information
<p><u>Summary</u></p> <p>The Visitor Services Department uses this document to set out its objectives and operational priorities for the coming financial year and demonstrates its current staffing structure.</p> <p>Recommendations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • That this report be received 	

Main Report

Background

1. Following a decision in May 2012 by your Committee, this report is now presented to both your Committee and the Epping Forest Joint Consultative Committee as an operational programme for the forthcoming 12 months, setting out the aims and activities for the Epping Forest Division's Visitor Services Team.

Current Position

2. There are seven areas the Visitor Services Department focus on and they are as follows –

- i) Delivering an information service to Epping Forest visitors primarily through the flagship Visitor Centre at The View and Queen Elizabeth Hunting Lodge and also at The Temple and High Beach Visitor Centre.
- ii) Providing memorable visits and income through complimentary retail activity
- iii) Delivering Life Long Learning sessions concentrating on Tudor History and provide support to three external Learning Partners that provide ecological 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 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.

2.1 In delivering the above, Visitor Services Priorities are as follows -

- i) Health and Safety of all
- ii) Visitor Experience
- iii) Heritage, Education and Learning
- iv) High Quality Events
- v) Positive P.R. (both internal and external)
- vi) Income Generation
- vii) Sustainability

3. Operating the Forest Centres

The Visitor Services Team currently delivers an information service for Epping Forest visitors from four buildings: The View, 6 Rangers Road which opened in July 2012, Queen Elizabeth Hunting Lodge (QEHL), situated right next door to The View, built in 1543, specifically protected under the Epping Forest Act 1878 and managed as a visitor attraction since 2001. There is also the Epping Forest Visitor Centre, a purpose built building located at High Beach which opened in 1991, and The Temple at Wanstead Park, built in 1765, and opened as a Visitor Attraction in 2006. The Temple has been open on weekends and Bank Holidays only since 2006 and this is planned to continue in 2014. The High Beach Visitor Centre is closing in late December 2013 with a scheduled re-launch planned for April 2014. Due to staffing budget issues, the plan is to train volunteers, mainly from the Friends of Epping Forest group, to man the High Beach Visitor Centre for at least two days per week. The View and QEHL are open seven days per week.

3.1 The four Visitor Services buildings received 85,943 visits from 1st April 2012 – 31st March 2013. The View had 31,122 visits, the QEHL had 25,777 visits (not including booked educational groups that totalled 3,675) the Visitor Centre at High Beach received 17,310 visits and the Temple received 11,734 visits.

3.2 The Visitor Centres all received the Visitor Attraction Quality Assurance Scheme (VAQAS) Award which is run by Visit Britain. Several mystery visitors

phone, go on line and visit the centres and we then receive a comprehensive report on the service we provide including information availability, customer care, cleanliness and accessibility.

3.3 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 our most successful year with income breaking £80,000 for the first time ever.

The 2013/14 target is an ambitious £100,000 – as at end of November 2013 with 4 months left in the financial year, this target is on track with revenue currently banked at £81,099

Visitor Centre Income (£k)

Year	Visitor Centre	Hunting Lodge	The Temple	Total
2008/09	43,346	9,445	5,480	58,271
2009/10	46,397	12,396	7,280	66,073
2010/11	54,022	12,095	7,508	73,625
2011/12	58,012	13,054	7,492	78,558
2012/13	40,077	41, 406	5,185	86,668

4. Delivering Life Long Learning Sessions

4.1 Learning sessions are on an upward curve and two Information Assistants were recruited in 2012 that have a specific responsibility for delivering Learning Sessions. These staff report directly into Jo Price (Forest Centre Officer – Lifelong Learning).

Learning sessions have been as follows –

Year (April – March)	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Sessions	97	123	118	132	141	166

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

4.2 These figures include all learning sessions, such as the Discovering Epping Forest Modules, Gun Powder Sessions and Sensory Sessions.

4.3 The Lifelong Learning Officer also hosts a Teachers Forum where approximately 20 local teachers meet on a quarterly basis to discuss educational issues.

5. Public Events

Visitor Services leads on numerous events each year that include 3 outdoor theatre events, 9 family learning events, weekly 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.

Since The View opened we have experimented with some evening events and these have proved to be very popular. 2014 will see Visitor Services continue with 5 Past Time and Tipple Events (£10 per ticket that includes a glass of wine on arrival) which have a capacity of 60 people and with 4 Craft Events such as bead and jewellery making. These events also cost £10 to cover the cost of equipment and due to the need for participants to enjoy 1:1 coaching the capacity for these events is limited to 12 people.

Wanstead Park will continue to host the very popular Outdoor Theatre events where capacity is 495 and The View will continue with a full programme of Temporary Exhibitions, held in the dedicated Temporary Exhibition space.

Visitor Services will also continue to manage the weekly Health Walk held every Thursday and the weekly 5km Park Run which is located at Wanstead Flats.

2014 sees the 100 year anniversary of World War I and there are two events scheduled that will tell this story and in particular the impact on Epping Forest.

6. Producing Forest Interpretation

Each year Visitor Services produces;

- i) Three editions of the 'Forest Focus' visitor publication with a total print run of 21,000. (7k per edition)
- ii) One annual Events Diary highlighting events run by all the main Epping Forest organisations. Print run of 15,000.
- iii) Subject specific leaflets.
- iv) 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.
- v) Football Season Handbook.

Epping Forest's website continues to be the most popular page for the Open Spaces Department with circa 30,000 visits per month. We are also on the Social Networking site 'Twitter' that gives us the opportunity to post short messages on key news and subjects and we produce our own Press Releases. We update our Website on at least a weekly basis and have just over 1,200 'followers' on Twitter.

7. Developing Football and other sports

There are 40 football pitches and 3 separate changing rooms within the Wanstead Flats site of Epping Forest. The Grounds Staff (4) report into the Head of Visitor Services as does the Football Development Officer (FDO).

The FDO has a Football Services Assistant that reports into the FDO to assist with running Summer Events and being Caretaker of the Harrow Road site.

The Football Development Officer works 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.

2014 should also see investment in the region of 220k being spent on Capel Road Pavilion. This money should be provided by the City Surveyor's Department and an update will be given as and when appropriate.

8. Volunteers

8.1 All Visitor Services staff recognises the value that suitable Volunteers bring to the Department. We have active volunteering taking place in the following Visitor Services areas –

- * Retired teachers that assist with the planning and implementation of the Family Learning and Outdoor Theatre Events.

- * Volunteers that assist us with our Heritage work with the London Metropolitan Archive.

- * Volunteers that provide cost saving operational cover at our four Visitor Centres.

- * Volunteers that provide additional sport support at Wanstead Flats and Chingford Golf Course.

- * Volunteers that assist with the weekly Health Walks that are provided on a Thursday morning from Bury Road Car Park.

Visitor Services remain committed to providing roles for volunteers and providing the necessary infra-structure such as relevant training, communication and desk space to allow the volunteers to develop their skills.

9. Proposals

9.1 As well as continuing to deliver the areas set out above the following changes will take place in 2013/14

- * The re-launch of the Visitor Centre in April 2014 using volunteers to run this building at least two days per week.

9.2 Visitor Services are also continuing to play an integral role in assisting Epping Forest District Council with the launch and support of 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 visiting the area in July 2014, this is an important piece of collaborative work between similar minded

organisations and has been welcomed by all. The Head of Visitor Services attends a bi-monthly meeting, hosted by EFDC.

10. Developing Sport

2014 will also see the launch of the formal golf recovery plan where Chingford Golf Course (CGC) income losses are reduced with the target being CGC breaks even by the end of summer 2016. The Football Development Officer will continue to increase participation at Wanstead Flats by putting summer events on and working with clubs to ensure they continue in this difficult economic climate by pursuing grant applications.

Corporate & Strategic Implications

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

- A Vibrant and Culturally Rich City

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.

Recommendation

That this report is received and Visitor Services proceed with the plan for 2014 to provide a safe, memorable visit to its four Visitor Centres that generate income through complimentary retail activity. Visitor Services should also continue to providing Life Long Learning sessions, host Forest Events and interpret the significance of Epping Forest through exhibitions and publications such as Forest Focus and the Events Diary.

Visitor Services will also continue to develop a communications presence for Epping Forest through other publications, the City of London Website, Press statements and social networking platforms such as Twitter.

Finally, Visitor Services will be tasked with developing wider public participation in formal sport, especially football at Wanstead Flats and golf at Chingford Golf Course.