

Inspiring environmental understanding through first-hand experience



Epping Forest Field Centre

Report on progress and background to planning



The Centre is managed by FSC for, and on behalf of, the City of London

Head of Centre's report on progress and background to planning

Purpose of report:

The purpose of this report is to provide the planning background for the Joint Committee in relation to the 2015 Plan. It also provides the Committee with an update on progress at the Epping Forest Field Centre in 2014 in advance of the formal report on 2014 that will come to the Committee in the spring of 2015.

I recommend that the report be RECEIVED.

Background

Epping Forest Field Centre (EFFC) delivers the City of London's environmental learning service in Epping Forest; it was established to commemorate the European Year of Conservation in 1970. From its inception the service has been managed by the Field Studies Council (FSC) for, and on behalf of, the City of London Corporation. FSC is an independent educational charity that inspires environmental understanding through first hand experience. The buildings (teaching and ancillary facilities and staff residences) are maintained by the City.

The FSC JCC receives reports on the performance of EFFC and approves a Plan for service provision. It provides an opportunity for the partner organisations to review progress and to provide direction and advice and to agree the funding arrangements (notably the City's annual payment to support the service) for EFFC based on provisional estimates of income and expenditure. The JCC received reports on 2013 and on 2014 at its meeting in May and noted pleasing progress and achievements.

EFFC connects a diverse range of learners (school children, adults and families) of all abilities to the natural world in Epping Forest. The majority of learners are from Greater London with a significant number also coming from Essex with comparatively high numbers of pupils that have free school meals, 'English as an additional language' (BME backgrounds) and/or diverse ethnicity. The service promotes Epping Forest as '*a wonderful place for discovery and learning*' and fosters responsible behaviours in relation to Epping Forest and the wider environment.

The Centre delivered its 500,000th learner experience in 2011.

Delivery against the 2011-14 Plan has been effective as shown in Appendix A - a summary of performance against broad objectives.

Buildings:

Maintenance is carried out by contractors employed by the City of London. (Defect reporting and monitoring, cleaning duties, grounds maintenance duties and routine repairs will be undertaken by Centre staff).

The Centre continues to be generally very well maintained by the City and its contractors. Boiler replacement is the subject of a separate report to the October 2014 meeting of the JCC.

Grounds and teaching sites:

The Centre Grounds and nearby learning sites continue to be very suitable for the provision of a range of great learning experiences.

Staffing and Support Services

The Head of Centre is supported by a ten full-time staff of which two are at senior level. Eight members of the staff have field teaching as the main part of their responsibilities. One member of staff is the Administrator (reception, bookings & finance processor) another is Centre Support Facilitator (main duty person, liaison with contactors, clients, volunteers, visiting tutors, coordinating of courses for adults, grounds maintenance). In addition there is a part-time Cleaner (15hrs pw).

Associate Tutors (subject specialists) on day rates are used to deliver the adult Courses for All programmes.

Community Engagement

The Associates of Epping Forest Field Centre are making progress towards:

- becoming an increasingly active community based organisation
- becoming a focal point for volunteering
- increased membership (907 members at end of June compared to 763 in 2013)
- providing increased support for the Centre (including getting support in kind from suppliers)

The screenshot shows the website for the Associates of Epping Forest Field Centre. The header includes a leaf logo and the text 'Associates of Epping Forest Field Centre'. A central image depicts a building with a large window. To the left is a navigation menu with categories: Membership, Volunteering, Donations, Sponsorship, Corporate Social Responsibility, Projects, Current Newsletter, and Past Newsletters. Below the menu is a call to action: 'Become a member and support the work of the Field Centre in Epping Forest. Membership is free! As a member you will receive: Regular newsletters, Details of Family activities, Details of Local Interest courses, Other events'. To the right of the central image is a text block: 'The Associates of Epping Forest Field Centre are dedicated to raising awareness of and funds for the work of the Field Studies Council at Epping Forest Field Centre, delivering projects and community activities using the Centre's grounds, which are designated a "breeding place". The objective is to link the community to Epping Forest Field Centre and to promote community engagement with the Centre. Your support will allow us to continue bringing Environmental Understanding to All. To find out more about the work we do and the activities offered by the Epping Forest Field Centre, please use the links to the left.' Below this text are logos for Yorkshire Tea, Loughton, and Shoe Zone. On the far right, there is a 'Join us on:' section with social media icons and a 'Tweets' section showing a tweet from Nick Laphorn (@nicklaphorn) about recruiting for a Trainee Scheme.

The Centre continues to benefit from the support of a significant number of occasional part-time volunteers providing invaluable help with supporting for teaching, chasing debtors, equipment and other ad hoc renovation, grounds maintenance and cleaning and other general Centre support tasks.

Learning delivery

We continue to offer a range of courses & activities (formal & informal) to participants from 4 years to beyond retirement age (with course lengths from 2 hours to five days). We continuously improve our 'core business' existing product/service range (especially for KS3 & 4 and A level biology and geography) courses in the light of experience, feedback, best practice and external influences (eg curriculum reform).

The EFFC 2011-14 Plan set what was then a 'stretch target' of 80,000 learner experiences across the year period. With the acquisition of significant grants to support learning in the period 2011–13 we were able to ensure that this target could be met reaching more than 22,000 learner experiences in each year. With reducing grant support in 2014 (and reduced staffing levels) this became more challenging in 2014: *'it is probably best to assume that the number of learner experiences will be in the range of 20,000 – 22,000'* [2014 Plan]. As at the summer of 2014 we are

on target to be at the upper end of that range in the current year. By the end of the period 2011-14 we are likely to be some 10% ahead of target by reaching something like 88,000 learner experiences.

The number of learner experiences has grown significantly across the past two decades and has now levelled at around 22,000 per annum. This is the level that has been estimated in previous JCC papers a practical maximum/optimal capacity level based on limiting factors (see Appendix B) and is approximately double the levels reached in the first two decades of the Centre's life.

Income generation from courses in 2014 is strong. Our 2014 Plan indicated the 'need to focus more on course income and viability (and on quality) rather than overly focussing on high numbers of learning experiences'. As at the summer of 2014 we are on target to match or exceed the 2014 course income budget estimate.

Subject to continuing support and staff continuity the 20,000 – 22,000 learner experiences can be sustained for 2015 (and probably beyond this). It is likely that income can be raised a little through some modest and judicious fees increases as has been achieved in recent years. The likely ongoing desire for our services from our loyal client base and our track record of sound business development support this view. This is backed by capacity to respond to change and the opportunity to build on our innovative project/development work legacies and to benefit from ongoing improvements to web pages and to the use of social media.

Prospects for repeat, referred and recommended business remain very strong with very positive service user feedback and the meeting or exceeding of > 90% expectations.

We are increasingly focussing our promotional activities on content marketing and social media and hope to find more time for these activities in the future.

Current challenges and performance

A 36% staff turnover in 2014 has/is proving to be challenging especially at a time of updating for curriculum reform and coping with heating related issues and other disrupting factors, especially staff sickness. A consequence of these factors is slower than desired progress with funding acquisition, development work and promotional activity.

However as at the summer of 2014 income and expenditure for the year appears to be broadly in line with budget estimates and visitor feedback continues to be excellent and there has been good progress with some developments. In this context the performance probably exceeds that which might reasonably be expected and the new team are enthusiastically embracing the challenge of making further progress in the Autumn Term.

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reputation of City, FSC and EFFC itself• The City FSC partnership which will span half a century after the end of this decade• Location, facilities, expertise, flexibility, loyal customers, strong systems, pedagogies and course resources	There is a lack of funding to improve: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• field teaching technology• Ancillary facilities (especially dining space for visitors, non-resident staff and volunteers)• Environmental impacts

Ongoing work is continuing to build on strengths and, subject to limited staff time, to explore means address weaknesses. The 2015 Plan will facilitate this and also refer to the management of risks and exploitation of opportunity.

Current situation analysis and the context for planning for 2015 and beyond

Progress in the period 2011-14 has been very good. In May the JCC noted the strong financial performance and significant achievement. As at the summer of 2014 the Centre performance remains broadly in line with budget. The prospects of maintaining the current level of performance in the future are very good given the exceptionally high levels of service user satisfaction.

EFFC now needs to be able the impacts of curriculum reform and other as yet unclear challenges of the operating environment. It should probably also respond maintain the flexibility and capacity to respond creatively to the evolving aspirations and planning frames of the City and of FSC:

- The City's Education Strategy 2013 -15
- The City's Community Strategy (*'encourage diverse skills development and learning for all'*)
- The City Open Spaces Directorate's Strategic Aims
- The Epping Forest Management Plan
- The Epping Forest Strategy for Learning (see Appendix C)
- Epping Forest Learning Providers Forum Action Plan (being developed from 'Appendix C')
- FSC's new four year planning cycle
- The evolution of FSC London Region

Appendix A:

Summary of performance against 2011 -14 broad objectives:

- 80,000 learner experiences - **ACHIEVED**
We are likely to have delivered approx 88,000 by the end of this period
- (of which) 8,000 subsidised learner experiences- **ACHIEVED**
- Provide new products and approaches relating to four theme areas:

- Learning for Biodiversity – **ACHIEVED**
(and identified by Quality Badge assessors as ‘leading edge’)

We addressed a need to increase taxonomic education and understanding of biodiversity and to increase the attention to this at least on all of our biology courses with funding secured from the City Bridge Trust. This project included networking, capacity and resource development work, and also the delivery teachers’ workshops, schools and community courses at a range of locations.



- Lessons from Nature – **ACHIEVED** (and received terrific responses from Council for Learning Outside of the classroom, AQA and others).
We will built upon our pilot ‘Sustainable Schools’™ and ‘Lessons from Nature’ projects and pioneered learning **from** nature provision with a very significant resource packed website to go beyond traditional learning ‘for’ and ‘about’ nature courses and traditional ‘do less harm’ sustainability courses.



- Epping Forest a special place – **ADAPTED**
Influenced by the views of the Superintendent we have made this a theme across all of our provision rather than a theme area. We have endeavoured to promote Epping Forest as ‘*a wonderful place for discovery and learning*’ and to foster an appreciation of the Forest and to develop a sense of place across all of our provision.
- Inspiration from Epping Forest – **IN PROGRESS**
We have continued with our long – standing practice of delivering well received occasional arts courses and also arts activities as part of cross-curricular course has continued but progress with significant development has been limited. Our Plan had indicated that ‘*once the other three themes have momentum we hope to explore further how we can increase our growth potential for creative arts course in the broadest sense. It is hoped that we will have in place an exciting viable development plan in place by 2014*’. This Plan is not yet in place and may still not be at the end of 2014 simply because of the challenges referred to in the main body of this report. This area of development will be considered further in 2015. Our aspiration is to develop and deliver pilot creative learning experiences (in the broadest sense) identify the market and funding potential.

These Projects have supported the development of delivery modes, markets, products, new income streams and to ensuring increased value of the impacts of our work. Other successful have included the HLF funded ‘Discovering Epping Forest’ (DEF), which has been reported in detail to the JCC, and the EU funded ‘Mind the Gap’ project.

- Develop more local provision at remote learning locations – **ACHIEVED**

We have now have 44 learning sites that we currently use within and outside of Epping Forest.

- Continuously improve the provision of electronic and paper based learning support material – **ACHIEVED** - for core courses as well as courses developed through projects
- Exceed 4.8 visitor feedback score with over 90% of customers scoring us in the highest category on a 5 point scale for overall provision – **ACHIEVED**
- Achieve a significant increase in environmental understanding as a result of an EFFC learning experience – **ACHIEVED**
- Maintain the LOtC quality badge – **ACHIEVED**
- Continue to meet the requirements of appropriate external accreditation including Safety Shield, IIP, Eco-Centre/Green Flag – **ACHIEVED** - subject to pending external assessment for Eco-Centre/Green Flag re-accreditation
- Ensure that the FSC - CoL partnership remains effective and mutually beneficial
This is probably best judged by the JCC
- Collaborate effectively with FSC at corporate level / Head office and other learning locations – **ACHIEVED** - with increasing mutual support across local FSC Centres
- To continue to work effectively with the Associates of EFFC to bring benefits to users of the Centre and extend community links - **PART ACHIEVED** - there is continuing progress but more active volunteers would be needed to accelerate this and hitherto we have not been able to recruit these
The Associates of Epping Forest Field Centre are making progress towards:
 - becoming an increasingly active community based organisation
 - becoming a focal point for volunteering
 - increased membership (currently 723 members)
 - providing increased fundraising and promotional support for the Centre in 2014.
- Be regarded by others as a good partner in all partnerships – **assumed but not yet measured**
- Create a trend of growth in operating surplus to re-invest in our services – **STRONG PERFORMANCE IN RECESSION**
- Utilise funded projects to create growth and also create capacity for future growth – **IN PROGRESS**
- Optimise repeat business whilst continuing to attract new learners in target groups – **ACHIEVED**
- Contribute to the FSC corporate target of a 15% reduction in CO₂ emissions per learner – **ACHIEVED IN SO FAR AS THIS HAS BEEN PRACTICABLE WITH INVESTMENT FROM CITY AND GOOD HOUSEKEEPING BY STAFF TEAM**
- Develop and deliver a dynamic programme of training for EFFC which meets the needs and reasonable aspirations of both staff and the EFFC business – **ACHIEVED**
- Promote, with the 'Associates', volunteer involvement in our work, and enlist at least 1700 volunteer days (13600 volunteer hours) across the lifetime of the plan - **ACHIEVED IN SO FAR AS THIS HAS BEEN PRACTICABLE WITH LIMITED STAFF TIME TO SUPPORT THIS**

- Ensure that staff structure is appropriate to needs of the business – **ACHIEVED** – overcoming challenges identified earlier

Appendix B:

Maximum practical/optimal capacity for learning deliver is limited by these factors:

- limitations of classrooms (number and size of classrooms/ capacity to accommodate peak demand)
- 'market' limitations (school exam periods, smaller group sizes, late cancellations, seasonal preferences, school holidays, 1st/last day/weeks of term)
- resource limitations (environmental impact on the Centre grounds and forest sites, tutorial/support staff (H&S standards), staff availability at short notice, compatibility of different groups).
- impact of high staff turnover in London schools
- smaller class sizes and shorter course lengths at Advanced Level
- curriculum change
- the economic climate
- the high relative cost of transport for day-visits

Appendix C: The Epping Forest Strategy for Learning

Epping Forest Strategy for Learning

– extract from documentation drafted by the Epping Forest Learning Providers Forum for consideration by the City and its Learning Partners:

Our Vision – we want Epping Forest to be widely recognised as a wonderful place for discovery and learning for local people, Londoners and those living beyond London

Our Mission is to inspire and enable people to connect with, learn about, value and enjoy Epping Forest so that they act positively to care for it into the future.

Strategic Aims

Our Strategic Aims direct our activities to ensure we work towards our Vision and Mission.

1 Continue to provide and develop a diversity of learning opportunities in and about Epping Forest to inspire and enrich people's lives

- responding to need and the social, economic and physical environment around us

2 Encourage continuous improvement and development of learning activities and opportunities

- through enabling provision for change in service provision, new programmes or providers and enabling organisations to respond to change and opportunities

3 Promote, strive for and support the pursuit of excellence in all learning activities/experiences

- through benchmarking, development of standard and models of best practice, monitoring and evaluation, working towards awards and training programmes

4 Value and nurture social inclusion and diversity in learning activities

- *improving the accessibility of learning activities and the diversity of participants*

5 Support, encourage and develop the community of learning providers in Epping Forest

- through sharing of resources, Service Agreements and the like

6 Ensure that financial resources are commensurate with sustaining and developing learning opportunities

- *including fundraising, income generation, sponsorship, etc.*

7 Improve and increase communications about learning in and about Epping Forest

- *through marketing, branding, effective communication about learning opportunities, raising our profile and increasing influence*

8 Work to mitigate the environmental impacts of our learning activities

- **including how we operate our buildings, transport, impact on the Forest environment, etc.**

9 Work in partnership to deliver our vision

- **through valuing the contribution of others and recognising potential added value**

Background to the ‘Strategy’:

The Strategy follows the ‘Learning Review’. [The City of London Epping Forest commissioned a review of learning provision delivered in Epping Forest, which was undertaken by independent consultants Sara Hoskins and Sally Williams. The funding to undertake the review was provided by the City Bridge Trust (CBT). The aim was to review the provision of lifelong learning in Epping Forest by the City of London and its partners, and to inform the sustainability and potential development of that provision following on from the successful ‘Discovering Epping Forest’ project, part of the wider Heritage Lottery funded Branching Out programme].

The principal findings and summarised principal Recommendations of the Review were as follows:

‘It is evident that learning about and understanding the natural heritage of Epping Forest is not an add-on, it is a core part of CoL’s service delivery. It reinforces many agendas, protecting our natural heritage, providing stimulating and meaningful experiences for all communities and investing in the heritage of children and young people. Epping Forest is a major national asset, a third of which falls within Greater London, one of the most culturally diverse and densely populated cities in the world; its value as a site for learning about natural heritage cannot be undervalued.

The review showed that the quality of current provision is high, generates very positive feedback, with many return visits and continued participation. Without exception all four learning providers on which the review was focused are delivering provision to the capacity of their staff resources.

.....the recommendations are aimed at establishing learning in Epping Forest as a core part of CoL provision and seek to create mechanisms whereby the high quality work being undertaken is sustained and developed’.

Recommendations

1. EPPING FOREST STRATEGIC VISION FOR LEARNING

CoL Open Spaces/Epping Forest should strengthen its stated endorsement of the importance of lifelong learning through all its services in Epping Forest.

2. OPEN SPACES LEARNING NETWORK

CoL Open Spaces should expand and promote the existing learning network to include relevant staff/volunteers for all CoL Open Spaces divisions, endorsed by Director of Open Spaces / all Superintendents / relevant Open Spaces Committees.

3. SUSTAINING AND DEVELOPING LEARNING PROVISION

CoL and the learning providers should aim to at least sustain the current level of learning provision in Epping Forest and, subject to resources, to further develop the provision, building on the strong outcomes of DEF and other programmes including CBT-funded projects.

4. EPPING FOREST LEARNING NETWORK

In collaboration with the learning providers CoL should facilitate the establishment of a new Epping Forest Learning Network.

5. STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK FOR LEARNING IN EPPING FOREST

CoL in collaboration with the learning providers should build on the Epping Forest Strategic Vision for Learning and Epping Forest Learning Network by drawing up a Strategic Framework for Learning in Epping Forest; strands within the framework should address Learning Delivery, Community Engagement, Communications, and Fundraising / Sponsorship / Income Generation.