

Inspiring environmental understanding through first-hand experience



## Epping Forest Field Centre Head of Centre's report on progress in 2015



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

The purpose of this report is to inform the Joint Committee on progress at the Epping Forest Field Centre in 2015. I recommend that the report be RECEIVED.

We are making very good progress with most of the 'broad objectives' listed in the 2015 Plan approved by the JCC; there are no significant exceptions to report at this stage.

### Service user feedback and continuous improvement

We continue to regard service user feedback as a performance indicator and continuous improvement tool. From the beginning of 2015 we have been using *PollDaddy* (software) in place of 'clunky' MS Access databases to record and analyse service user feedback. Set up time was minimal compared to the time that would have been taken to set up new Access databases for 2015. Processing time is also quicker and the production of report data is much easier. Using *PollDaddy* has also facilitated the introduction of web-based feedback and the opportunity to provide feedback on iPads during the course as well as online later. Visitors on family courses and courses for individual adults are now encouraged to leave feedback on the FSC website at <http://www.field-studies-council.org/individuals-and-families/about-fsc-customer-reviews.aspx>

Here is some recent feedback from service users:

Primary - *'Fantastic - I would highly recommend it to other schools/other year groups'*

KS3 - *'Terrific in all aspects. The Tutor was fantastic'*

KS4 - *'Exceptionally well led course and very well tailored to the course we are studying - completely in line with expectations and all objective achieved'*.

Advanced - *'Fantastic, work was directly focused on AS criteria with great knowledge of each site'*.

Adult - Birthday Party - Family - *'Fabulous- really learned a lot. Excellent tutor'* - *'Brilliant'* - *'Perfect'*



Figure 1:  
Birthday party

Strong support from the management team and a very well embedded culture of learning and development for staff have offset any potentially negative impacts from significant staff turnover. There have been no poor course reviews and expectations have been met or exceeded for 98% of teachers completing feedback forms. Given that five of our six tutors joined the team since the first quarter of last year with two of these coming in at the tail end of 2014, it is not surprising that schools feedback is little less strong in the early part of 2015. There has been a fall from around 90% to (a still rather good) 84% of responses in the highest category on a five point scale for the year to date for 'overall'. We envisage a full return to the highest levels of visitor satisfaction in the coming months.

From the start of 2015 we have asked service users, on our feedback forms, whether or not our courses lead to a significant increase in appreciation of Epping Forest. Initial data indicates that 85% of teachers believe that the experience for their group did lead a significant increase in appreciation of Epping Forest. 10% indicated that this was not applicable and 5% indicated that there was no significant increase in appreciation. Fieldwork techniques courses, and courses that are mainly in the Roding Valley, are not seen by teachers to have a significant impact on appreciation of the Forest. We will be giving further consideration as to how we might further enhance the limited opportunities to foster appreciation of the Forest on these particular courses.

Our feedback also ask if service users are if they are aware that EFFC delivers the City of London's environmental learning service in Epping Forest Feedback from the beginning of the year indicates that 65% of service users (schools) were aware of this before their visit. Members will undoubtedly have spotted that the mechanism now ensures that 100% of teachers completing feedback forms are made aware of this by the time that they complete their form.

### **Booking patterns and curriculum change**

Booking patterns in recent years and in this year to date are encouraging; they indicate a strong demand for our services. The challenge now is to maintain high numbers of learners and effective income generation with changed requirements from schools arising from dramatic curriculum reform. Significant effort by the EFFC team, well supported by FSC at Regional and Charity wide level, is being channelled into meeting this challenge. Detailed information on this appears in the appendix to this report.

### **Quality Badge (QB)**

OFSTED inspector Jane Woodall, with Andy Pratt (Head of FSC Slapton) will be at EFFC on 9 and 10 June to undertake a QB assessment. It is our hope that they will comment favourably on progress reported in the appendix and on our continuous improvement process and on the outputs of this including:

- learning walls which will help students to contextualise, set & track their learning objectives
- use of handheld whiteboards in the field to support (assessment for) learning
- new starter and plenary activities including 'ecosystem dingbats' and 'sampling strategy dominoes'
- new question cue cards for higher ability learners
- continuous course improvement log and actions to track and embed a culture of continuous improvement
- new display material with the trialling of augmented reality
- enhanced use of ICT in the field and using iPads in the classroom



Figure 2: iPads in use for locating sites and comparing underlying geology

## **Ipads**

An exciting development has been the acquisition of iPads for the EFFC team that should help with productivity, collecting and sharing digital images, using social media and, most importantly, enhance learning and teaching. Initial indications are encouraging that this planned development will prove to be very effective. The next step is to acquire class sets of iPads for student use. Following the suggestion of Verder Morris at the October 2014 meeting of the JCC the Associates of EFFC have agreed to try and raise funds to help support this. An appeal letter has been prepared and will be distributed as soon as Gift Aid arrangements are properly in place.

## **Epping Forest Learning Providers Forum, DEF, Freshwater habitats and taxonomy**

As part of the Epping Forest Learning Providers Forum, with City, Epping Forest Centenary Trust and Suntrap colleagues, we are currently drafting a pack for Primary Schools to guide teachers in securing funding and other support for fieldwork in Epping Forest. The pack will refer to a Discovering Epping Forest legacy programme. The updated offer will give schools a range of options. Teachers will be able to download free material and run their own programmes and/or book courses with the Learning Providers. Learners can complete the full learning programme or participate in any combination of modules to suit the school's own preferences. However the Learning Providers will strongly recommend the completion of the whole programme. This will be presented as the best way to ensure that all learners make great progress across very significant parts of the National Curriculum and develop a fuller understanding of the natural heritage in their local forest.

Two of the original six Discovering Epping Forest (DEF) modules will morph into pre and post course work for teachers to deliver in school. Teachers will also be able to download material to enable them to lead fieldwork at Forest a teaching site near to their school. The City's Lifelong Learning Officer in EF and the EFCT Chairman are updating and developing a module that will focus on the historical use and management of Epping Forest and on practical conservation. The Head of Suntrap is developing a woodlands discovery module incorporating elements of modules previously developed and delivered by EFFC.

I am currently working on a pond discovery module that will be delivered at Epping Forest Field Centre. This will incorporate elements of the freshwater module delivered by Suntrap and EFFC's 'Learning for Biodiversity' course. Learners have an opportunity to meet curriculum requirements to work scientifically, understand how living things can be classified and learn about differences in lifecycles. The learning experiences will also encourage appreciation of ponds as an important part of the natural heritage in Epping Forest and an understanding of the need for biodiversity and conservation.

Linked to the development of the new discovery course, there remains a much bigger aspiration to build upon EFFC's reputation for freshwater ecology and taxonomic learning at all levels and to increase the attention that this receives. In turn, this is linked to a strong desire to ensure the conservation of the existing ponds at EFFC and the habitats of the very significant populations of great crested newts. The creation of an additional pond (or pond complex) at the Centre, as previously discussed at the JCC, is a crucial development in the context of these plans. It is my belief that these developments will become increasingly important to stakeholders for reasons of conservation as well as for engagement, learning and enjoyment especially with freshwater habitats under pressure and maintenance challenges ever greater.

I am delighted to be able to report that Ken Adams, our long standing Associate Tutor, has very generously donated £9,000 from his personal funds to facilitate the purchase of microscopes. Ken has recognised that, whilst this sort of specialist equipment has been impossible to fund in other ways in recent years, it is crucial to maintaining the capabilities and reputation of EFFC to host advanced level taxonomic courses. I am asking FSC colleagues at corporate and regional level to consider how we might build on this funding and draw in additional funding to further build microscopy resources at EFFC.

## **Buildings and health and safety**

As part of FSC's Charity wide risk management strategy, Fire Safety Consultant, Jamie Davis, undertook a follow up fire risk assessment (FRA) on 29 April along the lines of the 2012 FRA reported to the Committee. No significant unmanaged risks to life were identified.

The consultant noted that the following remedial actions had been referred to the City Surveyors, by the Epping Forest Asset Manager, but had not been addressed prior to this FRA:

- rectify a defect with the main fire alarm control panel
- replace 'out of date' fire extinguishers
- test the lightning conductor (outstanding from the 2012 FRA)

The following (non-essential) improvement suggestions were made by the Consultant:

- zonation map by fire alarm control panel – (we are asking the Epping Forest Asset Manager to consider this, perhaps in relation to the remedial works)
- better vegetation clearance at exits – (whilst acceptable it was not exemplary – a higher specification and increased frequency for this regular task is being recorded on the task list - this will be in place before the meeting of the JCC)
- additional fire exit sign – (this will be in place before the meeting of the JCC)
- the moving of the fire extinguisher in the photocopier room to the main corridor – (we are asking the Epping Forest Asset Manager to consider this, perhaps in relation to the remedial works)

The FRA report, once received, will be shared with City Officers. It should confirm that there are no significant risks to life and that no immediate actions are required. In the unexpected event that there is anything of importance that has not been referred to above this will, of course, be reported to the next meeting of the JCC.

We are also expecting an FSC organised external health & safety inspection for ('Gold Shield' re-accreditation) in July or August. There are unlikely to be many shortcomings. Based on informal discussions with the City's Legionella risk assessment contractor, it is thought that minor works may be required to address a stagnant water issue in tanks that supplied hand wash basins prior to refurbishment of the toilets in 2013. If this is the case, evidence that timely works are being carried out would seem to be important. It would also be useful to have copies of the City's latest tree safety risk assessment records for EFFC sites together with appropriate safety (and other) information relating to the new boilers and confirmation that, after additional works earlier this year, the boilers have been properly commissioned.

## **Development work**

The Essex Learning for Sustainability Forum, of which we are a member body, is to change its name to Essex Learning Outside the Classroom. We have agreed to deliver a curriculum change impacts workshop on behalf of this Forum to the National Association of Field Studies Officers (which became part of Institute for Outdoor Learning from April 2015) when its annual conference is held in the Lea Valley in January 2016.

Building on our link with Wat Tyler Country Park, we have added several specialist outreach natural history courses led by Associate Tutor, Ken Adams to our programme for 2015. These include courses in salt marsh ecology and microscopy. Similarly, building on our link with Forty Hall Farm we are also offering a Phase 1 Habitat Survey training course led by Associate Tutor and EFFC volunteer, Sharon Brown. These developments are part of our strategic intentions to diversify our provisions to improve longer term prospects for viability, work in partnership with others to find synergies, take learning closer to the learners and join up provision to facilitate learning journeys that take individuals to a variety of learning locations.

In March, following the inaugural courses last year, we delivered a second geography fieldwork course for the Consortium for the School Centred Initial Teacher Training (Essex) with 16 trainee teachers in attendance; we hope to build on this SCITT link.

Also in March we endeavoured to find partner schools in the UK to work with us in putting together, with partners from the EU funded Lessons from Nature Project a successor project, 'Natural Futures'. Unfortunately whilst we still have a dialogue with schools on learning for sustainability, we could not find partner schools on this occasion. This was largely due to tight time scale (for schools), the cautious

approach of UK schools to committing to innovation outside of the core curriculum and the previously mentioned unhelpful new curriculum for ESD.

Following the success of the previous 'Loughton Big Family Pond Dip' for Loughton residents at Staples Road Pond, the Town Council has agreed to fund this event again in 2016.

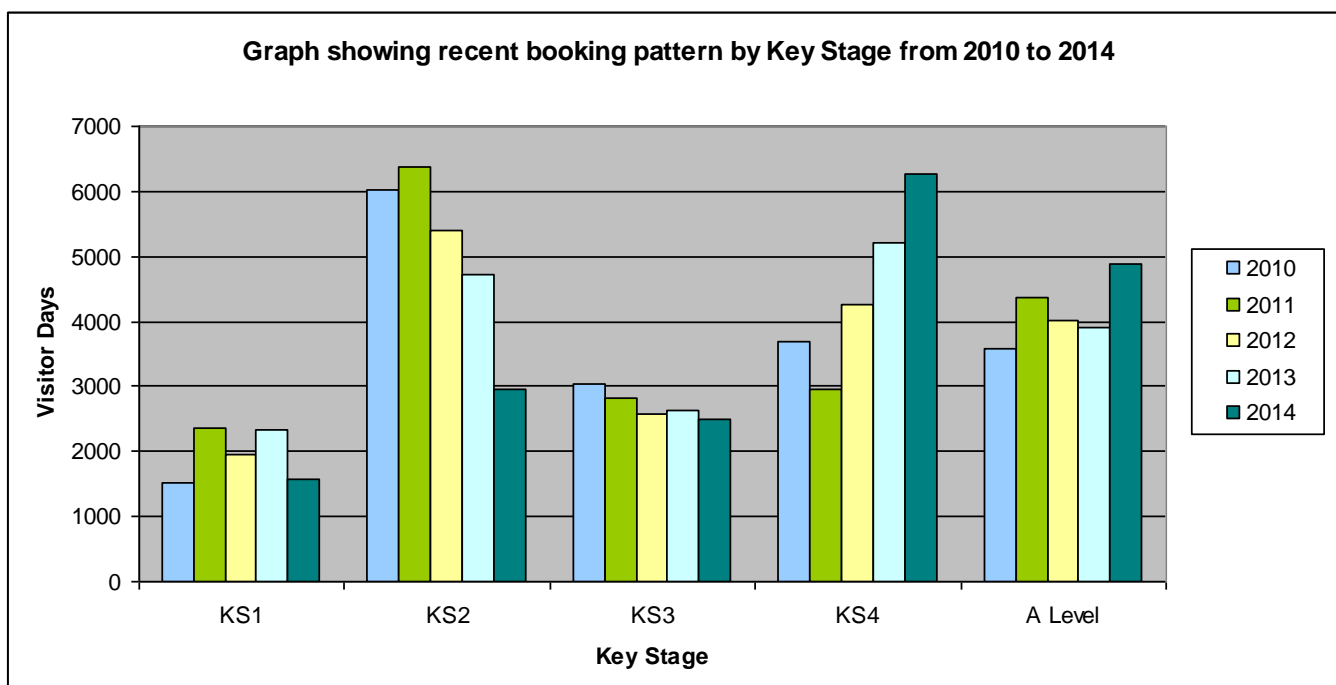
We have not been able to give as much attention to fundraising, planning for the longer term and to growing our social media presence as we would have liked. Nevertheless, we are making very good progress with most of the 'broad objectives' listed in the 2015 Plan approved by the JCC.

**Steve Bunce, Head of Centre (April 2015)**

## **APPENDIX to this report: Booking patterns and curriculum change**

In accordance with our plans, we have invested efforts into strengthening our courses and our tutor capacity and capabilities sought to build our 'core' business income generation around strong Key Stage 4 and Advanced level bookings where income generation is highest. Key stage 4 bookings generate a relatively strong per capita income (currently c £18 per head/day) with relatively large groups. Advanced Level bookings, whilst having smaller group sizes have a very strong per capita income (currently £27 per head/day). It is pleasing that bookings for both levels have been good in the period from 2010 -2014 and have led to unprecedented levels of income generation. We have been able to meet increased demands for Key Stage 4 Geography where Controlled Assessments of fieldwork have been part of the Specification.

As indicated to the Committee previously, head teacher, governor and parent concerns about cost are a very significant factor at KS 1 & 2. With coach transport costing around £300 and an EFFC fee of £220 per group per capita costs are in the region of £17. Alongside developmental aims and financial reasons one of the reasons for seeking grant funding for past years was to subsidise learners at KS 2 especially from areas of deprivation. This led to high numbers in the busy project years of 2010 -13 and a then fall in KS 2 bookings in 2014.



The challenge now is to maintain high numbers of learners and effective income generation with changed requirements from schools arising from dramatic curriculum reform. This is the story so far:

At Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 we have updated content incorporated resources and pedagogies trialled in projects into our mainstream programmes and changed course titles to reflect changes in the curriculum. These courses are additional to FSC programme courses and our hope is that our strong and relevant offer and reputation will maintain or grow (non grant funded) bookings from primary schools.

The new curriculum at Key Stages 3 and 4 does not appear to present especially exciting opportunities to increase the likelihood of day course fieldwork. Nevertheless, the need for learners 'to work scientifically' and the increased emphasis on the application of mathematical concepts have been noted and used to guide modification of our Scientific Skills course. Similarly, the increased emphasis on geographical skills and ICT may attract teachers to our updated Geographical Skills course. We will work hard to ensure that our reformed Geography fieldwork days are an effective replacement for the Controlled Assessment courses when this assessment is no longer part of the requirement at KS 4. We are also reviewing our BTEC provision.

FSC has identified opportunities for Chemistry and Physics fieldwork courses which could become new courses at EFFC offer as a means of filling any gaps in provision. In the opinion of the Head of Centre the new curriculum is disappointingly unlikely to encourage secondary schools to undertake learning for sustainability courses.

In preparation for new AS / A2 Biology Specifications in the new academic year, tutors attended very helpful FSC training in January. This was followed by a workshop here at EFFC in February to progress the development of non-residential course provision. Generic courses descriptors are in place and specific promotional and learning resources are being developed; information will shortly be uploaded to the website and conveyed to the schools that currently use our services.

Tutors have also attended training in relation to new AS / A2 Geography requirements that will be taught from September 2016. This learning has been cascaded across the tutorial team and the current belief is that we will be able to offer fairly attractive courses including catchment hydrology related to flooding. There may be increased opportunities for urban geography if there is a need to fill gaps in existing provision. Ongoing attention will be given to Geography A level courses with a view to finalising our provision for the academic year 2016/17 early in 2016.

We have been discussing the impacts of curriculum reform with teachers on an ongoing basis. Most are uncertain about what they think the implications will be but express a desire to continue to utilise our services which they hold in high regard. We have introduced questions in relation to this onto the back of feedback forms. We hope that teacher responses will help to develop our understanding of teacher perceptions and fieldwork needs.

We held an advisory teachers workshop, in the Easter holiday period, for local teachers. Our main focus for the Workshop was to get feedback and creative input from 'critical friends' on the work we have been doing to continuously improve our learning provision and pedagogy. It was reassuring that they indicated a shared belief that we are on the right track. Further workshops are being planned for the next half term holiday and for the summer holiday. In the interim we will endeavour to maintain links as best we can under the constraints of available time.

Teaching staff took part in 'regional' training hosted at FSC Flatford Mill. They led sessions relating to biodiversity learning education at KS2 and to managing challenging behaviour and benefited from sessions relating to new higher standards for Quality Badge plus (QB) assessment.

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