

Committee(s):	Date(s):
Epping Forest and Commons	9 July 2012
Subject: Update on the Epping Forest Visitor Survey	Public
Report of: Superintendent of Epping Forest SEF 19/12	For Information

Summary

The second year of the Epping Forest Visitor Survey was conducted during 2011 and builds upon the survey data gathered during 2010, helping to provide a more accurate picture of the visitor profile for Epping Forest. It is estimated that the total number of visits (rather than visitors) to Epping Forest in 2011 was 4.3 million.

Statistics from these surveys have been used in management plans, reports, funding bids and press releases providing valuable information both internally and externally. Where appropriate, action plans have sought to address issues and concerns identified through the Questionnaire Survey.

Recommendations

I recommend that Members note the content of this report.

Main Report

Background

1. The Epping Forest Visitor Survey began in 2010. It was designed and delivered in its first year by specialist consultancy Alison Millward Associates as part of a four year project to train Epping Forest staff and volunteers in how to deliver the project independently.
2. In 2011, as part of the phased handover, delivery and analysis of the visitor survey was managed internally by the Community Liaison Officer. The reports were compiled by Alison Millward Associates.
3. The annual Visitor Survey is a dual approach comprising of a Questionnaire Survey and an Observation Survey.
4. The Questionnaire Survey provided the opportunity for visitors to express their opinions of Epping Forest and how it is managed. It was available at our Forest Centres, online and through face to face interviews conducted by the Visitor Services Section. The Questionnaire Survey has replaced the Greenspace 'GreenStat' survey, which was the Department's principal investigative technique.

5. The Observation Survey records what visitors do when they come to the Forest and builds an increasingly accurate picture of who uses the Forest and why. To assist this process, the Forest has been divided into 29 geographically distinct sites, all of which are planned to be observed by 2014. The survey will then be repeated on a regular basis across these sites, especially where there has been major capital investment. See Appendix 1: Visitor Survey – Observation Sites in Epping Forest.
6. One hour routes were walked repeatedly at set times across the summer by a team of volunteers and staff for the Observation Survey. In 2011 the following sites were surveyed:
 - Wanstead Flats
 - Hollow Ponds & Gilbert Slade
 - Fairmead
 - Bury Wood
 - Loughton Camp and
 - Lower Forest
7. The total number of visits to eleven of the geographically distinct sites can now be calculated using the data gathered during 2010 and 2011. The results help us to estimate figures for the remaining 18 sites. Other recorded statistics, such as visitor centre statistics and football pitch bookings, are included to develop a more accurate picture of the actual number of visits to Epping Forest.
8. The number of visits is calculated, not the number of visitors, as one visitor may return many times.
9. The Visitor Survey was designed to gain a greater understanding of how many people visit Epping Forest, their principal activities and how representative they are of the local population. The survey is recognised by Heritage Lottery as an important means of evaluating the impact of the capital projects that are being funded as part of the Branching Out project, including the new visitor interpretation centre near Chingford.

Results

10. For the Observation Survey, staff and volunteers counted and mapped the location of 3,015 visitors across six sites over 50 hours during the summer of 2011. In addition, 522 questionnaire surveys were completed in 2011.
11. The summary results can be found in Appendix 2: Results Survey. The report compares the survey results to demographic data to see how representative Epping Forest visitors are of the population living close by.
12. According to the Questionnaire Survey, first impressions of the Forest were very good and the majority of respondents (female and male) said they felt safe.

"We are so privileged to have this wonderful space to visit."

"We live in Victoria Park and have just discovered how easy it is to get to Epping Forest from us. We love it. Wish we had discovered it before."

"I love the guided walks. All Epping staff are always very friendly and helpful."

13. Whilst the vast majority of respondents expressed views that the Forest should be kept as natural as possible and not turned into a "glorified park", it was also clear that an ongoing lack of certain facilities and services was detracting from people's enjoyment of the Forest:

"More seats required."

"More toilets needed through the Forest and more children's playground activities."

14. The results from the 11 sites surveyed over two years and estimates from unsurveyed sites were analysed alongside the data collected from our events and activities, web hits, football and golf bookings and the number of visits to our three Forest Centres. The total number of visits to Epping Forest during 2011 was 4.3 million. This is an increase from the estimated 4 million visits during 2010, as the estimated figures for the remaining unsurveyed sites have been adjusted in response to the 2011 results. A more accurate picture will only be available at the end of 2014 when all 29 sites have been surveyed.

15. Some of the busiest sites were surveyed in 2011 (Wanstead Flats with approximately 400,000 visits and Hollow Ponds with 430,000 visits) but also the quietest site (Lower Forest at 30,000 visits). The quieter sites were less popular than expected, while the number of visits to the south of the Forest far exceeds the previous maximum of 279,062 visits to High Beach in the north of the Forest recorded during 2010.

Plans for 2012

16. The Questionnaire Survey is being run between June and September 2012 with data being collected by forward facing staff including Visitor Services and Forest Keeper sections.

17. The Observation Survey for 2012 began in May and will also run until September with volunteers managing surveys at the following six sites:

- Barn Hoppitt
- Bushwood & Reservoir Wood
- Highams Park
- Lords Bushes & Knighton Woods
- Pole Hill & Yardley Hill
- Strawberry Hill Pond

18. The results of the observation and questionnaire surveys have informed action plans for each of the six sites observed in 2011. For example, we may target events, promotion and facilities to encourage a particular user group known to live within 2km of an area of the Forest, but that are currently under represented in the visit statistics.

Corporate & Strategic Implications

19. By gathering and collating statistics on visitors, effectively our service users, and involving volunteers in the process, the Visitor Survey helps to meet three of The City Together Strategy's aims:

- is competitive and promotes opportunity
- supports our communities and
- promotes and enhances our environment

20. Volunteering and community involvement are included in the Open Spaces Business Plan 2012 – 2015 Strategic Aim, "A World Class City needs a World Class Environment". Fulfilling the Open Spaces Departmental Objectives of Inclusion through involving communities and partners in developing a sense of place through the care and management of our sites.

21. The Visitor Survey project also helps meet two of the Epping Forest Management Plan 2004-2010 objectives:

- to improve accessibility to education and enjoyment and
- to improve recreational activities

22. Accurate visitor information will help to build up a better understanding and comprehensive view of Forest use, which will help inform future decisions affecting the long term provision of services.

Financial Implications

23. Since the start of the project, a total spend of £29,522 has been claimed by Alison Millward Associates. With £10,478.00 remaining for the next two years, £5339 in 2012/13 and £2672 in 2013/14 with a contingency / under spend of £2467. The total fee of £40,000 is divided equally between Local Risk expenditure and the Branching Out project, which received Heritage Lottery funding.

Conclusion

24. The Visitor Survey continues to be a successful project, not only engaging volunteers but creating valuable and workable data that can be used for the management of Epping Forest. It also contributes to the evaluation of capital works projects such as the construction, landscaping and waymarked trails.

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