

City Commons Visitor Observation Survey

Summary Report 2012

Introduction

In 2010 the City of London Corporation appointed consultants, Alison Millward Associates, to help design an observational visitor survey to determine the number of visits made annually to each of the City Commons. The surveys provide information such as demographics, density and activities of visitors. 2012 was the second summer of surveying by volunteers and rangers.

Methodology

The surveyor walked a set route around a site, recorded each user seen. Each user was plotted on a map to show their location and a record made of their gender, age group, ethnicity, whether they were part of a group, with or without a dog and the nature of their primary activity.

Eight one-hour surveys were completed for each site at various times of day, with half mid-week and half at weekends. Four surveys were conducted during term time and four in school holidays and all took place between April and October.

At the end of the survey, the data was analysed to determine the total visits to each site. We can produce maps and graphs to show density of users across a site, activity patterns of visitors or areas utilised by different age groups. The data was also compared to the social profile of our local catchment area, using census data of the population living within 2km of the sites. This helps show whether or not our sites are attracting visitors proportionally to the local demographic.

Summary

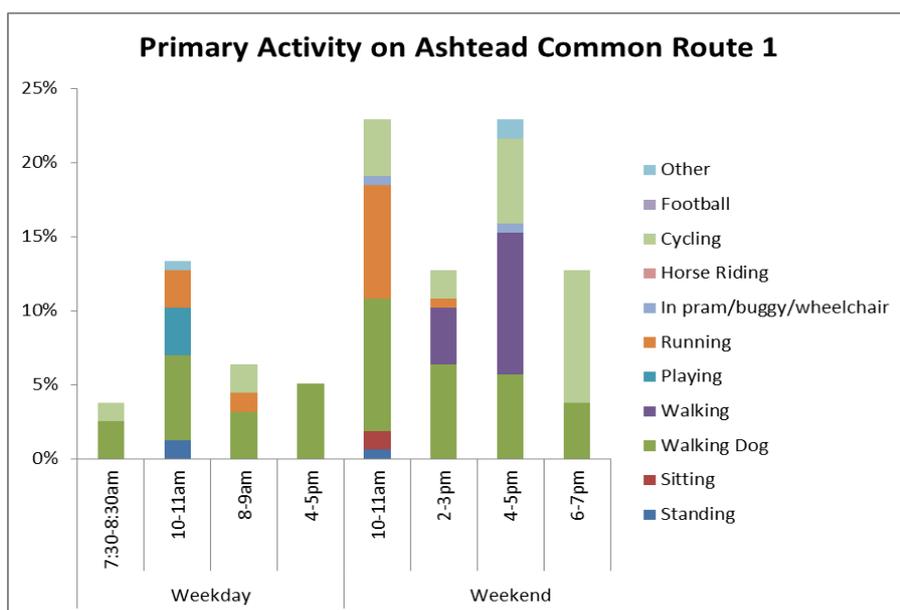
The survey estimated the number of visits made to City Commons in 2012 was 1,033,961 but this is a conservative estimate that does not record every user of our sites. For example, it does not take into account 2,219 visits by volunteers, 2,185 visitors to events or the school children who come out on educational visits each year.

Ashtead Common (219,107 visits pa @ 1,096/ha)

Ashtead Common had two survey routes due to its large size. Route 1 took in the rural, northern and western side of the Common; whilst Route 2 followed the urban southern and eastern areas.

As in 2011, Route 1 had lower numbers of visitors (68,699 visits pa) with more than double the number of visits at weekends than during the week days.

Cycling was the second most popular activity with 23.6% of visits, especially at weekends, as seen in graph.



In 2011 visit numbers tripled on Route 2 at weekends but in 2012 numbers were the same during the week as at weekends. This is partly accounted for by there being only 3 weekend surveys done in 2012 compared to 4 weekday surveys, but even discounting this factor the difference in overall visit numbers isn't significant.

As the difference in weekday and weekend use differs significantly between the survey years we cannot say for sure whether the perceived increase in visitor numbers at weekends is genuine. However, a greater percentage of males used Route 1 (55%), especially at weekends.

Our 2011 data showed a low percentage of visits made by over 65s (3.5%) but this had increased to 14.5% in 2012, showing this part of the Common isn't under used by them. In 2011 route 2 was popular for dog walking but in 2012 only 30% of visits were made with a dog. Cycling was equally as popular on both routes across Ashted Common.

Although Ashted Common has the second highest number of visits out of all seven of the City Commons, because it is such a large site, it appears to absorb these visitors well and retains a 'natural aspect'.

Farthing Downs (189,752 visits pa @ 2,063/ha)

The estimated number of annual visits has increased significantly since the 2011 survey (125,296). In 2011 two weekend surveys were missed and in 2012 a large Ramblers group that regularly visits the Downs was included, but not previously captured on the 2011 survey, so it is likely that this year's higher estimate is closer to the reality.

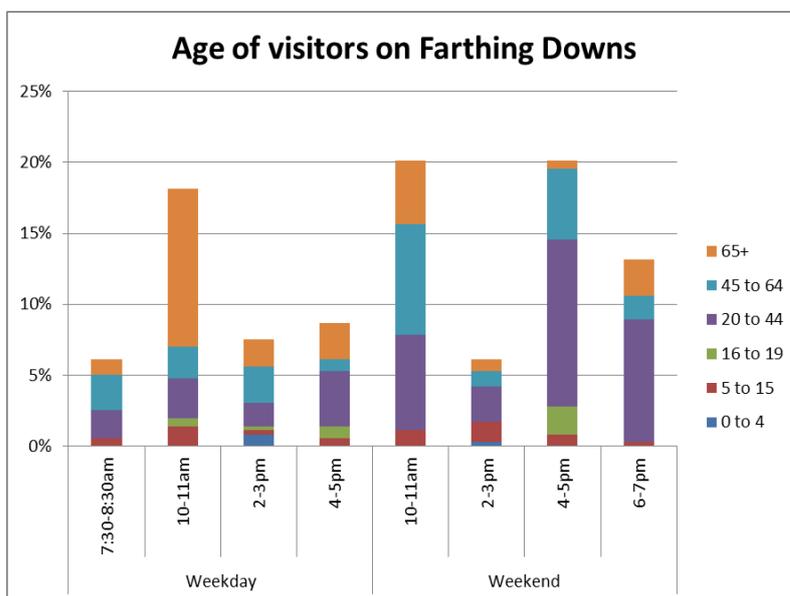
Greater densities of visitors were seen at the southern end of the site in amenity mown areas than in 2011. This area is closest to the car park and interpretation panels and is also where visitors that pass through into Happy Valley would be captured. Despite having a fairly steep gradient along its length, the entirety of the downs has open views and is well utilised.

The site is used equally by males and females all week. The 2011 data showed the Downs wasn't as well utilised by the over 65s. In 2012 they made up a quarter of all visits and were the most popular age group during the week.

At weekends, the Downs is visited mainly by the 20-44 age groups. Visits by the younger generations were even lower than 2011, with just 1.1% of visits made by 0-4 year olds and 6.4% by 5-15 year olds.

Similar to in 2011, 76% of the visits were made by people visiting in groups with sitting being a popular activity (13.7%) as families or friends enjoyed picnics or sunbathing on the flat areas at the top of the downs, close to the car park.

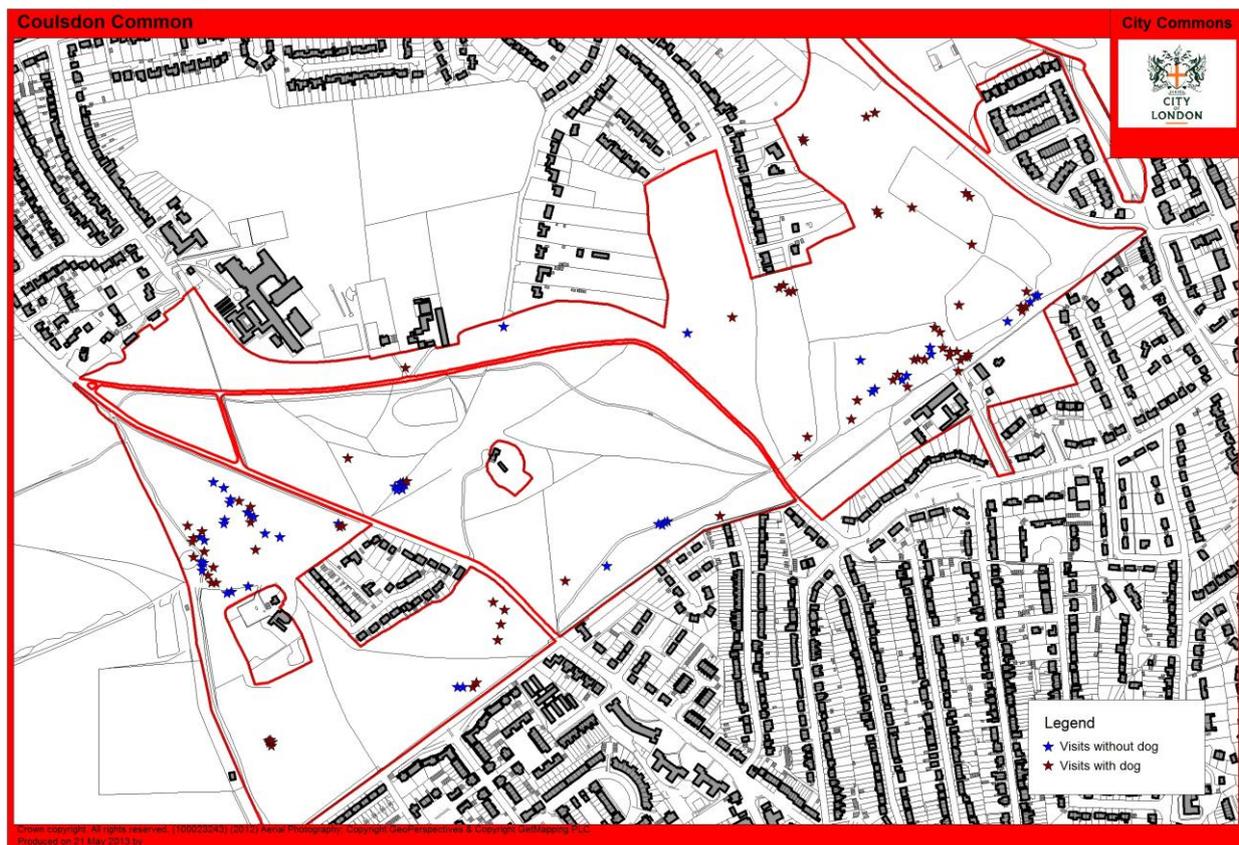
In 2011 there was a very low occurrence of visits by people with visible disabilities but we were unsure whether this was due to lack of awareness by recorders so extra training was given in what to look out for. In 2012, three to four people were observed with possible physical disabilities and a group of three with mental disabilities (approx. 2% of visits), showing that this demographic does make use of the site albeit still in fairly low numbers.



Coulsdon Common (58,317 visits pa @ 1,143/ha)

Coulsdon Common had similarly low number and density of visits in 2012 as in 2011. This may be because it is dissected by two busy roads forming an isolated central 'island' with no focal point to attract visitors. The visitor profile is close to that of the local catchment census data for gender, age and ethnicity.

This year 60.7% of visits were with a dog and the heaviest areas of usage were behind Merlewood Estate Office and in areas to the north of the Fox public house, following common usage patterns by all visitors, as seen in the map below. 10% of users were seen sitting, showing the site is a nice place to stop and spend a while enjoying the scenery.



Kenley Common (145,765 visits pa @ 2,603/ha)

Kenley Common received double the visits at weekends than during the week in 2012 which is a typical pattern for open spaces around the country, but which wasn't mirrored at most of the City Commons in the 2011 survey. Visits at weekends were dominated by visitors in groups.

All ages were observed in reasonable numbers at Kenley Common, but observations of children at play were down to 1.4%, compared to 6% in 2011 which is disappointing. The 15.2% of visits made by 5-15 year olds reflects use of the perimeter track around Kenley Airfield for cycling by children. Cycling is popular with all age groups, making up 23% of visits in 2012.

Despite being a well known historical site, only one observation was made in 2012 of a visitor with a visible disability, which seems low when Kenley Airfield has a flat and accessible perimeter track. Additionally, there is little ethnic diversity amongst visitors.

Riddlesdown (227,055 visits pa @ 5,406/ha)

The survey route on Riddlesdown covers only the western end of the site and the data gathered in this area suggests it is the most used site of the City Commons. However, the survey area includes the car park and care should be taken extrapolating this data across the whole site and measuring

visit density per hectare. Weekday visits make up 42% of the total and weekend visits 58% which doesn't reflect the difference often seen in other similar green spaces.

In 2011 use of Riddlesdown by females was lower than expected at 42% but in 2012 it was at 54% reducing concern. Use by under-20s is high again this year, showing continuing use of the site as a through route to local schools. Just 2% of visits observed play in 2012 which indicates that despite knowing of the site, not many children are utilising it for play in their spare time.

Contrary to the popular belief that Riddlesdown is overrun by dog walkers, just 40% of visits to the site were with dogs.

Spring Park (149,924 visits pa @ 7,139/ha)

The 2012 data like in 2011 showed that Spring Park is surprisingly well used for its size and has a high density of visits per hectare. Similar to 2011, most visits were made along the woodland edge and around the meadow (82%), with fewer people venturing deeper into the woodland.

Proportion of female visitors was higher than expected in 2011 but dropped back to 52% in 2012. Once again, Spring Park had the highest proportion of dog walking of all City Commons sites, with a staggering 87% of visits being made with a dog. These included nearly all of the visits that went into the woodland as can be seen in the map below.

No observations of people with visible disabilities were made which is surprising as there is a car park, surfaced track and relatively flat terrain around the popular meadow route.



West Wickham Common (44,041 visits pa @ 4,004/ha)

West Wickham is the least visited of City Commons but it is a relatively small and almost entirely wooded. Low numbers of visitor records meant that caution was exercised interpreting the 2011 data. In 2012 only 6 of the 8 surveys were completed but overall, data showed a similar number of annual visits. The 2011 data showed only 37% of visits were made by females, yet in 2012 it had increased to 42%. This is still low when compared to the profile of our local catchment area (52% female), but is a typical pattern seen at woodland sites.

The most popular activity was walking, then dog walking, sitting, cycling and running respectively. Visits by children under 15 were very low in 2011 (4.4%) but had picked up a bit in 2012 (10.9%) with more than half of visits being made by groups. Regardless of this, no playing was observed which has been a missing element across all the City Commons. Surveyors noted no observations of users with visible disabilities in both years, despite presence of a residential college for disabled people nearby and an accessible path from the site car park.

Conclusions

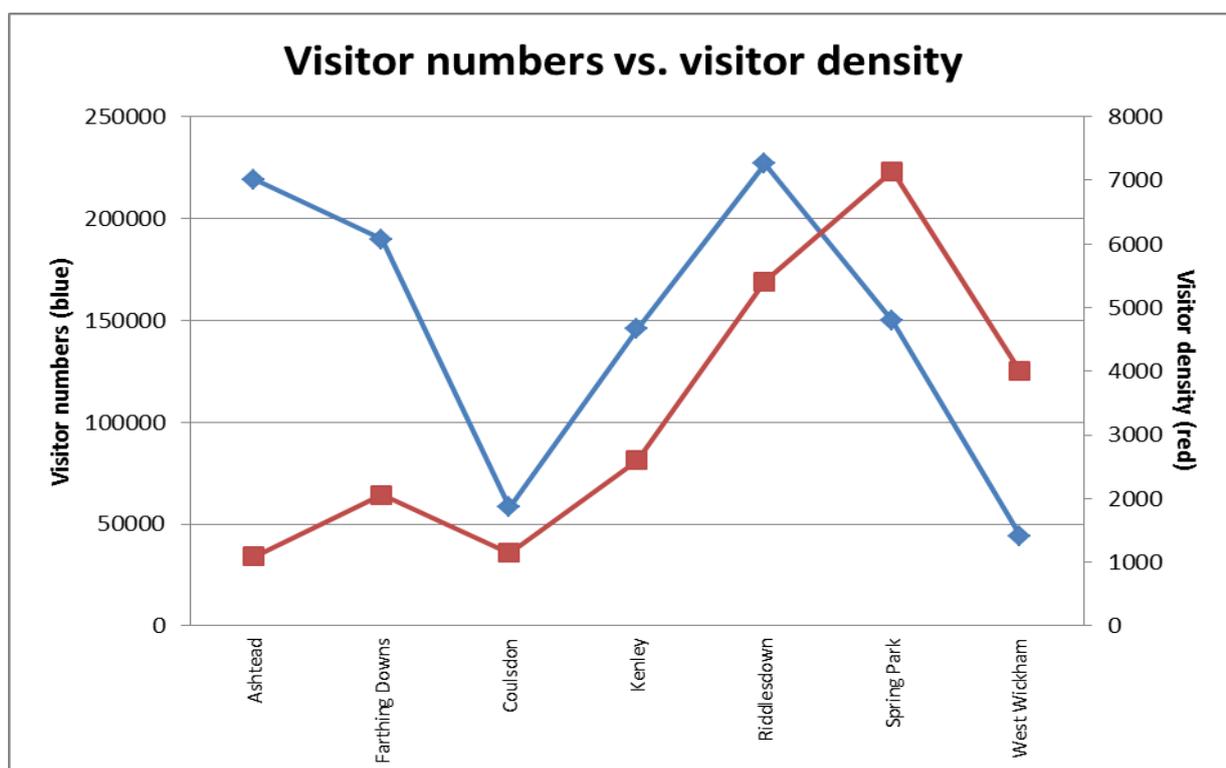
In 2012 we estimate that around 1,033,961 visits were made to City Commons, which combined with last years figures (circa 911,000 visits) represents an average of 974, 000 visits per annum. This does not include our organised events, school visits or walks and talks, which this year are estimated to have attracted a further 5,000 visits.

The similarity in estimated numbers of visits for both years gave us a good basis for analysing our data and we feel confident about making the following observations about City Commons:

1. The visitors to our open spaces reflect the local communities surrounding them,
2. Visitor numbers to some sites is lower than for similar sized green spaces in the UK,
3. There were very few observations of children at play on our open spaces, and
4. There were few observations of people with a visible disability.

Visitor profile

There were no major differences in the profile or activities of our visitors between years and they match up fairly well with the profile of the local population living within 2km of our sites. Previous customer surveys suggested that our sites cater for local people rather than acting as destinations for visitors from further afield, and our observations appear to confirm this. The City Commons are therefore mainly used by local people who enjoy the space for their own fresh air and exercise, with walking, dog walking, running and cycling as the main physical activities.



Visitor impact

The largest sites, Ashted Common and Farthing Downs can absorb their large visit numbers at low densities, meaning that they do not feel busy and retain a natural aspect. At Riddlesdown, the high number of visits was only recorded for a small area that can feel crowded at peak times and when school children cross through. Most visitors to Kenley Common use the perimeter track on Kenley Airfield, which is owned by the Ministry of Defence. Spring Park has a high density of visits per hectare and as the majority of visitors stick to the meadow perimeter, again, the site can feel busy here at peak times.

Children and play

The largest potential barriers for access on City Commons appear to relate to children. Visits made by children in the 0-15 age range are significantly lower than expected from our local catchment profile. The reasons for this are unclear but there may be uncertainty about where children are allowed to 'play' on City Commons, and which activities are prohibited. If we want to explore the reasons further, we would need to gather some qualitative data.

Disability access

Visible disabilities were recorded at very low numbers in the surveys in both years and more data is needed to understand this trend. There may be physical barriers to access or there may just be lack of engagement and less knowledge of City Commons amongst this visitor demographic. Again we would need to gather some qualitative data.

The information we have collected is proving useful when considering the impact of certain visitor groups on our open spaces, such as cyclists or dog walkers. We have a useful data set to review certain aspects of our management plans. The collation of our estimated visitor numbers has also added validity to grant applications such as the Heritage Lottery Funding bid for the Kenley Revival Project, which seeks to conserve and interpret important WW2 features of Kenley Common.

What next?

We will use the information that we have gathered to inform decision-making when considering improvements to the popular routes to ease access and when relocating livestock fencing so as to reduce disruption or conflict with visitors. We also use it when planning the location of additional facilities such as dog bins and benches.

With regard to visitor enjoyment of our open spaces we will be moving toward gathering customer satisfaction information rather than more observation data. The existing observational survey was achieved with significant support from volunteers and we express our thanks to them for their commitment over the last two years.

We intend to share our findings with stakeholders, including making our data available to local schools as part of our commitment to provide a local educational resource. The wealth of data gathered could provide a useful resource for students of Geography at GCSE and A level.

Sarah Barton

Project Assistant (City Commons)

Tel: 01372 279083 Ext. 6647

H:drive/Visitor Surveys/Reports/11 Summary Report 2012