

Visitor surveys: Willesley Wood

QA Research Ltd, National Forest Company and Woodland Trust.



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FOREST

Introduction

The research

This research summary covers one of two pieces of visitor perception research conducted by QA Research Ltd. It should be read in conjunction with the "Visitor Surveys – Tourism Gateways" summary, which discusses the National Forest Visitor Survey^{1,2} undertaken in 2007.

The subject of this research summary is a visitor survey that was undertaken in 2008 at Willesley Wood³, a 42ha community woodland owned by the Woodland Trust.

Why do it?

Willesley Wood is a locally-used woodland in the Heart of The National Forest. It has a very different type of visitor and pattern of usage to the larger-scale visitor attractions surveyed in 2007. Research at Willesley Wood allowed the NFC to estimate usage levels throughout the year. It also helped to canvass the views and levels of satisfaction among people using the woodland. The results have been used to identify lessons that could be applied to other locally-used woodlands elsewhere in the Forest.

Aims & objectives

The survey aimed to update previous research at Willesley Wood and to complement information obtained from The National Forest Visitor Survey in 2007. Specific aims were to:

- Establish a profile of visitors.
- Determine the mode of transport used to visit the wood.
- Identify the motivations for visiting.
- Understand previous visiting patterns.
- Rate the levels of satisfaction of the visit.
- Identify any suggested future improvements.
- Measure current understanding and awareness of The National Forest.
- Understand attitudes towards sustainable tourism

The Project

Description

Surveys of visitors were undertaken to find out their views and experience of using a local community woodland site. The findings were compared with previous research undertaken at the site in 2001⁴ and 1998⁵.

Approach

Face to face interviews and visitor counts were undertaken on nine days across a range of dates (Spring, Summer and Autumn) and types of day (midweek, weekend, bank holiday). In total, 97 interviews were conducted, between May and October 2008. The aim is to repeat this type of survey approximately every five years.

Timescales

The report was completed in February 2009.

Budgets

£4,144.32, including VAT.

Results

Outcomes

The results of the surveys are summarised under six headings and (where appropriate) compared with the results of the National Forest Visitor Survey 2007^{1,2}:

Profile of visitors.

- Visitors were primarily from A - C social grades (25% AB, 37% C1) and most belonged to middle and older age groups (with 47% aged between 35 and 54 years).
- The majority visited without children (86%).
- Visitors were mainly from Leicestershire (61%), Derbyshire (31%) and Staffordshire (5%).

Pattern of current visitors.

- 89% of visitors were local residents (an increase of 35% since 2001). In contrast to the visitor attraction gateway sites, Willesley Wood is a wood designed for local usage and consequently attracts few day trippers and overnight stays.
- Most visitors were repeat visitors (90%), but there had been a steady increase in first-time visitors since 2001 (6% up to 10%).
- The majority of people (80%) visited the site over 20 times a year.
- 60% of visitors visited daily and 28% weekly.
- Willesley attracted mainly solitary visitors (43%) or couples visiting without children (33%).
- Most visits were for short periods, with 73% staying under one hour.

Motivations for visiting

- Most visitors had local knowledge of the site (82%). A further 10% of respondents were visiting due to a recommendation by friends and family.
- The main reasons for visiting included dog walking (64%) and short walks (23%).
- Mode of transport to sites
- The largest proportion of visitors arrived by car (91%) and 9% arrived on foot (which is a 4% increase from 2001).

Overall satisfaction levels

- Satisfaction levels were high, given the number of regular repeat visitors, the high likelihood to recommend the woodland to friends/family, the positive comments and the lack of many dislikes regarding the site.
- Site features at Willesley Wood achieved 'satisfactory' to 'good' ratings.
- 61% of respondents could not state anything they disliked about their visit. Visitors most enjoyed the peaceful and relaxing atmosphere (35%), the countryside and open spaces (25%) and nice walks (18%).
- Quality and management of trails/footpaths and general maintenance of the site scored highly (both achieved a mean score of 4.1; on a scale from 1 (very poor) to 5 (very good)).
- A suggested improvement was to provide more dog bins on site (13%).
- When asked to describe Willesley Wood as a place to visit, a large number of respondents described the area as "peaceful, tranquil and spiritual."

Awareness and perceptions of The National Forest

- 100% of the respondents stated that they had heard of The National Forest, indicating very high levels of local awareness.
- Key NFC roles were fairly well understood, with 81% of visitors identifying "planting and managing trees" as important and 64% saying to "enhance and protect the wildlife".

Potential applications

- Getting local feedback will improve the woodland site experience and enable the NFC to better respond to the requirements of local visitors.
- The research findings will help to inform the design and management of new community woodlands.
- The research could be applied to other community woodland sites across the UK.

Further information

Dissemination

- Press releases.
- Sharing of data with partner organisations.
- NFC website www.nationalforest.org
- The NFC's Forest Scene newsletter.
- NFC research review seminar 2010.

Links to published work

- ¹ *National Forest Visitor Survey Report, Pre-Installation Stage, Phase One* (June 2007). Produced by QA Research, for the National Forest Company.
- ² *National Forest Visitor Survey Report, Post-Installation Stage, Phase Two* (December 2007). Produced by QA Research for the National Forest Company.
- ³ *Visitor Survey at Willesley Wood* (2009). Produced by QA Research for the National Forest Company.
- ⁴ *The National Forest Visitor Survey 2001, Willesley Wood* (2002). Produced by the Research Unit, Heart of England Tourist Board for the National Forest Company.
- ⁵ *National Forest Visitor Surveys 1998*. Site reports overview. Produced by Loughborough University for the National Forest Company.
National Forest Visitor Research Project Summary 2007 (2008). Produced by QA Research for the National Forest Company.

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