

REPORT OF THE GROUP MANAGER, COUNTRY PARKS & GREEN ESTATE 2012 VISITOR SATISFACTION SURVEYS IN COUNTRY PARKS

Purpose of the Report

1. To inform the Committee of the outcome of the 2012 annual visitor satisfaction surveys at Rufford Abbey Country Park and Sherwood Forest Country Park, and of the result of the Visitor Attraction Quality Assurance Scheme (VAQAS) annual inspection at Rufford Abbey Country Park.

Information and Advice

Annual Visitor Survey - Rufford Abbey & Sherwood Forest Visitor Centre

2. Rufford Abbey Country Park attracts some 480,000 visitors and Sherwood Forest Country Park approximately 360,000 per year. This puts the two sites amongst the top ten busiest visitor attractions in the East Midlands region.
3. An annual visitor satisfaction survey is commissioned. Its purpose is twofold: to find out more about the parks' 'visitor profile', including where visitors come from, and to check that we are providing a quality experience for our customers.
4. This year the survey was conducted face to face, with researchers asking visitors to input their answers on iPads. 625 people were randomly interviewed. The survey took place during the school summer holidays between 6 & 12 August 2012.
5. The visitor satisfaction survey showed extremely high levels of satisfaction with both parks. Our target at the beginning of the year was to achieve 92%. When asked to rate their visit overall, 97% of those questioned at Sherwood Forest rated their visit as 'Good' or 'Very Good' and at Rufford Abbey the figure was 98%.
6. The survey revealed many interesting facts about our visitors and their origins. Nottinghamshire residents accounted for roughly half of all visitors interviewed. The remainder came from as far afield as Kirkcaldy in Scotland, Belfast, Southampton, Canterbury, Norwich and Newcastle.
7. Nearly 18% of the parties interviewed included someone with mobility problems or a disability, indicating the good accessibility of the sites for visitors with mobility impairments, and possibly also reflecting our ageing population.

8. The most frequent answer to the question “How often do you visit the park?” was 2-3 times per year, though a hard core of 2% visited “every day.”
9. The two age groups who found the parks most appealing were those 65 years and over, and children between 5 and 12. However, all age groups were represented, and there is strong use of both sites by ‘institutional’ groups such as day centres, bringing clients by coach or minibus.

VAQAS Tourism Inspection at Rufford Abbey Country Park

10. For the last few years Rufford Abbey Country Park has participated in a national quality scheme run by *VisitEngland*, the English national tourist board.
11. This is specifically for tourist attractions, and a quality award is given if the site meets VisitEngland standards. A mystery shopper visit takes place, during which a trained external inspector with a background in the leisure industry examines all facilities on offer to the visitor, including pre-visit tests of website information and telephone enquiry responses.
12. The annual inspection for Rufford Abbey Country Park took place on 5 September 2012, and the park passed. The inspector’s conclusion was:

“Rufford Abbey Country Park, on its sixth assessment, continues to maintain the very high standards set on previous assessments. Further fine tuning of issues highlighted in our feedback would see the overall standard raised from Very Good to Excellent. Rufford Abbey Country Park fully merits the award of VisitEngland’s accreditation of ‘Quality Assured Visitor Attraction.’”
13. Good customer care and the friendliness of front line staff were praised. The assessor also mentioned in verbal feedback her satisfaction that the Undercroft Exhibition on Rufford’s monastic history has been refurbished since her 2011 visit. She identified the need to continually re-invest in sites in order to maintain a quality visitor offer.
14. Though it is highly creditable that the park has achieved the VAQAS award, there were a number of issues which will need to be put right within the next year, eg. improvement work in the main ladies’ toilets, completion of English Heritage stabilisation work on the Abbey ruins, and litter control around the catering areas.
15. These issues will be managed through day to day work on the site and as part of our longer term plans for Rufford Abbey.

Other Options Considered

16. The Country Parks Service chose to undergo annual external inspections in order to help us benchmark the quality of our visitor offer and to maintain high standards.

Reason/s for Recommendation/s

17. To bring to the attention of the Culture Committee the success of Nottinghamshire’s two main country park sites in terms of meeting visitors’ expectations.

Statutory and Policy Implications

18. This report has been compiled after consideration of implications in respect of finance, equal opportunities, human resources, crime and disorder, human rights, the safeguarding of children, sustainability and the environment and those using the service and where such implications are material they are described below. Appropriate consultation has been undertaken and advice sought on these issues as required.

Implications for Service Users

19. The annual visitor survey is an important means of checking that we are meeting the needs and expectations of visitors at Nottinghamshire country parks.

Financial Implications

20. The costs of the survey and participation in the VAQAS scheme are met from within the Country Parks' revenue budget.

Equalities Implications

21. The 2012 visitor survey confirmed that both parks are well used by people who consider themselves to be disabled or to have mobility restrictions. 17.6% of groups interviewed said someone in their party fitted into that category.

Crime and Disorder Implications

22. When questioned how secure they felt whilst visiting, 98% of those interviewed at both sites said they felt "safe" or "very safe" in the country park.

Implications for Sustainability and the Environment

23. The importance of the natural environment is critical to the visitor experience of country parks.

RECOMMENDATION/S

- 1) That the report be noted

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Constitutional Comments

24. As this report is for noting only, no Constitutional Comments are required.

Financial Comments (NDR 24/10/12)

25. There are no financial implications arising directly from this report.

Background Papers

Survey of Visitors August 2012 – Sherwood Forest Country Park, Rufford Abbey Country Park

VisitEngland VAQAS Assessment Report, Rufford Abbey Country Park, 2012

Except for previously published documents, which will be available elsewhere, the documents listed here will be available for inspection in accordance with Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972.

Electoral Division(s) and Member(s) Affected

Rufford Ward – Councillor John Peck

C0107