

REPORT OF THE SERVICE DIRECTOR, YOUTH, FAMILIES AND CULTURE**2013 VISITOR SATISFACTION SURVEYS IN COUNTRY PARKS****Purpose of the Report**

1. To inform the Committee of the outcome of the 2013 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 450,000 visitors and Sherwood Forest Country Park approximately 350,000 per year. This puts the two sites amongst the top ten busiest attractions in the East Midlands region.
3. A visitor satisfaction survey is commissioned each year. Its purpose is two-fold:
 - to find out more about the parks' 'visitor profile', including where visitors come from
 - to check that we are providing a quality experience for customers.
4. This year's survey took place between 12 & 18 August. It was conducted "face to face," with researchers asking visitors to input their answers on iPads. 575 parties of visitors were randomly interviewed – 310 at Rufford and 265 at Sherwood. This equates to 1,835 individuals. The survey took place during the school summer holidays, which is traditionally the busiest period of the year for country parks.
5. The visitor satisfaction survey showed extremely high levels of satisfaction with both parks. When asked to rate their visit overall, 95% of those questioned at Sherwood Forest rated their visit as 'Good' or 'Very Good' and at Rufford Abbey the figure was 98%. The lower figure for Sherwood is likely to be affected by the aging state of the visitor centre buildings. Plans are in hand to replace the visitor centre at a new site on the opposite side of Swinecote Road.
6. The survey revealed interesting facts about our visitors and their origins, which can be examined in more detail in the full report. Nottinghamshire residents, for example, accounted for 48% of all visitors interviewed, 16% had Sheffield postcodes and 8% Doncaster postcodes.

7. Of the remaining portion, over a quarter of those interviewed came from other areas of the country. At Sherwood, national visitors included parties from Glasgow, Norwich, Kendal and Dartford. At Rufford parties were interviewed from Bodmin, Bournemouth and Worthing. International visitors amongst the sample included tourists from Australia, South Africa, Spain, Belgium, Germany, France, and Hungary.
8. 69% of respondents said they intended to visit other towns, villages and attractions whilst in the area, indicating that both parks play a crucial role as tourist attractors, and can be assumed to have a positive impact on the local tourism economy.
9. When asked why they visited, the most frequently cited reasons were about fresh air, walking, taking outdoor exercise and the perceived health benefits of this. The second most common reason was “taking out children and grandchildren.” Many cited attending specific events as their reason for visiting.
10. Nearly 14% 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.
11. Asked “How often do you visit this park?” 27% said they visit once per year and 24.5% come three times per year. A hard core of 2% visit ‘every day’.
12. The two age groups who found the parks most appealing were those 65 years and over, who accounted for 23% of those interviewed and the next most frequent age group is children between 5 and 12. However, all ages were represented, and there is strong use of both sites by groups such as local day centres, bringing clients by coach or minibus.

VAQAS Tourism Inspection at Rufford Abbey Country Park

13. For the last few years Rufford Abbey Country Park has participated in a national quality scheme run by *VisitEngland*, the English national tourist board.
14. 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.
15. The annual inspection for Rufford Abbey Country Park took place on 17 July 2013 and the park passed. The inspector’s conclusion was that:

“Rufford Abbey Country Park, on its seventh assessment, continues to provide a very good quality experience.

Improvements in customer service, as suggested in my report, 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.”

16. The inspection includes a 'pre-visit' check by phone to see how brochure requests and general enquiries are handled, and information on web pages is also checked. The inspector felt that the quality of pre-visit responses had improved from last year and praised a speedy email response from the NCC Customer Contact Centre. The inspector was also very complimentary about the Tourist Information Centre on site which is now run as a partnership with Newark & Sherwood District Council.
17. The inspector remarked on the number of positive reviews left by visitors on the tourism website "Trip Advisor."
18. It was noted that problems with the ladies' toilets at the Abbey site last year had now been resolved, and baby-change facilities improved. Two damaged information panels remarked in the last inspection had been removed and cleanliness of the site overall was praised.
19. In her recommendations for ongoing improvement the inspector suggested more attention to weeding in some areas of the park, portion control in the Café, and more consideration of lighter food options in the Café. She also raised the need to replace poor quality "A Boards" (freestanding advertising frames). These improvement suggestions were gratefully received and plans are in place for rectification.
20. Finally, the quality of the Craft Centre exhibition was praised by the inspector. The Craft Centre at Rufford Abbey is run by the County Council's Arts Service.

Other Options Considered

21. The Country Parks Service chooses 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

22. 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

23. This report has been compiled after consideration of implications in respect of finance, public sector equality duty, 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

24. 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

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

Public Sector Equality Duty Implications

26. The 2013 visitor survey confirmed that both parks are well used by people who consider themselves to be disabled or to have mobility restrictions. 14% of groups interviewed said someone in their party fitted into that category.

Crime and Disorder Implications

27. When questioned how secure they felt whilst visiting, 98% of those interviewed in the 2013 visitor survey said they felt "safe" or "very safe" in the country park they were visiting.

Implications for Sustainability and the Environment

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

RECOMMENDATION/S

- 1) That the outcome of the 2013 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, be noted

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Constitutional Comments

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

Financial Comments (KLA 07/11/13)

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

Background Papers and Published Documents

Survey of Visitors August 2013 – Sherwood Forest Country Park, Rufford Abbey Country Park

VisitEngland VAQAS Assessment Report, Rufford Abbey Country Park, 2013

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

All.

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