



SOUTH EAST DEVON
HABITAT REGULATIONS
PARTNERSHIP

South East Devon Habitat Regulations Executive Committee

South East Devon Visitor Survey 2020-21

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East Devon District Council
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Exeter
City Council



Legal comment/advice:

There is no direct comment to be made in relation to this report, each and any individual issue will need to be considered as it arises.

Finance comment/advice:

There are no direct financial implications set out in the report.

Public Document: Yes
Exemption: None
Review date for release None

Recommendations

It is proposed that the Executive Committee:

1. Notes the results from the South East Devon Visitor Survey 2020-21 report.
2. Notes the interpretation and discussion relating to proposed operational changes in light of the report.

Equalities impact: Low

Risk: Low. This report provides the results of the first South East Devon Visitor Survey monitoring programme undertaken as part of the mitigation Strategy. These results are compared with the initial visitor surveys carried out to establish the original evidence base for the Strategy. The objective of the programme is to determine the efficacy of the approach to preventing recreational disturbance across the protected sites. This is important because without robust and effective mitigation which enables the partner authorities to be certain of no net impact to protected sites, continued development as outlined in respective local plans and within 10km of the estuary is at risk of legal challenge.

1. Summary

1.1 The South-east Devon European Site Mitigation Strategy (*Footprint Ecology, 2014*) was informed by postal surveys of local residents and by on-site visitor surveys to establish existing patterns of access, motivation and behaviour. This work went on to establish a 10km “zone of influence” within which new residential dwellings were considered likely to cause a likely significant effect as a result of increasing recreational demand. This zone of influence identified an increase of approximately 30,000 dwellings from the respective Local Plans.

1.2 Since the formation of the South East Devon Habitat Regulations Executive Committee (HREC) in June 2016, a number of regional and site specific mitigation initiatives have been implemented and there is the ongoing need to regularly undertake a robust programme of monitoring. This is to ensure that mitigation continues to be effective and for any emerging trends or pressures to be identified and addressed.

1.3 The outputs of the South East Devon Visitor Survey, attached here as Appendix A, will be used to inform management advice in respect of delivering adequate and effective mitigation to ensure no net impacts to internationally important wildlife sites as a result of increasing recreational pressures.

1.4 This study helps to contribute to the delivery of the mitigation Strategy by providing an updated understanding of visitor access, motivations and behaviour across the three protected sites. It will also help to guide management effort by enabling a measure of the awareness of the sensitivity of the sites and the mitigation initiatives implemented since June 2016.

1.5 The Executive Committee approved the recommendation to undertake the visitor surveys as part of the 2019-20 annual business plan. Following a competitive tendering process, Footprint Ecology were awarded the contract and began monitoring the areas in February 2020. The coronavirus pandemic and associated restrictions put a stop to fieldwork in March 2020 and it was not resumed until April 2021 when the majority of restrictions had eased.

2. The study.

2.1 The main objectives of the monitoring were:

- To design and undertake face to face visitor surveys across Dawlish Warren, the Exe Estuary and the East Devon Pebblebed Heaths.
- To determine where visits originate, frequency, length & duration of visits, activities & routes taken, transport used and factors influencing the choice of site. Questions should also be aimed at establishing an understanding of wider Habitat Regulations mitigation “brand awareness” – i.e. value of sites for nature conservation, site designations, interaction with staff, experience of codes of conduct, knowledge of consultations and other mitigation initiatives.
- To compile a written report which compiles, analyses and interprets the data.

2.2 Essential components of the survey included the following elements:

- To survey, record and quantify visitor responses to an agreed set of specific questions (postcode, mode of transport, activity, factors for site choice and awareness of mitigation initiatives).
- To undertake face to face visitor surveys at different locations across the protected sites of Dawlish Warren, the Exe Estuary and the East Devon Pebblebed Heaths.
- Use existing studies (Exe on-site visitor survey (Liley *et al.* 2010b), Pebblebed Heaths Visitor Management Plan (Liley, D., Panter, C., Underhill-Day, J. (2015)) to inform survey methodology and to ensure a growing and consistent evidence base.
- To compile a final report including summary of results, interpretation of the data, direct comparison and analysis with reference to previous surveys, full results, any issues arising and (if appropriate) recommendations for future management.

2.3 To ensure clear and concise output from the 3 year programme, the survey is intended to enable the following questions to be answered:

- 1) How far are visitors travelling to the sites and how do they arrive?
- 2) How often do they visit, for how long and what specific factors influence their choice of site?
- 3) What activities do visitors to the sites undertake and how long have they been visiting the site?
- 4) Are specific activities at a certain time of year or year-round?
- 5) Which routes do the visitors take on the sites?

- 6) Do visitors use any other sites and if so, how often and what for?
- 7) What level of understanding do visitors have about nature conservation value of the sites?
- 8) Are visitors now going to the Dawlish SANGS instead of/as well as the Exe Estuary and Dawlish Warren? How often?
- 9) How could we encourage greater use of the SANGS?
- 10) What is the level of awareness of the different mitigation initiatives?
- 11) Has visitor behaviour changed since the mitigation initiatives were launched?
- 12) How are the mitigation initiatives perceived by visitors?
- 13) What further actions (if any) could be taken to increase visitor awareness and influence behaviours?

2.4 Visitor surveys were undertaken between February 2020 and October 2021, and included both counts of the number of visitors and face-to-face interviews with a random sample of visitors. Survey methods were broadly consistent with those used in previous surveys.

2.5 Survey work took place at 12 locations as shown in Appendix B. 6 were on the Pebblebed Heaths, 5 on the Exe Estuary, and Dawlish Countryside Park (DCP). All except DCP and Model Airfield (on the heaths) had been included in previous visitor surveys. 192 hours of survey effort were undertaken in total, equally spread across the 12 survey points (16 hours at each).

2.6 The number of survey locations was determined by the available budget and then survey locations were selected to provide a reasonable geographic spread and to include range of different types of location. All survey locations (except for DCP) have direct access to the SPA and/or SAC. All were based either in/near popular car parks, or at other key access points such as slipways.

2.7 Face-to-face interviews were conducted with a random sample of visitors, by approaching the next person seen by the surveyor. Only one person was interviewed per group and no minors (under 18s) were interviewed.

2.8 The questionnaire design was based on previous surveys but with some additional questions to ensure that the requirements of the brief were met regarding visitor awareness of nature conservation and the effectiveness of mitigation measures. A copy of the questionnaire is provided in Appendix C.

2.9 Alongside the interview data, surveyors maintained a tally of all people seen, recording the number of groups (of any size), individuals, minors, dogs and cyclists. These counts allow a comparison across survey points in terms of footfall, and allow the proportion of visitors that were interviewed at each location to be determined.

2.10 Each survey point was surveyed at a relevant time of year, i.e. when the wildlife interest was likely to be present and potentially vulnerable. Each location was surveyed for 16 hours, with 8 hours on a weekend day and 8 hours on a weekday. Survey days were split into set 2-hour sessions to capture usage across daylight hours.

2.11 The weather during fieldwork was varied since it covered several seasons. The only location that was potentially affected by wet weather was Model Airfield, which had rainfall throughout almost all sessions, however this was mostly drizzle rather than heavy rain.

2.12 An additional question was added to the questionnaire in 2021 (Q7) to find out if interviewees' visit patterns had changed due to the pandemic, for example, if they were visiting more or less frequently now.

3. Monitoring results.

Visitor counts.

3.1 Total footfall is the summed count of people recorded passing the survey point (i.e. the combined sum of those entering, leaving or passing through at the survey point).

3.2 Over the 192 hours of survey, the tally counts recorded a total footfall of 6,066 people. This equates to an overall average 31.6 people moving through the survey points per hour. There were also 2,496 dogs, roughly 0.41 to every 1 person, and 10% of the people were minors (585) and 5% of people were on bikes (318).

3.3 There were marked differences between survey points and sites, with the highest value of 72.6 people per hour at Goat Walk (Topsham), and just 5.4 people per hour at Lympstone. Taking the average for each site, the values were 25.4 people per hour at the Pebblebeds (6 survey points), 37.6 at the Exe Estuary sites including Dawlish Warren (5 survey points) and 38.8 at the SANG (1 survey point).

3.4 Occasionally large, organised groups were observed with each involving 20-50 people. For example, running clubs were seen meeting at Joney's Cross and at The Warren, a group of marines passed through at The Warren and the City of Exeter hash house harriers were at Wheathill. These events could have affected the number of other visitors, for example if the majority of parking spaces were taken up by these groups.

3.5 A total of 2,982 people were counted 'entering', with both the busiest and quietest sites recorded on the Exe Estuary, ranging from 2.6 people per hour at Lympstone to 37.3 at Goat Walk. The survey points on the Pebblebeds were less variable, ranging from 8.4 (Model Airfield) to 17.7 people per hour (Woodbury Castle).

3.6 The average number of dogs entering across all sites was 6.1 dogs per hour. The number of dogs entering per hour was highest at DCP SANG with 13.1 dogs per hour. This was notably much higher than on the Pebblebeds and the Exe Estuary.

Interviews.

3.7 During the 192 hours of survey, 872 groups were approached to be interviewed. A total of 499 interviews were conducted (i.e. 57% of those approached). Those groups who did not take part in the interviews either had already been approached and interviewed, in which case they were not re-interviewed (39 groups, 4% of those approached), refused to take part in the survey (331 groups, 38%) or had language issues (3 groups, <1%).

3.8 The number of refusals tended to be higher on the Exe Estuary sites and this may be a reflection of those sites being surveyed during the winter (when colder and people perhaps less likely to linger). At the Exe Estuary sites and particularly Powderham the high proportion of cyclists following the Exe cycle trail may also be a reason for refusal as many were reluctant to stop given they were moving fast.

3.9 Overall, 464 of the interviewees (93%) were visiting directly from home. A further 27 interviewees (5%) were on holiday in the area and 6 interviewees (1%) were staying with friends or family. Finally 2 interviewees (<1%) described themselves as “other”, both visiting the sites for work.

3.10 There was an overall pattern of more interviewees visiting directly from home at the Pebblebeds, compared to the Exe. The percentage of interviewees visiting directly from home on the Pebblebeds was 97% (and the same at the SANG), compared to 88% on the Exe Estuary, with the Duck Pond and Dawlish Warren being notable for the proportion of holiday makers. On the Exe, the percentage of interviewees on holiday or staying with friends and family was 12% (25 interviewees), compared to just 3% (6) on the Pebblebeds and 3% (2) at the SANG.

Activities.

3.11 The most common activity was dog walking, with roughly 3 in every 5 interviewees stating that this was their main activity (285 interviewees, 57%). However, these were the self-reported single choice main activities, and it should be noted that while 57% of interviewees gave their main activity as ‘dog walking’, in fact 64% of interviewees had a dog with them.

3.12 The next most common response was walking, (150 interviewees, 30%). 64 interviewees (13%) gave an activity type that was not dog walking or walking and these included a range of activities such as cycling, running, wildlife watching, watersports etc.

Visit pattern.

3.13 Over 50% of interviewees at the Pebblebed Heaths and at the Exe Estuary said that they had been visiting the site for over 10 years. At the Dawlish Warren survey location, this figure was 70%. The SANG has only been open since 2017, however 45% of interviewees said they had been visiting it for at least 3 years.

3.14 The length of time spent on site varied greatly by survey location. Overall, 57% of interviewees at the Pebblebeds, 52% of interviewees at the Exe and 73% of interviewees at DCP had spent less than an hour on site. Sites where interviewees were staying the longest were Powderham, Exmouth Duck Pond and Lympstone. At Powderham, 30% of interviewees had spent or were intending to spend more than 3 hours there.

3.15 Across all interviews, the most commonly cited visit frequency during the past year was 1-3 times a week, given by 155 interviewees (31%). 16% of interviewees said they had visited at least once a day, and 14% had visited 'most days'.

3.16 The combined percentage of interviewees who visited more than once a day, daily or most days was 28% at the Pebblebeds, 26% at the Exe Estuary and 49% at DCP.

3.17 The majority (60%) of those who were interviewed in 2021 were visiting just as frequently as they had before the pandemic (Q7). 19% were visiting more frequently and 8% were visiting less frequently.

3.18 Over a third of interviewees (173 interviewees, 35%) indicated that the time of day that they visited varied, and they did not have a regular time that they visited. Of those who did give a time period, the most common response was 'before 9am', given by a quarter (25%) of interviewees.

3.19 Around two thirds of interviewees (337 interviewees, 68%) indicated that they tended to visit equally all year round. However, this varied by activity type, for example 31% of interviewees who were wildlife/birdwatching said that they tended to visit more in the winter.

Mode of transport.

3.20 Overall, 79% of interviewees had travelled to the interview location by car or van, 19% had come on foot and 3% by bicycle. However, this varied by survey location, and whilst car/van was the mode of transport used by the majority of interviewees at the Pebblebed locations and at DCP, this was not the case for all of the Exe Estuary survey locations. At Goat Walk and Lympstone the majority of interviewees had arrived on foot (77% and 67% respectively). Powderham and Goat Walk were the only locations where any interviewees had arrived by public transport (2 interviewees at each).

Routes on site.

3.21 Out of 499 interviewees, 491 of them were able to describe the route that they had taken during their visit, or the route that they planned to take.

3.22 In response to Q11, which asked interviewees at the Exe Estuary whether they went onto the intertidal areas at all, only 14 interviewees (7%) said they had, and an additional 3 interviewees (1%) said only their dogs had. However, examining the routes in GIS shows that 75 interviewees (36% of interviewees on the Exe) took routes that passed through intertidal areas within the Exe Estuary SPA. 35 of these interviewees were at Dawlish Warren, 22 at Exmouth Duck Pond, 17 at Lympstone and 1 at Goat Walk.

3.23 Across all sites, the length of interviewees' routes ranged from 170m to 32.73km, with a median length of 2.27km. The median route lengths on the Pebblebeds and the Exe were similar, 2.46km and 2.59km respectively. At DCP the median route length was 1.68km.

3.24 Across all locations, 58% of interviewees said that their route length was typical for when they visit this location (Q12). However, 28% said that their route was shorter than normal. Only 4% said that their route was much longer than normal.

3.25 The most common factor that influenced interviewees' choice of route was previous knowledge of the area, which was cited by 108 interviewees (22%). The next most common factors were the weather (16%) and time (13%). There were 98 responses that didn't fit into the pre-determined categories. These included visiting a pub/café en route, following their dog, taking a 'random' route, and the terrain (either preferring flat, level terrain, or favouring hills).

Reasons for site choice.

3.26 Overall, the most common reason given by interviewees for choosing to visit the particular location where interviewed was that it was close to home (142 interviewees, 28%). However, the reasons for site choice did vary by site, and at DCP the most common reason was because they could let their dog off the lead (37% of interviewees). On the Exe Estuary, the scenery was also a particularly important factor, given by 32% of interviewees.

Alternative sites.

3.27 Almost all interviewees (465, 93%) were able to name an alternative site that they would have visited for their activity if they could not visit the location where they were interviewed. Only 4% said that they wouldn't have visited anywhere and 3% were unsure or didn't answer this question.

3.28 30% of those interviewed on the Exe gave another place on the estuary as the alternative they would visit, and a further 16% indicated they would have visited the coast. 7% of those interviewed on the Exe would have gone to the Pebblebeds instead and the most commonly cited single location outside the Exe Estuary was DCP (cited by 8% of those interviewed at the Exe Estuary sites).

3.29 For those interviewed on the Pebblebeds, 63% gave an alternative location within the Pebblebed Heaths. 10% gave a location on the Exe Estuary and a further 4% gave other coastal locations away from the Exe. The most common single destination given away from the Heaths was Exmouth (8%).

3.30 For those interviewed at DCP, 31% would have visited the Exe Estuary instead and a further 16% another coastal location away from the Exe. The most commonly cited single alternative was Dawlish Warren (19% of interviewees there) and then Dawlish (15%).

3.31 DCP was named by 17 interviewees on the Exe Estuary in Q15 as an alternative site that they would visit instead of their interview location. In addition to this, when directly asked (Q16) another 75 interviewees said that they had visited DCP. However, most of these were infrequent visitors, with 85% (64 interviewees) visiting the SANG less than once a month. In total, therefore, 44% of interviewees on the Exe Estuary had visited DCP.

Awareness of nature conservation.

3.32 Interviewees at the Pebblebed Heaths and the Exe Estuary were asked two additional questions to gauge their awareness of the nature conservation importance of the site. Interviewees were not shown any options for these questions, although the surveyors had pre-determined categories to facilitate recording the responses given.

3.33 Regarding designations, 59% of interviewees at the Pebblebeds and 76% of interviewees at the Exe Estuary were aware that the site had environmental protection but only 43% and 42% respectively were able to name or describe what these were.

3.34 At the Pebblebeds, 20% of interviewees knew that it was a nature reserve and 18% knew that it was a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). On the Exe, 29% mentioned it being a nature reserve and 22% knew that it was protected because it was important for birds.

3.35 Regarding wildlife and habitats, 84% of interviewees at the Pebblebeds and 78% of interviewees at the Exe Estuary were able to name at least one group of species or habitats that the site is important for.

3.36 Over half of interviewees at both sites were aware that it was important for birds, even if they weren't able to name any species. A third of interviewees at the Exe knew that it was important for wading birds or wildfowl, with many of them specifically naming examples such as Avocet or Curlew. Around a third of interviewees at the Pebblebeds knew that it was important for reptiles.

Awareness of mitigation measures.

3.37 A third of interviewees (33%) at the Pebblebeds and a quarter of interviewees (25%) on the Exe Estuary had met one of the rangers or mitigation officers. Of those who had met a ranger or mitigation officer, 78% had spoken to them.

3.38 Interviewees on the Pebblebeds and Exe Estuary were asked if they were aware of any visit Codes of Conduct. Overall 34% (169 interviewees) were not aware of any, and 47% (236) were aware but unable to name any specific codes. Only 27 interviewees (6%) were able to name one or more than one specific codes.

3.39 The percentage who were aware, but unable to name specific codes, was greater amongst those on a short visit directly from home (49%, 227) compared to those on holiday (30%, 8), but still relatively high. Interestingly those who visited daily or more than once a day did not record high percentages (25%, 39 and 6%, 10 – although note smaller sample sizes). Those who had been visiting for more than 10 years included a very high proportion of those aware, but unable to name (83%, 123). For dog walkers the awareness (but not explicit naming of) codes of conduct was also very high (92%, 142).

3.40 Knowledge of any codes of conduct was lower on the Exe Estuary, where 58% (121) unaware of codes, compared to 22% (48) on the Pebblebeds. On the Pebblebeds over 7 in 10 interviewees will have been aware of codes of conduct, compared to just under 4 in 10 on the Exe Estuary.

3.41 Interviewees who were dog walking were asked if they had heard of, or were members of “Devon Loves Dogs”. Overall, 30% of dog walkers (86 interviewees) had heard of the organisation. A higher percentage of dog walkers had heard of the organisation at the Pebblebeds (36% of dog walkers, 50 interviewees), compared to the Exe (30% of dog walkers, 27), and Dawlish Warren Country Park (15% of dog walkers, 9).

3.42 In total, 5% of all dog walkers interviewed were members “Devon Loves Dogs”, and this percentage was 4% of dog walkers (3 interviewees) on the Exe Estuary, 6% (8) on the Pebblebeds and 3% (2) at DCP.

3.43 For the survey points along the Exe Estuary, specific questions were asked, regarding the interviewee’s awareness of the mitigation efforts. Across all the Exe Estuary survey points, 18% (37) of interviewees had seen the patrol boat, ranging from 25% (6) of interviewees at Lypstone to just 8% (3) at Powderham. Interviewees were then asked if they were aware of the wildlife refuges along the estuary. Across all the Exe Estuary interviewees, 53% (110) said they were aware of them, ranging from 85% (33) at Exmouth Duck Pond to 29% (14 interviewees) at Goat Walk.

Preferred communications methods.

3.44 Interviewees were asked what are the “best ways of keeping visitors such as yourself informed about this area and the way it is managed?” Interviewees were asked to rate 5 mechanisms for disseminating information from “1 - not useful” to “5 – very useful” and from these we were able to produce an average score for those who responded. Averaging the three scores for each area suggest the highest approval for noticeboards (3.6) and word of mouth (3.5), but lowest support for rangers (2.8) and leaflets (2.4).

Visitor origins

3.45 Full, valid postcodes were obtained for 445 (89%) of the interviewees. Approximately half (46%) of the interviewees who gave full, valid postcodes lived in East Devon District, 26% were from Teignbridge District, 18% were from Exeter District and 2% were from Mid Devon District. Other local authorities accounted for less than 1% each.

3.46 The mean linear distance from the interviewee's home postcode to the survey point at which they were interviewed was 16.7km and the median distance was 5.0km. Three quarters of all interviewees lived within 9.9km of the survey point at which they were interviewed.

4. Comparison with previous surveys

4.1 Previous surveys were undertaken in 2010 (Exe Estuary) and 2015 (Pebblebed Heaths) and used broadly similar methods. Comparisons provide some opportunities to check how access has changed. There are of course important caveats to note in that the surveys are 'snapshots' in time and represent just 2 days at each location in the most recent survey which also coincided with the Covid pandemic.

4.2 The data suggest a number of changes. Most striking is the change in the number of visitors, with marked increases suggested at all sites. The data show overall totals of footfall per hour are more than double on the Exe Estuary (excluding Dawlish Warren) and on the Pebblebed Heaths compared to the previous survey. The change at the Pebblebed Heaths from 12.6 people entering per hour in 2015 to 26.9 people per hour in 2021 represents a 213% increase over 6 years.

4.3 The mean number of dogs per group appears to have dropped slightly at all sites, suggesting perhaps that there have been bigger increases in the use from those visiting without dogs. The percentage of interviewees who gave dog walking as their main activity decreased on the Pebblebeds (78% to 63%) but increased at the other sites. The percentage of people who stated walking was their main activity appears to have increased at all sites, particularly the Pebblebeds (8% of interviewees to 25%).

4.4 There appears to be a difference at Dawlish in the proportion of local residents using the site on a short visit from home, with an increase from 77% in 2010 to 89% in 2020.

4.5 Close to home appears to be a stronger factor influencing site choice now for those at Dawlish compared to 2010 (cited by 13% in 2010 and 54% in 2020) while by contrast it appears to have dropped in priority for those visiting the Pebblebeds (cited by 37% of interviewees in 2015 and just 22% in 2021).

4.6 There were no clear differences in the postcode data between the different surveys, suggesting that people who visit the relevant sites are not living any further afield or closer now compared to the previous survey.

4.7 It is clear that all the numbers from the tally counts are higher at all locations compared to previous surveys with the exception of one survey point on the Exe, Lypmstone. This is the site that has seen the most marked increase. Changes seem more consistent on the Pebblebeds, though Four Firs perhaps stands out in that the data suggest a disproportionate increase in the number of dogs entering at that location.

5. Discussion

5.1 The survey results provide a snapshot into the levels of use and insights into visitor behaviour at a selection of adjacent countryside sites. The results provide direct comparison between locations and will help inform future management and mitigation delivery.

5.2 The survey results from 2020/21 provide a snapshot of visitor use at on the Exe Estuary, Pebblebed Heaths and the DCP. Some of the surveys (on the Exe Estuary) were undertaken prior to the Covid pandemic, in the early part of 2020 while other sites were surveyed just as restrictions relating to Covid were being relaxed but at a time where the pandemic would still have been affecting people's decisions regarding travel and where to go.

5.3 Visitor numbers have increased very markedly at the Exe Estuary and Pebblebed Heaths since the last surveys and this higher footfall potentially means increased pressure on the respective sites. The increase in use could be linked to Covid as well as changes such as increases in local development.

5.4 It is widely recognised that the pandemic has had a marked effect on how people use local greenspaces. It is therefore perhaps not surprising that the 2021 visitor survey results show some marked changes from previous surveys, in particular in the overall number of visitors, the reasons behind site choice and the behaviour. Looking to the future it is not clear how patterns of use will further change following the pandemic and whether the increased levels of countryside access are a new 'normal'. Climate change is also likely to be a driver of change in recreational use. Long term monitoring will therefore be important to pick up emerging trends and the drivers behind those trends.

5.5 The results from this survey indicate that DCP is well used and draws a high number of dog walkers, a target audience for the SANG given the particular impacts associated with dogs off-lead. The postcode data show that the site draws visitors from the local area, including Dawlish but that visitors using the site are also coming from Exeter and Newton Abbot.

5.6 The results show that the SANG is deflecting use away from the European sites. For example, 44% of the interviewees on the Exe Estuary had visited DCP. Furthermore, when asked which single alternative location visitors at the SANG would have gone to instead, Dawlish Warren was the most popular alternative (cited by 13 interviewees, 19% of interviewees at the SANG). Furthermore, those using DCP are doing so regularly (45% of those interviewed visiting more than once a day, daily or most days), suggesting that the site is working to draw frequent dog walkers.

5.7 SANGs have been a key element in strategic mitigation for European sites in other parts of the country, for example around the Thames Basin Heaths and the Dorset Heaths. The data presented here (and as previously reported¹) provide strong evidence that the approach is relevant for coastal sites, particularly for dog walkers.

5.8 The results suggest a reasonable level of awareness among interviewees that the sites they were visiting were protected (59% of interviewees at the Pebblebeds and 76% of interviewees at the Exe Estuary were aware that the site had environmental protection). Furthermore some 84% of interviewees at the Pebblebeds and 78% at the Exe Estuary could name a group of species or habitat for which the site was important. These figures would suggest that visitors are well informed. Messaging about the importance of these sites through face to face contact and a variety of different media has been at the heart of public engagement work and would appear to be making a difference.

5.9 It would seem the on-site ranger presence has reached a reasonable proportion of visitors, with a third of interviewees (33%) at the Pebblebeds and a quarter of interviewees (25%) on the Exe Estuary having met one of the rangers or mitigation officers. Powderham and Lypstone were the two sites with the lowest percentages of visitors having met a ranger. The locations with the highest percentages – at Dawlish Warren (36%) and the Exmouth Duck Pond (28%) – are potentially the more sensitive and reflect the locations of the refuges, so this potentially reflects that wardening effort is focussed in the right locations.

5.10 The responses to membership of “Devon Loves Dogs” indicate a relatively low membership among dog walkers, with just 5% of dog walking interviewees stating they were members. This could reflect the relative infancy of the organisation and suggests there is scope to boost membership, especially at DCP, where just 2 members were interviewed.

5.11 Although already identified as a prime location to engage with the target audience, efforts to establish a regular Devon Loves Dogs presence at DCP via “Waggy Walks” and gazebo pitstops are ongoing. Whilst very keen to promote the scheme at DCP as much as possible, issues of staff resource within the small TDC Ranger team and at Devon Loves Dogs have hampered efforts to have a greater impact.

5.12 The Devon Loves Dogs scheme has a steadily growing membership base (currently around 850) and engages with thousands of dog owners across the region via face to face events and other media. The data shows that 92% of dog walkers on the Pebblebed Heaths were aware of a code of conduct and 36% of all visitors had heard of Devon Loves Dogs. This is reflective of the high degree of cross-working and partnership effort between Devon Loves Dogs and the Pebblebed Heaths Conservation Trust.

¹ Covid-19 impact on sites and future management, Oct 2021 (4.5, page 8)

5.13 What the data infers, in addition to specific workload and capacity at DCP, is that the Devon Loves Dogs scheme may be approaching the limit of its reach in terms of what can be achieved across the region, with a 0.5 full time equivalent (FTE) staff resource and a small (£2K) annual operations budget. There is clear direction here in terms of recommendation for respective Local Plan reviews and the next mitigation Strategy.

5.14 Similarly, it is obvious that the 2 FTE Wildlife Wardens are not able to cover all the c.4000 hectares of the protected sites at the same time. The focus of their effort has to be prioritised to cover the areas which require support according to their ecological sensitivity at certain times of year. As previously reported², this is broadly adequate, yet there is also clear evidence from this report (and wider support from partners) for increased staff resource. Sites are ecologically sensitive for different reasons at different times of year and this is often at the same time as other sites, at times of year where visitor pressure is increased across the board.

5.15 There is ongoing effort to promote awareness of the various site based codes of conduct, although to a certain extent these are targeted at specific activities. Someone simply visiting the site for a walk (the most common activity after “dog walking”, 30% of visitors) may have little interest for codes governing activities which they do not participate. The codes have been developed to specifically address the “impact pathways” by which the protected sites are most affected by recreational activity.

5.16 Acknowledging that, there is more to do in terms of maintaining awareness of the codes and keeping them relevant and “live”. As previously identified and reported³ the Strategy currently only provides resource for one exercise to update these media. By making provision for updates of a website, signage, codes and other literature periodically (say every 5-10 years), this would ensure that they are kept relevant and up to date with inevitable changes to the operating environment(s). Again, this is a clear recommendation for the next mitigation Strategy.

5.17 There was little variation in the interviewee responses to the preferred means of being kept informed about management and other issues at the location where interviewed. Rangers scored slightly lower on average compared to noticeboards, word of mouth and social media.

5.18 The question was specific around being kept informed and does not therefore reflect the role played by some of these communication methods in influencing behaviour or informing visitors about the nature conservation importance of sites. The responses reflect that a range of approaches are perhaps likely to be effective in maximising the reach of any communication.

² Covid-19 - impact on sites and future management, October 2021 (4.3 – 4.4, page 8)

³ See (1) (4.7, page 9)

5.19 This report provides the results of the first regional visitor survey since the formation of the Executive Committee in June 2016. It provides valuable insight into the visitor profiles for each site and the motivations behind the reasons for the visit. Moreover, it offers important data relating to the level of awareness of key mitigation messages, which can be used to help focus/amend future mitigation effort. According to the timescales recommended in the Strategy, the next survey is due in 2025/26.

April 2022

Natural England comment:

We welcome this valuable survey.