



National
Trust

Newsletter 1

Every Step Counts

Welcome to the first edition of the Every Step Counts Newsletter.

This is one way we will be sharing what is happening; progress made, issues, concerns and successes related to all the activity around Every Step Counts. The detail of all this activity follows, but as an introduction I just wanted to ensure we were all clear on what Every Step Counts is and how we got to where we are.

Hatfield Forest is unable to cope with the number of people visiting during the wetter winter months. The soil of the forest is heavy clay, and while clay can cope with a lot when it is dry, it quickly becomes compacted when wet. Compacted soils cannot support the diversity of plants and fungi as healthy soils and so loss of habitat occurs with the loss of ground vegetation and trees are affected by the reduced vitality of their roots.

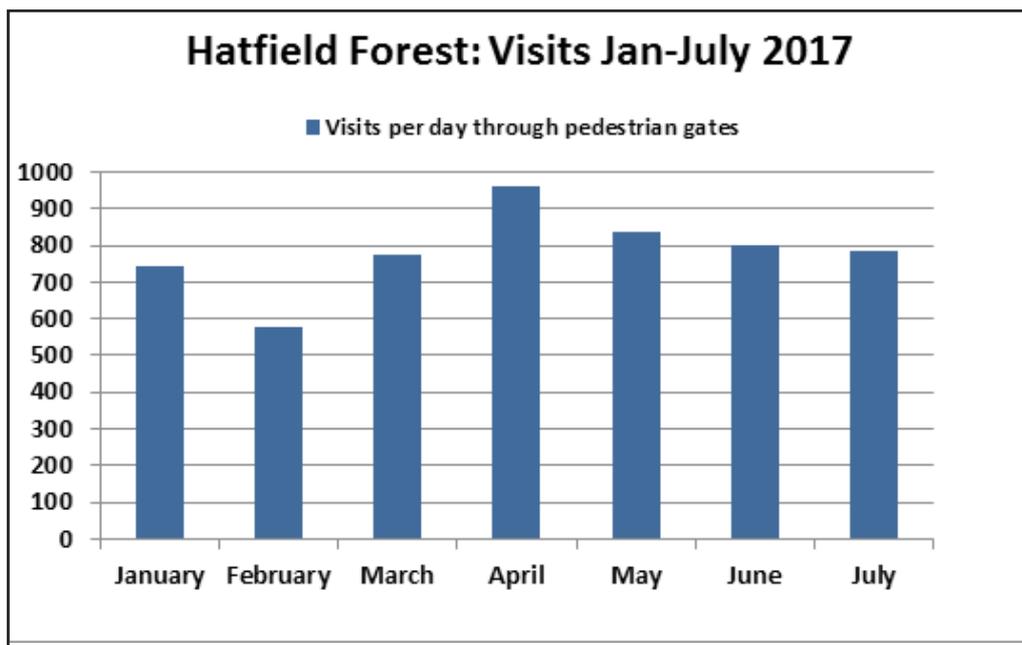
So with a combination of reducing the number of feet in winter, of ensuring the forest is as robust as it can be, and research that means we know as much about the forest as possible so that the decisions we make now are the right ones, along with making sure that the parts of the forest that are impacted are able to recover, either naturally or with our help. But most importantly it is that together we can care for the forest and its future, so that generations are able to experience the wonder that is Hatfield Forest.

Ade Clarke, General Manager

What is the visiting picture?

To get a good picture of the number of people walking into the forest, we have installed gate counters to 12 of the main entrance points. What is very clear from the graph below, that shows the average number of visits per day from January to July 2017, is that there is not a major difference between each month. The peak was in April due to the Easter holiday. The busiest days are Saturday and Sunday as expected, but we found that 58% of visits are during the weekdays, so the weekend peak is not especially sharp. Thus, we are seeing a rather consistent number of visits by people who access the forest through the perimeter gates, day by day and month by month. We can also look at the time of day that people come to the Forest. The peak is between 11am and 5pm, but 13% of visits are between 6pm and 6am.

We would like counters on all of our gates by the end of the year, but do have them on the main pedestrian entrances. So our current best estimate of the number of pedestrian visits to Hatfield Forest is a minimum of 285,000. Of course, to get a full picture, you need to add to this the people who drive and park inside the forest when the entrance gate is open and this brings us to a visitor number of over half-a-million.



Strategic planning and acquisition

Our regional planning consultant has been commenting and objecting to various proposed developments and Local Plans. Each one is looked at on its own merit and we are working with Natural England and the Local Authority to provide developers with as much detail and data we have about the issues and challenges we face.

We are no longer listed as the token green space for the area and Natural England are calling for developers to undertake detailed Environmental Impact Assessments as part of the planning process in conjunction with the local authority.

The suggestion of acquiring buffer land around the forest that came out of the workshops is still very much an ambition we share. We have been working with local land owners and researching at the Land Registry to understand who owns what in the local area. Recognising that this is a long term ambition we are keen to explore all avenues.

The suggestion of moving the visitor facilities off site with ample parking is one that at this time of year becomes increasingly desirable. With our limited hardstanding we have been operating a 'one in one out' policy on the main gate from the end of September and are often full by lunchtime, particularly at weekends and holidays.

Diversions and re-routing

During the workshops path closures and how to communicate them were discussed. Whilst we admit we have a long way to go in effective communication, we have been following your suggestions by producing the following.

- Keeping our team up to date with changes and installations so they can communicate them on a daily basis
- Signage and rerouting directions on the hurdles
- Updating our website with the latest messages and pdf maps
- Alerting people through our social media channels
- Producing maps with diversions clearly marked and leaflets with routes which stick to the most robust trails

Messaging around the muddy path issues has been a focus and is being understood to varying degrees. We still have the challenge of communicating that the forest is a National Nature Reserve and Site of Special Scientific Interest, and therefore we are unable to respond in the same way a country park might do under similar circumstances.

The ideas of rapid alerts via text message has not been explored as yet due to capacity, but we have been using our social media channels to try and communicate when there is a change. Our first post about the diversions was on the 19 May and reached 6,800 accounts. A few days later we released the film of Jake making the hurdles and talking about the challenge we faced. This time we reached over 8,000 accounts and 3,300 watched part or all of the video.

We are also about to look into rapid response signage for the B1256 through Takeley village to see if we can reduce the queues on the Bush End lane in winter. At present we do not know how much this would cost, whether we would get permission or indeed if it would be effective, but as we said at the workshop, this is a period of testing feasibility. Understanding the issues and testing different approaches is key to identifying a positive way forward to finding a way to enable public access without degrading the site.



Other updates from the workshop suggestions

Strategic Drainage Plan

Drainage surveys of the forest are complete. Having a clear understanding of the drainage network across the site will prove invaluable. We will be prioritising the lake area in early spring and then prioritising the rest of the site. Our challenge is to reestablish a working drainage network without drying out our valuable wet woodland habitat.

Finding ways to change the priorities and/or funding model of the forest.

We have been able to adjust how we fund the Every Step Counts work so we can get on with smaller tasks which would be held up if they were being lumped in with the larger aspects of delivery. We have moved a number of elements into 'business as usual' so we can fund them through our annual budgeting process.

Looking ahead...

The stakeholder working group is made up of twelve individuals who represent different user interests, local residents and businesses. These people are currently meeting on a monthly basis to progress the ideas and potential solutions you explored in the workshops. As we said at the start of workshop one, we may own and manage the forest, but we are but one stakeholder within its future.

As a group our next phase is to establish a wider forum which was an outcome of the workshops. This would be where others can more formally air their views and influence the focus of the working group representatives. Whilst the group discusses how this can work best I will ask that if you are interested in getting involved once more to please get in touch.

This winter we are already hitting our hardstanding car park capacity on a regular basis. Our latest focus has been how do we move people through the wood pasture known as Bush End Plain (from the main entrance to the boardwalk) without further impacting the ancient tree roots. Please help us by helping us to test these approaches.

Sacrificial areas

This was one of the suggestions that split the support during the wider digital stakeholder survey over the Christmas period. We went through the internal processes, were granted planning subject to conditions (providing a Construction Environmental Management Plan) which was approved. The path is now in place through Collins near the lake area car park and is testing four different techniques.

Walking routes and alternatives

At present we are messaging visitors who drive in to utilise the road and boardwalk when the ground conditions are wet. The stakeholder working group are discussing alternative routes and options which would give seasonal variations and further enhance visitors understanding of the management and significance of the forest.



Visitor leaflet highlighting hardstanding and a longer robust route

Stay in touch

Stay up to date on all things Every Step Counts
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