

Priority Actions to tackle the muddy path challenge

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Introduction

The solutions in this report were suggested and prioritised by participants in the first workshop in this process held on November 23rd 2016.

Wider engagement online and in a drop-in meeting invited the views of the community and other stakeholders. Their views are recorded in two reports.

This document succinctly provides an over view of the suggestions made in the first workshop and the feedback from the wider engagement.

Section A

1 Path Closures and related communication

1.1 Explanation

Habitats at the edges of the paths and rides in Hatfield Forest are special. They are one of the key reasons that Hatfield Forest is a 'Site of Special Scientific Interest' (SSSI) and a National Nature Reserve.

However when the paths and rides become muddy, people skirt around the edges and inadvertently trample the edge habitats. This is an issue for people using the paths, the plants and creatures that depend on this habitat, and also because the site has to be kept in good condition to comply with national laws that protect a SSSI.

To try to manage the situation the National Trust has already closed certain paths. Some paths have recovered, but others haven't yet.

Closing routes has been contentious and angered some people who find their favourite or closest/easiest routes closed. Some people have seen the words 'ride' and assumed that the routes are just closed to horse riders and cyclists. Others have chosen to ignore the signs anyway.

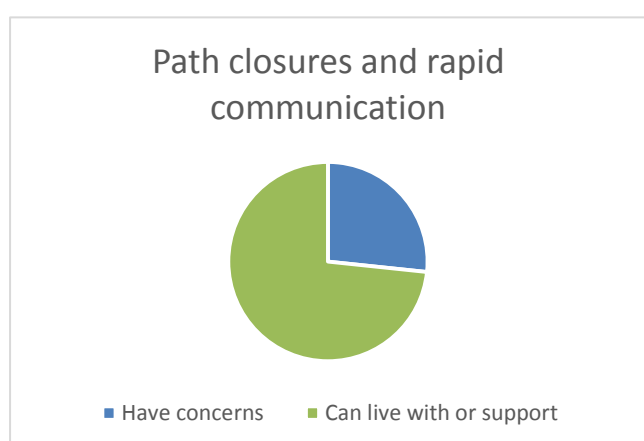
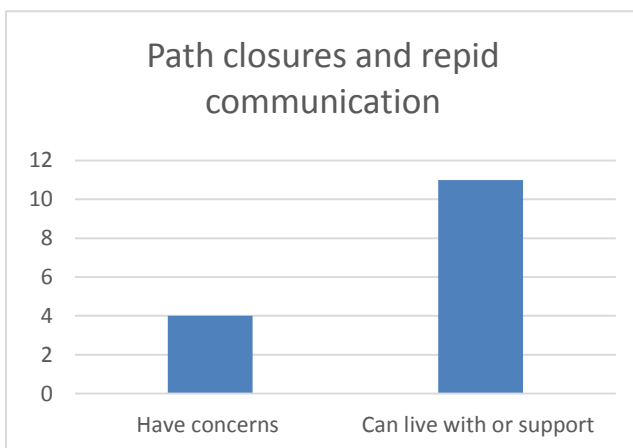
The key challenge is how to close paths that need to be closed in a way that visitors and locals understand and are willing to keep away from.

1.2 Idea/s proposed at the first workshops

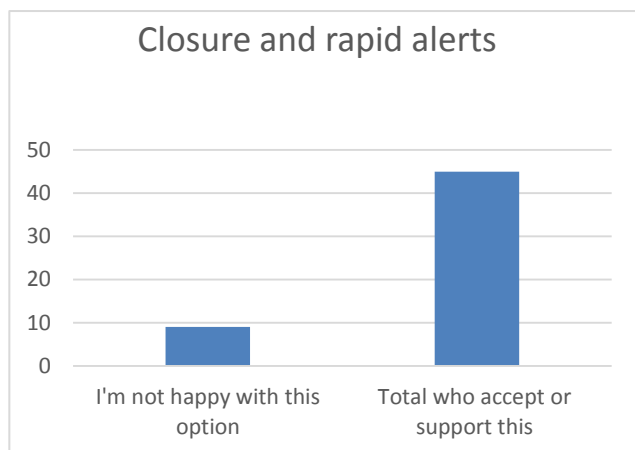
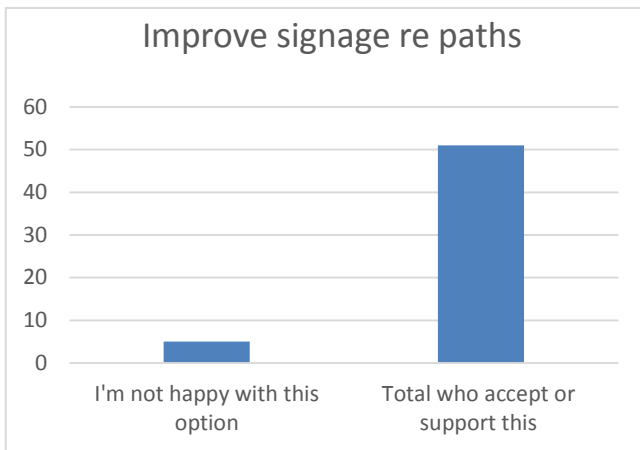
- **Closure of certain parts of the forest and effective, immediate communication of the closures and best routes via smart phones.**
- **Improve signage and language to increase understanding and increase people's willingness to keep away from closed paths.**

1.3 Discussion at workshop

The benefits of ride closure were seen as an opportunity for forest regeneration and recovery. The challenges are increased pressure on other areas, poor communication and public lack of regard for the closures. However people thought it could work well if the community understand and accept it. The majority of participants supported this idea. Outstanding concerns are that what has happened to date hasn't worked and is discriminatory against locals and the disabled.



1.4 Response from drop-in and online



In the wider engagement some people said that they think that closing paths when necessary is management that is working well - but that communication around this is not good.

1.5 What needs to be solved

The closures that are in place are not working well enough.

The key challenge identified in all the engagement focuses not on whether or not paths are closed but on how this is communicated, explained and made workable for locals and visitors. This includes:

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| Explanatory signage at closed routes | <p>This needs to be well worded and explained. Current signs are described as 'poor'.</p> <p>Information needs to include what the paths used to be like, why they have deteriorated, that closures are to give the ground a chance to dry out recover, the habitat/path management that is being done to help the recovery, and asking people to follow alternate routes.</p> |
|--------------------------------------|--|

Also need to set out not just why, but for how long the closures is likely to be in place

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| Information about alternate routes | Explanation of alternative circular routes, how long they take, subtle signage in the forest to help people follow the route. |
| Communicating closures to visitors | How can closures, the reasons for them and alternate routes be best communicated up front? There is a question about whether there is mobile signal in some parts of the forest so do visitors and locals need to update info at home or could it be live in the forest? What about text messages? |
| General information and awareness raising about the muddy path challenge | So people are aware that using and skirting around muddy areas ends up with the loss of sensitive habitats of woodland flowers and grasses, butterflies and insects for which the forest is special. Also, that wet muddy paths take a long time to recover. |
| Signage for visually impaired | Ensure that signage meets relevant standards. |

1.6 What do we need to do to move forward on this?

Developing the idea further

1. What are the key things to communicate?
2. How can these best be communicated?
3. Can we make the most of digital/technological advancements – what would that take and what kind (apps, alerts, web, social media)?
4. Suggest how the different communication tools (signs, leaflets, vlogs, pod casts etc) could be done well and effectively

Action Planning

1. What are the next steps to make progress?
2. What action could you help with or lead on?
3. Who wants to help shape and influence this as it progresses?

2 Adjacent land visitor centre

2.1 Explanation (and progress since workshop)

Visitor numbers to the forest are increasing and will continue to do so with new development in the area. The highest visitor numbers are around the café, Shell House and Lake which are of historic and landscape importance. Where visitors access the forest, many do so without realising it is a National Nature Reserve and SSSI so understanding the site needs to be treated with care.

A visitor centre on adjacent land could take the pressure off these features and provide information and a 'gateway' at which interpretation panels and information could be displayed. Different audiences could be directed to different areas.

2.2 Idea proposed in workshop

- **Acquire some adjacent land for a visitor centre and car park to act as a honey pot and to raise visitor awareness before people go onto the forest.**

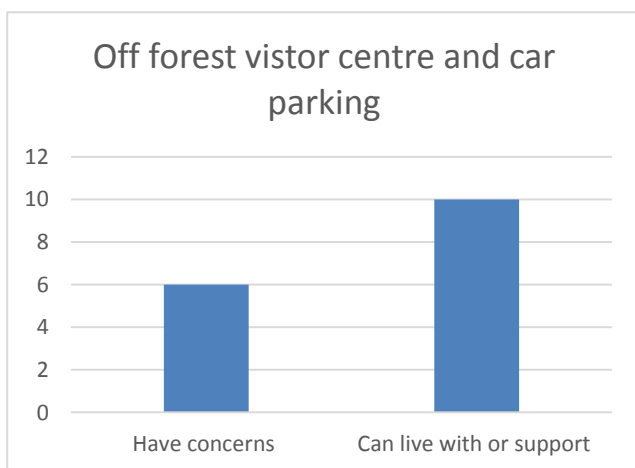
2.3 Discussion at workshop

Pros

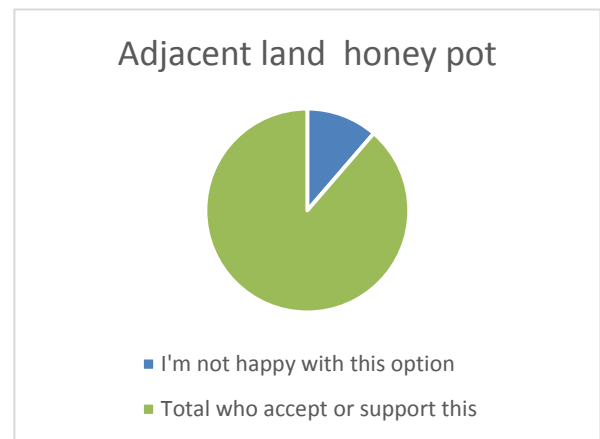
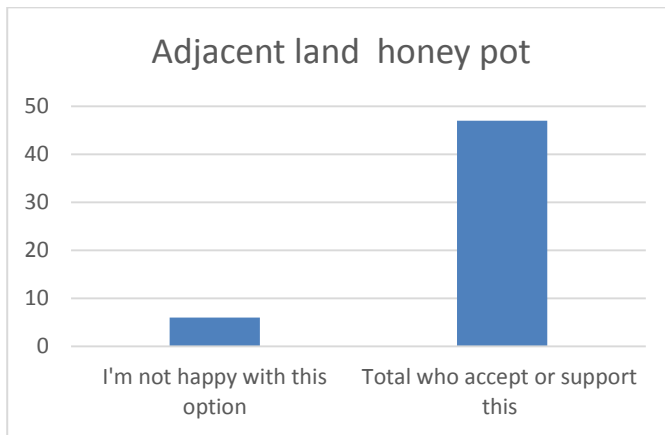
- It could take pressure off more sensitive areas and features
- It could provide facilities for education visits and community use

Cons

- Is there a risk it draws even more people?
- Would need to find funds, land and planning permission
- It would need to be staffed
- It would need to be designed in keeping with the forest and not erode its spirit of place



2.4 Response from drop-in and online



2.5 What needs to be solved

This idea needs to have a feasibility study (costs, location, facilities, staffing).

2.6 What do we need to do to move forward on this?

Developing this idea further

1. What would the centre need to be like to deliver benefits for visitors, locals, the NT and the forest?
2. What kind of information, education and messages could the centre provide?
3. What would need to be solved to make progress on this idea?
4. What solutions can you suggest for those challenges?

Action Planning

1. What are the next steps to make progress?
2. What action could you help with or lead on?
3. Who wants to help shape and influence this as it progresses?

3 Influencing plans and policies so there is more green space elsewhere

3.1 Explanation

There is intense development pressure in the area with increased numbers of houses. That should be matched with increased significant areas of green space and green infrastructure for people and nature. Without it the pressure on the forest will only increase. The National Trust needs to be able to influence planning and strategies at all the relevant levels from County to Neighbourhood Plans

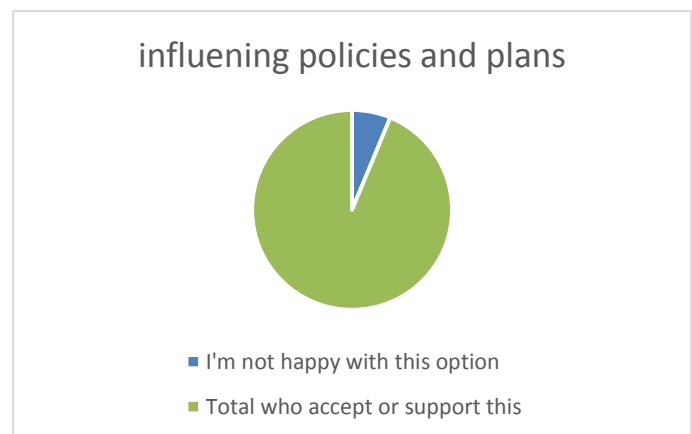
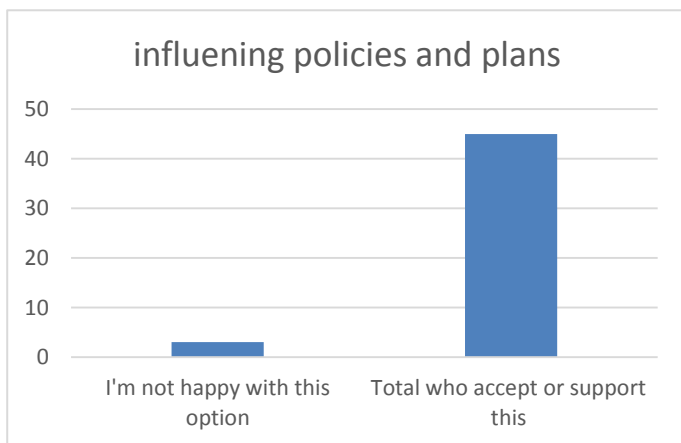
3.2 Idea proposed in workshop

- **Take the pressure off the forest by influencing policies and new development so there is more green spaces and green infrastructure elsewhere for people to enjoy**

3.3 Workshop

Due to the number of participants at the workshop, only 4 topics could be selected for discussion in the afternoon. This topic came 5th in the prioritisation so could not be discussed in detail. However the need to take this more strategic view and influence the amount of green space and its use to take pressure of the forest was repeatedly raised.

3.4 Response from drop-in and online



This proposal received strong support in the wider engagement.

3.5 What needs to be solved

The challenge is what needs to be influenced and how best to go about that.

3.6 What do we need to do to move forward on this?

Developing the idea further

1. What are the organisations that need to be made aware of the pressure on the forest and need for more Green Infrastructure?
2. What documents, strategies and developments need to be influenced?
3. What is the best way of influencing them?
4. What resources are their available to the NT to help them do this?

Action Planning

1. What are the next steps to make progress?
2. What action could you help with or lead on?
3. Who wants to help shape and influence this as it progresses?

4 Strategic Drainage Plan

4.1 Explanation

One of the reasons the routes get so muddy is because the thick clay soils don't drain well and the old drainage system has fallen into disrepair.

A drainage survey has now been completed for the lake area and the NT is waiting the report.

4.2 Idea proposed in workshop

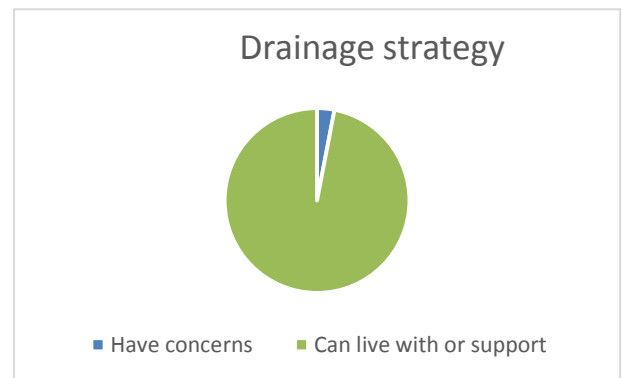
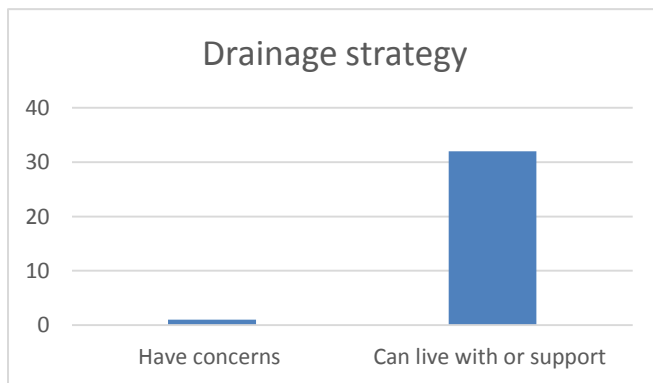
- **Create a strategic drainage plan and survey , clear and maintain the Victorian drainage system**

4.3 Response from workshop

The issue is the drainage of the paths and rides.

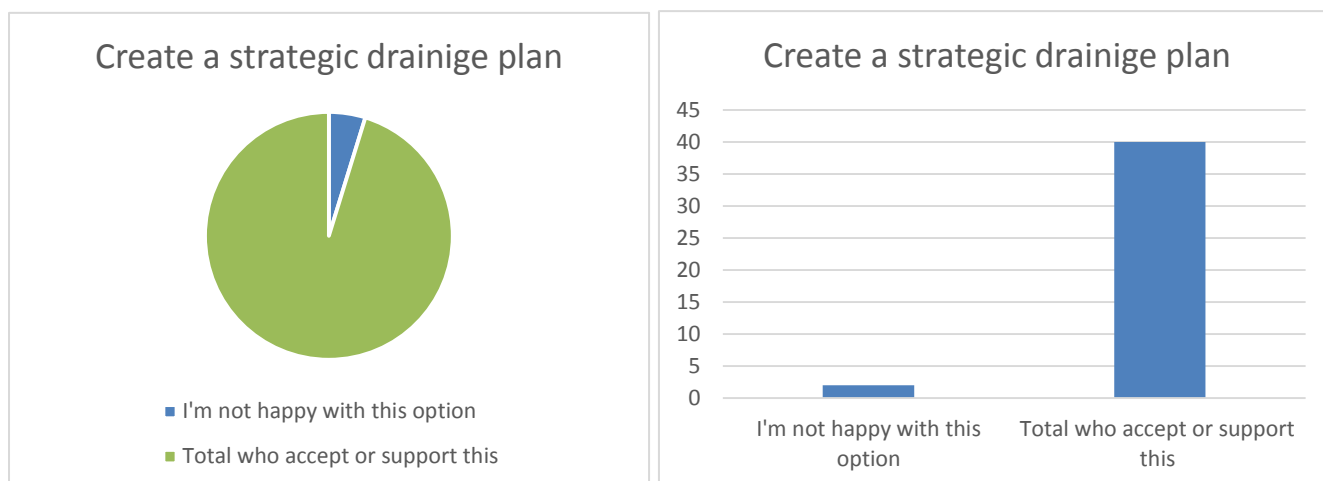
However the challenges include:

- Doing the works in a way that fits with the nature and heritage as well as being consented
- Carrying out a survey and resourcing the work – perhaps an opportunity for citizen survey and volunteer action
- Doing works in a way that avoids any further soil compaction and at times of year with least impact on nature



Please note: The person who expressed strong concerns about this proposal thinks drainage is a good idea but is concerned that it is not seen as the only idea and needs to be combined with restrictions

4.4 Response from drop-in and online



Comments included a range of practical solutions including: (mole drains to aerate the soil, using coppice chipping to create a drier surface and improve soil condition over time, use of stones, clearing clogged ditches, clear and replace all pipes, rotational ditch clearance over eg a 10 year cycle, use of de-compaction machines, use of tarram or similar (hexagonal mesh)).

4.5 What needs to be solved

Participants think that this is one of the easiest and simplest things to go but needs a feasibility study/plan to ensure it is done well and sensitively.

4.6 What do we need to do to move forward on this?

Developing ideas further

1. What would a wider survey need to find out?
2. A feasibility study and strategy was proposed at the first workshop. What does this need to include?
3. What kind of local knowledge needs to be factored in and who has it?
4. What are your initial suggestions about how the drainage is improved (e.g. where to start, time of year, equipment)

Action Planning

1. What are the next steps to make progress?
2. What action could you help with or lead on?
3. Who wants to help shape and influence this as it progresses?

5 Finding ways to change the priorities / funding model for the forest

5.1 Explanation

The National Trust has a policy that each of its properties should be self-sustaining on its basic upkeep. Hatfield Forest receives grant income for conservation management. Events provide additional funds for projects and initiatives.

However, people at the workshop and in the wider engagement see a contradiction between nature and quiet enjoyment, the NTs concern about the impact of too many people on the muddy routes, the Park Run and other large events which bring in large numbers of people which introduce people to the place.

The 'don't trample the paths' and 'every step counts' message is undermined and contradicted by these events drawing increasing numbers of visitors.

But the less financially viable the forest is, the less there is for staff and conservation action.

5.2 Idea proposed in workshop

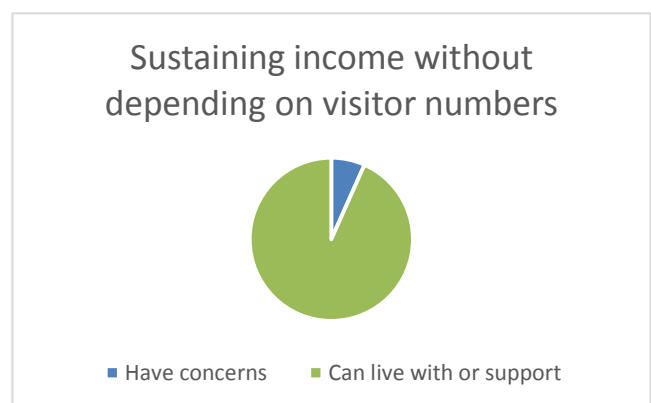
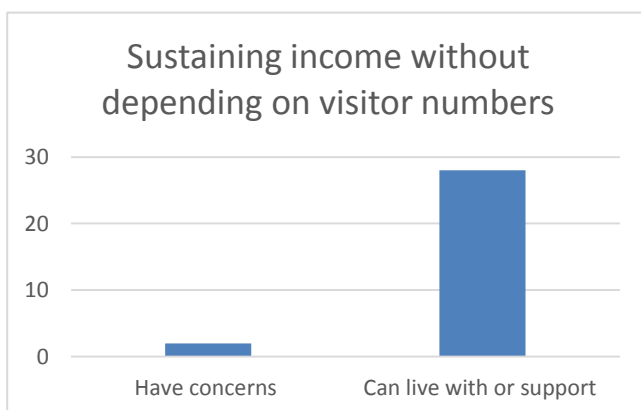
- **Change the income model and priorities for Hatfield Forest so that it doesn't have to be self-funding through visitor numbers**

5.3 Response from workshop

A change of priority could lead to less access and a faster recovery of the habitats but would also have an impact on income which is more crucial as other funding sources for conservation dry up.

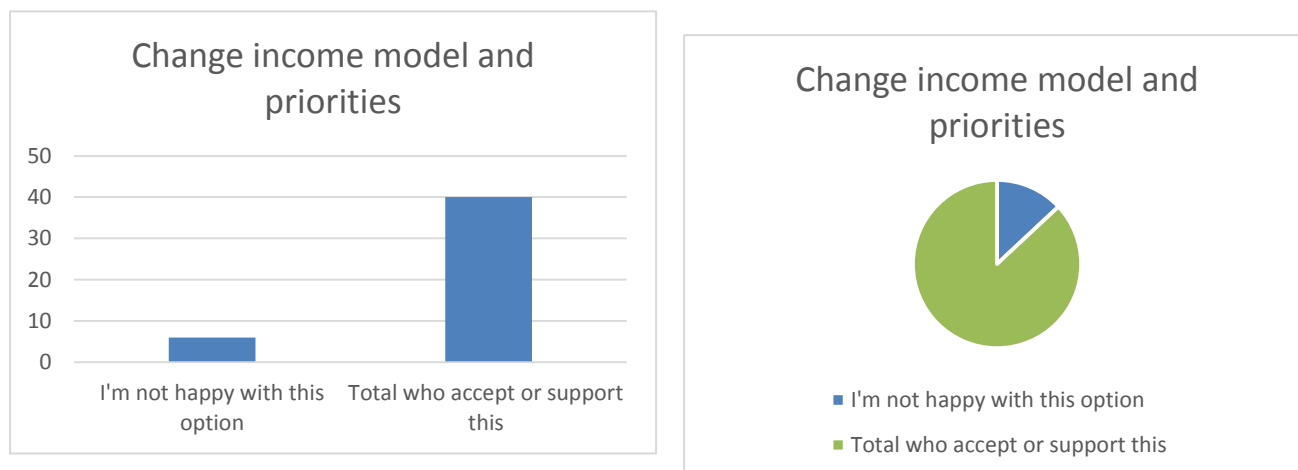
Ways to reduce access (path closures, car park restrictions, possible seasonal closures) are sensitive topics. Also, multiple access points make closure very difficult to achieve.

Whilst action is needed on the paths/rides now there is also the need to understand the 'carrying capacity of the forest' and the tipping points to avoid before damage is done.



Note: Concerns raised in relation to this are not specifically about changing priorities. They are about the risk that reducing access to the forest car parks might just increase parking in surrounding streets and that wider habitat conservation topics had not been discussed during the workshop.

5.4 Response from drop-in and online



The points raised in the wider engagement reflect those described above – and include the point about the NTs contradictory messages.

5.5 Update from the NT since the first workshop

What stakeholders said at the workshop, public drop in and online engagement, has already prompted the National Trust at Hatfield to start internal discussions about what they can do in the context of national NT priorities, policy and local needs.

Discussions have been held with Park Run with a view that it is now restricted to a hard-standing only route for the rest of the winter.

5.6 What needs to be solved

The key questions is: if (and how) income can be sustained without relying on visitor numbers and without causing a detrimental impact on nature and quiet enjoyment.

5.7 What do we need to do to move forward on this?

Developing ideas further

1. How could the NT bring in funds without increasing visitor numbers further? (e.g. suggestions included woodland products and increased visitor expenditure – but what and how, and what else?)
2. Two things were suggested that need to be worked out: a sustainable carrying capacity and the 'tipping point' to avoid before damage is done. How could these be found out?
3. What other/alternate sources of long term funding might there be?
4. Another group is considering a visitor centre – how could that become a source of revenue?

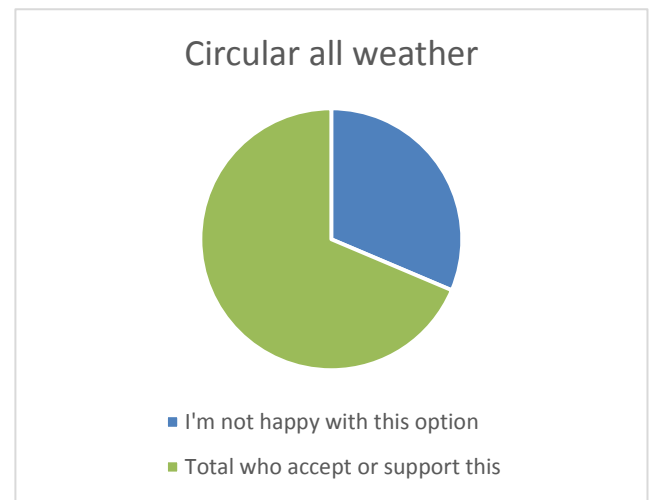
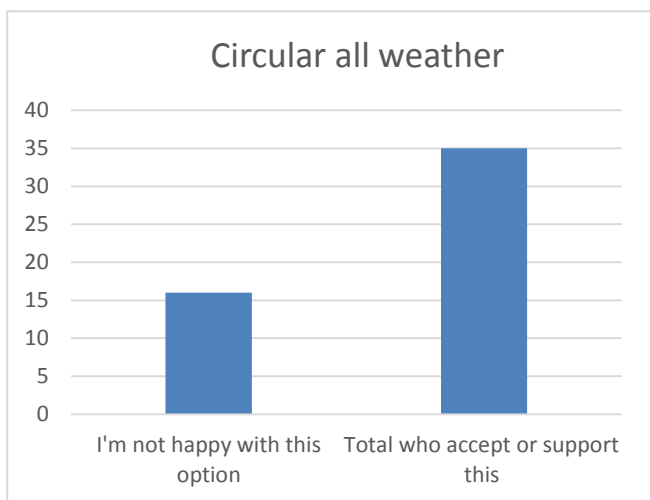
Action Planning

1. What are the next steps to make progress?
2. What action could you help with or lead on?
3. Who wants to help shape and influence this as it progresses?

6 Ideas with insufficient support to progress

The following ideas had insufficient support and the highest level of people saying they weren't happy with the idea:

- **Investigate the idea of sacrificing some areas of the forest to draw more people to and so the rest of the forest is under less visitor pressure**
- **Create an all-weather circular surfaced track for winter use**



7 Other challenges that have been raised

- National Trust vehicles churning up the ground – need to think about alternate vehicles and routes
- Management and impact of cows e.g. creating muddy areas around gates, Weavers Pond and culverts.
- Working out how best to surface some areas where there is no alternative. Suggestions include: bark chip from coppicing, quality board walks, pebbles,
- Promoting alternate areas for walking, riding and cycling
- Mountain biking
- Parking issues
- Deterioration in area around Shell House
- Aging population need accessible gates

8 Other solutions that have been suggested

Improving drainage and path surfaces:

- De - compaction machines
- Raised walkways/board walks (with anti-slip surface)
- Roll out plastic walkways
- Considering and understanding the pros and cons of coppicing either side of rides. It would create a drier environment to help with paths drying out - but what is the ecological effect

Managing access and reducing pressure

- Residents permit
- More and /or wider avenues
- Rotational closures
- Parking strategy/management
- Learning what solutions have worked elsewhere
- Red, amber, green system on posts to alert walkers and dog walkers
- Winter permits or permits to certain areas – residents and NT members only
- Weekend or temporary closures
- Significant replanting to expand the forest area onto adjacent land
- Create a brochure that provides information about other locations and sites people can go

NT provide consistent messaging, ethos and management

- Events having an impact assessment so they are consistent with Every Step Counts
- That NT staff have an impact reduction protocol with the use of their own vehicles and works

Research

- Research and surveys to inform management decisions - visitor surveys, recreation, habitat, soil/drainage, solutions, displacement effects of closing certain paths - does it just mean more damage elsewhere rather than spreading the load?
- Research and learn from historic management

Increased understanding

- Making management documents available
- Education events at local schools

Section B

1 Enhanced communication in general

(Note: the communication about the muddy paths is being considered separately).

1.1 Explanation

At the first workshop participants said that they thought visitors, in particular parents and children, are often unaware of the value of the historic and natural features of the forest and as a result appear not to ‘respect’ them. Some incidents were described to illustrate this concern and include damage to the Shell House.

1.2 Idea proposed in workshop

- **Enhance communication, understanding and education to foster a culture of care, respect and greater active involvement e.g. in citizen science, or as conservation volunteers**

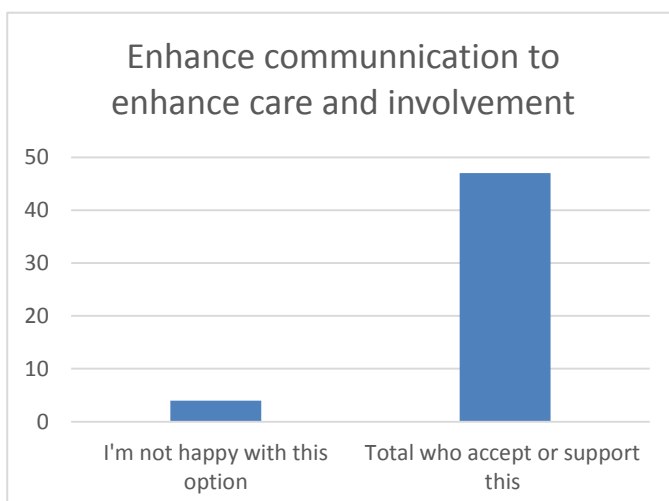
1.3 Response from workshop

The need for communication about the muddy paths to be set within a broader and more effective communication about the sensitivity of the forest and the need for care was raised at several points in the workshop and prioritised as 6 out of 13 possible solutions.

Helping visitors to understand and adapt to change was also a topic within the workshop and includes ideas relevant to this topic including:

- Use of local parish magazines and other local media
- Information being clear and in accessible language
- Use of social media to flag changes
- Explaining any work being done and why
- More publicity of the traffic light system
- A social inclusion project
- Greater engagement with local schools
- More staff/volunteers to explain the sensitivity and wise use of the forest to visitors

1.4 Response from drop-in and online



1.5 What needs to be solved

People think enhanced communication for visitors and locals is necessary to increase general awareness. The challenge is who is the audience and how best to communicate with them.

1.6 What do we need to do to move forward on this?

Developing ideas further

1. What are the different audiences?
2. What would inspire them to 'respect' the forest and get more involved?
3. What types or methods of communication would work best?
4. What are the key messages that this audience would want to know?

2 Supporters forum and active support

2.1 Explanation

There used to be a Friends of Hatfield Forest which had a members for less than the cost of a NT card. The National Trust had to stop this arrangement because it was not compliant under the Charities Commission.

There is now a clear desire for people to come together to support Hatfield Forest and:

- help champion the forest,
- provide a resource and way of coordinating active support
- provide a two way flow of information and ideas
- provide walks and talks for members

Suggestions for active support include:

- Helping with practical tasks,
- Volunteering to explain and help people understand the sensitivity of the site and how to enjoy it without compromising that
- Acting as informal ‘wardens’ and providing feedback and photos of things that need to be solved

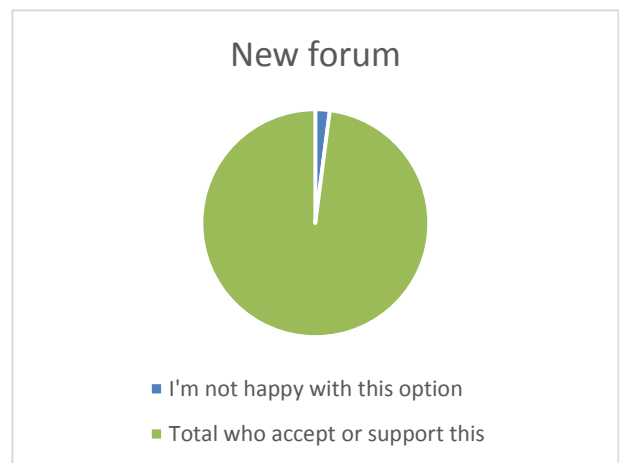
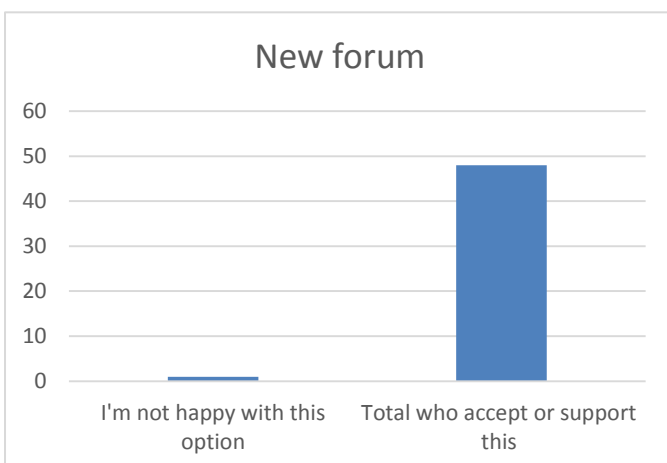
2.2 Idea proposed in workshop

- **Set up a new forum and network (like the previous Friends of Hatfield Forest) to act as explainers of the forest – its history and importance**
- **Active involvement through citizen science or volunteer action**

2.3 Response from workshop

The need to reinstate some form of Forum like the Friends of Hatfield Forest was suggested at different points in the first workshop.

2.4 Response from drop-in and online



2.5 What needs to be solved

The key things that need to be solved are how the group could be set up and function effectively.

2.6 What do we need to do to move forward on this?

Developing ideas further

1. What are the benefits for the members – why would you join?
2. What could members contribute?
3. When, where and how often should it meet?
4. What are the practical steps in setting up?
5. Who wants to help make it happen?

Action Planning

1. What are the next steps to make progress?
2. What action could you help with or lead on?
3. Who wants to help shape and influence this as it progresses?

3 New Working Group

3.1 Explanation

The National Trust are keen that the momentum and collaboration started in these workshops is maintained and shifts from generating ideas and action planning to collaborative implementation.

To do that, they want to set up a balanced working group of enthusiastic, knowledgeable and constructive people. The group will act as a sounding board to help maintain and build momentum. It will also provide two-way communication between the community and/or other stakeholders interests and the NT.

3.2 What do we need to do to move forward on this?

Developing the idea further

1. What could be their main function?
2. How often and when could it meet?
3. What makes for successful meetings that are constructive and good to be part of?
4. What 'guidance for working together' would help keep the group achieve this
5. If there were 12 places what interest or organisation should have a place? (Suggest names too if you can)

Action Planning

1. What are the next steps to make progress?
2. What action could you help with or lead on?
3. Who wants to help shape and influence this as it progresses?