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Thames Basin Heaths SANGs Visitor Survey Analysis 2024

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Summary

This work has been commissioned by the Thames Basin Heaths Partnership (TBHP) to analyse the visitor survey data collected from Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace (SANG) sites near the Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area (TBH SPA). The aim is to understand how the sites are functioning as SANGs and how the sites compare to the existing TBH SPA.

Visitor surveys were conducted at 78 SANGS by the TBHP, comprising a combination of tally counts and visitor interviews to understand visitor use of the sites. Visitor surveys were conducted at each site during summer 2023 and again in winter 2023/24.

Key findings included:

Tally counts

- A total of 1,930 people were recorded using SANGs during the survey period.
- Visitor use of site appeared to be evenly distributed between the summer (49%) and the winter (51%).
- The total people number of people counted per hour also shows similar levels of seasonal use, although SANGs appear to be slightly busier in winter (12.2 people per hour in the summer compared to 13.2 in the winter).
- Counts were busier at larger SANGs, with 7.3 more people per hour counted at larger SANGs (in both summer and winter).

Interview data

- A total of 512 visitor interviews were conducted over the survey period;
- The main activity of interviewees was dog walkers (418 interviewees, 81%);
- Almost half of all interviewees had been visiting the site at which they were interviewed for between 1 and 5 years (242 interviewees, 47%);
- Over half of all interviewees were spending between 30 minutes and 1 hour on site (284 interviewees, 55%);
- A typical visitor to the site makes on average 220 visits per year to the SANG at which they were interviewed and the majority suggested that they use the site equally on weekdays and weekend (336 interviewees, 65%);
- 58% of interviewees (297) travelled to the site by car/van and 42% (215) travelled to the site on foot.
- A fifth of all interviewees (244 responses, 20%) chose to visit the site because it was ‘close to home’.

- When asked about site improvements, 22% stated that no improvements were needed (148), however 16% (112) cited more dog poo bins and 12% (85) suggested better surfaced paths.
- Overall site rating feedback was positive, with 97% (497) scoring 7 out of 10 or higher.
- 55% (281) of interviewees stated that half or more of their weekly visits occur at the site at which they were interviewed.
- A total of 201 alternative sites were named: 23% were within the SPA and 31% related to SANGs.
- A third of interviewees (165 interviewees, 34%) had heard about the SANG via word of mouth and a quarter (123 interviewees, 26%) drive past/saw a sign.
- The median distance between an interviewee's home postcode and the SANG they visited was 1.4 km, however those that visit more frequently lived closer (median distance 0.6 km from home for those visiting daily).
- Approximately a fifth of all interviewees had heard of the Thames Basin Heaths Partnership (115 interviewees, 22%).

These results provide an important snapshot of visitor use and highlight the role the network of SANGs plays in deflecting use away from the TBH SPA. There are some limitations within the data which make direct comparison between sites and over time difficult; we recommend some changes to the survey approach.

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Acknowledgements

This report has been commission by Natural England on behalf of the Thames Basin Heaths Partnership. We give thanks to Ruth Shelton, Zoe Shorter and Victoria Huth for overseeing the work and input throughout. Thank you also to other members of the TBHP team who carried out the survey work providing data for this report.
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1. Introduction

1.1 This report describes the visitor survey data collected at Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspaces (SANGs) for the Thames Basin Heaths (TBH) Special Protection Area (SPA). This work has been commissioned by Natural England on behalf of the Thames Basin Heaths Partnership (TBHP).

The Thames Basin Heaths SPA

1.2 The TBH SPA was classified under the EC Birds Directive (Council Directive 2009/147/EC on the conservation of wild birds) in March 2005. A subset of the area also qualifies as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC).

1.3 The SPA is composed of 13 separate Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) totalling 8,274 hectares and separated further into isolated fragments. Many are surrounded by high levels of housing and are subject to heavy visitor pressure.

1.4 Spanning three counties (Surrey, Berkshire and Hampshire), the SPA extends across 11 local authorities. About half (c. 4,000 ha) is within the Ministry of Defence Training Estate, with the remainder owned and managed by Local Authorities, Conservation NGOs, Forestry Commission and private landowners.

1.5 The TBH SPA includes areas of dry and wet heathland, mire, oak and birch woodland, gorse scrub and acid grassland, plus conifer plantation. It is classified for three species of bird listed on Annex I of the Birds Directive: Nightjar *Caprimulgus europaeus*, Woodlark *Lullula arborea*, and Dartford Warbler *Curruca undata,* all of which occur in internationally important numbers.

1.6 The designation, protection and restoration of European wildlife sites, such as the TBH is embedded in the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017, as amended, which are commonly referred to as the 'Habitats Regulations'. These afford the site strict protection and importantly, the most recent amendments (the Conservation of Habitats and Species (amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019[1]) take account of the UK's departure from the EU.

TBH SPA Area Delivery Framework and SAMM

1.7 Around 2006, on the basis of growing evidence of detrimental recreational and urban effects on the TBH SPA, it was recognised that mitigation measures were necessary to ensure continued residential development did not adversely affect the TBH SPA. The local authorities, with Natural England, worked in partnership to produce a strategic package of mitigation measures that would allow development to take place while complying with the Regulations. The background is discussed in detail in Burley's report on the TBH SPA draft delivery plan (Burley, 2007) and details of the agreed approach set out in the Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area Delivery Framework (Thames Basin Heaths Joint Strategic Partnership Board, 2009).

1.8 The delivery framework establishes a series of zones around the SPA that inform where and how residential development can be taken forward, and sets out mitigation requirements including the use of alternative sites, visitor access management and the accompanying monitoring:

- A 400m zone around the SPA boundary within which there is a premise of no net development.
- A zone of influence from 400m to 5 km from the SPA boundary (up to 7 km for large developments) within which any new residential development should provide or

[1] The amending regulations generally seek to retain the requirements of the 2017 Regulations but with adjustments for the UK's exit from the European Union. See Regulation 4, which also confirms that the interpretation of these Regulations as they had effect, or any guidance as it applied, before exit day, shall continue to do so.

contribute to the provision of avoidance measures to mitigate the impacts of the new residents.

- Avoidance measures such as the provision of additional green space ('SANG' - suitable alternative natural greenspace) and on-site access management ('SAMM' – strategic access management and monitoring).

1.9 Access management is coordinated strategically by Natural England working with the local authorities and partners, under collective of the TBHP. The TBHP is made up of 26 organisations, primarily the 11 local authorities, but also relevant government bodies and NGOs. The access management can include 'soft' measures, such as education and wardening, or 'hard' measures such as limiting car parking, managing path networks etc. Wardening staff, which have been on the ground since 2015, promote appropriate behaviour on the SPA and encourage use of alternative sites, including the use of a website to detail alternative sites for visitors to use (https://www.tbhpartnership.org.uk/greenspace/).

1.10 The other part of SAMM is the monitoring of the mitigation. SAMM recognises that continual monitoring is needed to evaluate the levels of recreational use on heaths and on SANGs. Monitoring should allow a check on the effectiveness of measures, act as an early warning and allow mitigation measures to be adjusted as necessary to reflect changes in access patterns, and types of use on both heathland and SANG mitigation sites.

SANGs

1.11 SANGs is the term given to greenspaces that are created or enhanced with the specific purpose of absorbing recreation pressure that would otherwise occur at sites designated as European wildlife sites. By providing alternative greenspaces that meets users' needs and provides a similar recreation experience to the European site, some of the recreation pressure that would otherwise be inflicted on the European site can be diverted.

1.12 SANG design is not necessarily straightforward as SANGs need to have features to draw visitors, be easy to access, attractive and pleasant

places to visit and feel safe. They need to be well maintained and provide a recreation experience broadly similar to that of the SPA.

1.13 SANGs can be created as entirely new sites, that previously had no public access, or on greenspaces with existing access, enhanced to create a SANG. Such enhancements may include the addition of car parks, marked routes or new planting, for example.

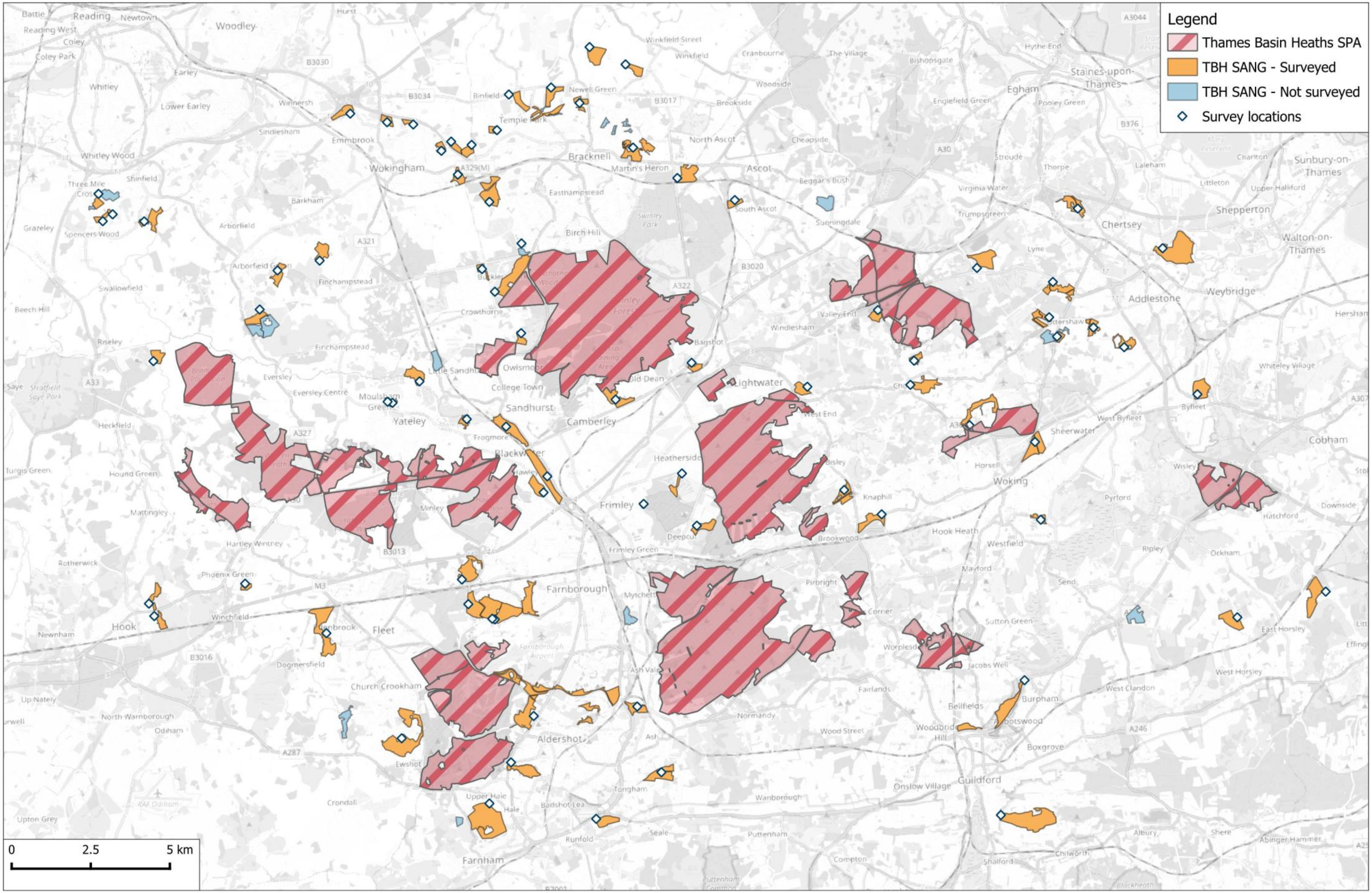
1.14 While also established in other areas, the approach has become strongly linked to the Thames Basin Heaths and there are now over 80 SANGs sites established, as shown in Map 1. Individual SANGs may be located in close proximity to new development, but may also occur more strategically around the SPA. It is recognised that a SANG may not fully prevent all visits by new residents to the European site, but is however likely to take up some existing pressure and the placement of SANGs more strategically in the context of existing housing and the SPA is relevant. By providing sites for both new residents and the existing local population, it is recognised that new residents will still exert some pressure on the European site, but that the 'net effect' of a SANG should help prevent an increase in recreation pressure on the European sites.

1.15 As part of SAMM there is an explicit requirement to monitor the outcome of access management. Monitoring within the SAMM extends to cover SANGs and is critical to establish whether SANG sites are functioning effectively. It can also be used gauge visitor opinion of historic management and inform future management decisions. Management actions which consider visitor opinions are more likely to enhance the visitor experience; encouraging more frequent visits or longer visits likely to result in reduced visitor pressure on the SPA. Monitoring across a number of SANG sites, examined simultaneously be used more strategically to examine the access management network as a whole.

1.16 Visitor surveys on the SANGs aim to cover all sites to understand the volume of access on the SANGs and understand visitor patterns and drivers. The purpose of this report is to analyse the SANG visitor survey data from 78 SANG surveys conducted by the SAMM team

during summer 2023 and winter 2023/24 as part of their ongoing monitoring.

Map 1: Overview of Thames Basin Heaths SPA and SANGs, highlighting those surveyed over Summer 2023 and Winter 2023/24



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2. Methods

Survey protocol

2.1 A survey protocol had been established by the TBHP previously, and set out their framework for monitoring visitors on SANGs across multiple sites. The protocol aims that each SANG is surveyed in the winter for one hour at a single key access point. This year additional surveys were conducted in the summer for a novel comparison with the summer SPA surveys. The winter survey protocol is to involve surveys at the same time and same type of day (weekend or weekday) every year for each site. This means that a site which has previously been surveyed at a specific time/day (i.e. 2pm on a weekday) should always be surveyed at the same time and day, therefore meaning data are directly comparable at individual locations over time.

2.2 The protocol is used to devise a surveying schedule. Surveys were then conducted by the TBHP staff and undertaken alongside ranger duties and patrols. The interview questions are listed in Appendix 1.

Survey coverage

2.3 Surveys, in the form of face-to-face interviews and tally counts, were conducted at a total of 78 SANGs during Summer 2023 and Winter 2023/24. The interview data (responses and tally count) were collated by the TBHP and provided to us, alongside precise survey points using what3words (see Map 1).

2.4 Survey scheduling between summer and winter did not always match the survey protocol, in terms of the required type of day or time, and the actual times surveys were completed did not always match the schedule. A summary of the schedule and surveys actually done is given in Table 1, and by site in Appendix 2.

2.5 For example, 28 sites were scheduled to be surveyed at weekends in the summer and 25 were scheduled for weekends in the winter. At 36 of the 78 sites, the survey day scheduled the summer was a different

type of day (i.e. weekend/weekday) to that in the winter. Other variations in the data included:

- Discrepancies between times were common between those scheduled and those conducted, and also between those conducted between seasons;
- No interviews were conducted at Bisley Common or Effingham Common, but the tally data indicated people passing and at these SANGs.

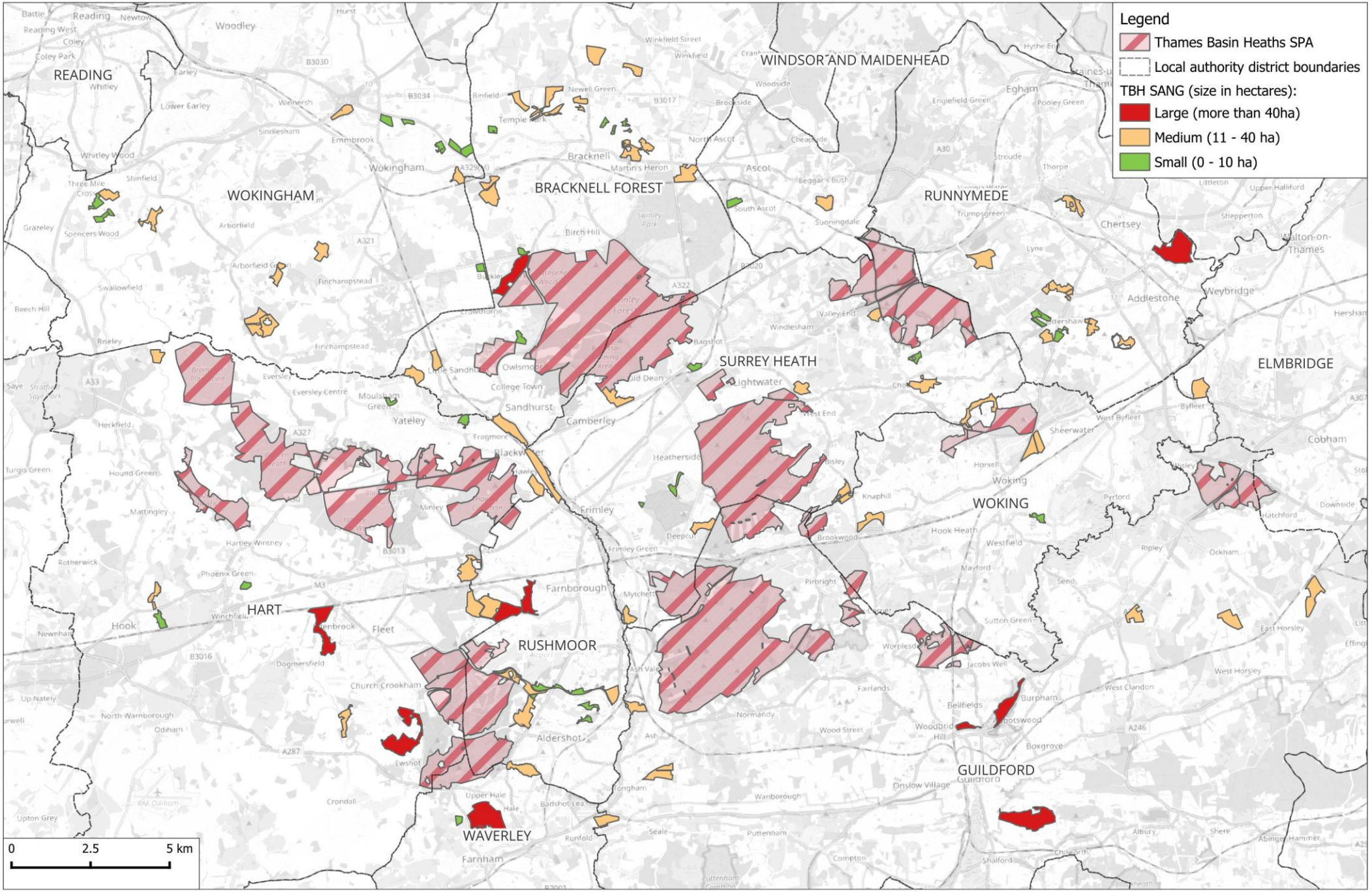
2.6 These variations are to some extent inevitable and reflect the need for the ranger team to balance a range of duties and their workloads. However, as a result of the variations in times and types of day, we have refrained from comparing between individual sites in the analysis. We therefore present the results from the combined dataset (i.e. across all locations), or as groups of sites, with groupings reflecting site size and spatial distribution of the sites (i.e. local authorities). SANGs were assigned to local authorities in GIS, based on the location of the survey point. These were subsequently checked by the TBHP team, and any corrections were made (for example Hawley Meadows and Blackwater Park SANG is jointly managed by Rushmoor & Surrey Heath authorities and is therefore assigned as such).

2.7 Sites were also grouped by size using GIS data and categorised as: Small (0 – 10 ha), Medium (11 – 40 ha) and Large (more than 40 ha).

Table 1: Summary of interviews conducted on weekdays and weekend days in summer and winter.

	Scheduled ratio	Scheduled total SANGs for interviews	Actual ratio (based on surveys conducted)	Number of SANGs with interviews conducted
Summer weekday: weekend	50:28	78	48:23	71
Winter weekday: weekend	52:26	78	61:13	74

Map 2: Overview of TBH SANG size category and associated local authority



3. Results

Tally counts

3.1 A total of 1,930 people were counted in the tallies visiting SANGs across the survey period. During the summer, 953 people were counted (12.2 people per hour) and this increased slightly (by 2%) in the winter to 977 (13.2 people per hour). Table 2 shows tally counts expressed as the number of people per hour both in the summer and winter and separated in the Large, Medium and Small SANG sites. The hourly rates were higher at the larger sites and interestingly, counts were consistently higher in winter for the different sizes.

Table 2: The number of people per hour counted in tally counts for SANGs, separated by the size of the site.

SANG size	Number of sites	Summer people per hour	Winter people per hour
Large (≥ 41 ha)	8	15.4	16.4
Medium (11- 40 ha)	47	13.7	14.7
Small (0 – 10 ha)	23	8.1	9.1
Total	**78**	**12.2**	**13.2**

Visitor interview results

3.2 A total of 512 visitor interviews were conducted over the survey period, with 255 completed during the summer and a further 257 during the winter. An average of 6.8 interviews were conducted at each SANG, ranging from 0 (at Allens Field and Effingham Common) to 14 at Frost Folly.

3.3 The number of SANGs surveyed per local authority is summarised in Table 3.

Table 3: Total SANGs surveyed, and the number of interviewees conducted in each local authority.

Local authority	Total SANGs surveyed	Total number of interviews
Bracknell Forest	15	110
Elmbridge	1	8
Guildford	7	42
Hart	11	81
Runnymede	8	51
Rushmoor	4	31
Rushmoor & Surrey Heath	1	12
Surrey Heath	10	47
Waverley	1	10
Windsor & Maidenhead	1	3
Woking	4	34
Wokingham	15	83
Total	**78**	**512**

Main activity (Q1)

3.4 Most visitors appeared to be using the SANGs for dog walking (418 interviewees, 81%). Roughly 12% of interviewees were using the SANGs for walking (63 interviewees), and the remaining interviewees (6%, 32) were undertaking one of a range of other activities (see Figure 1).

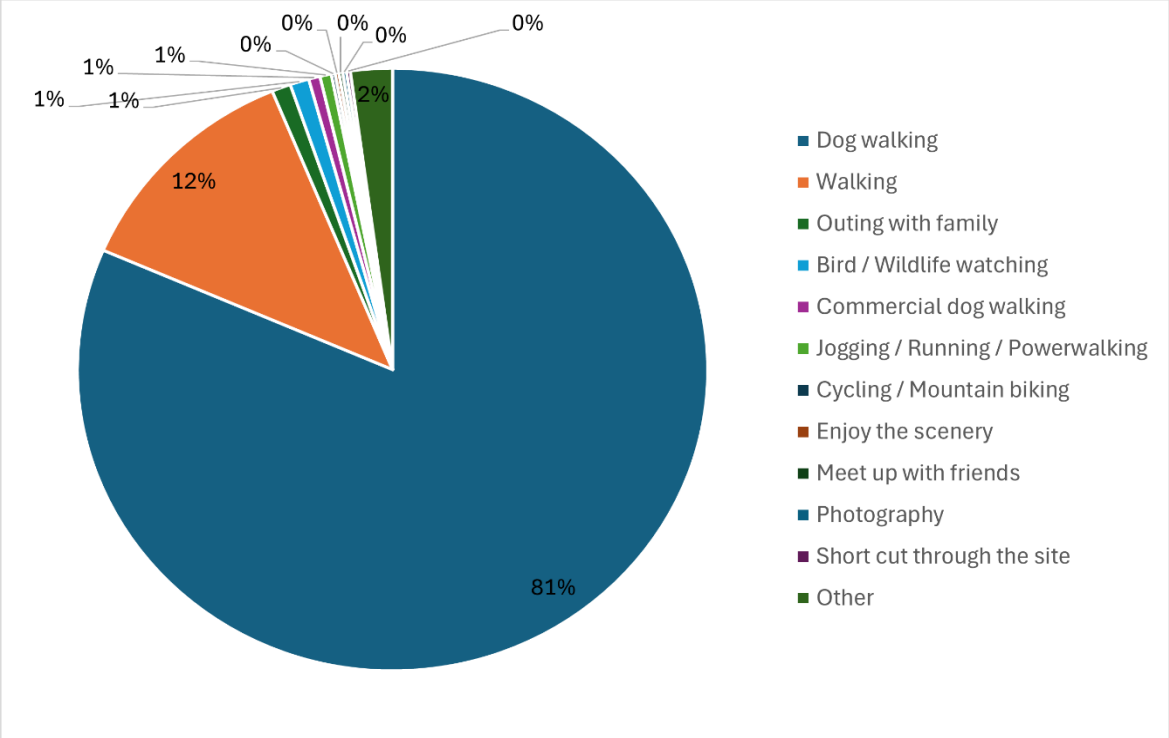


Figure 1: Main activity recorded by interviewees across all sites [n=512].

3.5 SANG size appears to affect the main activities on site (Table 4). Smaller (0-10 ha) and medium size (11-40) SANGs are mostly visited by dog walkers (102 interviewees, 84% of users and 267 interviewees, 83% of users at small and medium sites respectively). In comparison, larger SANGs have a wider range of activities and in particular draw a higher proportion of those walking as a main activity, with 20% (14 interviewees) walking as a main activity at these locations (compared to 12%, 63 interviewees across the data set as a whole).

Table 4: Summary of main activity given by interviewees by SANG size [n=512].

SANG size [number of sites]	Dog walking	Walking	All other activities	Total
Large (≥ 41 ha) [8]	48 (70%)	14 (20%)	7 (10%)	**69 (100%)**
Medium (11- 40 ha) [47]	267 (83%)	35 (11%)	19 (6%)	**321 (100%)**
Small (0 – 10 ha) [23]	102 (84%)	14 (11%)	6 (5%)	**122 (100%)**
All interviewees	**417 (81%)**	**63 (12%)**	**32 (6%)**	**512 (100%)**

3.6 Main activities did not appear to differ between seasons.

3.7 Survey effort was not even between weekdays and weekends, however the percentage of interviewees on weekdays who were dog walking was 79% (288 interviewees), compared to 87% (130 interviewees) at weekends. Due to the varying survey effort, this may be a reflection of differences between types of sites rather than weekdays or weekends specifically.

Visit patterns (Q2-3)

3.8 When asked to consider how long they had been visiting the site, almost half of all interviewees had been visiting for between 1-5 years (242 interviewees, 47%). A further 15% had been visiting for 6-10 years (76 interviewees) and 21% (105 interviewees) stated they have been visiting for more than 11 years (see Figure 2).

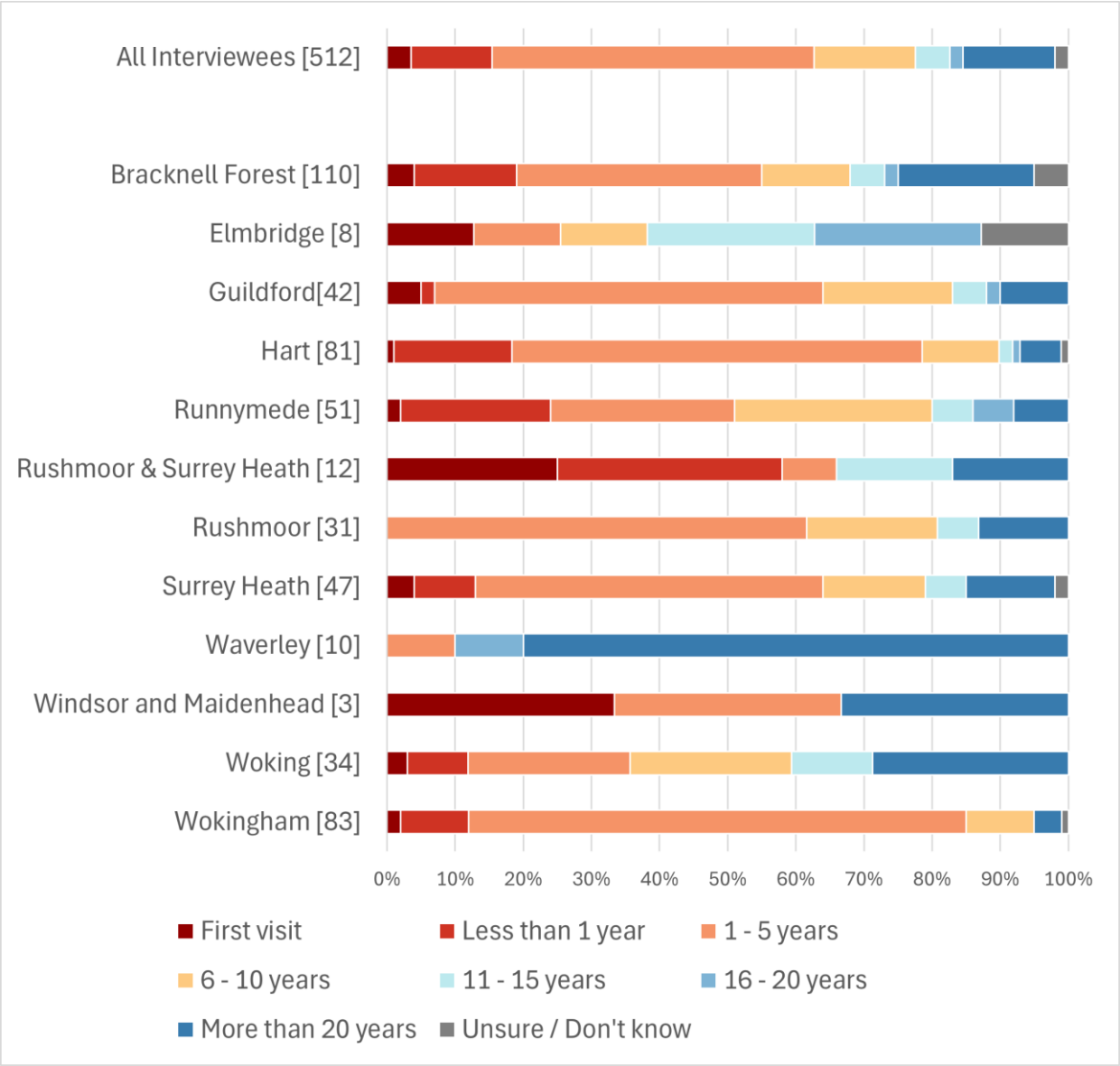


Figure 2: Repeat visits to the site, number of years visiting the site by interviewees, compared by local authority [number of interviewees].

3.9 There was some variation between local authorities. At most SANGs there were few interviewees who had been visiting the site more than 10 years. The exception was Elmbridge where 50% of interviewees (4 interviewees) reported that they had mostly been visiting for over 11 years. Also notable was Waverley as almost half of all interviewees at Waverley SANG sites (40%, 8 interviewees) stated that they had been visiting for more than 20 years.

3.10 The average visit duration (Figure 3) was between 30 minutes to 1 hour for most interviewees (284 interviewees, 55%). Very few (9 interviewees, 2%) interviewees visited for over 2 hours.

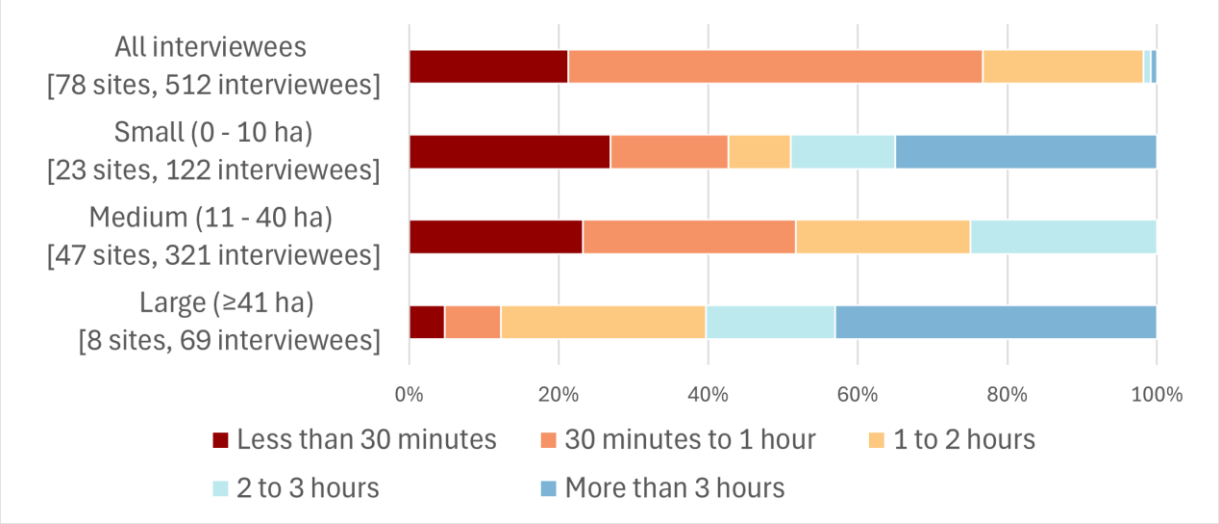


Figure 3: Visit duration of interviewees by SANG size.

3.11 Interviewees at large SANGs appeared to spend more time on their visit, with 14% (31 interviewees) spending up to an hour per visit compared to the overall total across all sites of 77% (393 interviewees).

Visit frequency (Q4-6)

3.12 Most interviewees visit up to 3 times per week (409 interviewees, 80%) – see Figure 4. An estimation based on these categories[2] suggests that a typical visitor will make 220 visits per year. This level was observed across most local authorities ranging from an estimated 33 visits per year 397 visits per year at Waverley).

3.13 Interviewees appeared to be visit smaller SANGs more often, with 89% (122 interviewees) visiting up to 3 times a week at smaller SANGs compared to 78% (321 interviewees) at medium sized SANGs and 72% (69 interviewees) at large SANGs. The proportion of interviewees that

[2] We scaled up the categories as follows: "More than once a day" visits per year = 700; "Daily" = 350 visits; "Most days (180+ visits)" = 200 visits; "1 to 3 times a week (40-180 visits)" = 110 visits; "2 to 3 times per month (15-40 visits)" = 27.5 visits; "Once a month (6-15 visits)" = 10.5 visits; "Less than once a month (2-5 visits)" = 3 visits; and "First visit" =1.

visit more than once a day was broadly consistent across size classes, at approximately 10% (51 interviewees).

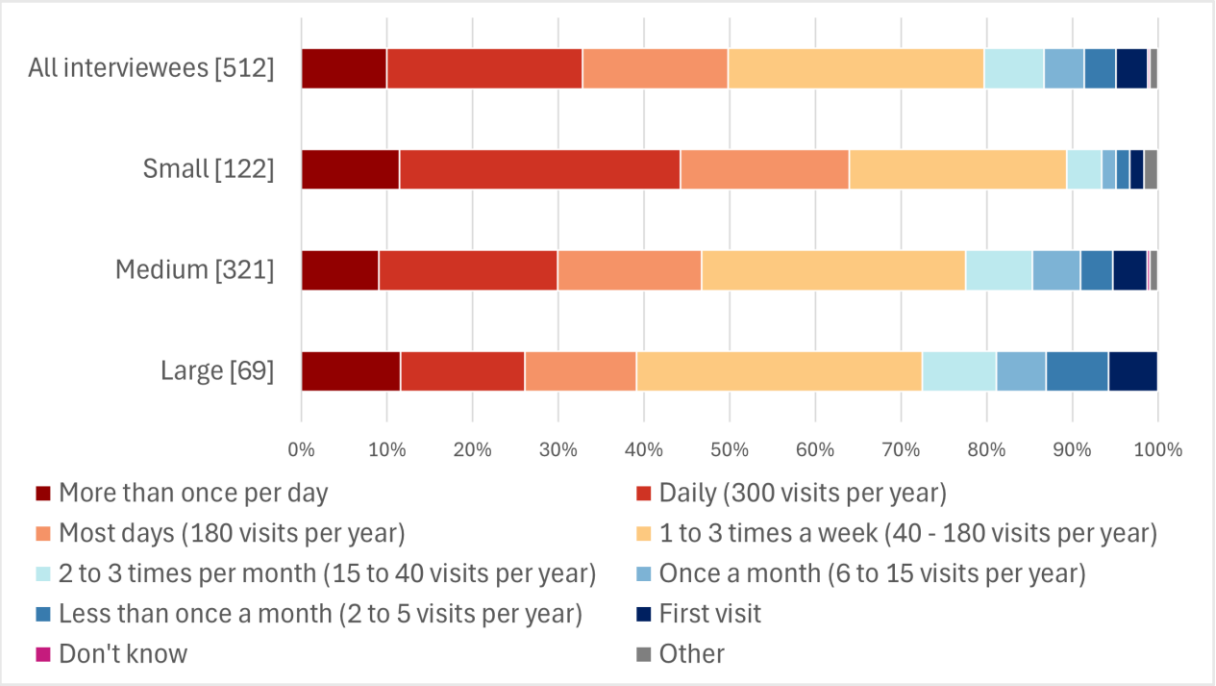


Figure 4: Frequency of visits, compared across SANG size [number of interviewees].

3.14 Most interviewees stated that they visited the SANG where the interview took place equally on weekdays and weekends (336 interviewees, 66%) whilst a further 20% stated that they tended to visit only on weekdays (104 interviewees) – see Figure 5.

3.15 There was little variation across local authorities (Figure 5), with the proportion of interviewees stating equal usage on both weekdays and weekends above 60% for all authorities apart from Windsor & Maidenhead, Elmbridge and Rushmoor & Surrey Heath (note the relatively small sample sizes of 3, 8 and 12 interviewees respectively).

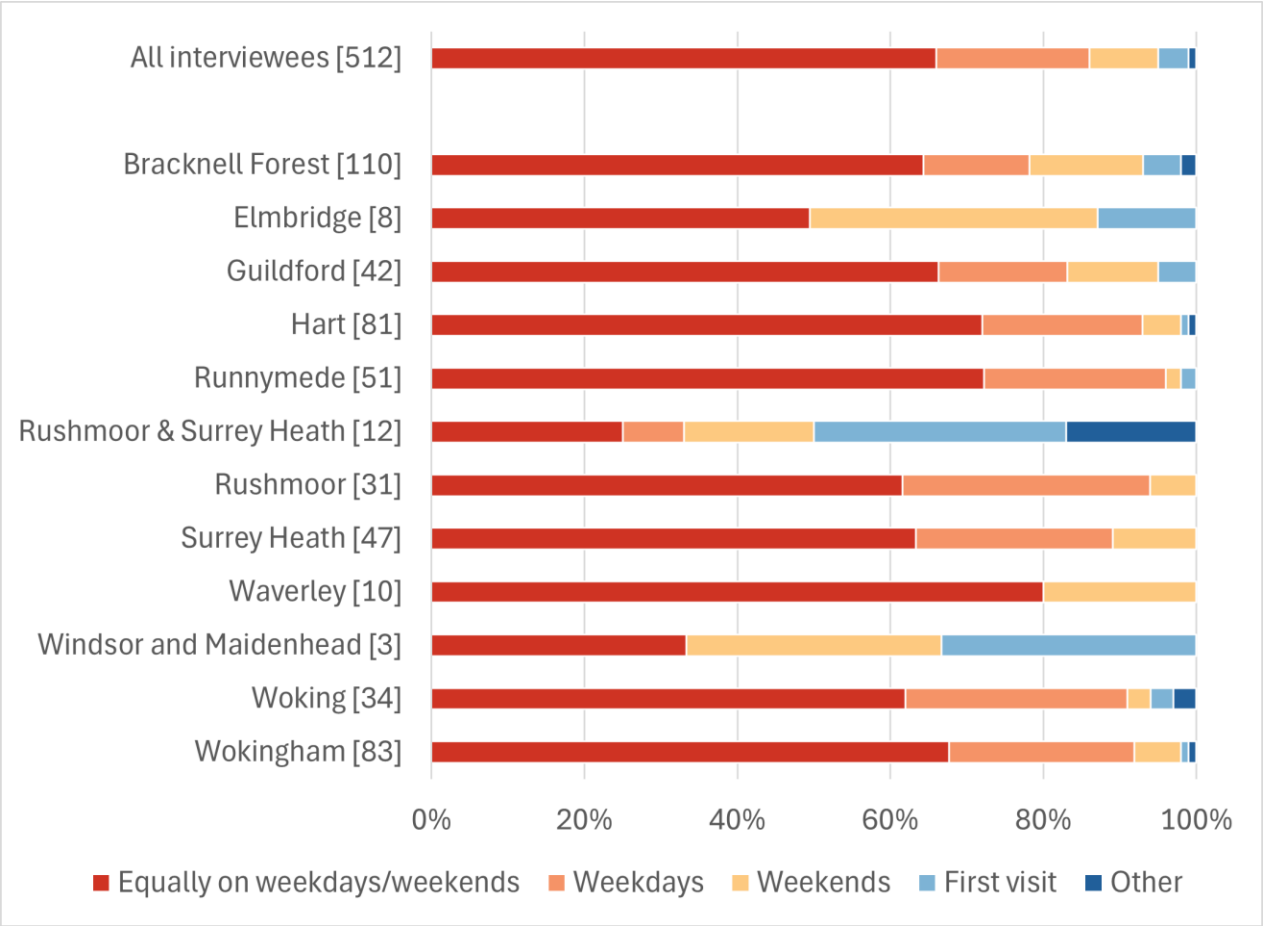


Figure 5: Proportion of weekday/weekend visits by interviewees, across each local authority [number of interviewees].

3.16 Across all SANG size classes, the majority of interviewees indicated they visited equally at weekends and weekdays. However, the proportion of interviewees who stated that they visit more at weekends increased with SANG size (3 interviewees, 2% in small SANGs; 33 interviewees, 10% in medium SANGs and 11 interviewees, 16% in large SANGs).

3.17 Interviewees were asked to consider whether they visit at a particular time of year. Almost three-quarters (405 interviewees, 71%) stated that they visit equally all year, however of those that showed a preference in time of year, 12% (68 interviewees) were likely to visit more in the summer. Please note that this was a multi-response question, and interviewees could choose multiple times of year if they wished (568 total responses).

Transport (Q7)

3.18 Most interviewees had travelled to the site by car or van (296 interviewees, 58%) with the remaining 42% on foot (215 interviewees). One individual arrived on bicycle.

3.19 This was the case across almost all the local authorities (Table 5), with the exception of Waverley, Wokingham and Windsor and Maidenhead where a greater proportion arrived on foot in preference to by car or van.

Table 5: Summary of main form of transport to the site. Proportion of interviewees is compared across local authority, with total interviewees included for each [n].

	Bicycle	Car or van	On foot
All interviewees [512]	**1 (0%)**	**296 (58%)**	**215 (42%)**
Bracknell Forest [110]	0 (0%)	77 (73%)	29 (27%)
Elmbridge [8]	0 (0%)	6 (75%)	2 (25%)
Guildford [42]	0 (0%)	32 (76%)	10 (24%)
Hart [81]	1 (1%)	41 (50%)	40 (49%)
Runnymede [51]	0 (0%)	32 (63%)	19 (37%)
Rushmoor [31]	0 (0%)	23 (74%)	8 (26%)
Rushmoor & Surrey Heath [12]	0 (0%)	10 (83%)	2 (17%)
Surrey Heath [47]	0 (0%)	28 (55%)	23 (45%)
Waverley [10]	0 (0%)	3 (30%)	7 (70%)
Windsor and Maidenhead [3]	0 (0%)	1 (33%)	2 (67%)
Woking [34]	0 (0%)	18 (55%)	15 (45%)
Wokingham [83]	0 (0%)	27 (31%)	60 (69%)

Site choice (Q8)

3.20 Interviewees were able to cite multiple reasons for choosing to visit the interviewed location rather than another local site. A total of 1,235 reasons were provided~~:~~, with an interviewee providing on average 2.1 responses.

3.21 Just under half (244 interviewees, 48%) cited being 'close to home' as a reason for site choice (Figure 6). A further 21% (107 interviewees) cited

the ability to 'let the dog off the lead' and 19% (96 interviewees) stated that the location was 'good for the dog/the dog enjoys it' (see Figure 6).

3.22 "Other" reasons given for site choice varied (27%, 136 responses) and included availability of shaded areas, seeking variety, on route to another walk, good access and that it was quieter than other places.

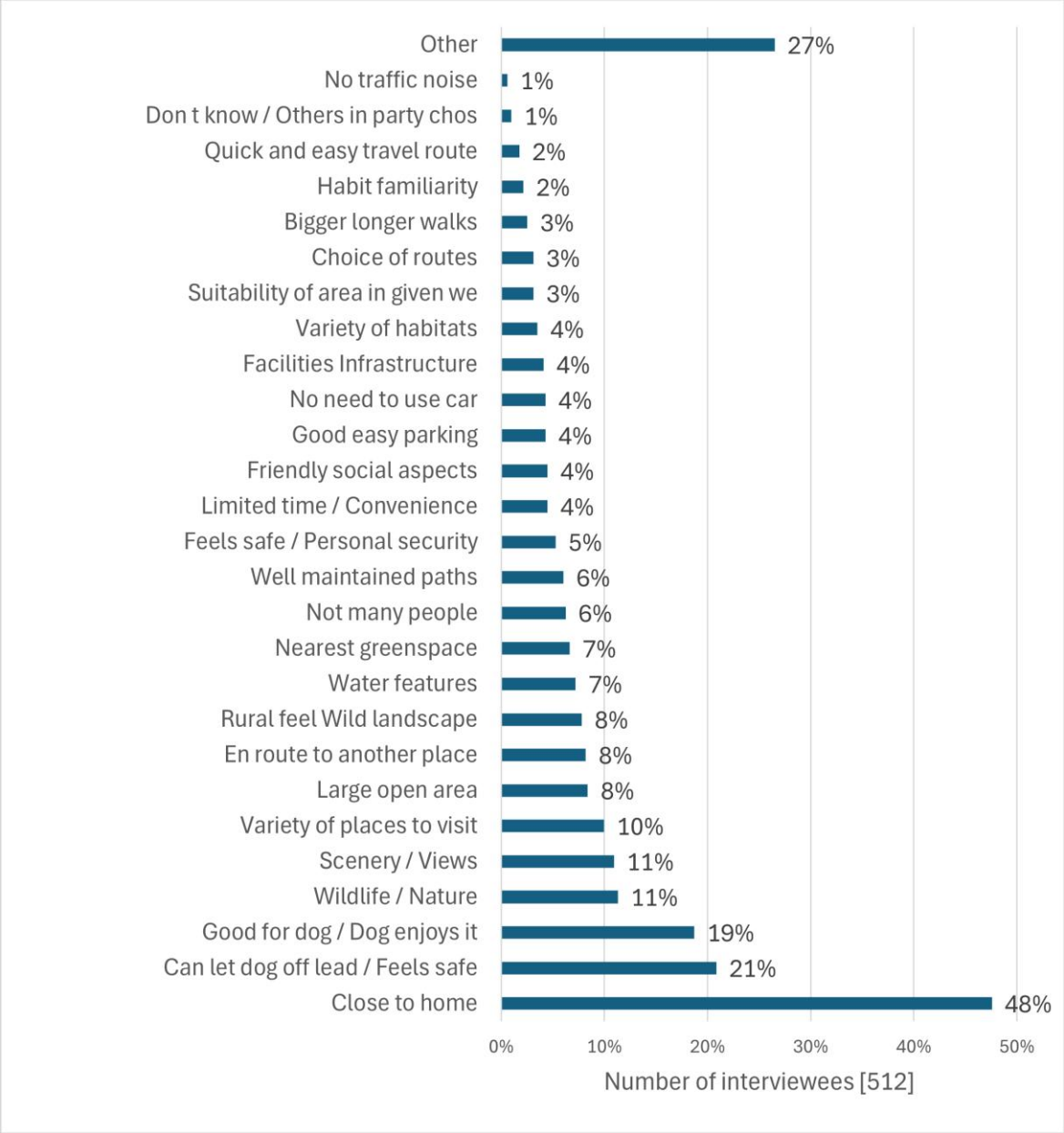


Figure 6: All responses [n=1,235], summary of reasons cited for choosing to visit the site at which they were interviewed.

3.23 Reasons for site choice varied with SANG size. Large sites were chosen more for the:

- Scenery / views (14 interviewees, 20% vs. 56 interviewees, 11% across all interviewees),
- Rural feel (14, 20% vs. 40, 8%) and,
- For having a variety of places to visit (13, 19% vs. 51, 10%).
- Well maintained paths (8, 12% vs. 31, 6%)
- Feels safe / Personal security (7, 10% vs 27, 6%)

3.24 At medium sized sites reasons for site choice tended to be less clear cut. However, the interviewee's reasons were often strongly related to dogs, such as:

- Can let the dog off the lead (76, 23% vs 107, 21%)
- Good for the dog / Dog enjoys it (69, 21% vs 96, 19%)

3.25 At smaller sized sites site choice was often related to a clearer preference for:

- Being close to home (71, 60% vs 244, 48%) and,
- No need to use the car (10, 8% vs 22, 4%).

3.26 However, the most notable pattern with smaller site was the comparative reduction in prevalence of factors such as large open areas, importance for dogs and well maintained paths (see Figure 7).

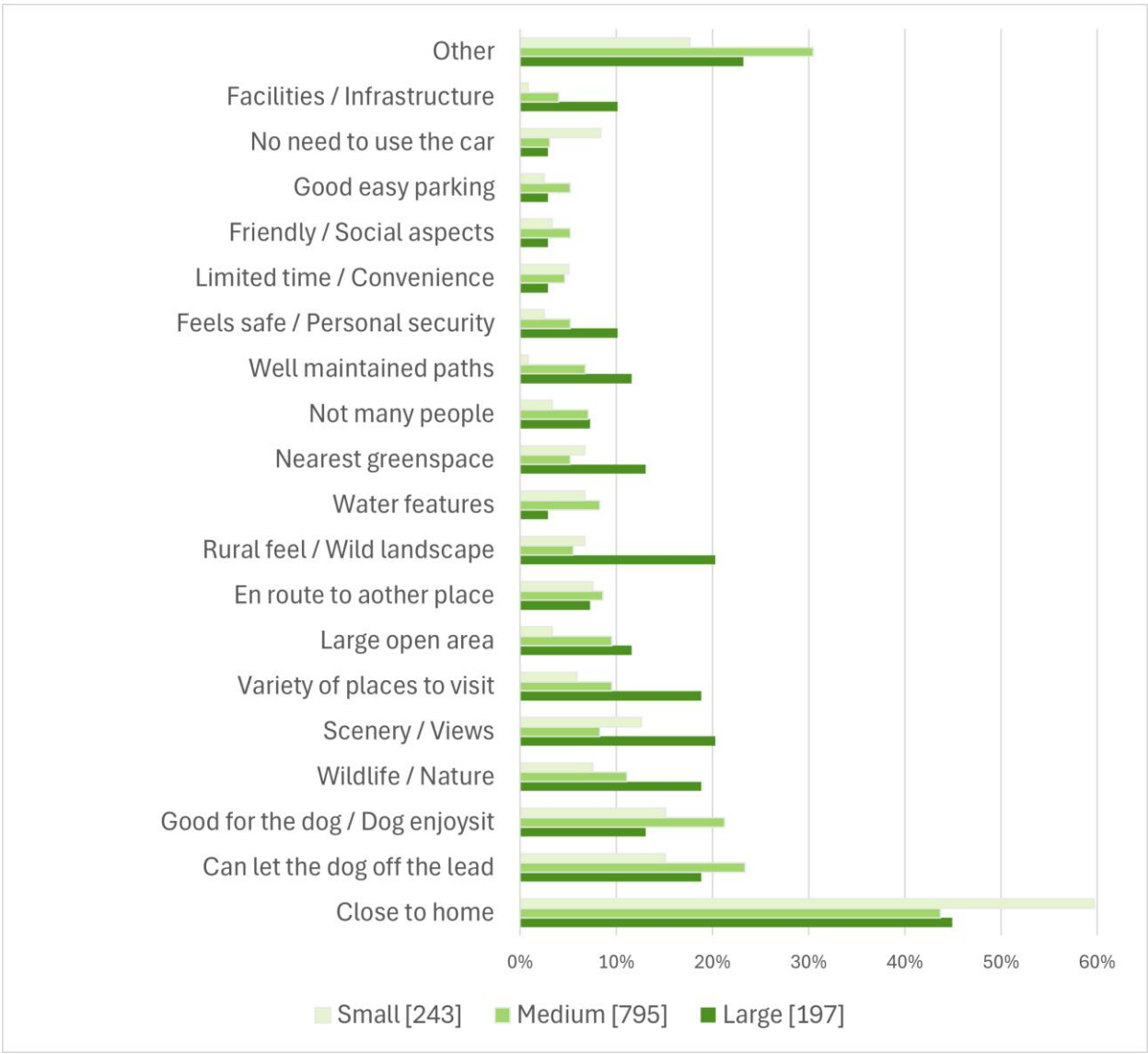


Figure 7: Top 20 reasons overall for site choice compared by approximate site size [number of responses].

3.27 Close to home was the most cited reason across almost all local authorities (except for Rushmoor, where it was the 2nd most cited reason). In Waverley, interviewees commented on the large open areas (3 interviewees, 30% vs. 43 interviewees, 8% across all interviewees) and in Woking interviewees commented on the facilities/infrastructure (4 interviewees, 12%, vs. 21 interviewees, 4% overall). However, the grouped "Other" factor was important in Runnymede with, for example, interviewees citing the site being well managed, the lack of bikes and easy (flat/short) walks.

Site improvements (Q9)

3.28 Roughly one third of interviewees (29%) suggested that 'no improvements / none' were needed at the site where interviewed. Those 381 interviewees that did suggest improvements gave 681 suggestions for improvements (interviewees were able to give multiple suggestions).

3.29 Of those that did think that improvements were needed, 22% (112 responses) mentioned the need for 'more dog poo bins' and 17% (85 responses) stated that better paths including surfacing were required – see Figure 8. A further 47% (241 responses) stated 'Other' improvements which did not fall into the pre-defined categories in the questionnaire. These included suggestions of more regular emptying of litter bins / dog poo bins, general maintenance such as grass cutting, cleaning ponds and widening pathways, sorting flooding in area and more habitats created such as wildflower meadows.

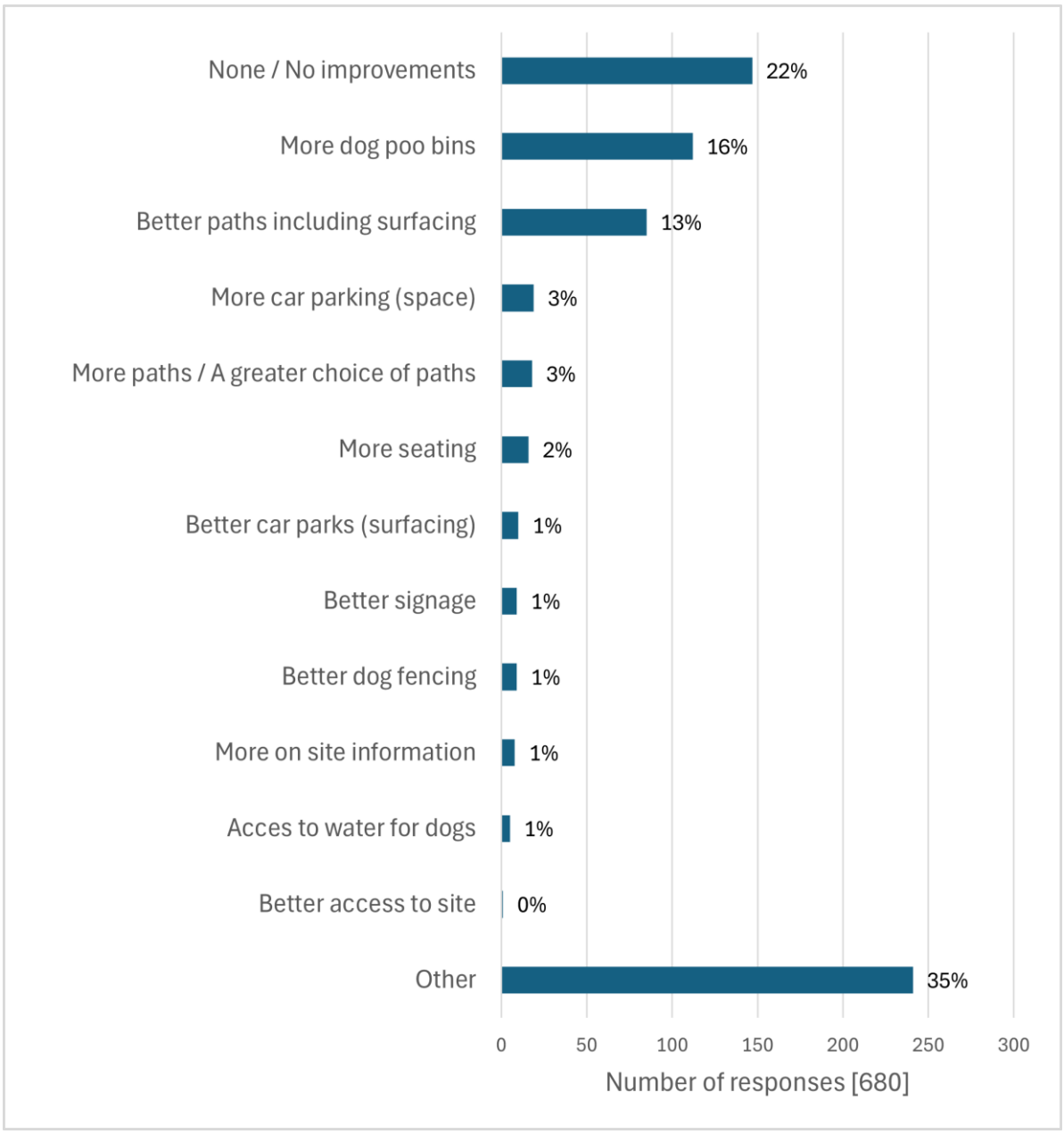


Figure 8: Most cited improvements combined across all sites [n=512].

3.30 When compared across local authorities (Figure 9), interviewees at Waverley SANGs were the most likely to comment that no improvements were needed (4 responses, 40%). Interviewees from Surrey Heath were more likely to suggest other improvements (32 responses, 57%).

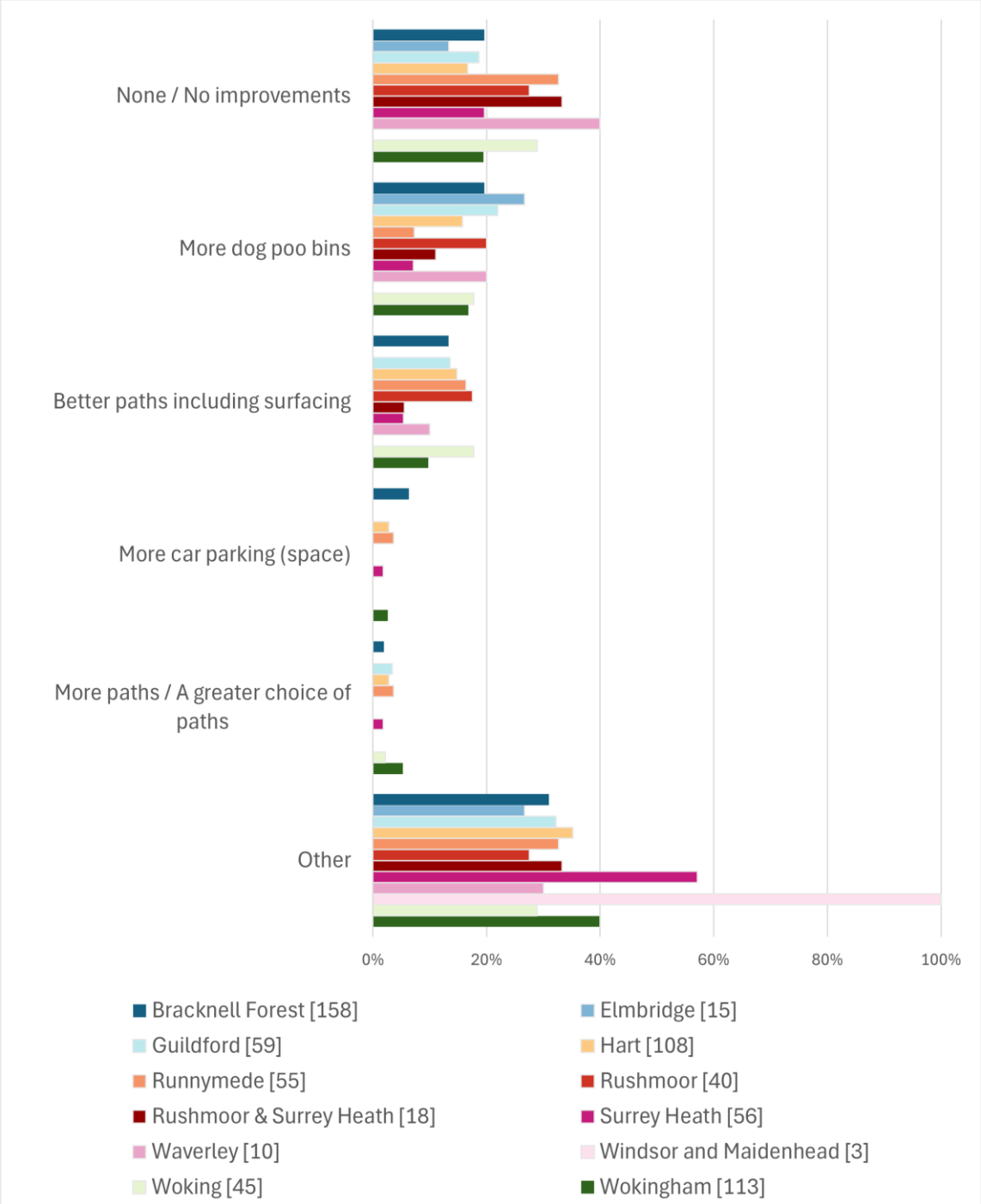


Figure 9: Most cited improvements by all interviewees compared by local authority [number of responses].

Site ratings (Q10-13)

3.31 Interviewees were asked to rate different aspects of the site where interviewed. The scores reflected the path infrastructure, parking, how 'good' the site was for dogs and an overall rating on a scale of 1 (very poor) to 10 (excellent).

3.32 Generally, responses were positive (see Figure 10), with most individuals scoring the sites at a 7, or above, for all aspects of the site (497 interviewees, 97%). Interviewees were particularly positive about the suitability of sites for dogs; 58% (261 interviewees) deemed the site excellent (score of 10), and a further 37% (167 interviewees), 95% overall, scored 7 or higher. Parking appeared to invoke a relatively low but more negative reactions compared to other aspects of the site, with 5% (17 interviewees) scoring below average (1-4). Similarly, the quality of paths was clearly not perceived to be good at some sites, with 5% (23 interviewees) scoring the sites below average.

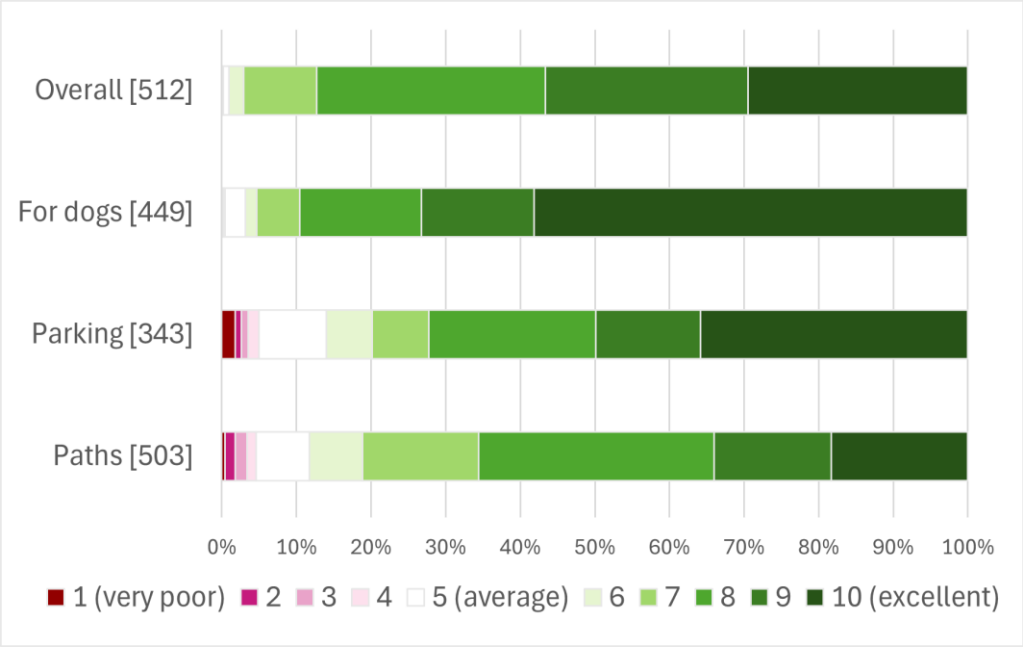


Figure 10: Combined site ratings given by interviewees.

Proportion of weekly visits (Q14)

3.33 Visitors were asked to estimate what percentage of their visits took place at the site where they were interviewed (see Figure 11).

3.34 Approximately 1 in 10 interviewees (55 interviewees, 11%) stated that all of their weekly visits for their given activity took place at the site at which they were interviewed. A further 26% (133 interviewees) stated that 75% or more of their visits occurred on site, and overall just over half of all interviewees (292 interviewees, 57%) stated that half of their weekly visits occurred on site.

3.35 This pattern was relatively similar across local authorities. In Hart the proportion of interviewees that stated all of their weekly visits for their given activity took place at the SANG was approximately double the value across all interviewees (21 interviewees, 26% compared to 55 interviewees, 11%). Similarly, interviewees in across some local authorities (except Guildford, 48%; Woking, 38%; Windsor and Maidenhead, 33%; and Rushmoor & Surrey Heath, 17%) stated that more than half of their weekly visits occur at the site at which they were interviewed. In Hart and Waverley, this figure increases to 70% (81 interviewees) and 70% (10 interviewees) respectively, the highest proportion across all authorities surveyed.

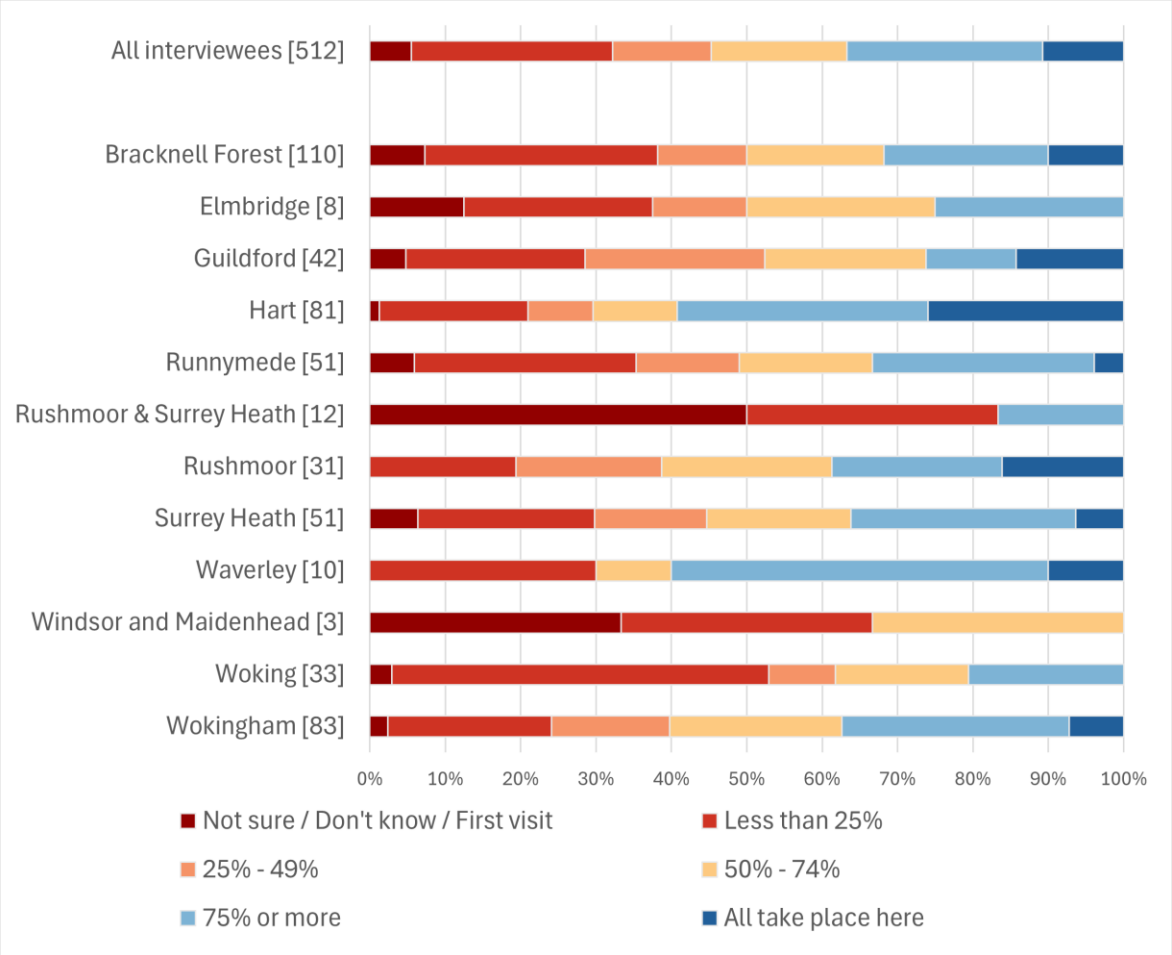


Figure 11: Proportion of weekly visits to the site at which they were interviewed, compared across all local authorities.

Alternative sites (Q15-17)

3.36 Visitors were asked to name up to three alternative sites they would also visit for their given main activity. In total, 291 interviewees gave a total of 540 responses and named 201 different alternatives. Table 6 shows the most commonly cited alternative sites (overall and the first choice).

3.37 Of all 540 responses given, 23% (126 responses) related to sites across the SPA, 31% (170 responses) related to other SANGs and the majority (244 responses, 45%) mentioned other locations, such as town centres, greenspaces and visitor attractions.

Table 6: Alternative sites names by interviewees. Shading indicates whether these sites are SPA (orange), SANG (blue) or other locations (no shading, colour remains as per the table).

Ranking	Sites overall [540]	First named site [291]
1	Swinley Forest (26, 2%)	Swinley Forest (12, 2%)
2	Virginia Water (20, 2%)	Local (10, 2%)
3	Yateley Common (15, 1%)	Horsell Common (9, 2%)
4	Horsell Common (14, 1%)	Horseshoe Lake (9, 2%)
5	Horseshoe Lake (14, 1%)	Yateley Common (6, 1%)
6	Lily Hill Park (13, 1%)	Southwood Woodland (6, 1%)
7	Simon's Wood (13, 1%)	Wildmoor Heath (6, 1%)
8	Local (12, 1%)	Frost Folly (6, 1%)
9	Southwood Woodland (12, 1%)	Virginia Water (5, 1%)
10	Wildmoor Heath (11, 1%)	Lily Hill Park (5, 1%)

Reasons that attract to other places (Q18)

3.38 Reasons that interviewees gave for visiting these alternatives are summarised in Figure 12. The most commonly cited reasons were for a variety of places to visit (124 responses, 12%) and being close to home (122 responses, 12%). Being good for the dog / the dog enjoys it was also cited by a further 8% (82 responses overall).

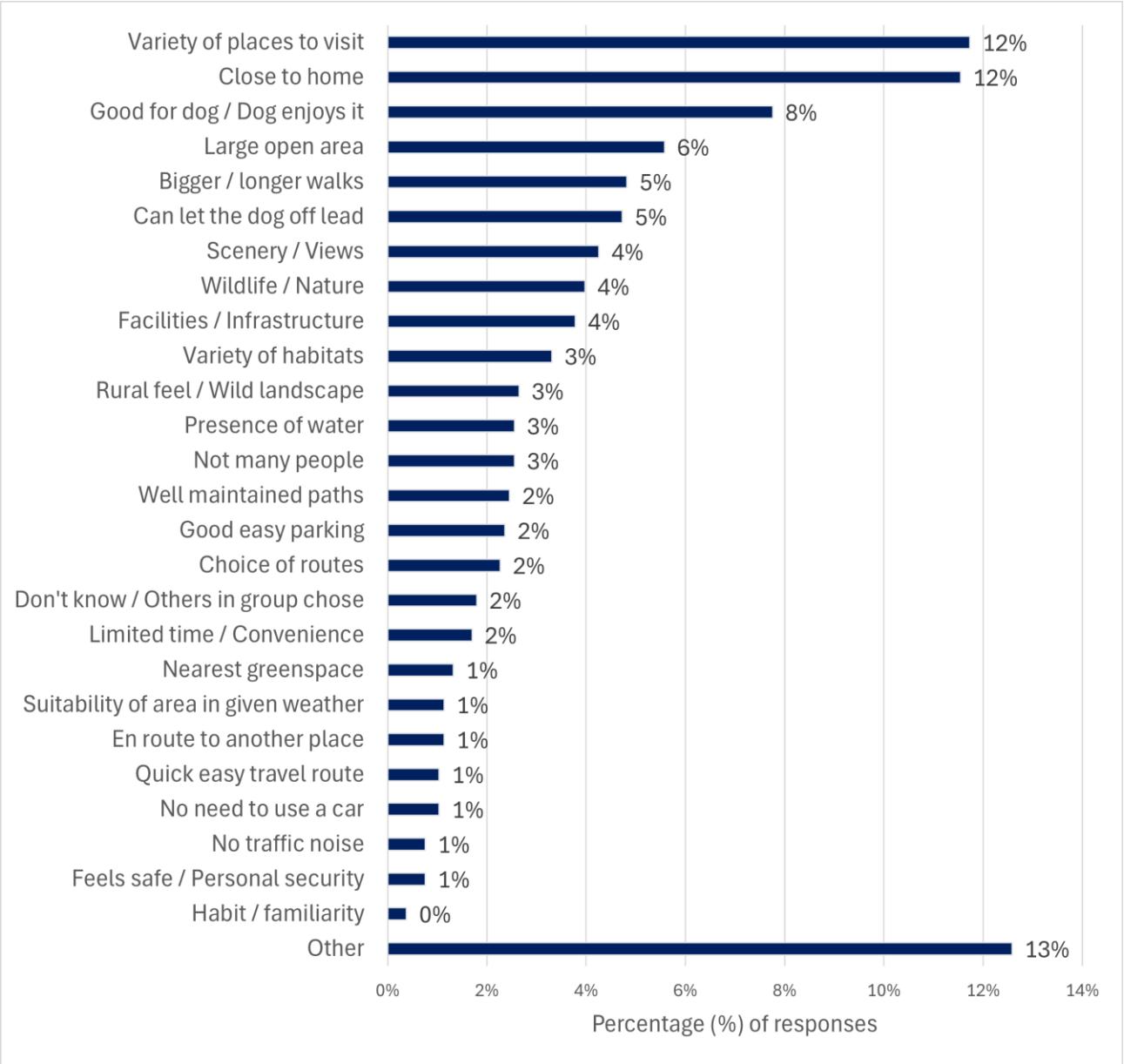


Figure 12: Factors that draw interviewees overall to alternative sites [n=1,056 responses].

First heard about the site (Q19)

3.39 When asked to consider where they had first heard about the SANG they were visiting, a third (165 interviewees, 34%) had heard via word of mouth, 26% (126 interviewees) said it was other forms of local knowledge and a further 26% (123 interviewees) stated that they had seen a sign for the SANG / driven past.

3.40 There was strong variation across local authorities in how interviewees had first become aware of the SANG, with signage/driving past a site much more important for sites in Elmbridge (56%, 5 interviewees) and Rushmoor & Surrey Heath (54%, 7).

3.41 There were also differences associated with the size of the site, for example, word of mouth was more common for interviewees at small sites (3%, 41 interviewees), while at large sites signage/driving past a site was more common (27%, 18 interviewees).

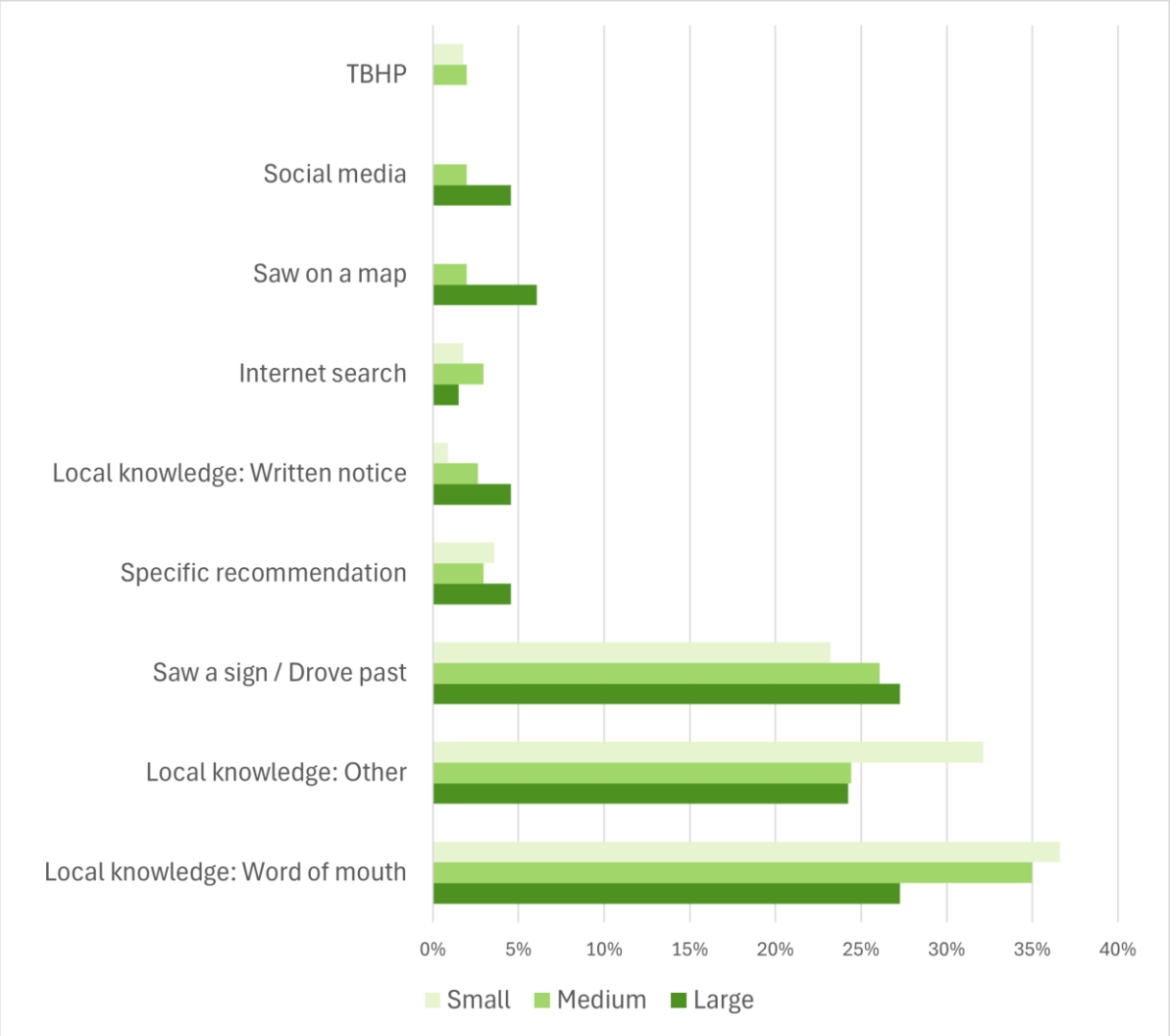


Figure 13: Source of awareness about SANG visited, by size of site.

Visitor origins (Q20-22)

3.42 96% of all interviewees provided a valid home postcode (494 interviewees of a possible 512). These locations are shown in Maps 3 and 4, with the exception of 4 interviewees which are outside the map area (and resided in Devon, Somerset, Sussex and Lancashire respectively).

3.43 The average straight-line distance from the survey point to home postcode was 3.8 km for the mean and 1.4 km for the median (see Table 7). Those that visited more frequently tended to live closer to the SANG. For example, those that visited more than once a day lived on average 0.5 km from the survey point (median) while those who visited less than once a month lived an average of 4.3 km from the survey point (median).

3.44 Q3, or the 75th percentile, indicates the distance within which most interviewees live. Overall, most postcodes are within 3.19 km of the SANG interview location. Interviewees who were dog walking (3.12 km) and on an outing with family (2.1 km) appear to be closer to the SANG at which they were interviewed. Interviewees frequenting smaller SANGs appear to live the closest compared to their larger counterparts (1.7 km).

Table 7: Summary of straight-line distance to site, from interviewees' home postcodes.

	Category	N	Mean (±1SE)	Min-Max	Median	Q3
	All interviewees	**494**	**3.79 (±0.8)**	**0.05 - 317.48**	**1.40**	**3.19**
Size	Large	67	4.49 (±2.01)	0.09 - 135.96	1.61	4.18
	Medium	276	3.41 (±0.7)	0.05 - 182.38	1.79	3.31
	Small	138	4.39 (±2.3)	0.06 - 317.48	0.72	1.87
Activity	Dog walking	404	2.91 (±0.48)	0.05 - 182.38	1.36	3.12
	Walking	58	2.52 (±0.47)	0.06 - 19.01	1.09	3.39
	Other	11	44 (±29.9)	1.1 - 317.5	2.80	12.90
	Bird / Wildlife watching	5	5.45 (±1.26)	2.75 - 9.45	5.40	8.12
	Outing with family	5	1.32 (±0.34)	0.48 - 2.10	1.17	2.10

Visit frequency	More than once per day	50	0.87 (±0.12)	0.09 - 4.33	0.54	1.22
	Daily	114	4.09 (±2.78)	0.05 - 317.48	0.59	1.44
	Most days	85	2.18 (±0.27)	0.13 - 14.11	1.40	3.07
	1 - 3 times a week	145	2.64 (±0.35)	0.09 - 46.22	1.67	3.28
	2 - 3 times a month	36	8.59 (±4.99)	0.05 - 182.38	2.90	4.78
	Once a month	22	4.36 (±1.38)	0.29 - 31.65	2.49	4.49
	Less than once a month	17	12.69 (±7.80)	0.16 - 135.96	4.33	9.02

3.45 All 512 provided their hometown/district in which they reside. A higher proportion were visiting from Wokingham (44 interviewees, 9%) compared to other named locations. All locations are named in the word cloud below, with size of town/area proportional to the number of mentions.

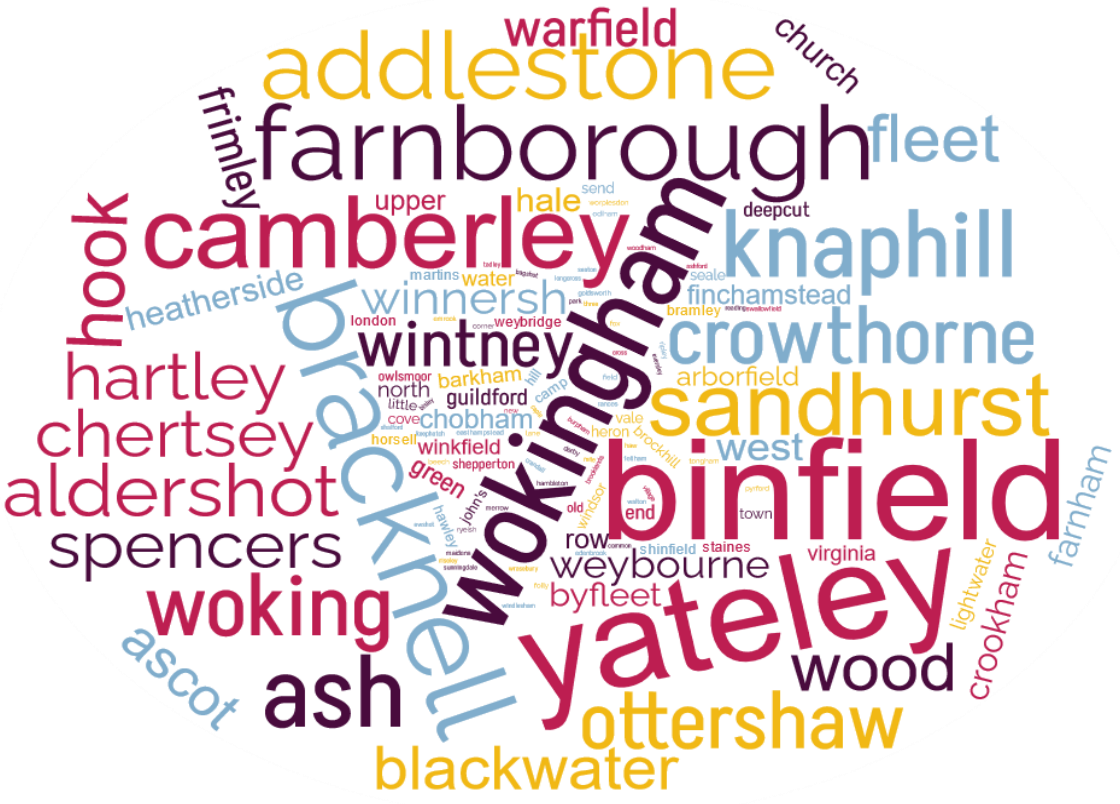
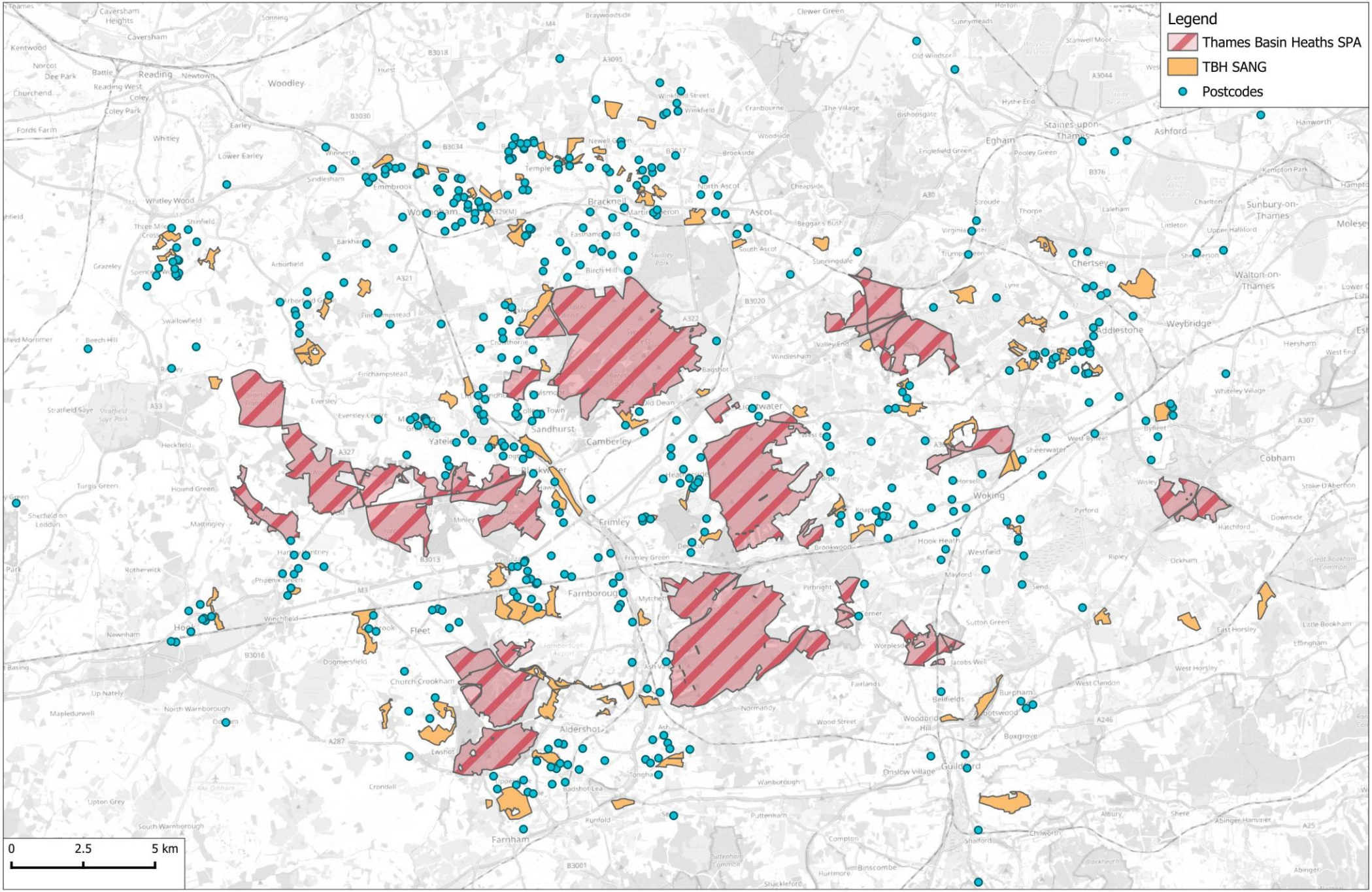
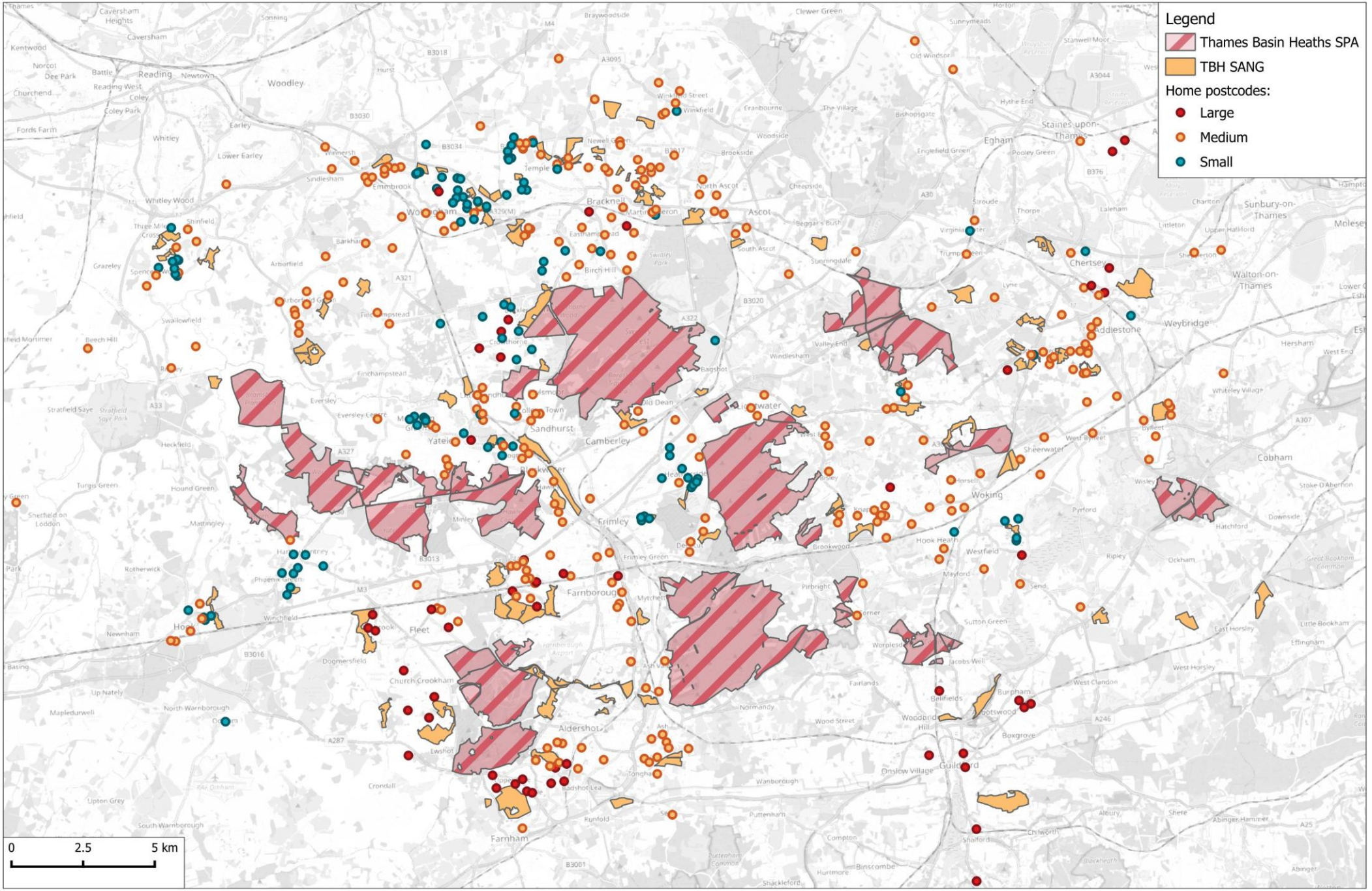


Figure 14: Wordcloud of named 'Hometowns' by interviewees. Made using: https://www.wordclouds.co.uk/

Map 3: Home postcodes of interviewees



Map 4: Home postcodes of interviewees, shown as size of SANG at which they were interviewed



Awareness of TBHP (Q23)

3.46 Approximately a fifth of all interviewees had heard of the Thames Basin Heaths Partnership (114 interviewees, 22%).

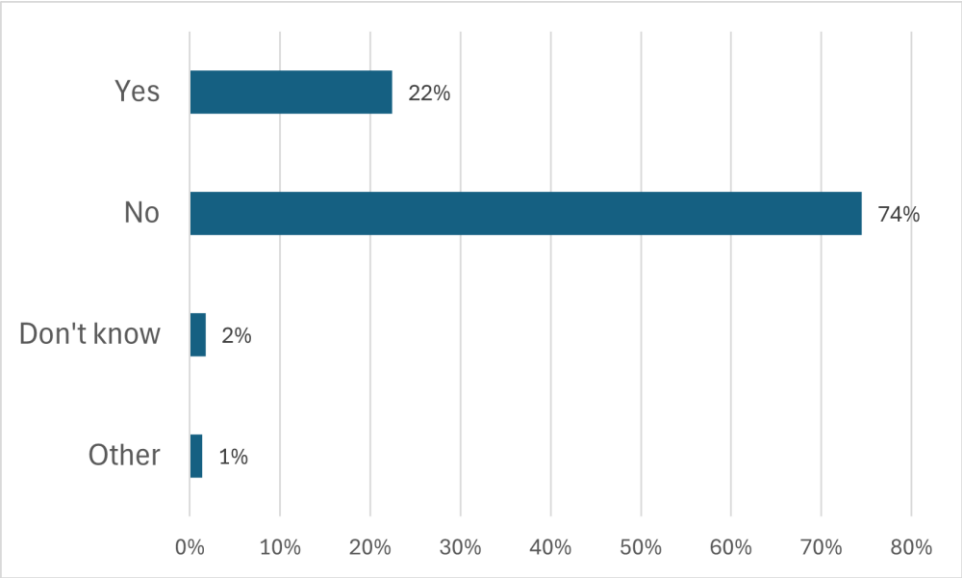


Figure 15: Awareness of Thames Basin Heaths Partnership in interviewees [n=512].

3.47 A slightly higher proportion had heard of the TBHP at medium sites (72 interviewees, 25%) compared to their larger (14 interviewees, 20% awareness) and smaller (25 interviewees, 18% awareness) counterparts.

4. Discussion

4.1 The level of use across TBH SANG sites appears to be consistent between the summer and winter, with the tally count data almost equal between the seasons.

4.2 Broadly, the interview data suggests that SANGs are primarily being used by visitors local to the area, such as by daily dog walkers (81% of interviewees) who are travelling a short distance to visit the site (half of all interviewees live within 1.5 km). However, there is some important variation between size of SANGs. For example, smaller sites are much more likely to attract daily dog walkers whereas larger SANGS (≥ 41 ha) appear to have visitors undertaking a more diverse range of activities (such as family outings, wildlife watching etc).

4.3 Interviewees were also clearly aware of other SANGs in their local area; with 31% of the alternative named other sites being SANGs. This compares to 17% of the alternative sites named as SANGs in the 2024 TBH SPA surveys, suggesting visitors to SANGs are perhaps more likely to use other SANGs than visitors to the SPA. However, awareness of the TBHP appears to be consistent between the SANGs and parts of the SPA with 22% of all interviewees being aware of the partnership.

4.4 A brief summary table of key metrics from the SANG visitor survey is presented in Table 8 alongside data from the SPA survey (Panter et al., 2024).

Table 8: Selected metrics from the survey. 'Home only' indicates the metric is extracted only for those on a day trip/short visit from home (from Q1).

Metric	Result on SPA	Result on SANGs	
Month/year	August '23	Summer '23	Winter '23
Number of survey points	30	72	76
Number of interviews	1,118	255	257
% of interviewees on a day trip/short visit from home	97%	-	-
% of interviewees with main activity of dog walking	74%	80%	83%
% of interviewees with main activity of walking	19%	12%	12%
% visiting daily	24%	54%	46%
% visiting all year round	76%	66%	77%
% arriving by car/van	74%	55%	61%
Median route length	2.9 km	-	-
% stating close to home as most important reason for site choice	30%	22%	17%
Median distance from home postcode to survey point	2.4 km	1.44 km	1.38 km
75th percentile distance from home postcode to survey point	4.6 km	2.91 km	3.28 km
Median distance from home postcode to survey point (home only)	2.3 km	-	-
75th percentile distance from home postcode to survey point (home only)	4.4 km	-	-

Limitations

4.5 The data collected from individual SANGs did not always align with the survey protocol or survey schedule. While such discrepancies are inevitable given the other duties and workloads of staff, there are some implications in terms of the interpretation of the results. Key limitations are:

- Surveys on individual SANGs were not always repeated on the same type of day (weekends vs weekdays), making it difficult to compare results over time. They need to follow a

protocol of weekday vs weekend and survey times. We understand the survey design calls for each site to be surveyed at a set time on a weekday/weekday. This allows a site to be tracked for changes over several years, which are not biased by different survey days/times. Current variability in survey dates and differences between surveying schedule and actual surveying is a concern.

- There were some discrepancies between the number of interviews recorded on the tally form and actual number of interviews. For example, there were 2 sites where no interviews were recorded, despite the tally form indicating otherwise.
- Site names recorded within the survey software were not always standardised, for example matching the names used in the the 'Greenspace on your doorstep' leaflet.
- Where some SANGs have been extended or the boundaries changed over the years, the SANG GIS layer has some overlap and duplication. This made it difficult to calculate the area of the SANG and attribute to a local authority.
- Analysis has categorised sites in a number of ways, however the use of local authorities, conducted to consider spatial distribution, may be confused by local authority ownership, management and funding. It is suggested that it may be more useful to consider spatial distribution by more simple geographic classification (i.e. central, north, south, east, west), separately from local authorities.
- The survey results provide a quick snapshot of use across the SANGs network, covering many sites. With just one hour of survey at each site per season and at different times at different sites, there is limited potential to drill down to individual sites. This is because use will vary through the day and at weekends compared to weekdays.

Recommendations

4.6 There is a need for a clear monitoring strategy that sets out the key questions and information that need to be addressed by monitoring. This will ensure that those collecting and using the data are clear as to what is collected, why and how it is intended to be used. The strategy will refer to the clear monitoring protocols and the monitoring strategy should be clear how data from different datasets (SANG visitor surveys, SPA visitor surveys, bird data, housing growth etc) should be combined and analysed.

4.7 In addition, we recommend that:

- There is a single standardised GIS layer for SANGs, with one name and polygon per SANG, the relevant local authority (either ownership or located within), the size and date established etc.
- Using site names that are consistent between the two would ensure interview responses are more accurately matched to their location.
- There is a cleaned and tidied SANG survey point spatial dataset that clearly captures the survey location and has data relating to the SANG (using standard names), what3words location, timing that surveys should be undertaken etc.
- The survey protocol and schedule for future surveys on SANGs is clear and adhered to, ensuring the data can be compared over time.

5. References

Burley, P. (2007). Report to the panel for the draft south east plan examination in public on the Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area and Natural England's Draft Delivery Plan. Planning Inspectorate. http://www.eipsoutheast.co.uk/downloads/documents/20070220094334.doc

Panter, C., Bishop, E., & Rush, E. (2024). Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area 2023 Visitor Survey (No. 767). Footprint Ecology / Natural England.

Thames Basin Heaths Joint Strategic Partnership Board. (2009). Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area Delivery Framework. http://www.southeast-ra.gov.uk/documents/sustainability/thames_basin_heaths/delivery_framework_march2009.pdf

Appendix 1: Survey questions

Questions were provided by Zoe Shorter of Natural England (pers. comm) for reference of during our analysis.

Visitor survey questions:
1. What is the main activity you are undertaking today?
2. How long have you been visiting this SANG?
3. How long have you spent/will you spend here today?
4. How frequently do you visit this site?
5. Which days of the week do you tend to visit this site?
6. Do you tend to visit this place more at a particular time of year for [given activity]?
7. What form of transport did you use to get here today?
8. Why did you choose to visit here, rather than another local site?
9. What if any improvements would you like to see on the site?
10. How would you rate the paths of this site, from 1 to 10? Where 1 is very poor and 10 is excellent.
11. How would you rate the parking at this site, from 1 to 10? Where 1 is very poor and 10 is excellent.
12. How would you rate this site for dogs, from 1 to 10? Where 1 is very poor and 10 is excellent.
13. How would you rate this site overall, from 1 to 10? Where 1 is very poor and 10 is excellent.
14. What proportion of your weekly visits for [given activity] take place here compared to other sites. Can you give a rough percentage?
15. Which one location would you have visited today if you could not visit here?
16. Could you name a second site which you also visit for your current activity?
17. Could you name a third site which you also visit for your current activity?
18. What factors draw you to these other places?
19. How did you first find out about the site?
20. What is your full home postcode?
21. What is the name of the town or village where you live?
22. Approximately how many years have you lived there?
23. Had you heard of the Thames Basin Heaths Partnership before?

In addition to the above questions, data was collected on the date & time of the survey, the gender of the respondent, the number of people per group and the number of dogs per group.

Appendix 2: Summary of survey points

Summary of survey points by season and size:

ID	SANG	Summer Surveys	Winter Surveys	Approx. Size
1	Allens Field	1	2	Small
2	Ambarrow Court and Hill	4	4	Medium
3	Ash Green Meadows	5	6	Medium
4	Bassett's Mead CP	2	4	Small
6	Blue Mountain	4		Medium
7	Bramshot Farm CP	4	5	Medium
8	Broadmoor Farm Meadow	3	1	Small
9	Brooklands Community Park	3	5	Medium
10	Brookwood CP	8	6	Medium
11	Buckhurst Meadow	2	3	Medium
12	Bucklers Forest	6	5	Large
13	Cabbage Hill	5	6	Medium
14	Chantry Wood	3	6	Large
15	Chertsey Common (Longcross)	4	8	Medium
16	Chertsey Meads	2	4	Large
17	Chobham Place Woods	1	2	Medium
18	Chobham Water Meadows	3	4	Medium
19	Clare's Green Field	1	3	Small
20	Diamond Ridge Woods	1	2	Medium
21	Earlswood Park (Notcutts)	2	3	Small
22	Edenbrook CP	2	2	Large
24	Eldridge CP	3	4	Small
25	Englemere Pond	1	6	Medium
26	Ether Hill/Queenswood		5	Small
27	Farnham Park	6	4	Large
28	Finchwood Park	2	2	Medium
29	Five Acre Field	2	2	Small
30	Franklands Park (Strawberry Fields)	2	5	Medium
31	Frimley Fuel Allotments	4	5	Small
32	Frost Folly	8	6	Medium
33	Great Hollands Wood	3	1	Small
34	Hare Hill	5	4	Medium
35	Hartland CP	6	3	Medium

ID	SANG	Summer Surveys	Winter Surveys	Approx. Size
36	Hawley Farm	2	5	Medium
37	Hawley Meadows and Blackwater Park	10	2	Medium
38	Hazebrouck Meadows	1	2	Medium
39	Heather Farm	6	3	Medium
40	Homewood Park	4	1	Medium
41	Horseshoe Lake	3	2	Medium
42	Horsley Meadows		1	Medium
43	Keephatch Meadows	3	5	Small
44	Keephatch Woods	4	4	Small
45	Kentwood Meadow	4	3	Small
46	Lakeside NR	2	2	Medium
47	Langley Mead	4	4	Medium
48	Lark's Hill (Cut Countryside Corner)	4	1	Medium
49	Lily Hill Park (Longhill Park Group)	4	5	Medium
50	Little Heath Meadow		1	Small
52	Mindenhurst	3	3	Medium
53	Moulsham Meadows at Forest Chase	5	3	Small
54	Naishes Wood at Crookham Park	4	6	Large
55	Oakham Woods		2	Small
56	Old Forest Road Meadows	5	8	Medium
57	Peacock Meadows and Big Wood	6	2	Medium
58	Piglittle Field	4	1	Small
59	Pope's Meadow	3	3	Small
60	QEII Fields	5	4	Small
61	Riverside NR	4	3	Large
62	Rook's Nest Wood	3	2	Medium
63	Rowhill NR	3	2	Medium
64	Runfold Ridge	5	5	Medium
65	Shepherd Meadows	4	4	Medium
66	Southwood CP	6	6	Large
67	Southwood Woodland	6	2	Medium
68	St Ann's Hill	2	3	Medium
69	St Catherine's Road	2	2	Small
70	Swan Lake Park	3	4	Small
71	Timber Hill and Ottershaw Chase	1	1	Medium
72	Wellesley Water Meadow	1	3	Medium
73	Wellesley Woodlands	2	4	Medium

ID	SANG	Summer Surveys	Winter Surveys	Approx. Size
74	White Rose Lane NR	4	2	Small
75	Whitewater Meadows	3	5	Medium
76	Windlemere	6	3	Medium
77	Windmill Meadows	4	2	Medium
78	Woodham Common	2	3	Medium

Summary of interviews conducted on weekend/weekday:

ID	SANG	Weekday	Weekend	Total
1	Allens Field	3	0	3
2	Ambarrow Court and Hill	4	4	8
3	Ash Green Meadows	11	0	11
4	Bassett's Mead CP	6	0	6
5	Bisley Common*	-	-	-
6	Blue Mountain	0	4	4
7	Bramshot Farm CP	9	0	9
8	Broadmoor Farm Meadow	1	3	4
9	Brooklands Community Park	0	8	8
10	Brookwood CP	6	8	14
11	Buckhurst Meadow	5	0	5
12	Bucklers Forest	11	0	11
13	Cabbage Hill	6	5	11
14	Chantry Wood	9	0	9
15	Chertsey Common (Longcross)	4	8	12
16	Chertsey Meads	2	4	6
17	Chobham Place Woods	2	1	3
18	Chobham Water Meadows	7	0	7
19	Clare's Green Field	3	1	4
20	Diamond Ridge Woods	1	2	3
21	Earlswood Park (Notcutts)	5	0	5
22	Edenbrook CP	4	0	4
23	Effingham Common*	-	-	-
24	Eldridge CP	7	0	7
25	Englemere Pond	7	0	7
26	Ether Hill/Queenswood	5	0	5
27	Farnham Park	0	10	10

ID	SANG	Weekday	Weekend	Total
28	Finchwood Park	2	2	4
29	Five Acre Field	2	2	4
30	Franklands Park (Strawberry Fields)	0	7	7
31	Frimley Fuel Allotments	9	0	9
32	Frost Folly	6	8	14
33	Great Hollands Wood	4	0	4
34	Hare Hill	9	0	9
35	Hartland CP	3	6	9
36	Hawley Farm	2	5	7
37	Hawley Meadows and Blackwater Park	2	10	12
38	Hazebrouck Meadows	3	0	3
39	Heather Farm	9	0	9
40	Homewood Park	5	0	5
41	Horseshoe Lake	5	0	5
42	Horsley Meadows	1	0	1
43	Keephatch Meadows	8	0	8
44	Keephatch Woods	8	0	8
45	Kentwood Meadow	0	7	7
46	Lakeside NR	4	0	4
47	Langley Mead	4	4	8
48	Lark's Hill (Cut Countryside Corner)	5	0	5
49	Lily Hill Park (Longhill Park Group)	9	0	9
50	Little Heath Meadow	1	0	1
51	May's Farm Meadows	-	-	-
52	Mindenhurst	6	0	6
53	Moulsham Meadows at Forest Chase	8	0	8
54	Naishes Wood at Crookham Park	10	0	10
55	Oakham Woods	2	0	2
56	Old Forest Road Meadows	13	0	13
57	Peacock Meadows and Big Wood	0	8	8
58	Piglittle Field	5	0	5
59	Pope's Meadow	3	3	6
60	QEII Fields	4	5	9
61	Riverside NR	7	0	7
62	Rook's Nest Wood	5	0	5
63	Rowhill NR	2	3	5
64	Runfold Ridge	10	0	10
65	Shepherd Meadows	8	0	8

ID	SANG	Weekday	Weekend	Total
66	Southwood CP	12	0	12
67	Southwood Woodland	8	0	8
68	St Ann's Hill	5	0	5
69	St Catherine's Road	4	0	4
70	Swan Lake Park	3	4	7
71	Timber Hill and Ottershaw Chase	1	1	2
72	Wellesley Water Meadow	1	3	4
73	Wellesley Woodlands	6	0	6
74	White Rose Lane NR	2	4	6
75	Whitewater Meadows	8	0	8
76	Windlemere	0	9	9
77	Windmill Meadows	6	0	6
78	Woodham Common	5	0	5

*Note: No interview data for these sites, despite tally data suggesting that interviews were conducted.