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Thames Basin Heaths SANGs Winter Visitor Survey Analysis 2025

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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) 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 85 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 winter 2024/25.

Key findings included:

Tally counts

- A total of 935 people were recorded using SANGs during the survey period.
- SANGs appeared to be busier on weekends, with 13.3 people recorded per hour compared to 9.9 people per hour on a weekday.
- Larger SANGs (≥41ha) appeared to be busier, with visitor counts three times those taken at smaller SANGs (less than 10 ha).

Interview data

- A total of 252 visitor interviews were conducted over the survey period, across 78 SANGs.
- The main activity of interviewees was dog walking (82%, 207 interviewees).
- Half of all interviewees had been visiting the SANG at which they were interviewed for between 1 and 5 years (50%, 126 interviewees).
- Most interviewees were spending less than an hour on site (77%, 193 interviewees).
- A typical visitor makes on average 219 visits per year to the SANG at which they were interviewed, with the majority visiting at least once a week (86%, 216 interviewees).
- All interviewees arrived by either car/van (61%, 153 interviewees) or on foot (39%, 99 interviewees).
- Being 'close to home' was the most cited reason given by interviewees for choosing to visit the SANG at which they were interviewed (46%, 116 interviewees).
- When asked about SANG improvements, 23% said that no improvements were needed (57 interviewees), however, 20% (69 interviewees) suggested 'better parking' was needed and 14% (47 interviewees) suggested the provision of more dog poo bins.
- When asked to rate different aspects of the site, overall the feedback was positive, with 98% (246 interviewees) scoring the site a 7 out of 10 or higher.

- Approximately 57% (143 interviewees) suggested that half of their weekly visits for their given activity take place at the SANG at which they were interviewed.
- A total of 206 alternative sites were named: 27% were within the TBH SPA and 32% related to other SANGs.
- Most interviewees had heard about the SANG they visited by either word of mouth (28%, 73 interviewees) or had driven past/saw a sign (27%, 70 interviewees).
- The median distance between an interviewee's home postcode and the SANG they visited was 1.24 km, however those that visit more frequently lived closer (median distance of approximately 0.6 km from home for those visiting daily).
- A quarter of all interviewees had heard of the Thames Basin Heaths Partnership (25%, 63 interviewees).

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. We use this report to highlight clear recommendations for future SANG survey efforts and discuss the potential for a long-term review and monitoring strategy.

Contents

Summary ii
Contents 1
Acknowledgements 2
1. Introduction 3
The Thames Basin Heaths SPA 3
TBH SPA Area Delivery Framework and SAMM 4
SANGs 5
2. Methods 10
Survey protocol 10
Survey coverage 10
3. Results 13
Tally counts 13
Visitor interview results 13
Main activity (Q1) 14
Visit patterns (Q2-3) 16
Visit frequency (Q4-6) 18
Transport (Q7) 21
Site choice (Q8) 21
Site improvements (Q9) 26
Site ratings (Q10-13) 29
Proportion of weekly visits (Q14) 30
Alternative sites (Q15-17) 31
Reasons that attract to other places (Q18) 32
First heard about the site (Q19) 33
Visitor origins (Q20-22) 34
Awareness of TBHP (Q23) 39
4. Discussion 40
Interpreting Long-Term Trends in SANG Use 40
Key findings on long-term changes at SANGs in the TBH area: 40
Recommendations 43
5. References 45
Appendix 1: Survey questions 46
Appendix 2: Summary of survey points 47

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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 Special Protection Area (TBH 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 TBH 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 SPA 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, based on 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 TBH 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 TBH SPA boundary within which there is a premise of no net development.
- A zone of influence from 400m to 5 km from the TBH 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 TBH 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.

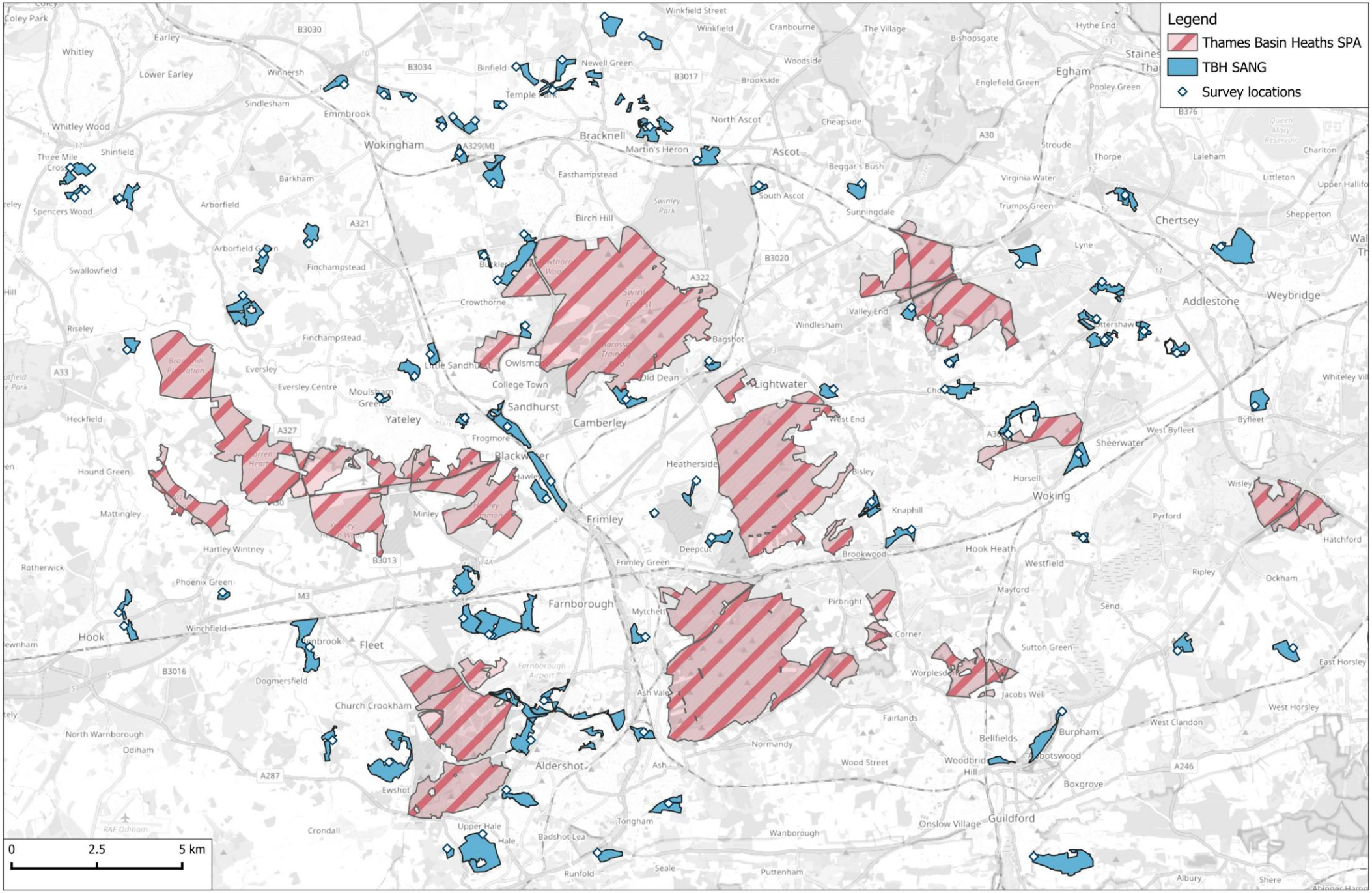
1.14 While also established in other areas, the approach has become strongly linked to the Thames Basin Heaths and there are now over 80 SANGs sites established, as shown in Map 1. Individual SANGs may be in close proximity to new development but may also occur more strategically around the SPA. It is recognised that a SANG may not fully prevent all visits by new residents to the European site but is 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, may 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 volumes of access on the SANGs and understand visitor patterns and drivers. This series of surveys follows on from previous SANG surveys conducted over summer 2023 and winter 2023/24, and visitor survey

work across the TBH SPA in 2023. This report analyses the SANG visitor survey data from 85 SANGs conducted by the SAMM team during winter 2024/25 as part of their ongoing monitoring. This report will also compare the latest SANG survey results to previous years, where possible.

Map 1: Overview of Thames Basin Heaths SPA and SANGs, with approximate survey locations.



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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. The winter survey protocol aims to survey at the same time and 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, 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 warden 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 (i.e. the number of people passing the surveyor), were conducted at a total of 85 SANGs during Winter 2024/25. The interview data (responses and tally count) were collated by the TBHP and provided to us, alongside precise survey points using what3words[2] (see Map 1).

2.4 We present the results as a combined dataset, as well as by categories, such as site size or its location (i.e. local authority). Sites were assigned to local authorities in GIS, based on the location of each survey point. These were subsequently checked by the TBHP team and any corrections were made (e.g. Hawley Meadows and Blackwater

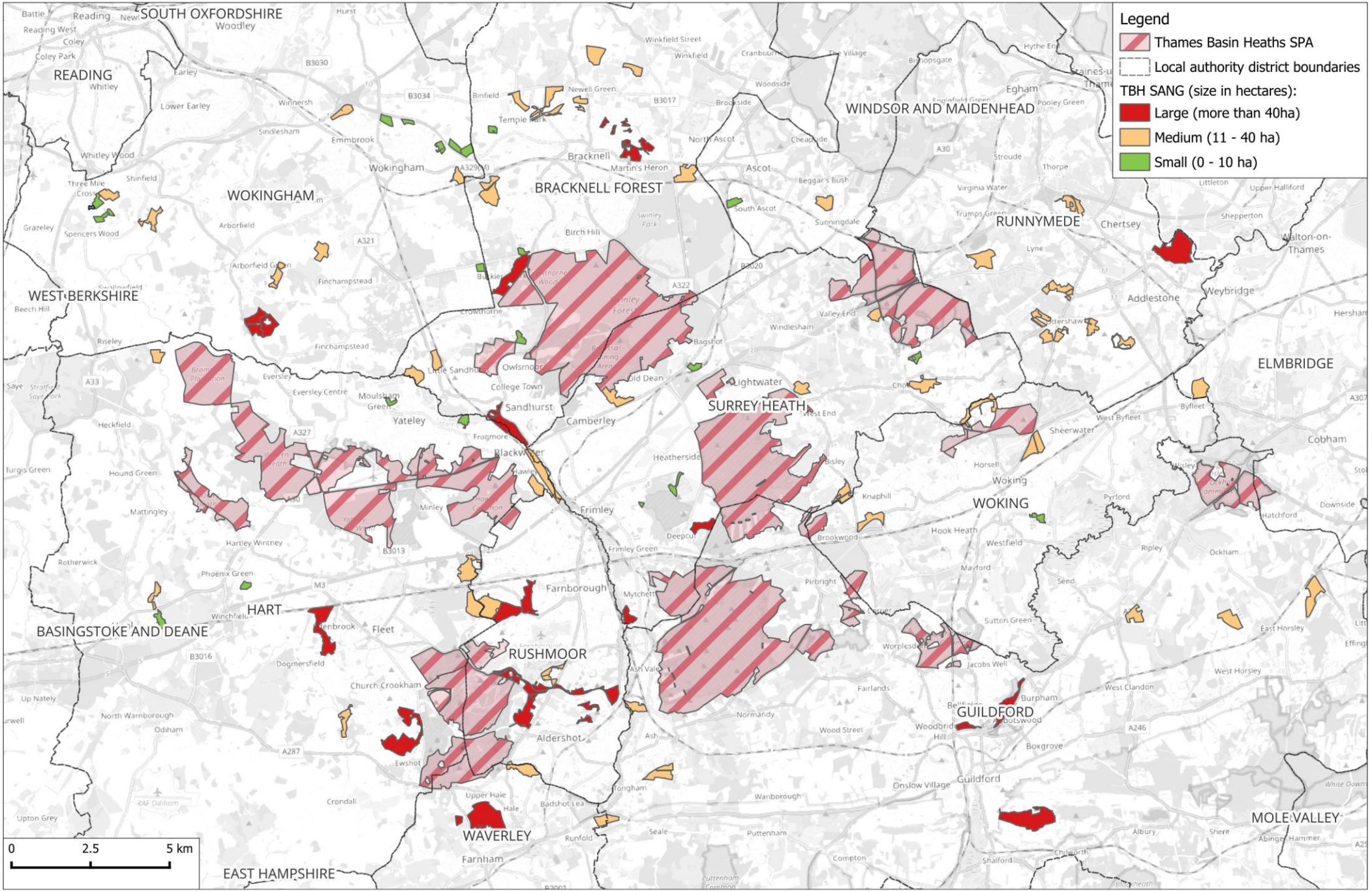
[2] What3words location changed to grid refences and mapped in QGIS. Note that five 'what3words' locations were incorrectly labelled in the SANG survey tracker, and therefore the locations of these are approximate and based on the description provided.

Park SANG is jointly managed by Rushmoor & Surrey Heath and is therefore assigned as such).

2.5 Using the survey protocol, we understand that 57 sites were due to be surveyed on a weekday, and a further 28 were to be surveyed on a weekend. Where possible, some comparisons have been made between weekday and weekend visitor use.

2.6 A summary of the survey scheduling, and the assigned categories (e.g. **size:** Small (0-10 ha); Medium (11-40 ha) and Large (more than 40 ha), **local authority** and **weekday/weekend**) is included in Appendix 2.

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



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3. Results

Tally counts

3.1 Across all 85 SANGs surveyed, a total of 935 people were tallied visiting during the survey period. This is approximately 11 people per hour, with Windlemere (48 people per hour) and Farnham Park (43 people per hour) the busiest locations and May's Farm Meadows and Effingham Common (both 0 people per hour visiting) the quietest locations at the time of the surveys.

3.2 Table 1 summarises the tally counts, expressed as people per hour, by size and by weekday/weekend visitor use. Large sites (≥ 41 ha) were approximately three times busier than smaller sites (less than 10 ha), and survey periods at weekends were busier than weekdays.

Table 1: The number of people per hour counted in tally counts for SANGs, compared by the size of the site.

SANG size	Number of sites	People per hour	Weekday	Weekend
Large (≥ 41 ha)	12	18.5	12.7	26.6
Medium (11- 40 ha)	50	11.5	11.1	12.4
Small (0 – 10 ha)	23	6.0	5.7	6.8
Total	**85**	**11.0**	**9.9**	**13.3**

Visitor interview results

3.3 A total of 252 visitor interviews were conducted over the survey period. An average of three interviews were conducted at each SANG, ranging from 0 at Effingham Common and May's Farm Meadows to a maximum of 10 at Frost Folly. Most interviews were conducted at medium sized SANGs (162 interviews), compared to small (49 interviews) and large (49 interviews) SANGs.

3.4 The number of SANGs surveyed per local authority is summarised in Table 2.

Table 22: 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	62
Elmbridge	1	2
Guildford	9	22
Hart	12	38
Runnymede	8	23
Rushmoor	5	17
Rushmoor & Surrey Heath	1	2
Surrey Heath	11	26
Waverley	2	6
Windsor and Maidenhead	1	3
Woking	4	9
Wokingham	16	42
Total	**85**	**252**

Main activity (Q1)

3.5 The main activity recorded by SANG users was dog walking (82%, 207 interviewees). A further 11% (27 interviewees) stated that they were walking in the SANGs, and the remaining interviewees (7%, 18 interviewees) were undertaking other activities on site (see Figure 1).

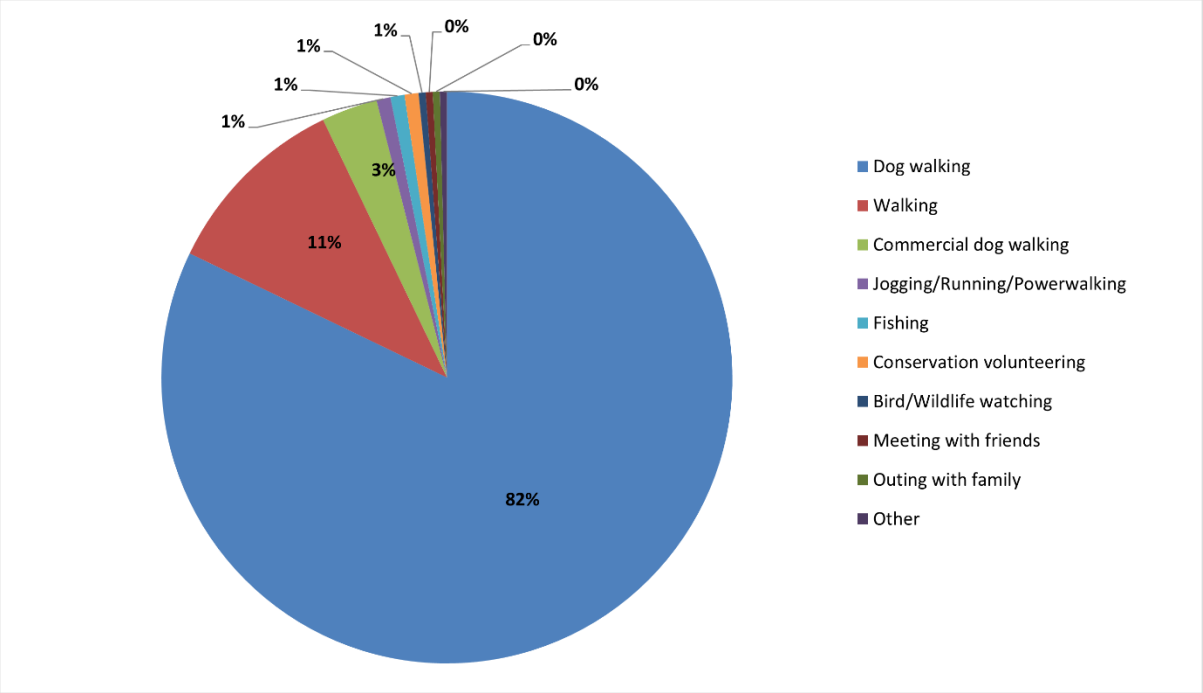


Figure 1: Main activity recorded by interviewees across all sites [n=252].

3.6 SANG size did not appear to affect the main activities undertaken on site (see Table 3**Error! Reference source not found.**). Consistent with the results overall, dog walking was the most common activity recorded at each SANG when compared by size, however, was slightly more common at medium sites (88%, 142 interviewees). Commercial dog walking, one of the other activities undertaken on site, was most recorded at small SANGs with 5 of the 8 interviewees occurring at small sites (12%).

Table 3: Summary of main activity given by interviewees by SANG size [n=252].

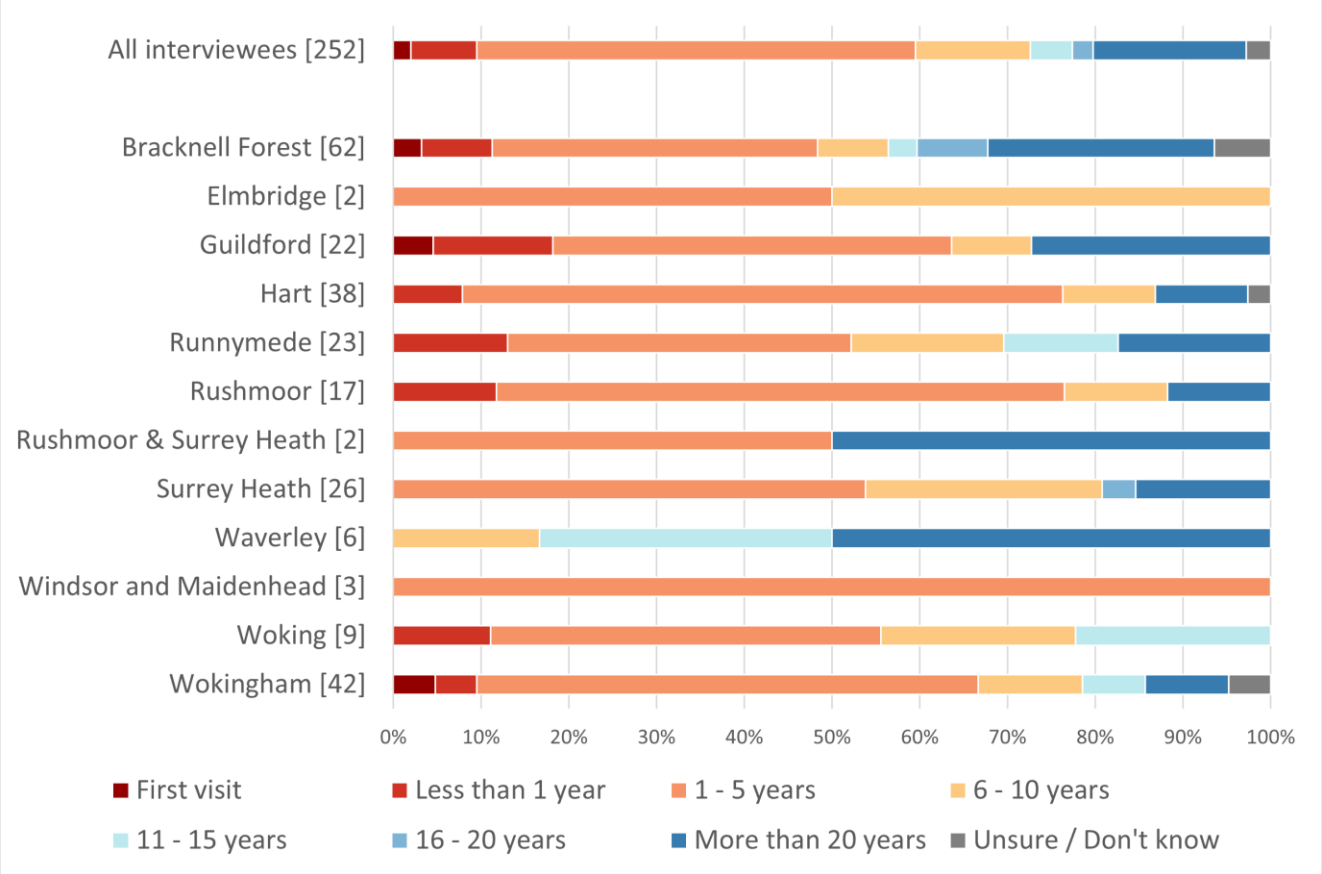
SANG size [number of sites]	Dog walking	Walking	All other activities	Total
Large [11]	35 (71%)	9 (18%)	5 (10%)	49 (19%)
Medium [48]	142 (88%)	13 (8%)	7 (4%)	162 (64%)
Small [19]	30 (73%)	5 (12%)	6 (15%)	41 (16%)
All interviewees [78]	**207 (82%)**	**27 (11%)**	**18 (7%)**	**252 (100%)**

3.7 Main activities undertaken at SANGs appeared to be similar on a weekday compared to a weekend, however note that approximately

two-thirds of sites were surveyed on a weekday compared to a third on a weekend day, therefore weekend activities may not be proportionally represented.

Visit patterns (Q2-3)

When asked to consider how long they had been visiting the site, half of all interviewees had been visiting for between 1-5 years (50%, 126 interviewees). A further 17% had been visiting for more than 20 years (44 interviewees) and 13% (33 interviewees) stated they have been visiting between 6 and 10 years (see Figure 2



3.8 Figure 2).

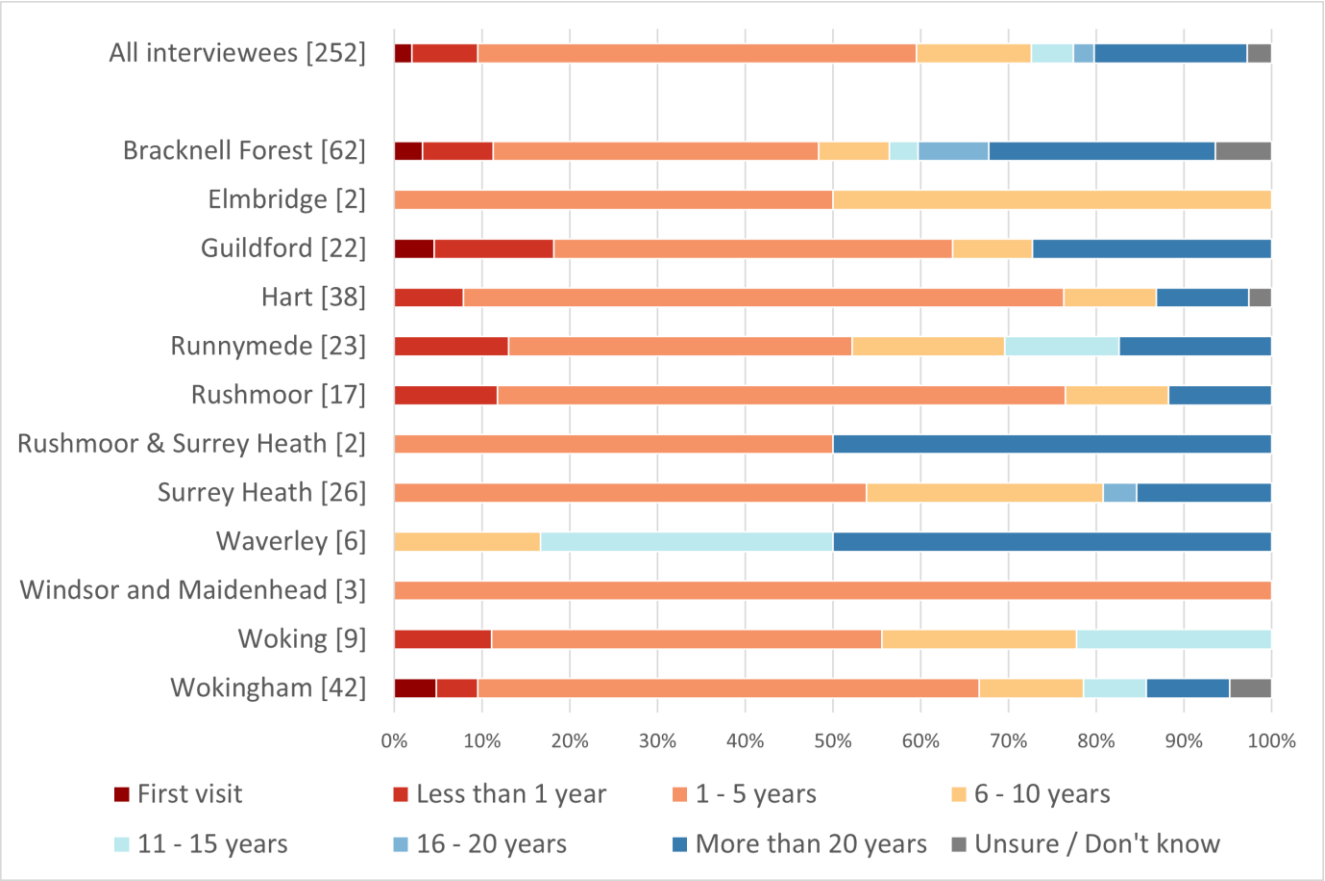


Figure 2: Repeat visits to the site, number of years visiting compared by local authority [number of interviewees].

3.9 Across all local authorities, most interviewees had been visiting for 1-5 years, with four authorities reporting higher than overall proportions of interviewees visiting for this time (Windsor and Maidenhead 100%, 3 interviewees; Hart 68%, 38 interviewees; Rushmoor 65%, 17 interviewees and; Wokingham 57%, 42 interviewees). The number of interviewees visiting for over 5 years varied across local authorities, notably in Waverley where all interviewees had been visiting for more than 5 years, and half of all interviewees had been visiting for more than 20 years (50%, 3 interviewees).

3.10 Most interviewees (77%, 193 interviewees) tend to spend less than one hour visiting the SANG at which they were interviewed (see Figure 3). This was typical of small and medium sized SANGs, however at large SANGs interviewees were likely to spend longer on site, with 39% (19

interviewees) stating that they spend between 1 and 2 hours visiting and a further 6% spend over 2 hours (3 interviewees).

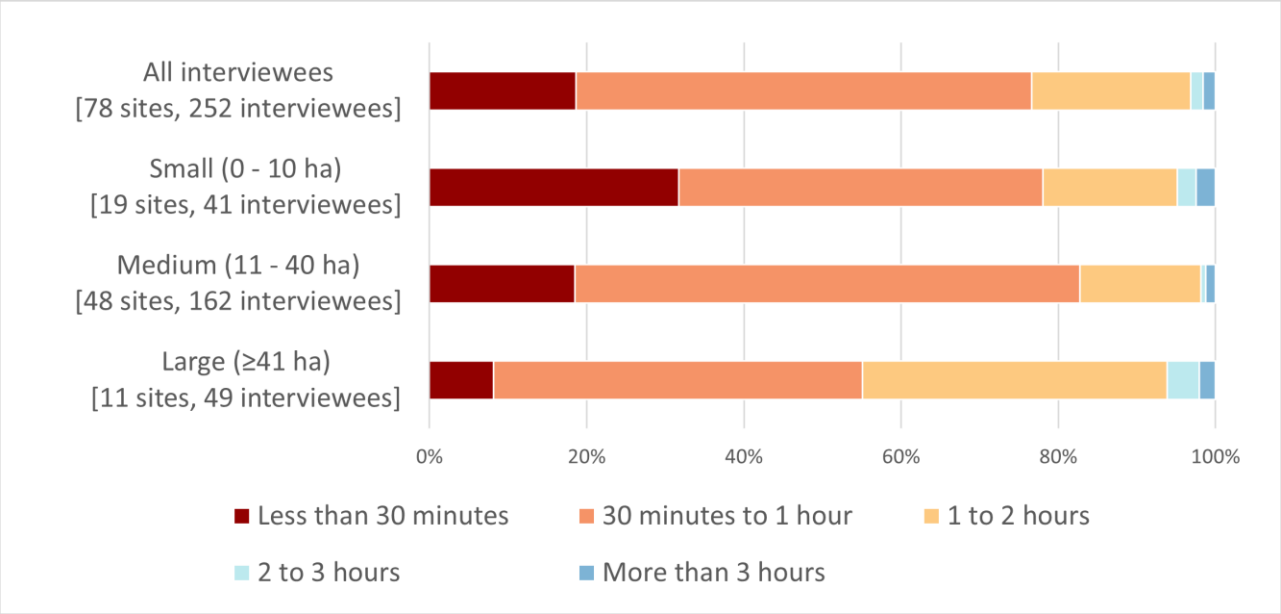


Figure 3: Visit duration of interviewees by size [n=252].

3.11 Visit duration was largely unaffected by day of the week, however, visitors were more likely to spend longer on site at the weekend (28% visiting for over an hour, 22 interviewees) compared to a weekday (21%, 37 interviewees).

Visit frequency (Q4-6)

3.12 Approximately a third of all interviewees (35%, 87 interviewees) visit a SANG at least once a day and the majority will visit at least once a week (86%, 216 interviewees).

3.13 An estimation based on these categories[3] suggests that a typical visitor will make approximately 219 visits per year. This level was observed across most local authorities, with half showing visits averaging over 200 per year.

[3] 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.

3.14 Visit frequency appears to decrease as SANG size increases, with interviewees visiting smaller SANGs more often (see Figure 4). At small SANGs, 90% (37 interviewees) visit at least once a week compared to 86% (140 interviewees) at medium SANGs and 80% (27 interviewees) at large SANGs who said the same.

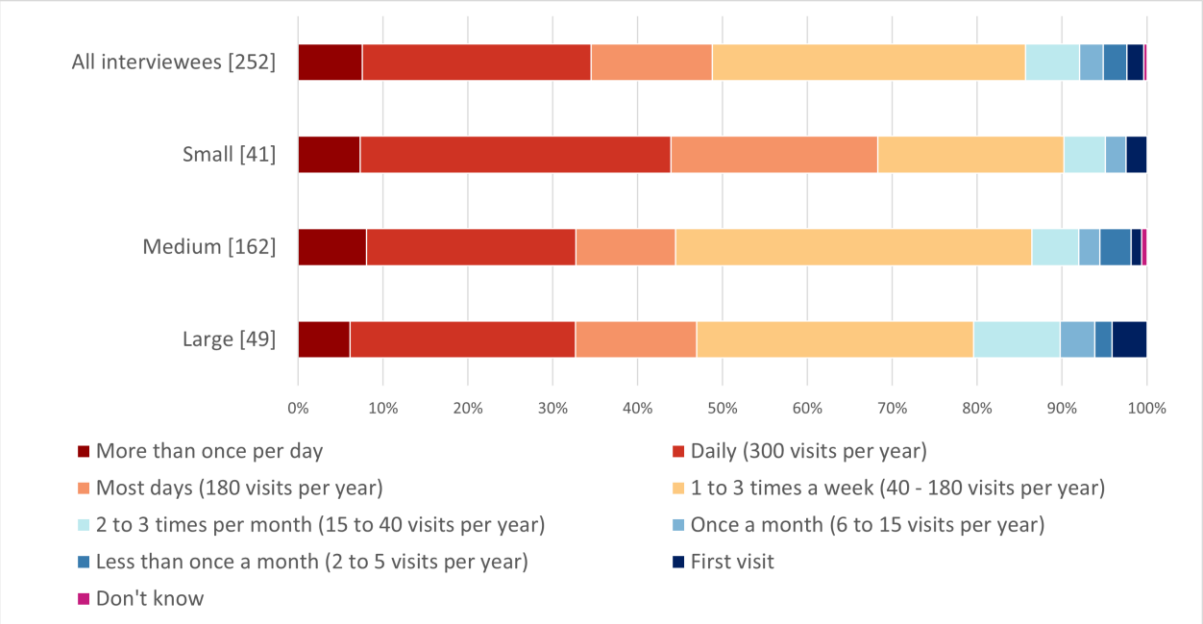


Figure 4: Frequency of visits, compared across SANG size [number of interviewees].

3.15 Interviewees were asked to consider which days of the week they visited a SANG and most stated that they visit equally whether a weekday or a weekend (70%, 177 interviewees). For those that did show a preference, more than half stated that they were more likely to visit on a weekday (19% overall, 48 interviewees).

3.16 There was little variation across local authorities (), with the majority of interviewees suggesting equal usage on both weekdays and weekends, with the exception of Woking, where weekdays were preferred (44%, 4 interviewees).

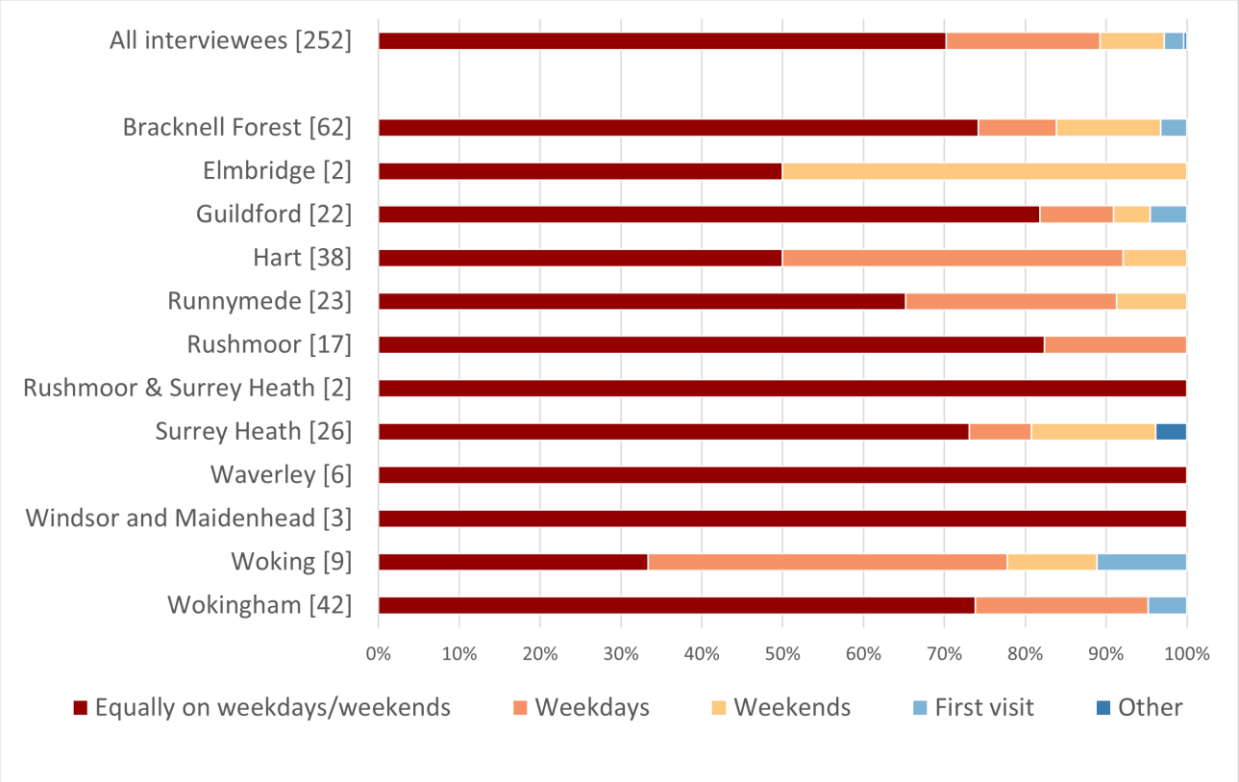


Figure 5: Proportion of weekday/weekend visits by interviewees, across each local authority [number of interviewees].

3.17 Across all SANG size groups, most interviewees indicated that they visited equally at weekdays and weekends, especially at small SANGs (81%, 33 interviewees). Interviewees visiting medium SANGs were more likely to show a preference, with 22% (36 interviewees) more likely to visit at a weekend.

3.18 Interviewees were asked to consider whether they visit at a particular time of year. Over three-quarters (82%, 206 interviewees) stated that they visit equally all year, however of those that showed a preference, 10% (25 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 (266 total responses).

Transport (Q7)

3.19 All interviewees arrived on site either by car or van (61%, 153 interviewees) or on foot (39%, 99 interviewees).

3.20 This was the case across almost all local authorities (Table 4), 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 44: Summary of main form of transport to the site. Proportion of interviewees is compared across local authority, with total interviewees included for each [n].

	Car or van	On foot
All interviewees [252]	**153 (61%)**	**99 (39%)**
Bracknell Forest [62]	46 (74%)	16 (26%)
Elmbridge [2]	2 (100%)	0 (0%)
Guildford [22]	13 (59%)	9 (41%)
Hart [38]	27 (71%)	11 (29%)
Runnymede [23]	15 (65%)	8 (35%)
Rushmoor [17]	14 (82%)	3 (18%)
Rushmoor & Surrey Heath [2]	1 (50%)	1 (50%)
Surrey Heath [26]	12 (46%)	14 (54%)
Waverley [6]	0 (0%)	6 (100%)
Windsor and Maidenhead [3]	1 (33%)	2 (67%)
Woking [9]	7 (78%)	2 (22%)
Wokingham [42]	15 (36%)	27 (64%)

3.21 When compared by SANG size, large and medium sized SANGs were consistent with the overall preference to travel to site by car or van, however, at small sites interviewees were more likely to arrive on foot (61%, 25 interviewees).

Site choice (Q8)

3.22 Interviewees were able to cite multiple reasons for choosing to visit the interview location rather than another local site. A total of 571

reasons were provided, with an interviewee providing on average 2.3 responses.

3.23 'Close to home' was the most cited reason by interviewees for choosing to visit the SANG at which they were interviewed (46%, 116 interviewees). A further 20% (50 interviewees) chose to visit because the site is 'good for the dog/the dog enjoys it' and 19% (48 interviewees) stated that they choose the site because it felt safe and they could let the dog off lead (see Figure 6).

3.24 For those who gave 'other' reasons for choosing to visit the site (16%, 41 responses), these varied but were largely positive, and included cleanliness / lack of litter, being well maintained, dry, having a good play area and that it was enjoyable to visit.

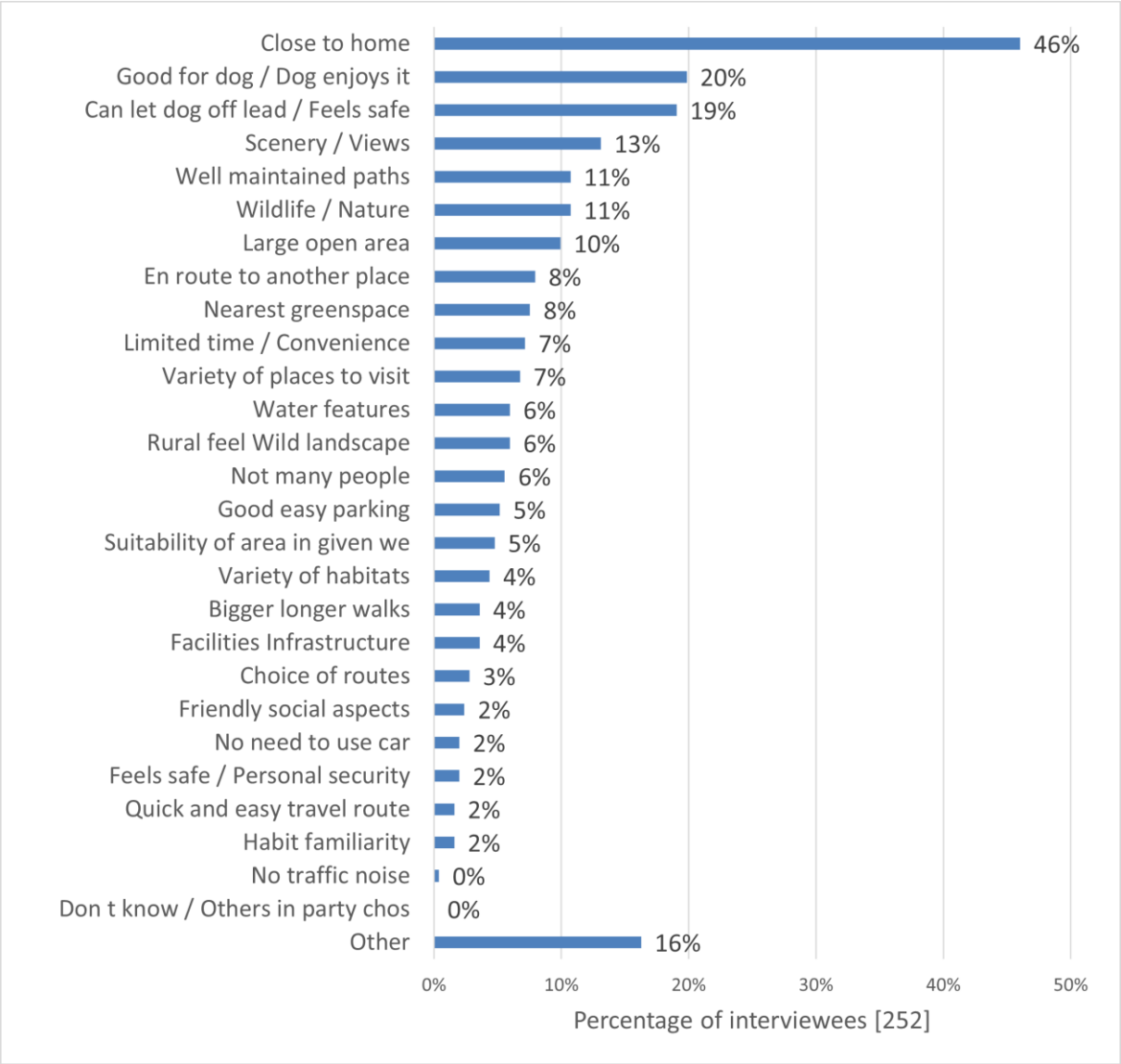


Figure 6: Summary of all responses [n=571], reasons given for choosing to visit the site at which they were interviewed.

3.25 Reasons for site choice varied with SANG size (Figure 7), however, across all sizes being 'close to home' remained the most common reason given for site choice, particularly at small SANGs where 63% of interviewees mentioned this as their reason for visiting (compared to 38% at medium SANGs and 59% at large SANGs).

3.26 Other reasons given more commonly at small SANGs [41 interviewees] were:

- Good for the dog/dog enjoys it (17%)
- Can let the dog off the lead/feels safe (17%)
- En route to another place (12%)

3.27 Reasons provided most frequently at medium sized SANGs [162 interviewees] were:

- Can let the dog of the lead/feels safe (22%)
- Good for the dog/dog enjoys it (19%)
- Well maintained paths (14%)
- Scenery/views (11%)

3.28 At large SANGs [49 interviewees] the most common reasons given were:

- Scenery/views (25%)
- Good for the dog/dog enjoys it (25%)
- Nearest greenspace (16%)
- Large open area (14%)
- Wildlife/nature (14%)

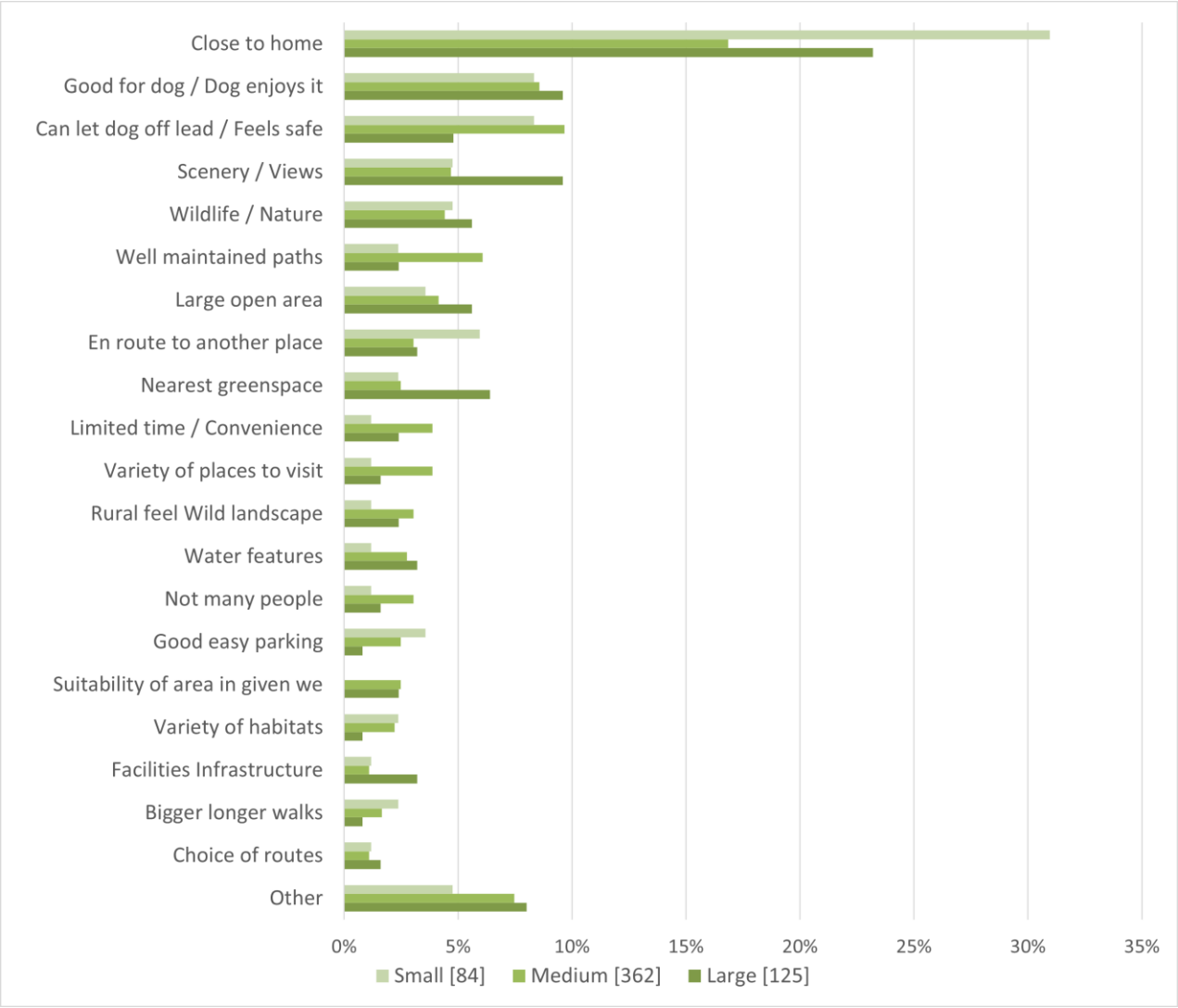


Figure 7: Top 20 reasons overall for site choice, compared by approximate site size [number of responses].

3.29 Close to home was the most cited reason given for visiting a site in 8 out of 12 local authorities, with 7 a greater proportion than interviewees overall. In Waverley, it was the second most cited reason behind scenery/views (87%, 5 interviewees). In Woking and Windsor and Maidenhead the most cited reasons related to their dogs; 'can let the dog off lead' and 'good for the dog' respectively. Interviewees in Bracknell Forest gave the widest variety of reasons for choosing to visit a SANG, with 'well maintained paths' (19%, 12 interviewees) the second most cited reason, after close to home.

Site improvements (Q9)

3.30 Interviewees were asked to consider what improvements could be made to the SANG at which they were interviewed. Approximately 23% (57 interviewees) suggested that none / no improvements were needed. Of the 195 interviewees who did suggest improvements, 280 suggestions were made. All responses are summarised in Figure 8.

3.31 Of those who suggested site improvements, 20% (69 responses) referred to 'better parking including surfacing' and 14% (47 responses) stated that more dog poo bins were required – see Figure 8. A further 32% (109 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, less litter, general maintenance such as grass cutting, cleaning ponds and planting more trees, repairing of potholes and provision of longer walks.

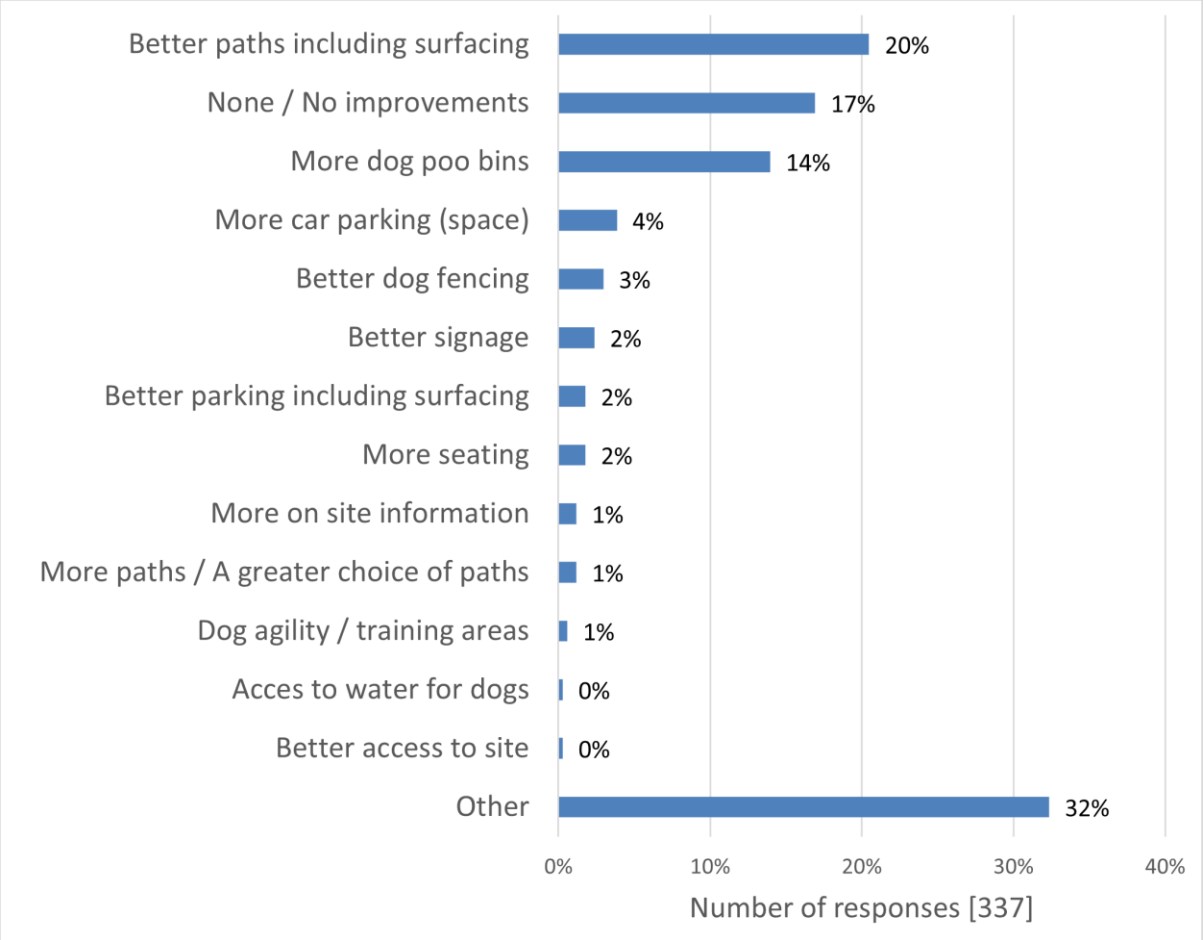


Figure 8: Most cited improvements combined across all sites [n=252].

3.32 Interviewees in Woking (45%, 5 interviewees) and Rushmoor (30%, 6 interviewees) were more likely to state that no improvements were needed on site. Interviewees in Wokingham, Surrey Heath and Hart drew attention to the better paths and surfacing (27%, 26% and 20% respectively), whilst Wokingham (22%) and Rushmoor (20%) were particularly concerned about dog poo bins. Woking was the only authority where interviewees were concerned about access to water for dogs (9%, 1 interviewee) and similarly only Rushmoor and Bracknell Forest suggested more seating as an improvement (both 5%, 1 and 4 interviewees respectively). Comparisons by local authority of the five most frequently cited improvements can be seen in Figure 9.

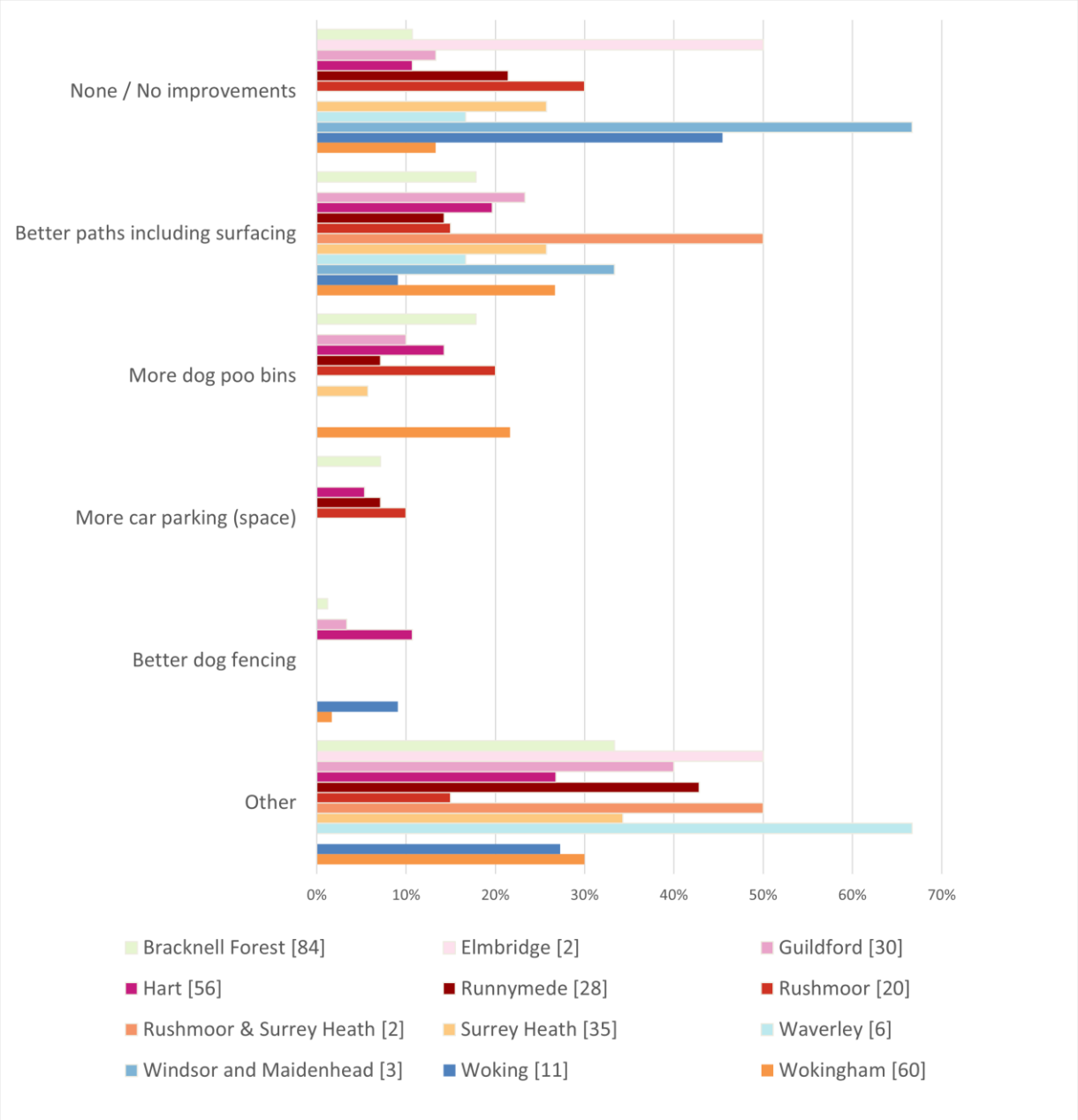


Figure 9: Top 5 site improvements given by local authority [number of responses].

3.33 Site improvements appeared to vary little across SANG size. 'Other reasons' (outside of predetermined responses) remained the most common response in each SANG size category. However, as SANG size increased the variety of responses increased, with interviewees at large SANGs suggesting a wider variety of improvements. For example, 3% of interviewees at large SANGs suggest dog agility / training areas as an improvement, and 1% suggest better access to

the site overall, compared to 0% at medium and small SANGs respectively).

Site ratings (Q10-13)

3.34 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).

3.35 Generally, responses were positive (see Figure 10), with most individuals scoring the site at a 7, or above, for all aspects of the site (98%, 246 interviewees). Interviewees were particularly positive about the suitability of sites for dogs; 56% (127 interviewees) deemed the site excellent (score of 10), and a further 40% (92 interviewees), 96% in total, scored 7 or higher. While interviewee's opinion on 'paths' had the fewest number of interviewees scoring 7 or above (75%, 189 interviewees), parking appeared to invoke the most negative reaction, compared to other aspects of the site. A total of 18 interviewees (10%) scored parking a relatively low score of between 1 and 4.

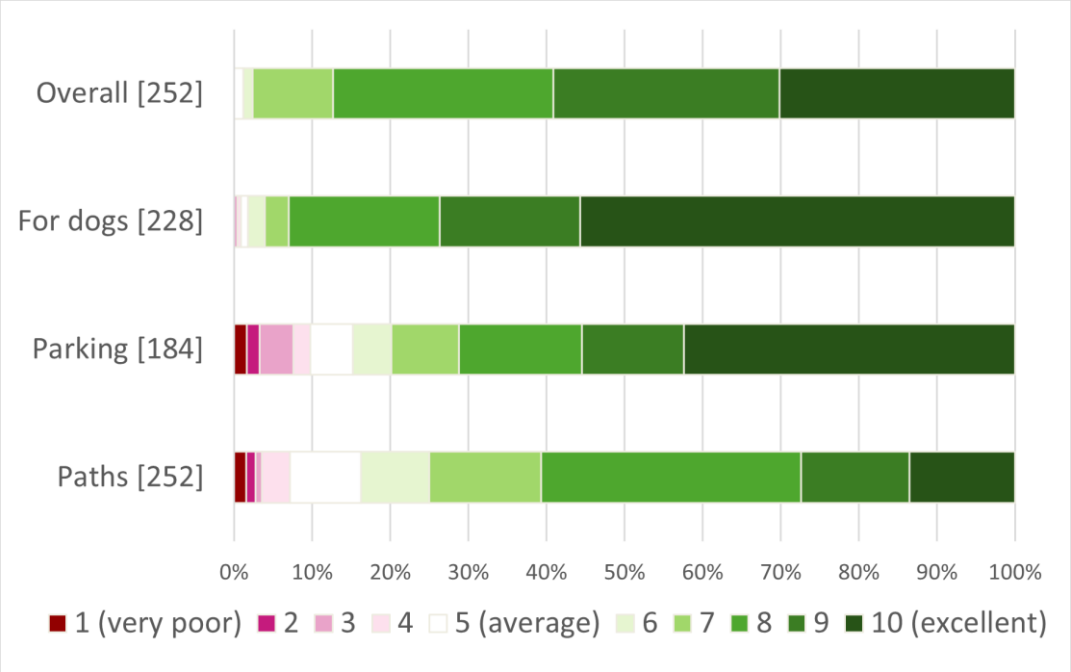


Figure 10: Combined site ratings given by interviewees [number of interviewees].

Proportion of weekly visits (Q14)

3.36 Visitors were asked to estimate what percentage of their visits took place at the site where they were interviewed. Approximately 1 in 10 participants (10%, 24 interviewees) stated that all their weekly visits for their given activity took place at the site at which they were interviewed. A further 29% (73 interviewees) stated that 75% or more of their visits occurred on site and overall, just over half of all interviewees (57%, 143 interviewees) stated that at least 50% of their weekly visits occurred on site.

3.37 Patterns of weekly visits were relatively similar across all local authorities (see Figure 11). For each local authority, at least half of the interviewees stated that 50% of their visits took place at the site at which they were interviewed. For Windsor and Maidenhead and Waverly, 100% of interviewees said the same (however note the small sample size, 3 and 6 interviewees respectively). In both Guildford (77%, 75% of weekly visits and 41%, over 50%) and Rushmoor (71%, over 75% f weekly visits and 65%, over 50%) the proportion of weekly visits taking place at the site at which they were interviewed was higher than most other authorities (excluding Waverly and Windsor and Maidenhead).

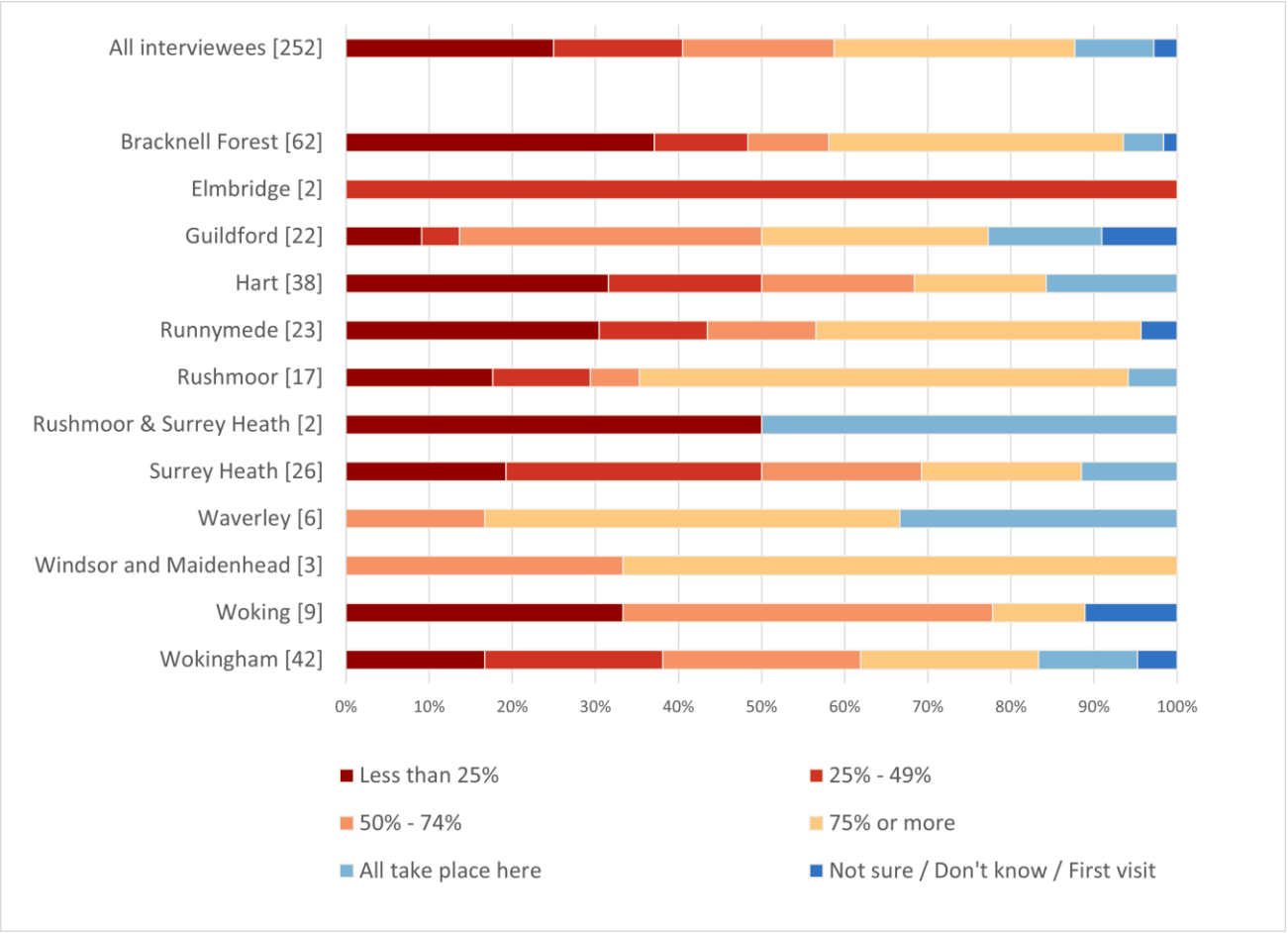


Figure 11: Proportion of weekly visits to the site at which they were interviewed, compared across local authorities [number of interviewees].

3.38 SANG size did not appear to influence the proportion of weekly visits, with the percentage of interviewees stating that 75% or more of their visits took place on site consistent across all size classes. Notably medium size SANGs had a greater proportion stating that less than 25% of their weekly visits took place on site (28%, 45 interviewees; compared to 15% at small SANGs and 25% at large SANGs).

Alternative sites (Q15-17)

3.39 Visitors were asked to name up to three alternative sites they would also visit for their given main activity. In total, 235 out of 252 interviewees named an alternative site, with 206 unique alternatives provided. Table 5 shows the most cited alternative sites (overall and their first choice).

3.40 Of all 555 responses given, 27% (152 responses) related to sites across the SPA, 32% (177 responses) related to other SANGs and the majority (41%, 226 responses) mentioned other locations, such as town centres, greenspaces and visitor attractions.

Table 5: 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).

Rank	Sites overall [555]	First named site [235]
1	Ash Ranges (25, 5%)	Chobham Common (12, 5%)
2	Swinley Forest (23, 4%)	Swinley Forest (11, 5%)
3	Chobham Common (18, 3%)	Ash Ranges (10, 4%)
4	Caesar's Camp (14, 3%)	Hartland Country Park (7, 3%)
5	Horsell Common (14, 3%)	Virginia Water (7, 3%)
6	Fleet Pond (12, 2%)	Cabbage Hill (6, 3%)
7	Virginia Water (12, 2%)	Fleet Pond (6, 3%)
8	Hawley Common & Lake (11, 2%)	Horsell Common (6, 3%)
9	Windsor Great Park (10, 2%)	Dinton Pastures Country Park (5, 2%)
10	Dinton Pastures Country Park (9, 2%)	Hawley Common & Lake (5, 2%)

Reasons that attract to other places (Q18)

3.41 Reasons that interviewees gave for visiting these alternatives are summarised in Figure 12. The most cited reasons were having a variety of places to visit (14%, 73 responses) and being close to home (10%, 56 responses). The site being good for the dog / the dog enjoys it was cited by a further 8% (41 responses overall).

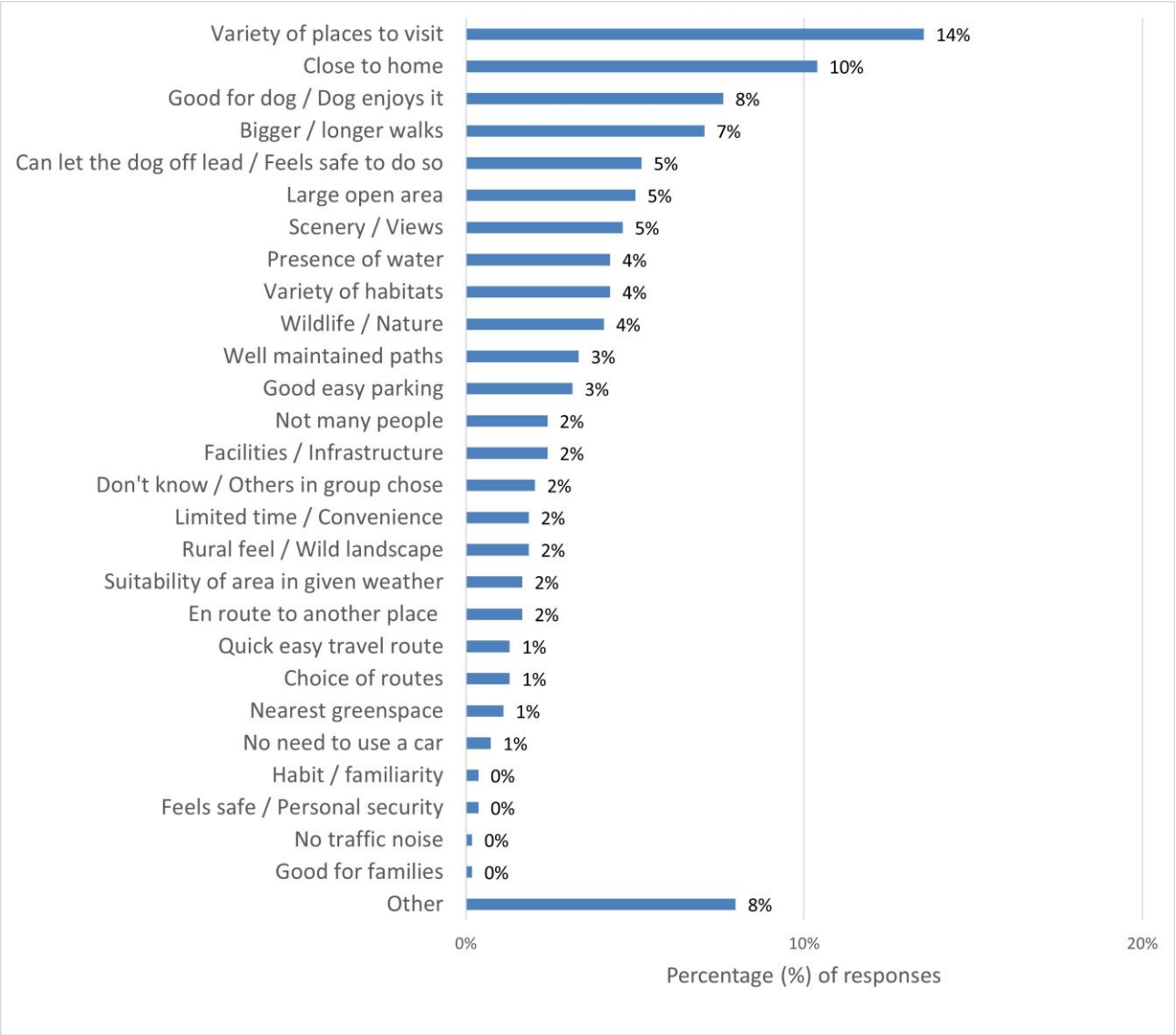


Figure 1212: Factors that draw interviewees to alternative sites [n=539 responses].

First heard about the site (Q19)

3.42 When asked to consider where they had first heard about the SANG they were visiting 28% (73 interviewees) stated they had heard via word of mouth, 27% (70 interviewees) saw a sign or had driven past, and a further 21% (56 interviewees) had heard about the site through some 'other' form of local knowledge.

3.43 There was some variation across local authorities in how interviewees had first become aware of the SANG. Local knowledge (word of mouth) remained an important factor in SANG awareness for most.

For interviewees in Hart, over half (54%, 22 interviewees) has seen a sign or driven half, more than any other local authority.

3.44 There were also differences associated with the size of the site (see Figure 13), for example, written notice (7%, 3 interviewees) was most noted at small SANGs, compared to 2% of interviewees at medium and large SANGs that said the same. At large SANGs, most awareness came from 'word of mouth' (33%, 16 interviewees), whereas for medium SANGs most interviewees had seen a sign/driven past (31%, 52 interviewees).

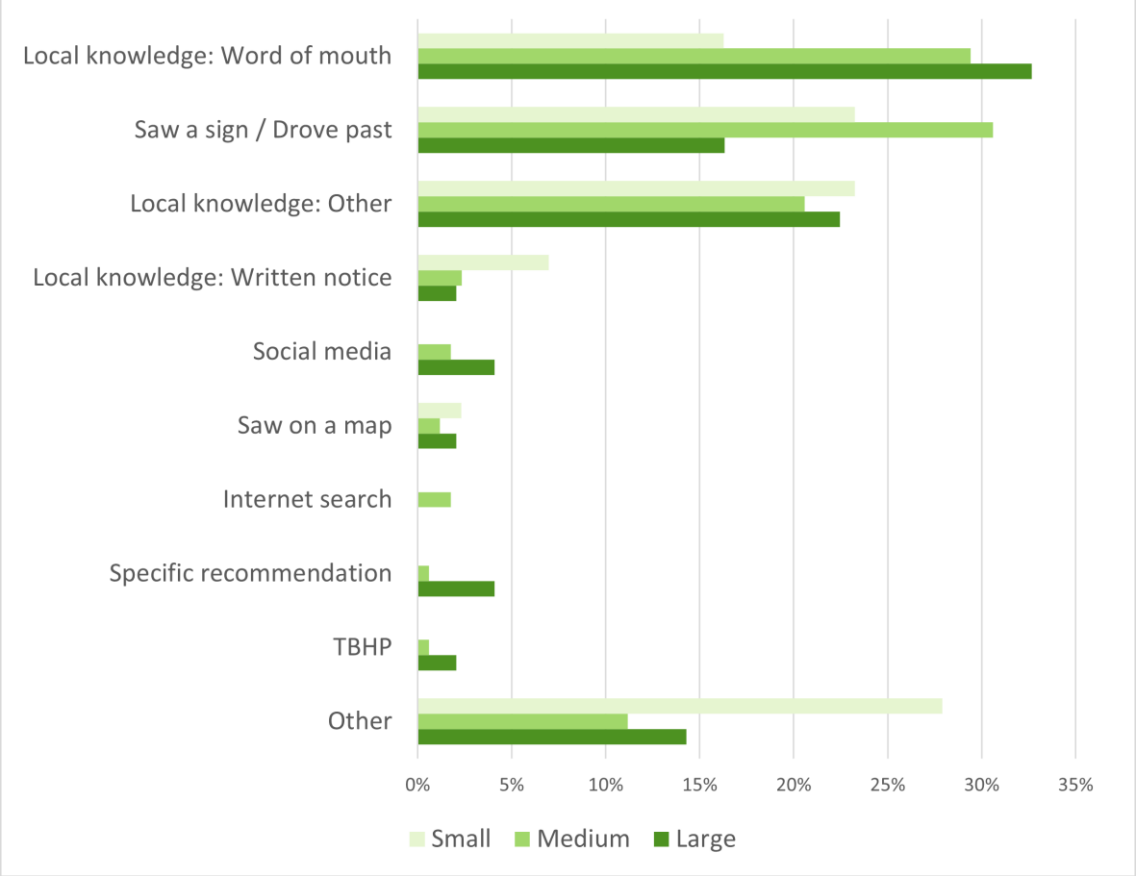


Figure 13: Source of awareness about SANG visit, by size [number of responses = 262].

Visitor origins (Q20-22)

3.45 95% of all interviewees provided a valid home postcode (240 interviewees of a possible 252). These locations are shown in Maps 3 and 4.

3.46 The average straight-line distance from the survey point to home postcode was 2.2 km for the mean and 1.3 km for the median (see Table 6). Those that visited more frequently tended to live closer to the SANG – those who visited more than once a day lived on average 0.61 km from the survey point (median) while for those who visited less than once a month the figure was 5.3 km. Similarly, interviewees who state that all of their weekly visits take place at the SANG lived on average 1.2 km away, compared to those whose proportion of weekly visits were less than 25% lived on average 3.4 km away.

3.47 Q3, or the 75th percentile, indicates the distance within which most interviewees live. Overall, most postcodes are within 3.2 km of the SANG interview location. Interviewees visiting smaller SANGs tend to live closer, with 75% of interviewees living within 1.1 km from the site compared to 3.0 km at larger and 3.7 km medium sized SANGs.

Table 6: Summary of straight-line distance (km) to site, from interviewees' home postcodes.

	Category	N	Mean (±1SD)	Min-Max	Median	Q3
	All interviewees	**240**	**2.15 (±2.20)**	**0.03 - 11.98**	**1.24**	**3.17**
Size	Large	48	2.25 (±2.41)	0.10 - 10.38	1.34	2.97
	Medium	153	2.38 (±2.23)	0.03 - 11.98	1.69	3.67
	Small	39	1.13 (±1.42)	0.10 - 5.77	0.65	1.13
Activity	Dog walking	198	2.03 (±2.04)	0.03 - 11.98	1.24	3.06
	Walking	25	2.18 (±2.55)	0.13 - 8.85	1.05	2.87
	Other	17	3.46 (±3.07)	0.1 - 9.62	1.92	6.21
Visit frequency	More than once per day	18	0.74 (±0.53)	0.1 - 1.75	0.61	1.13
	Daily	66	1.51 (±2.08)	0.11 - 10.38	0.66	1.64
	Most days	33	1.79 (±1.94)	0.1 - 8	1.02	2.14
	1 - 3 times a week	89	2.45 (±2.10)	0.03 - 11.98	2	3.67
	2 - 3 times a month	15	2.54 (±2.09)	0.23 - 7.88	2	4.33
	Once a month	7	3.67 (±2.10)	0.42 - 6.53	3.2	5.75
	Less than once a month	7	5.54 (±2.86)	1.18 - 9.2	5.27	8.85

	Category	N	Mean (±1SD)	Min-Max	Median	Q3
	First visit	4	4.91 (±2.68)	0.99 - 7.01	5.82	6.78
Proportion of weekly visits	All take place here	23	1.21 (±1.43)	0.15 - 4.74	0.49	1.75
	75% or more	70	1.37 (±1.7)	0.1 - 10.38	0.8	1.64
	50 – 74%	44	2.00 (±2.46)	0.12 - 9.97	1	2.14
	25 – 49%	37	1.93 (±1.43)	0.16 - 4.6	1.36	3.21
	Less than 25%	60	3.43 (±2.35)	0.03 - 11.98	3.16	4.72

3.48 All 252 provided their hometown/district in which they reside. A higher proportion were visiting from Wokingham (24 interviewees, 9.5%) 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.

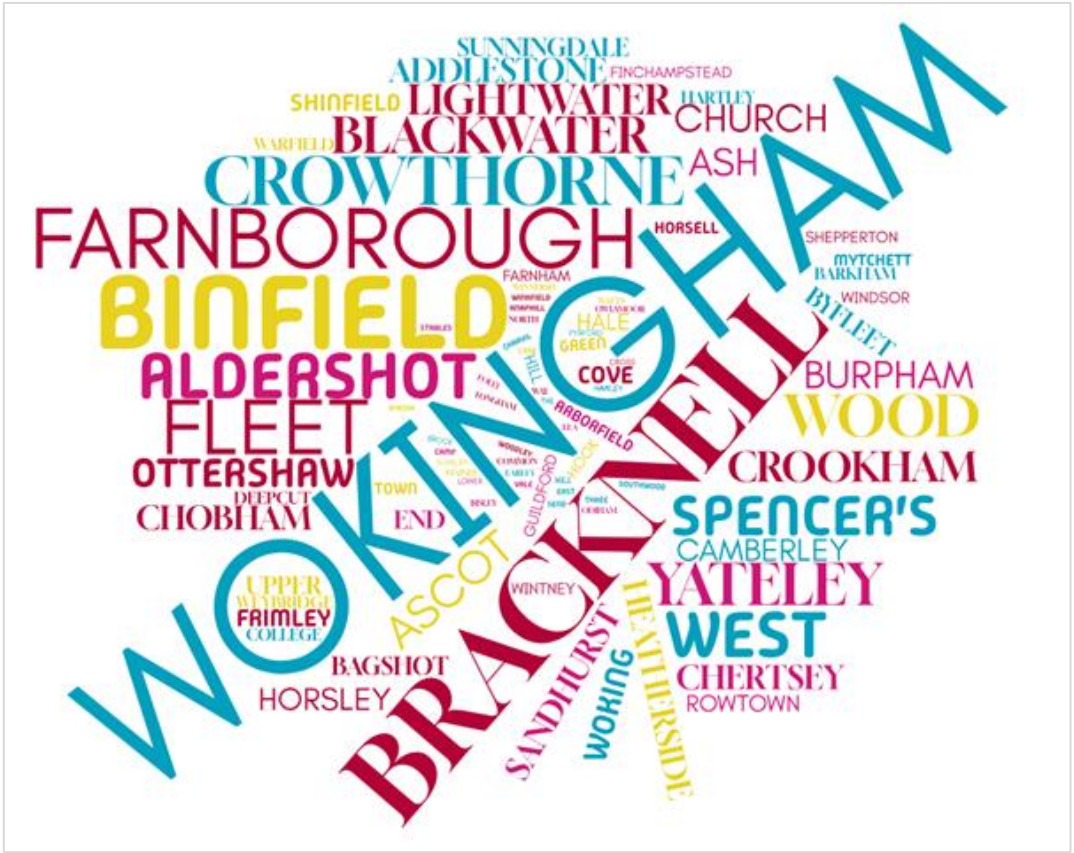
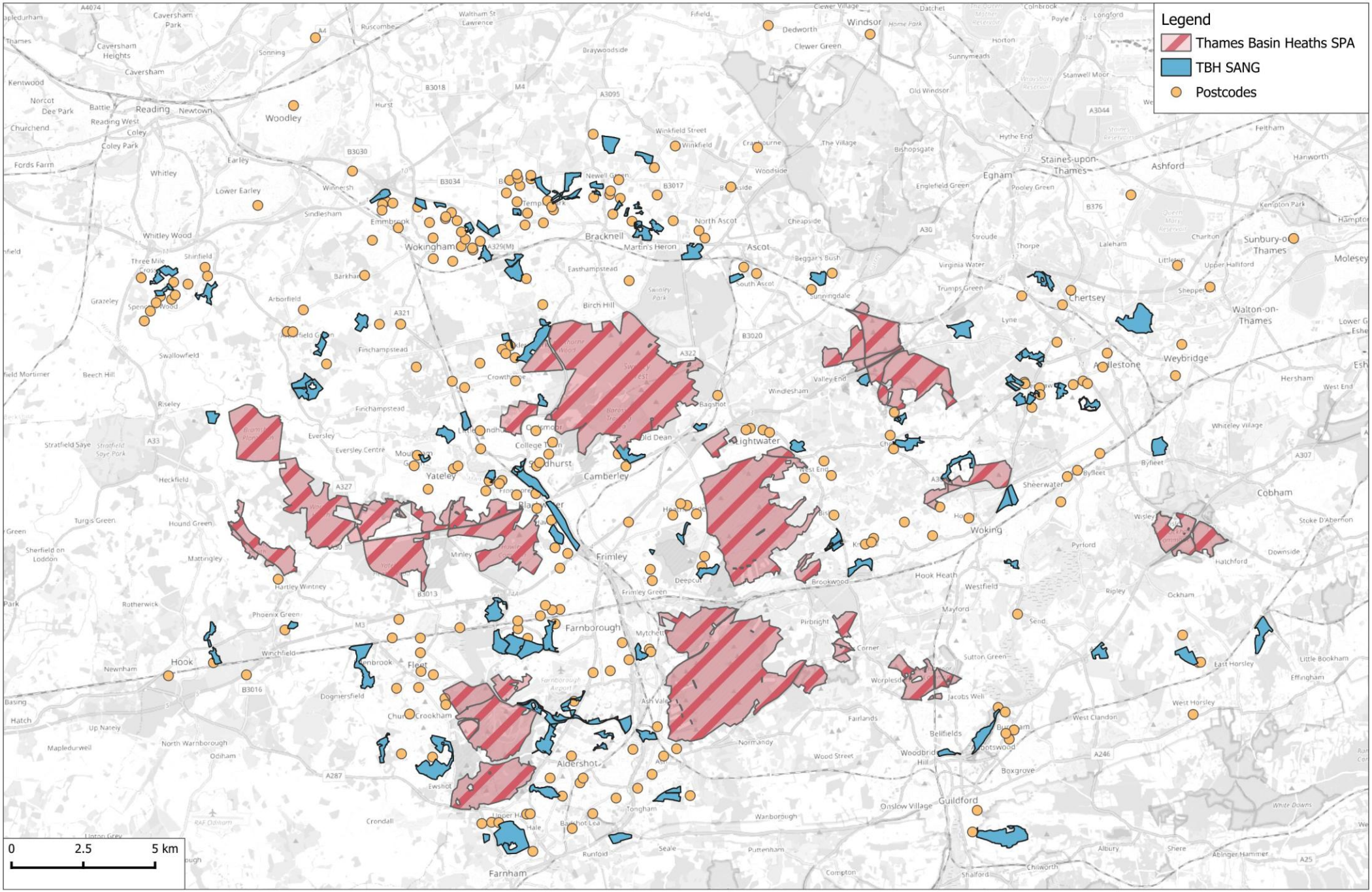


Figure 14: Wordcloud of named hometowns by interviewees [n=252]. Made using: https://www.wordclouds.co.uk/

Map 3: Home postcodes of interviewees



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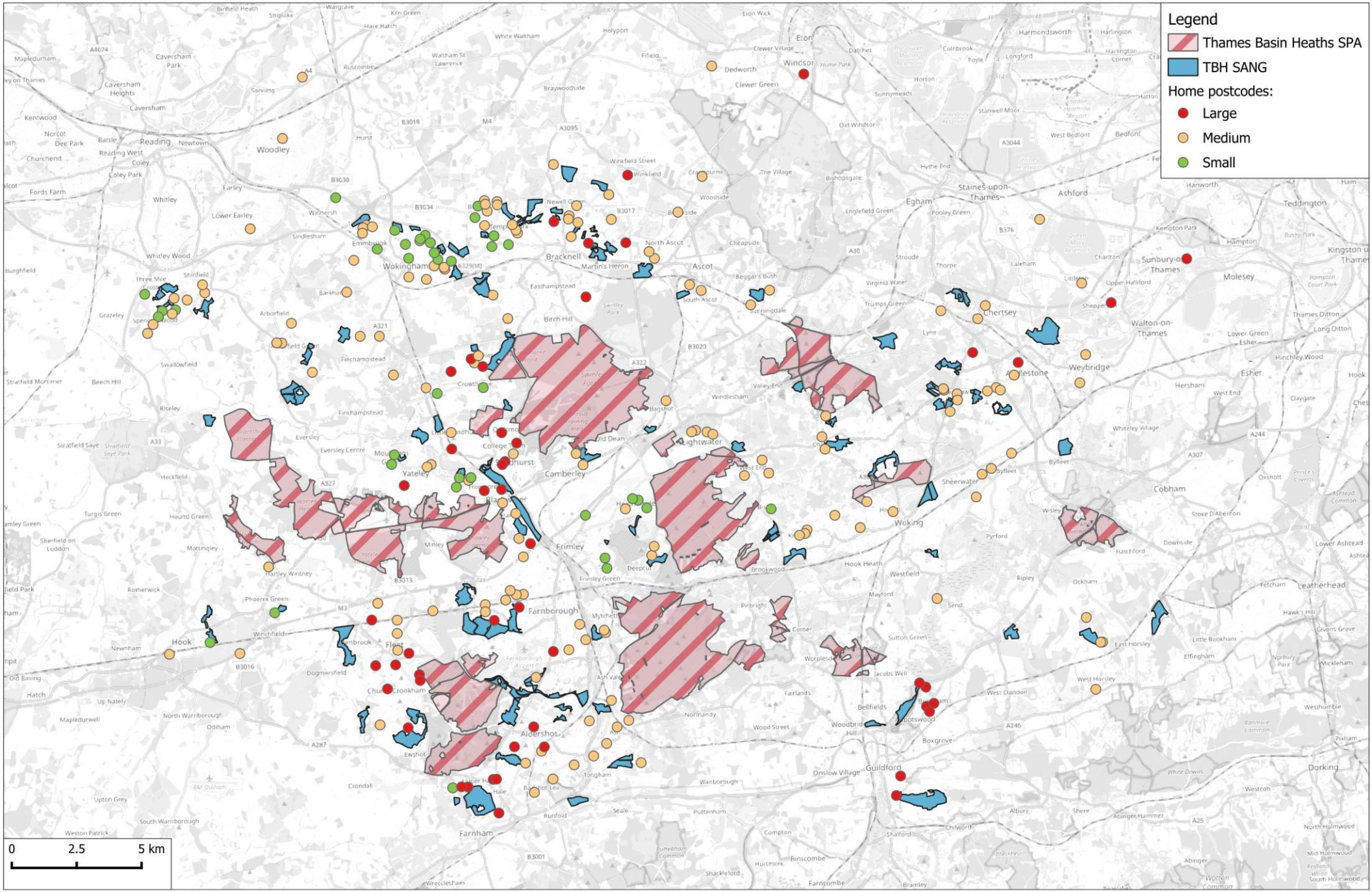
Map produced by Footprint Ecology.

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



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Map produced by Footprint Ecology.

Awareness of TBHP (Q23)

3.49 A quarter of all interviewees had heard of the Thames Basin Heaths Partnership (25%, 63 interviewees).

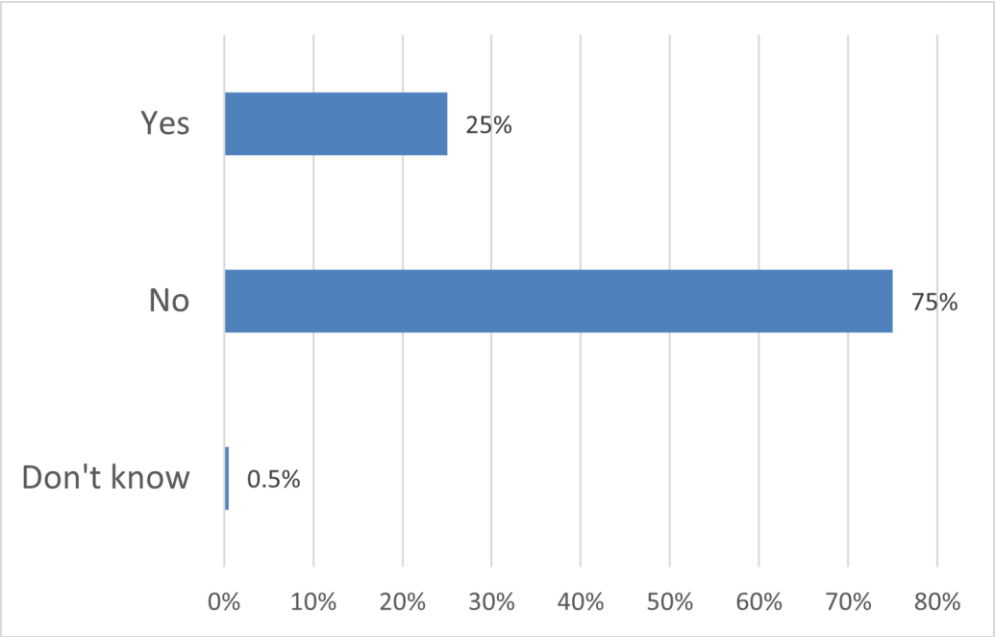

Figure 1515: Awareness of Thames Basin Heaths Partnership (percentage of interviewees) [n=252].

3.50 A slightly higher proportion of interviewees were aware of the TBHP at medium sites (27%, 162 interviewees) compared to small (24%, 41 interviewees) and large (20%, 49 interviewees) sites respectively.

4. Discussion

4.1 Broadly, the interview data suggests that SANGs are primarily being used by visitors local to the area, such as by daily dog walkers (82% of interviewees) who are travelling a short distance to visit the site (75% of all interviewees live within 1.3 km).

4.2 Interviewees were aware of other SANGs in their local area, with 32% of the named alternative sites being SANGs. This suggests that at least a third of visitors to SANGs are likely to use other SANGs as an alternative location for their activity. The percentage is similar to that from 2024 (31% of named alternatives being SANG) and is a marked increase from 2023 (17%).

4.3 Awareness of the TBHP appears to be consistent between the SANGs and parts of the SPA with 25% of all interviewees being aware of the partnership, an increase from 22% recorded on SANGs last year and across the TBH SPA in 2023.

Interpreting Long-Term Trends in SANG Use

4.4 Key metrics from the 2024/25 survey are summarised below, alongside visitor survey data from the SPA survey (Panter et al., 2024) and the previous SANG surveys[4] conducted since 2021. It should be noted that longer term analysis is challenging, due to the lack of a consistent long-term dataset. Changes in methodology and inconsistencies in survey execution mean some caution is required when comparing between years.

Key findings on long-term changes at SANGs in the TBH area:

4.5 **Visitor Numbers:** After adjusting for survey effort, the number of people recorded per hour has remained relatively stable ranging from 11.0 people per hour in the most recent survey to 12.9 in the one

[4] All previous SANG survey data has been collated from JSPB meeting reports, as provided on the TBHP website. Accessed here: https://www.tbhpartnership.org.uk/published-reports/

before this (2023/24). Notably, SANGs consistently show higher usage levels than the SPA.

4.6 **Activities at SANGs:** Activity patterns have remained broadly consistent over the past four years, particularly since winter 2022/23. The last three winter surveys showed consistent percentages, with dog walking accounting for approximately 82–83% of visits and general walking for 11–12%. Prior to this, looking back to summer 2022 it would appear that there were a smaller percentage of walkers and more dog walkers. In addition, the proportion of interviewees who state that they are dog walking at SANGs is currently higher than those who said the same across the TBH SPA in 2023 (74%).

4.7 **Visit Patterns:** The duration of visits has remained steady, with most visitors spending between 30 minutes and one hour at a site. Visit frequency has also been consistent, with around 33% of respondents reporting daily visits, showing only minor year-to-year variation.

4.8 **Site Improvements:** Across all winter surveys, the two most common suggested improvements were: more dog waste bins and better paths (including improved surfacing). These two improvements have remained consistently high across all SANGs. The proportion of respondents indicating that no improvements are needed has declined over time.

Table 7: Selected metrics from the survey.

Metric	Result on SPA	Result on SANGs				
Month/year	Aug-23	Winter 2021/22	Winter 2022/23	Summer 2023	Winter 2023/24	Winter 2024/25
Number of survey points	30	75	79	72	76	85
Number of interviews	1,118	262	256	255	257	252
Number of people counted (people per hour of survey)	7,208 (7.2)	836 (11.1)	984 (12.5)	953 (13.2)	977 (12.9)	935 (11.0)
% of interviewees with main activity of dog walking	74%	72%	83%	80%	83%	82%
% of interviewees with main activity of walking	19%	21%	11%	12%	12%	11%
% visiting daily	24%	35%	33%	37%	29%	35%
% visiting all year round	76%	-	-	66%	77%	82%
% arriving by car/van	74%	50%	56%	55%	61%	61%
% stating close to home as most important reason for site choice	30%	50%	38%	22%	17%	46%
Median distance from home postcode to survey point	2.4 km	< 1.6 km	< 1.6 km	1.44 km	1.38 km	1.24 km
75th percentile distance from home postcode to survey point	4.6 km	-	-	2.91 km	3.28 km	3.17 km

Recommendations

4.9 Following the previous survey, a number of improvements have been made to the survey methods and how surveys have been scheduled. There are further changes that would facilitate data collection and analysis. These would help ensure consistency and comparability across data sets:

- **Standardised GIS Layer**: Develop a single, standardised GIS layer for all SANGs. Each entry should include one name and polygon per SANG, the relevant local authority (ownership or location), size, date of establishment, and other key attributes.
- **Consistent Site Naming**: Use consistent site names across datasets to ensure interview responses can be accurately matched to a location. A list of aliases for each site could be maintained to resolve discrepancies.
- **Clean Spatial Dataset**: Create a cleaned and well-organised spatial dataset of SANG survey points. This should clearly indicate survey locations and include relevant metadata such as standardised site names, correct What3Words location, and recommended survey timing.
- **Clear Survey Protocol**: Ensure that the survey protocol and schedule for future SANG surveys are clearly defined and consistently followed. This will support reliable comparisons over time.

4.10 Alongside the above, two key recommendations remain critical: a comprehensive large-scale review of all monitoring and mitigation data and a clear and cohesive monitoring strategy.

4.11 The review should involve data analysis which would integrate this current SANG visitor survey data with all the other TBH datasets. This would quantify mitigation efforts to date—such as housing data, warden time, educational outreach, Heathland Hound events, and SANG provision—within the context of visitor behaviour (e.g. sensor data, vehicle counts, surveys, warden observations) and SPA condition (e.g. bird population data).

4.12 This integrated approach would help identify trends and answer key questions about visitor numbers, behavioural changes, and impacts on the SPA. Ultimately, it would provide a clearer understanding of how mitigation delivery can be improved and where it should be targeted in the future.

4.13 Following on from this, a clear monitoring strategy would serve two purposes. Firstly, it would build on the results of the long-term analysis, using the recommendations set out to make any required changes to the long-term monitoring. Secondly, it would set the future direction of travel in terms of how monitoring results feed back into the mitigation delivery, ensuring the monitoring is integrated into the SAMM. 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 would be clear how data from different datasets will be combined and analysed again in the future. The strategy would make clear recommendations in terms of future mitigation requirements, such as overall team size required.

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

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 size, local authority and weekday/weekend:

ID	SANG	Weekend (Yes/No)	Interviews	Approx. Size	Local Authority
1	Allens Field	Yes	2	Small	Windsor and Maidenhead
2	Ambarrow Court and Hill	Yes	5	Medium	Bracknell Forest
3	Ash Green Meadows	No	2	Medium	Guildford
4	Bassett's Mead CP	No	1	Small	Hart
5	Bisley Common	Yes	0	Medium	Guildford
6	Blandford Woods	No	2	Medium	Rushmoor
7	Blue Mountain	No	3	Medium	Bracknell Forest
8	Bramshot Farm CP	No	6	Medium	Hart
9	Broadmoor Farm Meadow	Yes	1	Small	Bracknell Forest
10	Brooklands Community Park	Yes	2	Medium	Elmbridge
11	Brookwood CP	No	3	Medium	Woking
12	Buckhurst Meadow	No	5	Medium	Wokingham
13	Bucklers Forest	Yes	6	Large	Bracknell Forest
14	Cabbage Hill	No	4	Medium	Bracknell Forest
15	Chantry Wood	Yes	3	Large	Guildford
16	Chertsey Common	No	4	Medium	Runnymede
17	Chertsey Meads	No	5	Large	Runnymede
18	Chobham Place Woods	No	2	Medium	Surrey Heath
19	Chobham Water Meadows	No	5	Medium	Surrey Heath
20	Clare's Green Field	No	4	Small	Wokingham
21	Diamond Ridge Woods	No	2	Medium	Surrey Heath
22	Earlswood Park (Notcutts)	No	1	Small	Surrey Heath
23	Edenbrook CP	No	4	Large	Hart
24	Effingham Common	Yes	0	Medium	Guildford
25	Eldridge CP (Ashridge Meadows)	No	4	Small	Wokingham
26	Englemere Pond	Yes	6	Medium	Bracknell Forest
27	Ether Hill/Queenswood	No	3	Medium	Runnymede
28	Farnham Park	Yes	5	Large	Waverley
29	Finchwood Park	Yes	0	Large	Wokingham
30	Five Acre Field	No	1	Small	Wokingham
31	Folly Heights	Yes	1	Small	Waverley

ID	SANG	Weekend (Yes/No)	Interviews	Approx. Size	Local Authority
32	Franklands Park (Strawberry Fields)	Yes	2	Medium	Runnymede
33	Frimley Fuel Allotments	No	4	Small	Surrey Heath
34	Frost Folly	No	10	Medium	Bracknell Forest
35	Great Hollands Wood	Yes	2	Small	Bracknell Forest
36	Hare Hill	Yes	4	Medium	Runnymede
37	Hartland CP	No	4	Medium	Hart
38	Hawley Farm	No	8	Medium	Hart
39	Hawley Meadows and Blackwater Park	No	2	Medium	Rushmoor & Surrey Heath
40	Hazebrouck Meadows	No	3	Medium	Wokingham
41	Heather Farm	No	5	Medium	Woking
42	Homewood Park	No	1	Medium	Runnymede
43	Horseshoe Lake	No	4	Medium	Bracknell Forest
44	Horsley Meadows	No	4	Medium	Guildford
45	Keephatch Meadows	No	3	Small	Wokingham
46	Keephatch Woods	Yes	2	Small	Wokingham
47	Kentwood Meadow	Yes	2	Small	Wokingham
48	Lakeside NR	No	2	Medium	Guildford
49	Langley Mead	No	3	Medium	Wokingham
50	Lark's Hill (Cut Countryside Corridor)	No	3	Medium	Bracknell Forest
51	Lily Hill Park (Longhill Park Group)	No	5	Large	Bracknell Forest
52	Little Heath Meadow	No	0	Small	Surrey Heath
53	May's Farm Meadows	No	0	Small	Wokingham
54	Mindenhurst	No	2	Medium	Surrey Heath
55	Moulsham Meadows at Forest Chase	No	2	Small	Hart
56	Naishes Wood at Crookham Park	No	2	Large	Hart
57	Oakham Woods	Yes	1	Small	Wokingham
58	Old Forest Road Meadows	Yes	5	Medium	Wokingham
59	Oldlands Copse	Yes	0	Medium	Guildford
60	Peacock Meadows and Big Wood	Yes	3	Medium	Bracknell Forest
61	Piglittle Field	No	3	Small	Wokingham

ID	SANG	Weekend (Yes/No)	Interviews	Approx. Size	Local Authority
62	Pope's Meadow	No	3	Small	Bracknell Forest
63	Poulters Meadows	No	1	Medium	Hart
64	QEII Fields	No	1	Small	Hart
65	Riverside NR	No	4	Large	Guildford
66	Rook's Nest Wood	No	1	Medium	Wokingham
67	Row Hill NR	No	2	Medium	Rushmoor
68	Runfold Ridge	Yes	5	Medium	Guildford
69	Shepherd Meadows	Yes	6	Large	Bracknell Forest
70	Southwood CP	No	5	Large	Rushmoor
71	Southwood Woodland	No	4	Medium	Rushmoor
72	St Ann's Hill	No	3	Medium	Runnymede
73	St Catherine's Road	No	2	Small	Surrey Heath
74	Sunningdale Park	No	3	Medium	Windsor and Maidenhead
75	Swan Lake Park	Yes	3	Small	Hart
76	The Ridge	No	5	Medium	Wokingham
77	Timber Hill and Ottershaw Chase	No	1	Medium	Runnymede
78	Waters Edge	No	2	Medium	Surrey Heath
79	Wellesley Water Meadow	Yes	4	Medium	Hart
80	Wellesley Woodlands	No	4	Large	Rushmoor
81	White Rose Lane NR	No	0	Small	Woking
82	Whitewater Meadows	Yes	2	Medium	Hart
83	Windlemere	Yes	6	Medium	Surrey Heath