

**Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment (Natural England's  
Access and Engagement Summary)**

Report by Senior Waterways and Recreation Officer

**Summary:** This report provides members with a summary of the latest findings from Natural England's annual Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment (MENE) survey.

**Recommendation:** That members note the contents of the report.

## **1 Background to the MENE Survey**

- 1.1 The MENE survey was first commissioned by Natural England, Defra and the Forestry Commission in 2009 to provide baseline and trend data on how people use the natural environment in England. One of the main reasons the survey was commissioned was because there was a lack of information about how and why people spend time in the natural environment, even though a growing evidence base suggests that having contact with nature is beneficial for people's health and wellbeing.
- 1.2 The fifth MENE annual report which was recently published by Natural England gathered data between March 2013 and February 2014. During the survey period, 46,785 interviews were undertaken allowing the details of 55,897 visits to be collected. More detailed information from a further 18,808 visits was also gathered.
- 1.3 In the survey the 'natural environment' is defined as 'all green open spaces in and around towns and cities as well as the wider countryside and coastline'. Home and private gardens are excluded. The survey collects data about how people use the natural environment, including:
  - type of destination
  - duration
  - mode of transport
  - distance travelled
  - expenditure
  - main activities
  - motivations
  - barriers to visiting.
- 1.4 The annual report from the 2013/14 survey presents findings from the 5th year of the survey. Over 800 people are interviewed at home every week across England; the survey conducts at least 45,000 interviews annually. The survey has produced valuable new data on people's behaviour in, and attitudes towards, the natural environment.

## 2 Survey findings

- 2.1 The key finding from the latest survey results is that there has been a statistically significant increase in how frequently people visit the natural environment. During 2009/10, half of the population (50 per cent) said they visited the natural environment at least once a week. In 2013/14 this rose to about 6 in 10 (or 60 per cent). The most visited destinations were town and city parks: the number of annual visits to these parks has increased significantly, up by 17 per cent between 2009/10 and 2013/14. Other popular activities were using footpaths, cycle paths and bridleways (16%), visiting other open spaces in the countryside (10%) and visiting rivers lakes or canals (9%).
- 2.2 Unsurprisingly walking was by far the most frequently undertaken activity with two thirds of visits regardless of the destination involving a walk. Three quarters of visits were less than 2 hours in duration and almost four-fifths were taken within 2 miles of the visit start. It is interesting to note that the finding that walking was the most popular activity accords with the findings of the recent stakeholder surveys undertaken by the Broads Authority.
- 2.3 The full report is available to read on the Gov.uk website.  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/monitor-of-engagement-with-the-natural-environment-2013-to-2014>

## 3 Conclusions

- 3.1 Aside from the information regarding the activities that people engage in during visits to the natural environment the MENE survey also provides valuable evidence about the amount of money that people spend whilst doing so. In the latest survey people spent money on almost a quarter of the visits made in the period from March 2013 to February 2014, resulting in an estimated spend of £17 billion. What is clear from this evidence is that the benefits of access to the natural environment have the potential to impact on a wide range of local authority responsibilities including health and wellbeing, local economic development, recreation, education and environmental quality.
- 3.2 These are significant findings for local authorities as they consider how to discharge their duties with regard to countryside access, green infrastructure and other service provision in the face of further likely cuts in funding from central government. It will be interesting to see whether these interconnected interests will be recognised when authorities cost the benefits of investment in the natural environment.

Background papers: Nil

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Broads Plan Objectives: None  
Appendices: Nil