Park Life: Assessing the need to Understand User Group Needs when Balancing Commercial Enterprise with Biodiversity Conservation

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Abstract

This report outlines and reviews the findings of a collaborative project between researchers at The University of East Anglia (UEA) and Brandon Country Park. The former were commissioned to undertake two surveys to elicit the opinions of current users and stakeholders regarding their perceptions of the park, with particular emphasis on how this improves their mental, physical and social well-being. Information was then used to identify how the facility might be improved. 200 surveys were conducted through July 2016, asking questions which referred to park usage, attitudes and socio-demographic status. These responses were combined with a qualitative focus group, and using these mixed-methods field experiment techniques provided an in-depth examination of user perspectives on how to best manage this woodland amenity. The overall results pinpoint some key interactions between the key mental and physical benefits of such a facility, and yet the trade-offs that these human sources of welfare may create for wider biodiversity conservation.

Key Words: Collective Decision-Making; Local Public Goods; Forest Management; Environmental Sustainability, Biodiversity Conservation;

JEL Codes: D71, H4, Q23, Q26, Q28, Q57

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Introduction

This report outlines and reviews the findings of a collaborative project between researchers at The University of East Anglia (UEA) and Brandon Country Park. Building upon the findings from previous years, the project's main aims were to ensure that:

1. User preferences regarding the park had not altered.
2. The provided amenities of the park were successfully facilitating positive health and wellbeing benefits for the park users whilst maintaining the conservation and biodiversity within the park. This former is part of a larger initiative; 'Being Well in the Wild', and coincides with the initiative for Suffolk to become 'Suffolk - Most Active County'.

To incorporate these aims, both for reviewing park services and examining health and wellbeing, a survey was created which sought to explore the views of park respondents. By using a survey, quantitative data was ultimately extracted to analyse a multitude of aspects relating to usage and opinion. This included an exploration of demographics such as males and females, age groups and group structures and how these craft an individual's preferences for the park and its role to them. Other notable variables included annual income of the respondent, what the park is used for, and qualitative questions on available park facilities.

To further examine more qualitative elements surrounding these aims, a focus group for park stakeholders was scheduled after the survey period. This enabled both cross-analytics between the responses of park users and figures such as council representatives, and to ascertain further information about improving park features and targeting positive health and wellbeing attributes in Brandon Country Park users.

Survey design

Over a period of 8 days at Brandon Country Park, 207 survey responses were collected in total. Firstly, these days were deliberately split over week and weekend days in an attempt to capture as much variance in our sample size as possible. To further increase the variety of users questioned, survey days also spanned time periods both before and during the school-children's summer holidays. This hoped to give the most representative sample of park users under the projected limited time-scale.

To model user preferences, and to gather data on health and wellbeing, a simple tick box approach was used to attain statistical information which would be later used to draw conclusions and recommend changes in park design and policy. By asking quantitative questions thus allowed for an easier classification of response with regards to the aims of the study. The collected data could also be compared with that from previous years' studies and allow to see if notable changes had arisen in user behaviour and perspectives.

Qualitative questions ensured that broader responses were ascertained. This gave a wide variety of responses, which directly addressed objective park improvement without a restrictive tick box approach. In turn this improves the ability to efficiently tailor the park to specific user

requirements, one example being the introduction of a sheltered soft play area for children under 3 years of age.

Focus Group

In addition to the qualitative questions considered within the survey questionnaire, a focus group was held for representative park stakeholders. The aim of this focus group was to gather longer qualitative responses to park improvement and derive anecdotal problems, and to also investigate there was representational cooperation between the park and its majority stakeholders.

These two survey approaches provided an ample insight into park users and in particular, their perspectives surrounding how to successfully allocate resources for park improvement and contingency planning whilst ensuring that these anthropocentric land uses did not impinge upon the natural ecosystem balance and role of the park for public engagement with the natural world. The responses were relatively consistent, with similar themes and attitudes arising. It is clear, for example, the focus group asserted that Brandon Country Park should retain its tranquil environment, and 44.4% of all survey respondents valued 'park tranquillity' the most.

Overall, the two sets of results show that effective woodland management involves a recognition that the 'naturalness' of an amenity can in itself provide a revenues stream, and facilitate a recreational environment that improves the mental and physical wellbeing of its members

Methodology

Early consultations took place with the Park's management team to ensure that the survey and focus group content would explore aspects directly linked with current and future planning and investment. In light of the objectives above, it was felt that the August focus group would nicely complement the questionnaires conducted in July, potentially providing more detailed explanations for the issues which arose from the latter. Given its current regional policy relevance, an additional emphasis was placed upon how this type of amenity could enhance the physical, social and mental well-being of park users, and where adjustments could be made at the facility in order to maximise the benefits for the public in this regard.

Efforts were taken to ensure that the sample interviewed during the July surveys represented a wide range of park users. To do this, 'survey days' were identified through the month which sought to balance of consumers in the following two dimensions:

a) **Weekday v Weekend Users**: this was an important consideration. The incentive for participation was a café voucher and, as such, surveys had to take place between the hours of 10:30 and 16:00 to allow redemption. Consequently, weekday interviews would have restricted the sample to a subset of park users (i.e. primarily those not in full time employment). Thus, weekend surveys hoped to capture a demographic for whom weekday surveys would miss completely, widening the participant base.

b) **Pre-School Holidays v During School Holidays**: the research project was deliberately timed to capture this element. During the later questionnaire days, when schoolchildren

were on summer vacation, there were greater opportunities to survey family groups and visitors from outside of the local area on both weekday and weekend occasions.

Imposing this structure seemed highly important to ensure that a wide range of opinions would be heard from different user groups. Because every survey was numbered chronologically, researchers were able to log when a given survey was conducted on a weekday or weekend and if within or outside of the UK school term time. Although current analysis has not thus far extended to this, it would be possible for such segregated comparisons to be made.

Subsequent to the discussions with park managers, the surveys were designed and pilot tested at UEA. Whilst some minor alterations arose from piloting, it was apparent that surveys were relatively simple to follow and the average completion time lasted no longer than 5-10 minutes. This confirms that the survey comprised 15 questions. Questions 1 – 10 and Question 14 followed a simple tick-box (closed question) format, whilst Questions 11 – 13 also offered the option for respondents to provide brief comments and justifications for their answers. Question 15 was open-ended, allowing subjects to provide more detailed qualitative comments on potential changes they felt would be most beneficial. The questions directly sought to address those objectives set out by the park, namely (a) the depth of knowledge and usage on park amenities *(Questions 1, 13 & 14);* (b) the distance travelled, frequency and duration of stay *(Questions 2 - 4)* and (c) the perspectives of the park with respect to fitness and well-being *(Questions 10 - 12)*. Other questions identified socio-demographic information *(Questions 8 & 9)*, group dynamic *(Questions 6 & 7),* and views on possible park alteration *(Questions 5 & 15).*

As reward for participation, each respondent was given a voucher entitling them to a free hot drink from the on-site park café. Given the short completion time, this method of reward seemed more appropriate than its equivalent financial offering. Previous research conducted at the park had used this mechanism and this had proved highly successful, not only regarding its cost-effectiveness, but by also giving the café an opportunity to showcase its catering facilities and thus attract customers who may not otherwise have consumed food or drink at the site.

207 surveys were successfully completed in the scheduled survey time in July 2016 and all were conducted in various locations within close proximity to the visitor centre at Brandon Country Park. The researchers received response rates deemed above that which is typical for this type of survey.

The focus group took place in the first week of August. The participants were jointly selected by the parks management and by the survey researchers. They therefore comprised key stakeholders such as park employees and local council representatives, alongside members of the public who had taken a keen interest in the survey work of the previous month. This enabled a balance of perspectives to be brought to the session, which was run in the evening with a sandwich buffet provided as a means of compensation for participant time.

Eight respondents took part in the focus group and all signed a consent form agreeing to be audio-recorded. The session lasted for two hours and was semi-structured to ensure that, broadly speaking, conversation revolved around key and recurrent issues which had arisen from the surveys. More specifically, the discussions were based around three key themes, namely (i) the geographic and demographic sectors under-represented at the park and possible reasons for this; (ii) the ways in which the park enabled users to maintain and enhance their well-being and (iii) where the park's management could adjust its current offerings in order to raise park footfall and its ability to promote healthy living in the local area, whilst simultaneously ensuring that goals of biodiversity and

conservation were maintained. As is natural in such a setting, conversation also deviated from these themes. Nevertheless, the research team were pleased with the duration and structure of the evening and this qualitative discussion, which was subsequently converted into a transcript, has enabled for more insightful inspection and recommendations to be elicited.

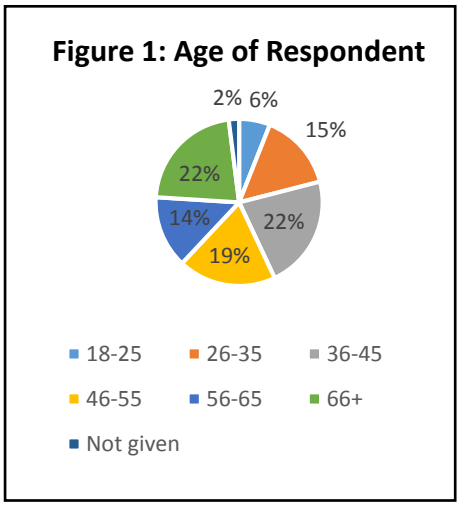
Results & Discussion

The data collected from the 207 surveys was imported into Microsoft Excel and formatted for statistical interpretation. The Focus Group was transcribed and excerpts are taken from this transcript in the following discussion section.

a) Park Users: Who are They & What They did?

Demographic Information

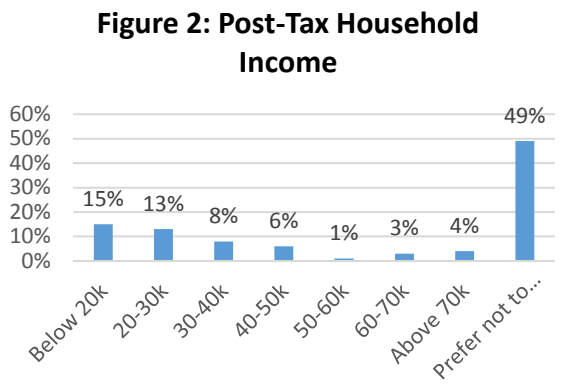
57% of park respondents were Brandon residents, 11% were visiting from Cambridge and 9% were visiting from Norwich. The remaining 23% were visiting from other areas of the country, or would not disclose (8%).

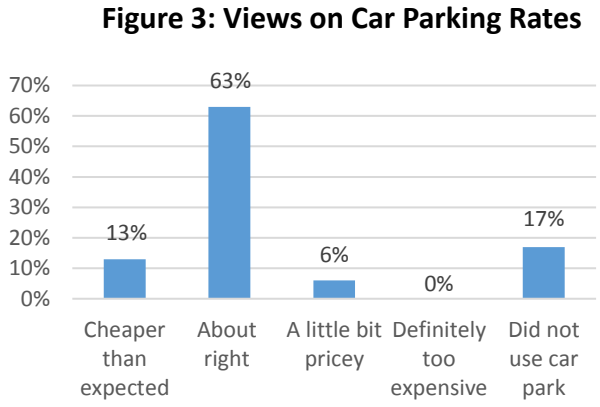


A conscious effort was made to maintain a rough split between male and female respondents and as such 53% of participants were female. Importantly, both 36-45 year olds and 66+ year olds provided the largest population demographics. We would expect during off season times however that retired people would represent a larger demographic, and thus it is crucial to not discount the importance of the elderly demographic.

From Figure 2, we note a downward trend in park usage from below £20,000 per year post-tax income, up to £50-60k per year. After this point there is a steady increase in users from £60-70k per year to above £70k per year. It is important to note however that almost 50% of respondents did not consent in sharing income details for the survey. In relation to car park pricing, 63% of respondents stated that car parking was “about right”, and no respondents thought the charges were “definitely too expensive”.

On the day of visitation, the modal time spent on-site is 1-2 hours (40%), with 2-3 hours (35%) following closely behind. 6% of those surveyed stayed less than 1 hour, and 17% for longer than 3 hours. From discussions with respondents, most users go for a short walk to the lake and lawn, and then return to the tearoom for refreshment before leaving. This is important for the park to know when reviewing and adjusting the car parking charges and timeframes.





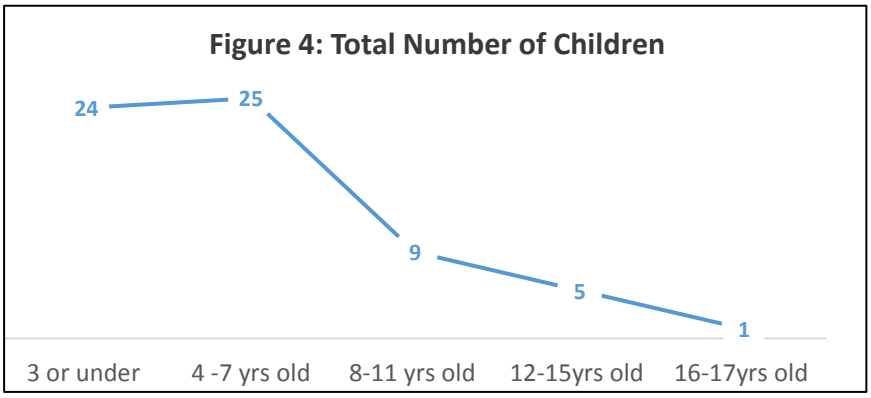
Park Alterations

Table 1 shows the aggregate activity decisions of the survey respondents, ordered by most favourable. Comparing this with 2015 data, the tearoom is consistently used by around 7 out of 8 people. From the 2016 cohort, walking around the grounds is equally popular. Discussed later, those activities with low uptake, such as the "Tree and History Trail" and "Marked Routes" could be suitable for investing in. This may relate to either structural changes or re-branding.

Table 1: What Survey Visitors Did

Activity	Did this on the visit (2016)	2015 Comparison	Activity	Did this on the visit (2016)	2015 Comparison
1. Tearoom	83%	87%	5. Marked Routes	34%	18.5%
2. Walking	82%	64%	6. Cycle trails	24%	14.5%
3. Lake/Lawn	69%	42.5%	7. Play Area	23%	4.5%
4. Mausoleum	38%	19.5%	8. Tree & Hist. Trail	11%	7%

It is important for the park to consider that a large part of its success is attributed to the child-friendly nature of the amenities, encouraging families to use the park regularly. Markedly, 100% of respondents who had a child in their group had used the play area facility. The modal age of these children was between 4-7 years, however 76% of children belonging to survey respondents were aged between 5 months and 7 years old. As clearly shown by Figure 4, there is a significant downward trend in children attending the park beyond the age of 7. Investing in an indoor play area was recommended by numerous respondents and when presenting this idea to the focus group, an obvious suggestion is for the inclusion of a small indoor ball-pool. This would be well suited to maintaining a fun and friendly environment for family users at both indoor and outdoor facilities within the park. Other suggestions for improving child facilities included more baby swings, a gift shop, installing monkey bars and expanding the play area itself.



80% of respondents have never attended an event at Brandon Country Park, with only 42 respondents having been to "at least one event" in their history of park usage. Of these, 'Park Run' was the most frequented, with 10 respondents having attended this activity. Importantly however, 67% of those who had *not* attended an event did not want to attend one in the future. The reason most commonly cited for this was that they used the park for tranquillity and wanted to avoid large groups. This appears a key point of conflict when comparing whether an amenity such as that at Brandon moves towards more crowd-orientated events, which bring large one-off revenues, or remain with their steady income stream with no doubt lower impacts on the local environmental and associated ecosystem. Notable recommendations for events are shown in Table 2:

Table 2: Suggested Events

Suggested Events	Frequency
"Kiddies'" events	15
Music events	10
Garden plays	3
Star Gazing	3
Audax*	3

When asking why people use Brandon Country Park, only 29 participants said that they used the park solely for exercise and health. 130 users used the park for both physical wellbeing (exercise and health) *and also* mental wellbeing (peace of mind) and 20 used the park solely for mental wellbeing. 14 users described other motives – including to take out the children or an elderly relative, visit the tearoom or to meet with friends. Maintaining a park which facilitates this mix of uses, including a prioritisation of conversation efforts and retention of the natural environment, is therefore a clear imperative. Some suggestions were given for an expansion of use-related events. One such example is Audax*- an orienteering-style exercise for cyclists. There are also suggestions of organised evening walks, a female MTB group, improved cycle routes and woodland survival technique classes. It is interesting to see how many of these suggestions involve ongoing engagement and interaction with the forest ecosystem and therefore the potential management implications of exploring these options.

Alongside the main suggestions given in the discussion section below, small enhancements included the provision of more dog waste bins and seating further into the park. The lake should be dredged (as far as is ecologically possible) and notice boards should be erected that keep users informed of park decisions and why these have been taken.

The Focus Group confirmed many survey respondent views. A fine example relates to The Mausoleum, where both forums raise a desire to gain an impression of its interior. An illustrative reconstruction of the original Mausoleum, a glass screen door to view inside, history boards and interactive sections were all suggested as ways to enhance this feature within the park. This would also coincide with planned initiatives to show-case the area's history, and be in conjunction with the proposed Brecks viewing platform as more 'hands-on' user facilities.

The tearoom is incredibly well received, with no major criticisms raised, although a few logistical issues, such as long queues and slow service at busy times, were noted. These issues are to be expected and hiring additional staff is unlikely to be economically worthwhile. The adjacent "Walled Garden" would benefit from a seasonal blackboard. Here, plant names could be displayed for gardeners and this could be a place where users write suggestions for what they would like to see.

b) Discussion for Park Transition

This section outlines how both survey and focus group responses can provide direction for Brandon Country Park's management on how to transform and improve the park for its users.

Echoing previous studies conducted at the park, the first point of note here is that users are generally content with its atmosphere and facilities. Indeed, the changes suggested below do not require extreme financial investment, and doing this may actually detract from the essence of natural tranquillity which attracts its existing clientele.

Table 1 reinforces this point. It shows the uptake of most attractions within the park is already high and people make good use of what is already offered. When assessing visitation frequency and stay duration data, it seems the park largely performs the role of a local community amenity. As such, future spending should seek to make small, visible, incremental improvements that demonstrate a desire to maintain and widen its appeal to existing consumers as opposed to wild adjustments that could dissuade the park's main user base from continued and repeated visitation. This in itself indicates the value this clientele have for the ongoing efforts of management to maintain and preserve the woodland ecosystem and prevent excessive degradation or commercialisation of a public amenity space. This is encouraging for the park's management, signalling a positive confirmation that (a) they already supply a facility suited to its users and (b) recommendations for improvement are both structurally and financially viable.

Result 1: ***Existing park users are broadly content with the facility, and suggested changes are both small-scale and financially viable. The park should seek to make visible yet incremental improvements so as to maintain and emphasise the local community feel of the amenity and retain the natural and tranquil atmosphere it provides.***

Despite Result 1, patterns do arise from both the quantitative and qualitative surveys for guidance on where basic park improvements are feasible. A major example here is in the descriptions, signposting and branding of on-site trails. Table 1 confirms this, showing only 11% of those surveyed used the "Tree & History Trail". Regarding suggestions for trail improvement, the majority of answers revolved around one of the themes below:

- Trails have inadequate signposting regarding both their distance and estimated completion time.
- There is a lack of seating and interesting or interactive aspects on the trails to maintain the user experience for adults or children.
- A deficiency in the diversity of trails or that current trail names do not confer potentially different experiences.

These themes partially overlapped with those raised during the focus group, exemplified by some of the extracted comments below:

i. "*It would be good to have a trail which only lasts 5 minutes, you know, to be used by those people who are very old or have a disability*" **FG Respondent A1**
ii. "*What does the trail name actually mean? Why don't we have something a bit more interesting for young people to do*" **FG Respondent A3**
iii. "*Definitely need some benches along the way!*" **FG Respondent A1**

Potential remedies were raised by both questionnaire respondents and the discussion group. Examples include a 'trim trail' with small optional exercise stops; a "disability-friendly" trail, explicitly stating both its shortness in length and even surfaces. The latter would issue reassurance and possibly lead to the park being seen as a more inclusive facility.

Improving trails nicely complements another of the park's objectives –to enhance the health and well-being benefits within its facility. Firstly, trail diversification will allow a broader range of people to undertake manageable physical exercise. Secondly, by re-branding some routes as ones that pertain to peace and tranquillity offer an avenue for escapism and the ability for the park to demonstrate the psychological benefits which its natural environment can seemingly facilitate.

***Result 2:* Trails should be both re-branded and more clearly signposted with regards to duration, distance and intended user-groups. Ideas include a short route for less confident walkers, a trim trail for active users and an interactive family course. Associated infrastructure such as exercise apparatus, increased seating and children's activities are advised. Such adjustments could also improve showcasing the mental well-being benefits Brandon Country Park's trails can offer.**

Many changes were raised by and relate to cycling. These include the construction of a bike shelter and bike-wash facilities; a broadening of the café menu to include nutritional items that cyclists would benefit from (e.g. energy bars or sports drinks) and the sale of bicycle products like puncture repair kits in the visitor centre. Once more, some of these themes arose through focus group discussion, and in particular councillor members recalled a previous request for a bike-wash facility and questioned its absence at the park.

It is noteworthy that many of these suggestions would also enhance the park's appeal to other users. Two such examples were raised at the focus group:

- A semi-sheltered changing facility for cyclists coincided with a concern raised by a park employee that open-air changing was potentially off-putting for other users.
- A shelter could not only accommodate the needs of cyclists, but also be a place where people tethered dogs whilst getting refreshments or seek shelter in adverse weather.

Therefore, implementing some of the changes instigated by cyclists hold the potential to simultaneously benefit other user-groups for their own purposes.

Result 3: ***Appease the Cyclists! This group identify many small structural improvements, including stock sold on-site and the construction of a semi-sheltered change and bike-wash facility. Not only are these very cost-effective measures for an integral group of users, but these adjustments are likely to benefit a wider range of the park's clientele and thus have multiplied advantage through their implementation.***

The final major point of discussion revolves around the scope, frequency and advertising of on-site events at the park. Site managers already have detailed future designs in this regard, no better demonstrated than by the ongoing construction of a 'lodge' building, designed to house events like conferences, weddings or private functions. Not wishing to outline a direct events template, this report instead simply conveys some broad insights regarding user perspectives for the activities that could take place and how this could complement their existing connection to the amenity.

One such aspect considers advertising. Focus group members emphatically agreed that social media was the most fruitful and cost-effective method for raising awareness of an event. One participant also emphasised that eye-catching advertising boards at the park entrance could be helpful in capturing the attention of a different (non-digital) sector of potential attendees. Moreover, by frequently changing these boards, the park would convey to passing road-users that it caters to a diverse range of people, as well as reminding them of the facility's existence itself. Of course, the promotional strategy for the 'lodge' could take a totally different route and, upon completion, paper advertisements, tourist information pamphlets or attendance at specialist events like wedding fairs might be necessary to stimulate initial interest.

Finally, themes in the aforementioned events suggested by respondents in both the surveys and the focus group should be scrutinised. They included family events in school holidays, gardening and wildlife demonstrations by local experts and the possibility of workshop-style sessions for local people, combined with a subsequent craft fair event. Such events hold common principles of connecting people in a community setting and being of an outdoor nature. This not only coincides with the current facility ambience, but provides another way to demonstrate the increased health and well-being advantages which the park and its assimilated activities can issue.

Result 4: ***The Park should continue in its pursuit to host a range of events on-site, but should ensure advertising is conductive with those who they hope will attend whilst remaining cost-effective. Furthermore, there is an opportunity to reinforce the local and outdoor appeal which the park already holds by providing events themed around the natural world or community action.***

Conclusion

Conclusively, this work has shown the challenges that a woodland management authority have when trying to improve he economic viability of its facility whilst simultaneously attempting to conserve the natural environment and its biodiversity. Not only do people value this in itself and state it was a major reason for visitation, but effective forest conservation also forms a major objective of sustainable environmental planning. The studies here have shown the park should not try to deviate away from its main function, namely in acting as a local facility with the primary purpose of being utilised for both physical and mental wellbeing. Its major attraction lies in the tranquillity and relaxation which the park manifests, creating user enjoyment from the park and leading to their recurring usage. Incremental changes would be beneficial, and would allow the park to maximise the satisfaction of its users based on 207 survey responses and information gleaned from a Focus Group in this 2016 project.

The most notable infrastructural changes that stemmed from the research are concisely listed below:

1. Make significant **investments in the walking and cycling trails** currently located at the parks. This relates to re-branding, infrastructure and signposting.
2. Consider changes to the on-site **cycling facilities**. Not only do cycling groups constitute a vital section of the park's clientele, but the suggested improvements could have spill-over benefits for other users
3. The park should continue to host a **range of appropriate events** for users and devise a suitable mix of promotional strategies to ensure these are well attended

We suggest that the park consider implementing as many of the changes suggested in this report as it feasible. Once done, it would be prudent to review the success of these adjustments through a repeat consultation with park users in the future. Crucially, it is clear that there are trade-offs between economic commercialisation of a forest amenity and the subsequent impact on the ecosystem itself. However, this study has shown that if properly targeted and planned, it is possible to preserve a popular woodland amenity in a way that retains the depth of biodiversity and environmental quality whilst at the same time improving the health and wellbeing of its user group.