



The Cheshire Sandstone Ridge Visitor Survey 2024

Final Report



University of
Chester

North Cheshire
COMMUNITY RAIL



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Executive Summary

The Cheshire Sandstone Ridge is a significant natural and cultural landscape, known for its striking geological features, rich biodiversity, and historical landmarks. To better understand visitor demographics, experiences, and expectations, a comprehensive visitor survey was conducted in the summer of 2024, which comprised an on-site visitor survey and an online visitor survey, and which was designed to update and supplement the 2017 visitor survey. The findings provide insights that will guide future infrastructure improvements, promotion of the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge, tourism development, and management strategies.

The primary objectives of the survey were to:

1. Continue to identify the profile and origin of visitors
2. Capture demographic data of the visitors (not captured in 2017)
3. Identify reasons and motivations for visiting the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge
4. Assess the levels of visitor satisfaction
5. Examine the barriers to visiting the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge

The survey was conducted over a four-month period and a total of 874 respondents participated, representing a diverse mix of visitors, including local residents, domestic tourists, and even international travellers. Data collection focused on frequency of visits, motivations, preferred activities and locations, and perceptions of the Ridge's amenities and services, as well as exploring any barriers to visiting the Ridge.

Key Findings

1. Visitor profile - the majority of visitors were domestic tourists from Cheshire and across the North West, and this profile has not altered since 2017. Most visitors were aged between 40-70+ years, with groups, couples, and families making up the largest segments.
2. Popular activities - walking and dog walking were the most favoured activities.
3. Satisfaction levels - over 95% of respondents reported high satisfaction with their visit, citing the Ridge's scenic beauty and tranquillity as key highlights. However, many visitors expressed concerns regarding parking availability, quality of roads, and parking costs, as well as issues with dogs and dog waste, signage, and maintenance and accessibility of some trails.
4. Economic impact - the volume of visitors to the Ridge plays a key role in supporting the local economy, particularly through spending on parking, food, and accommodation. Many visitors expressed a willingness to pay for improved services, such as parking, if it helped to support the maintenance and access of the Ridge.
5. Accessibility and inclusivity - while the Ridge is generally accessible, feedback indicated a need for better facilities to aid access to the Ridge (including for individuals with disabilities), with enhanced public transport links (such as a seasonal hop-on/hop-off Ridge bus) outlined as an issue, as well as clearer signposting, and maintenance of trails.

Executive Summary

From the wide range of findings, there are a number of recommendations to be considered. These include:

1. Infrastructure improvements - invest in maintaining local roads and repairing potholes and uneven surfaces, improved parking facilities, provide better signage, and undertake trail maintenance to enhance the visitor experience.
2. Marketing strategies – review and develop promotional activities in partnership with key stakeholders to attract a wider audience, including international visitors and underrepresented groups.
3. Enhanced resources – develop digital and interactive resources, such as mobile route apps or downloadable interactive guides, to enrich the visitor experience and exploration across the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge.
4. Improved transport links – investigate the potential to develop seasonal public transport links via train and bus across the Ridge, thereby increasing accessibility and reducing parking congestion.

The Cheshire Sandstone Ridge continues to be a treasured natural and cultural asset. Insights from this survey highlight the importance of balancing conservation with tourism growth, whilst ensuring a sustainable and enjoyable experience for all. By implementing strategic improvements and fostering responsible tourism, the Ridge can remain a cherished destination for generations to come.



Introduction

Introduction and Acknowledgements

The Cheshire Sandstone Ridge Visitor Survey was undertaken across the summer of 2024 and was designed to complement and build upon a previous visitor survey undertaken in 2017. The 2017 visitor survey was one component of a larger 24-month project, which also incorporated a community consultation, stakeholder interviews, Town and Parish Council workshops, as well as a secondary data review of key policy documents.

The 2024 visitor survey was tasked with examining the overall visitor experience of the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge and was designed specifically to gather a raft of information examining visitor profiles, usage, behaviour, and satisfaction levels.

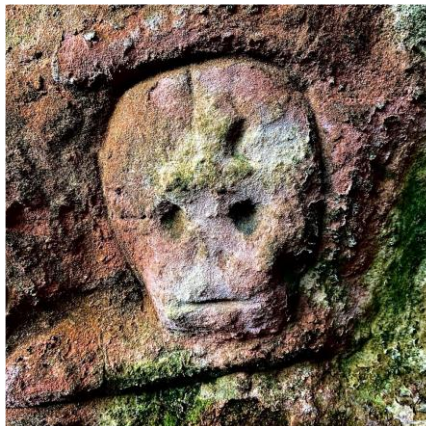
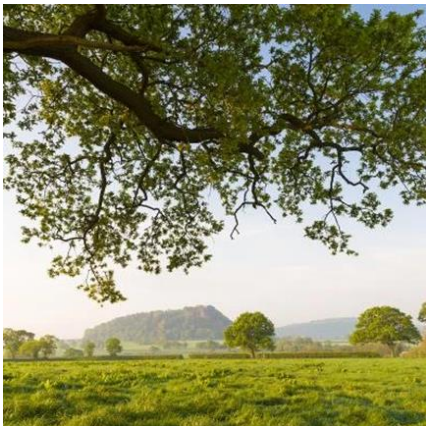
The data and findings will be used to inform management strategies, partnerships, and projects undertaken by the Sandstone Ridge Trust and other key stakeholders, which will enhance the visitor offer and experience, and identify opportunities for improving infrastructure, creating additional events and activities, as well as engaging with new markets.

Acknowledgements

This project was funded by the UK Government through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF).

The project was also supported by a number of key stakeholders which included:

- The Sandstone Ridge Trust, their executive committee, and volunteers.
- University of Chester, the survey project team and student surveyors.
- North Cheshire Community Rail team, Garfield Southall and Marina Farey.
- Marketing Cheshire.
- The staff at Delamere Forest, Beeston Castle (English Heritage), and National Trust.
- The visitors who kindly gave their time to support the project.



About the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge

Standing prominently above the surrounding plain, the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge is one of county's most distinctive landscapes, covering 230 square kilometres of rolling hills and sandstone escarpments stretching between the Mersey Valley and the county boundary with Shropshire.

The Cheshire Sandstone Ridge is a vibrant and diverse rural landscape and is home to more than 36,000 people who live in the area, providing a living for over 400 farmers and landowners. In addition, over 1,000 businesses are located on the Ridge. More than 1 million visitors a year are attracted to the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge from across Cheshire and the surrounding conurbations of Greater Manchester, Merseyside, North Wales and the Midlands (Sandstone Ridge, 2018), providing a significant positive impact to the local rural economy and supporting the numerous attractions, businesses, towns and villages across the region.

At the time of writing (April 2025) the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge is being considered by Natural England as a potential Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

It also provides the region with many of the essentials of life, such as, clean air and water, food, timber and raw materials. Furthermore, it helps to regulate the local climate, stores flood waters, filters pollution, and provides opportunities for the public to improve health and wellbeing.

The Ridge has many special qualities that define its sense of place and distinctiveness, and make it highly cherished (Sandstone Ridge, n.d.):

- Breath-taking and panoramic views to Merseyside, the Shropshire Hills, Peak District and Welsh Hills
- 250-million-year-old Triassic sandstone outcrops and cliffs – the backbone of Cheshire
- A refuge for wildlife and habitats including internationally important meres and mosses, and the most extensive remnants of lowland heath and sessile oakwood in Cheshire
- Over six thousand years of human occupation, with six prehistoric hill forts, a medieval royal forest and two castles
- Great opportunities for outdoor recreation and learning experiences, including the 55km long Sandstone Trail
- Picturesque market towns, villages and hamlets, with half-timbered black-and-white and sandstone manor houses, farms and historic inns
- Communities with real pride in their area
- A tranquil landscape shaped by centuries of farming, forestry and utilisation of natural resources, including ancient springs, wells and water sources, and an industrial heritage of copper mining and sandstone quarrying
- A source of inspiration, folklore and legend

Methodology

In order to capture a wide array of data examining the visitor experience and barriers to visiting the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge, two visitor surveys were conducted between July and October 2024. The first survey was an 'on-site' survey at a number of locations on and across the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge. The second survey was an 'online' survey which was promoted across the wider Cheshire region, to gather additional insights as well as exploring barriers to accessing the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge.

In total 328 on-site visitor surveys were completed, and 546 online visitor survey responses were received (874 responses in total).

The on-site survey research data was gathered using face-to-face interviews across several locations, with the data recorded onto Jisc Online Survey. Surveying was carried out before, during and after the peak school holiday season on weekdays and at weekends. A random selection of people was approached and interviewed (no quotas set), with each survey taking approximately 15 minutes to complete.

Both sample sizes of 328 and 546 provide a confidence level of 95%, with a confidence interval/margin of error of 5%.

It should be recognised that the results reported refer to actual responses received. Not all the questions were mandatory and therefore the number of respondents for some questions are less than the total responses, for example for overnight visitors and their accommodation choices. Similarly for some questions respondents were able to select multiple answers, for example the reasons for visiting the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge, meaning the total number of responses for these questions was higher. Where these differences occur this has been noted within the findings.

Methodology

Building specifically on the 2017 visitor survey, the 2024 visitor survey was designed to the following principles (adapted from the 2017 guidance):

- Gather comprehensive data on visitor usage of the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge
- Highlight the Ridge's strengths and weaknesses of the Ridge as a visitor destination
- Highlight areas requiring improvement and potential opportunities for the Ridge
- Gather a wide range of views and opinions of visitors and non-visitors to aid in future strategies for the Ridge
- Inform the development of appropriate branding, marketing, and events for the Ridge to increase visitor numbers
- Provide guidance on the provision and possible improvement of the current visitor offer/facilities, and how this has evolved since 2017
- Provide information to inform future partnership and funding work in the area
- Continue to build upon the baseline data set to inform future visitor surveys

In order to achieve these principles and appropriately build upon the 2017 data set, it was important to replicate many of the core questions from the 2017 survey, whilst adding appropriate variations.

Therefore, the 2024 visitor survey was designed to:

1. Continue to identify the profile and origin of visitors
2. Capture demographic data of the visitors (not captured in 2017)
3. Identify reasons and motivations for visiting the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge
4. Assess the levels of visitor satisfaction
5. Examine the barriers to visiting the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge

Methodology

The on-site visitor surveys were conducted by a team from the University of Chester, led by Dr Tim Brown and Dr Gozde Turktarhan, as well as additional surveys conducted by volunteers from the Sandstone Ridge Trust.

The surveys were undertaken between July and October 2024 at a number of locations on and across the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge. The days and times were varied to attempt to capture different perspectives and profiles of visitors.

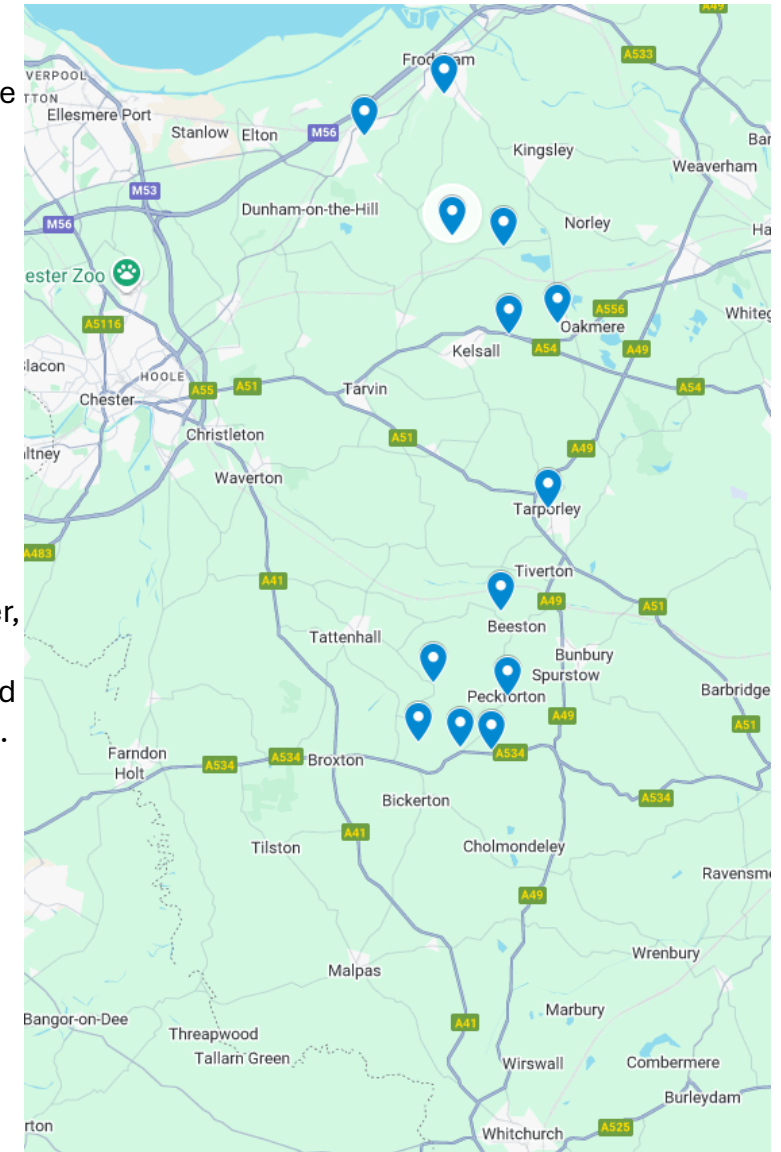
The locations are indicated on the map (right) which pins the thirteen different locations used for the survey. The table (below) outlines in more detail the different locations, the number of surveys completed at each location, the number of visits to that location between July and October, and the percentage of total responses gathered at each location. The table highlights that both Delamere Forest and Bickerton Hill received the highest number of responses which is due to each location being surveyed three times across the summer (due to the high visitor numbers at these locations). The other locations were all visited once, and as well as those listed in the table, other sites included Burwardsley, Tarporley, Peckforton, Helsby Hill, and Eddisbury.

As with all research, there are elements of unavoidable bias within the on-site survey which are important to recognise:

- The number of surveys collected in each location significantly varied (due to time of day, day of week, weather, etc).
- Those who were surveyed had chosen to visit the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge, generally in visitor ‘hotspots’ and are therefore likely to already have a positive attitude towards the Ridge, particularly if they had visited before.

Location	No of surveys	Percentage	No of visits to location
Delamere Forest	118	36.0%	3
Bickerton Hill	106	32.3%	3
Beeston	28	8.5%	1
Gresty's Waste	22	6.7%	1
Frodsham Hill	17	5.2%	1
Other	37	11.3%	1 at each location (8)
Total	328	100.0%	17

Map of survey locations



Part 1 – On-site Visitor Survey

On-site Survey

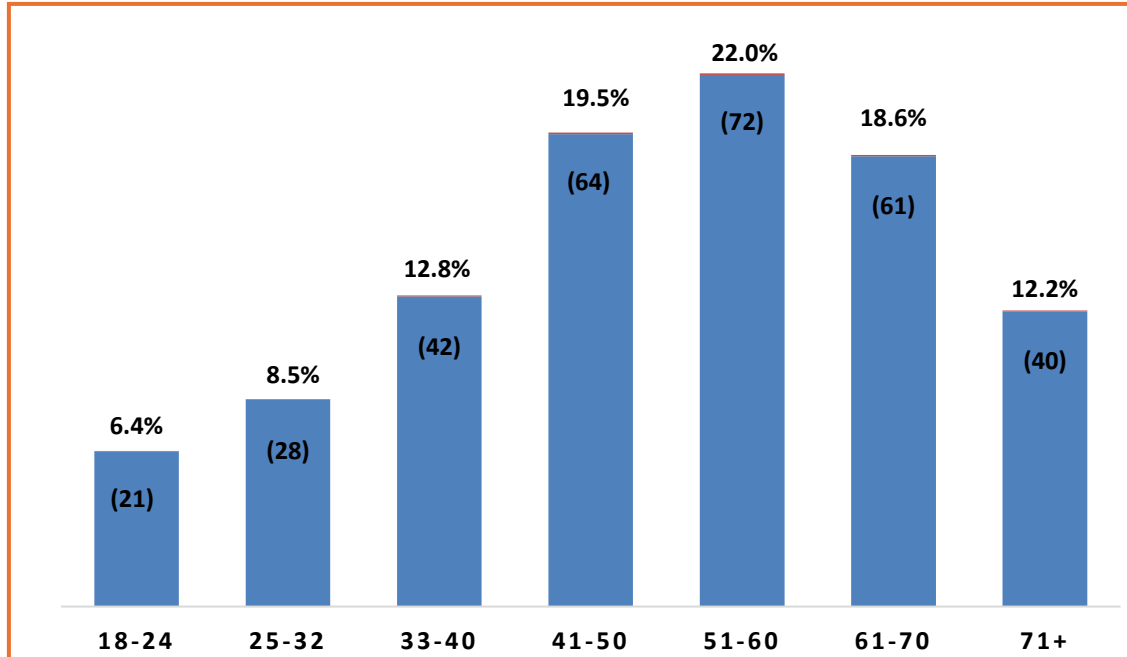
The on-site visitor survey was conducted between July and October 2024 at a number of locations on and across the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge. In total 328 on-site visitor surveys were completed using face-to-face interviews, with the responses captured within the Jisc Online Survey application.

The on-site visitor survey findings are presented in the following order:

- Visitor demographics
- Home location of visitors
- Overnight visitors
- Travel to and from the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge
- Exploring the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge
- Reasons for visiting the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge
- Frequency of visits to the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge
- Dwell time at the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge
- Awareness of the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge
- Visitor spend
- Visitor satisfaction
- Improving the visit

Visitor Demographics

Age profile of respondents

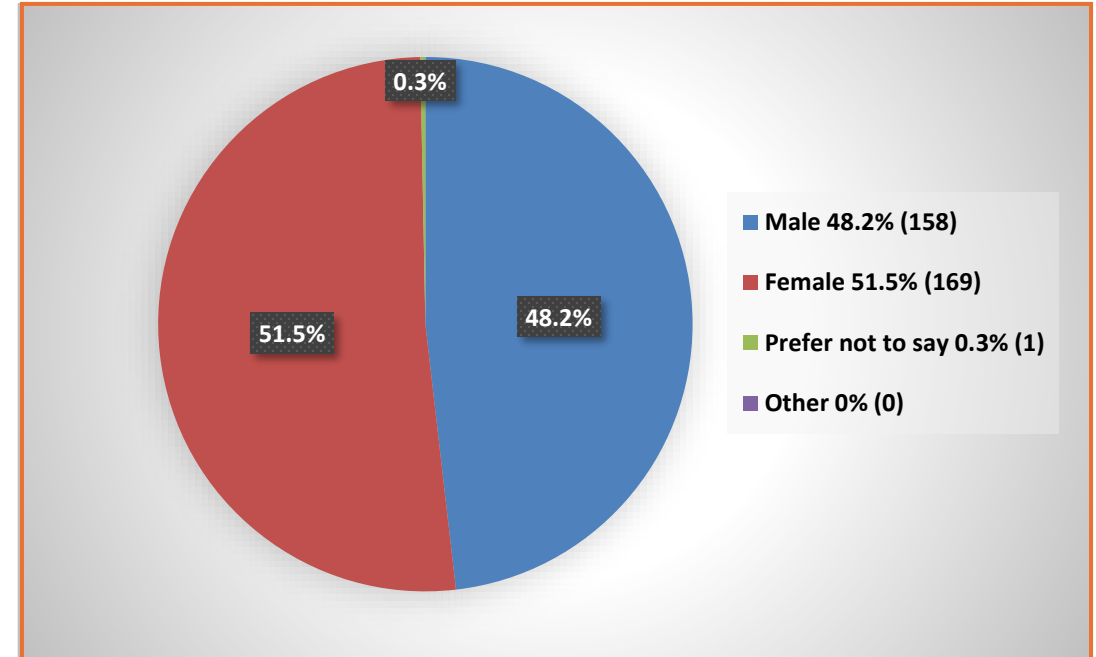


The age profile of respondents visiting the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge varied, with the highest proportion aged between 51 and 60 years old (22%), with 41 to 50 years being the second highest (19.5%), closely followed by those aged 61 to 70 (18.6%). Overall, the data highlighted that the main proportion of visitors ranged between 41-70 (60.1%) indicating that the Ridge attracts an older demographic of visitors.

Furthermore, according to the data, only 14.9% of visitors are aged between 18 and 32, highlighting a potential gap in attracting a younger audience to the Ridge.

The age demographics and distribution recorded are similar to the Cheshire and North West Census Data 2021 (ONS, 2023).

Gender of respondents

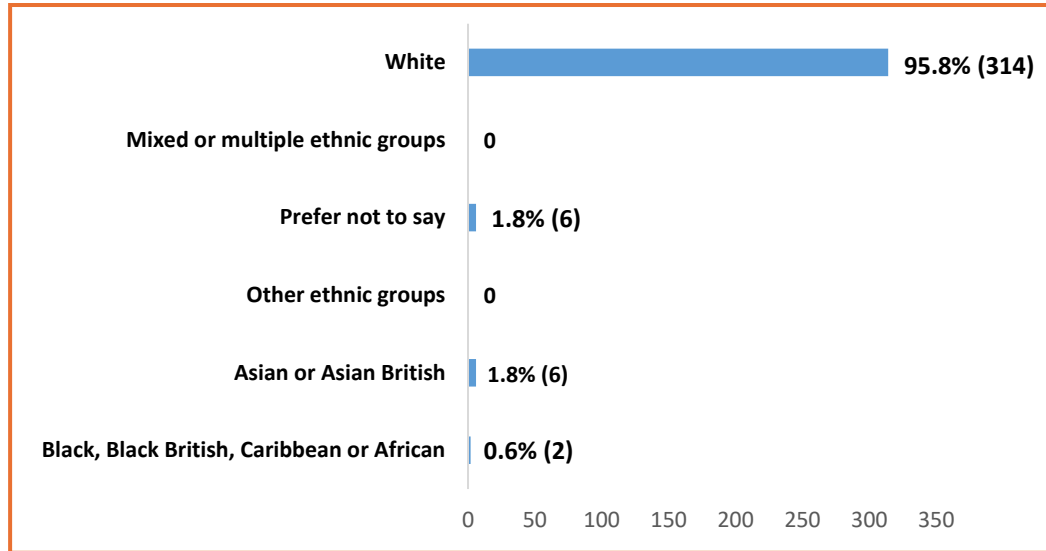


The gender profile of respondents is a nearly even split with 51.5% female and 48.2% male, with one respondent indicating that they 'prefer not to say'.

This data also aligned with the North West and Cheshire Census Data (Varbes, 2024a), which highlights that the region is 51% female and 49% male.

Visitor Demographics

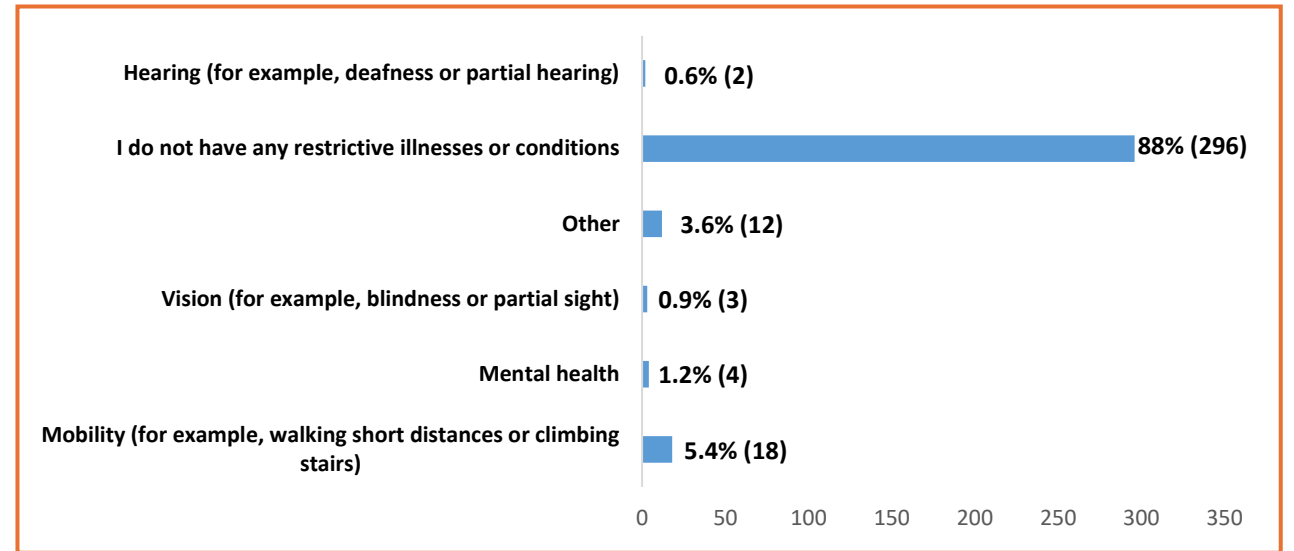
Ethnicity of respondents



The profile of respondents highlighted that 95.8% identified as being white, with 2.4% belonging to a different ethnic group, and with a further 1.8% not wishing to provide a response to this question. This data is higher than the North West which is 86% white, and England and Wales which is 82% white, but is in keeping with Cheshire Census Data where the average is 94.5% white (Varbes, 2024a).

One potential consideration from these findings is to review the marketing for the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge in order to attract a more diverse visitor profile from across the UK, as well as internationally.

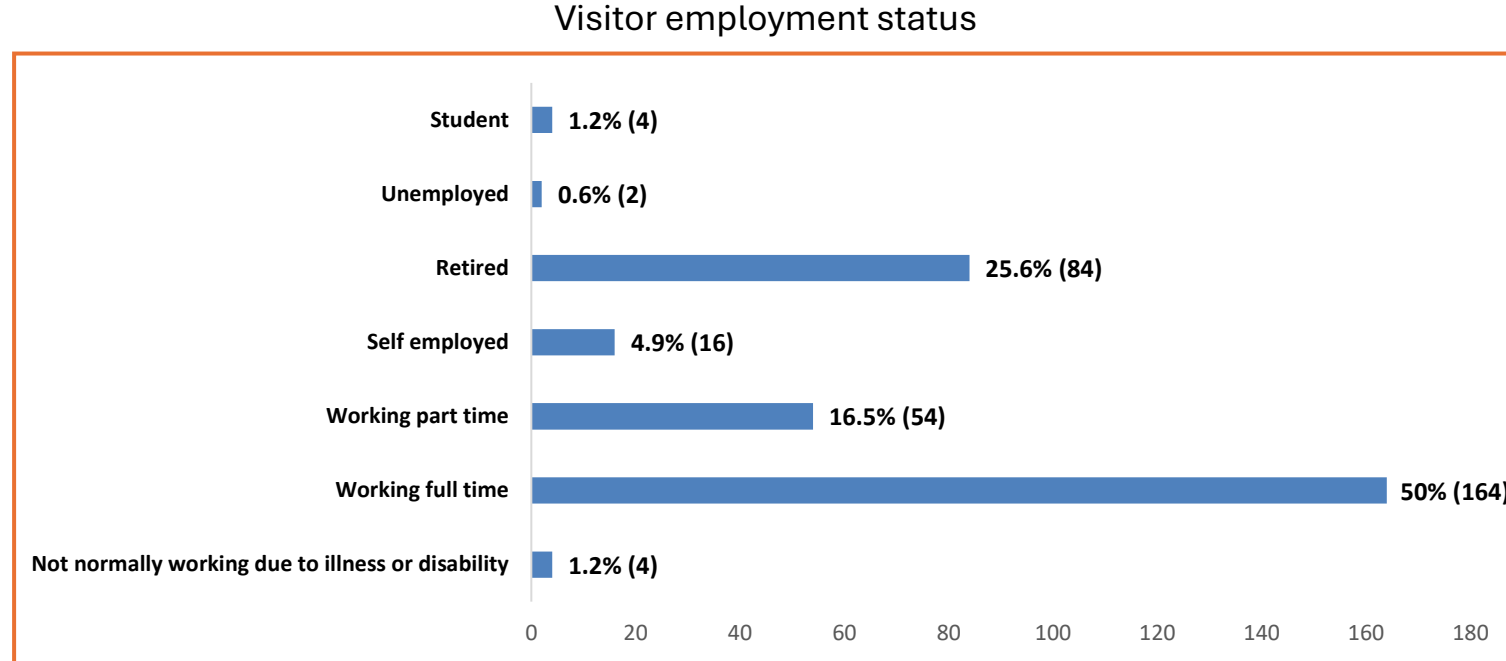
Disability/long-term health conditions



The profile of respondents highlighted that 88% do not have any restrictive illness or condition, but that 12% of respondents do, with a small number identifying as having more than one long term condition. Of those with a restrictive illness or condition, 5.4% identified mobility issues, which is also highlighted within the 'other' category with 3.6% of respondents noting "limited stamina" or "chronic fatigue" as examples of the underlying health conditions. Hearing (0.6%), vision (0.9%), and mental health (1.2%), accounted for the other results.

This data is lower than the national average where 17.7% of the population have a disability that limits their ability to undertake some day to day activities (such as visiting destinations) (ONS, 2023). This data is useful as it indicates that regionally and nationally health considerations need to be factored into visiting destinations, and whilst the rural nature of the Ridge is a key part of its appeal, ensuring that parts of the Ridge are accessible will be important in attracting more visitors.

Visitor Demographics



The profile of respondents highlighted that 50% of visitors were working full-time, 25.6% were retired, and 16.5% worked part-time. This data differs from both the National and North West data, where 76% of people were working full-time, and 24% were working part-time (Gov.uk, 2023), and 16% of the population were retired (ONS, 2024).

Of the remaining visitor respondents, 4.9% outlined that they were self employed, which is slightly lower than the North West average of 9.6% (Varbes, 2024b). The unemployed status (0.6%), is considerably lower than the North West average of 4.2% (Nomis, 2024), but the student status (1.2%) and those not working due to illness/disability (1.2%) are both in keeping with the North West and National average which is 1% (Nomis, 2024).

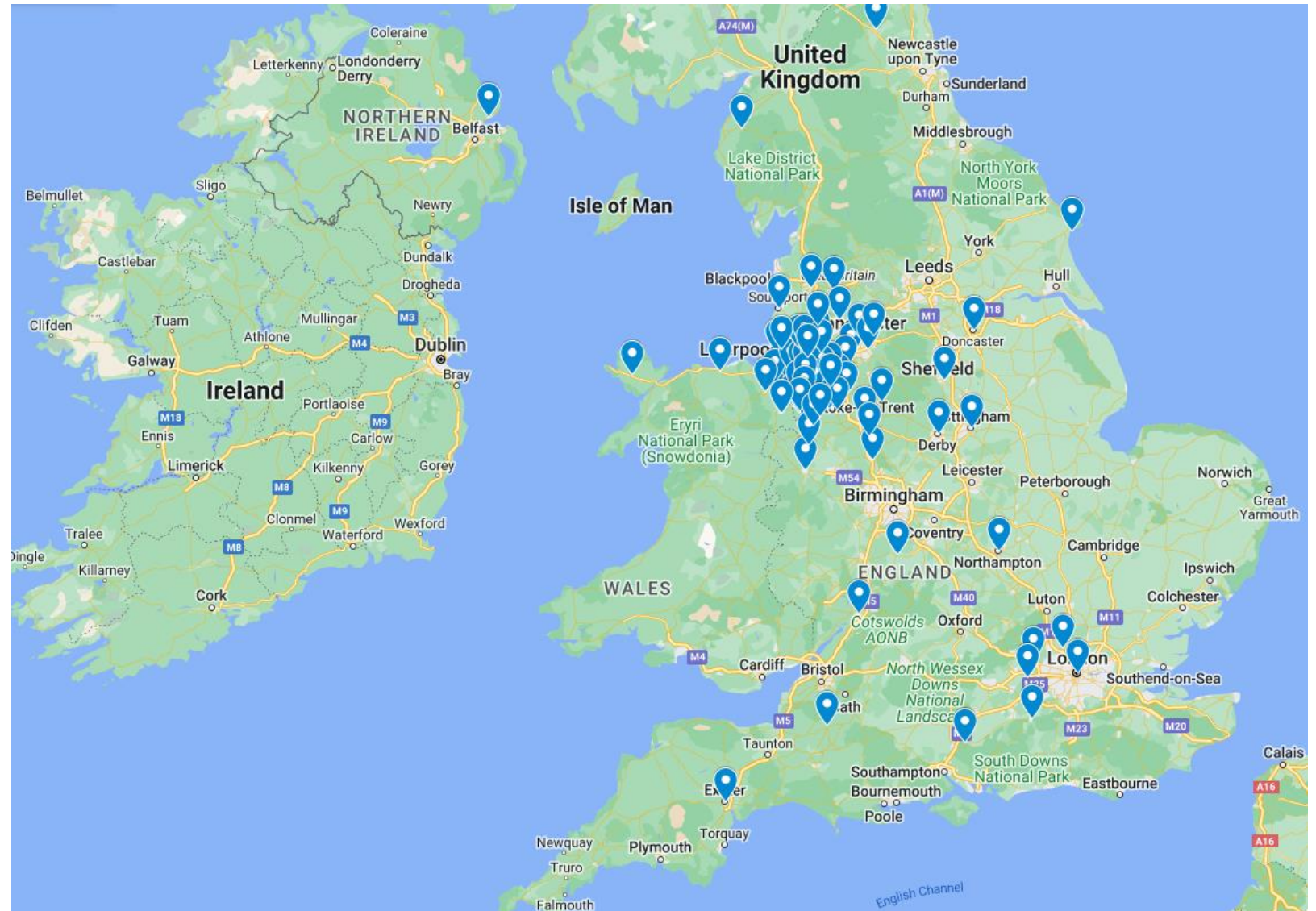
The variations in data captured for full-time, part-time and retired visitors, is likely attributed to the days, times, and locations of the surveys undertaken whereby more retired visitors were most likely surveyed during week days, compared to those who were working, therefore resulting in some of data being out of sync with National and North West data trends.

Home Location of Visitors

Map showing the home location of visitors

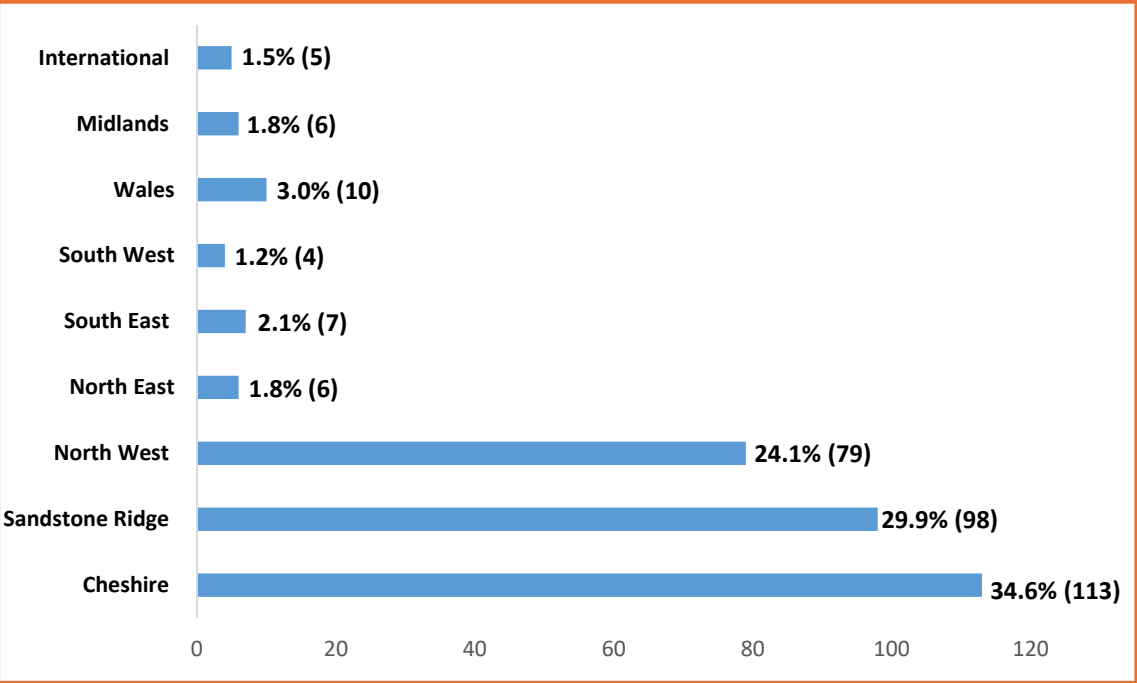
As outlined in the map (right) the geographic profile of respondents' home location was overwhelmingly from across Cheshire (34.5%) and the North West (24%), or living in towns or villages on the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge (30%). A further 3% of visitors were from North Wales and all were in relatively close proximity to the Ridge.

The remaining 7.5% of visitors came from across the UK and Northern Ireland (as demonstrated in the map). Finally an additional 1% were international visitors from Malta, The Netherlands, USA, and Australia.

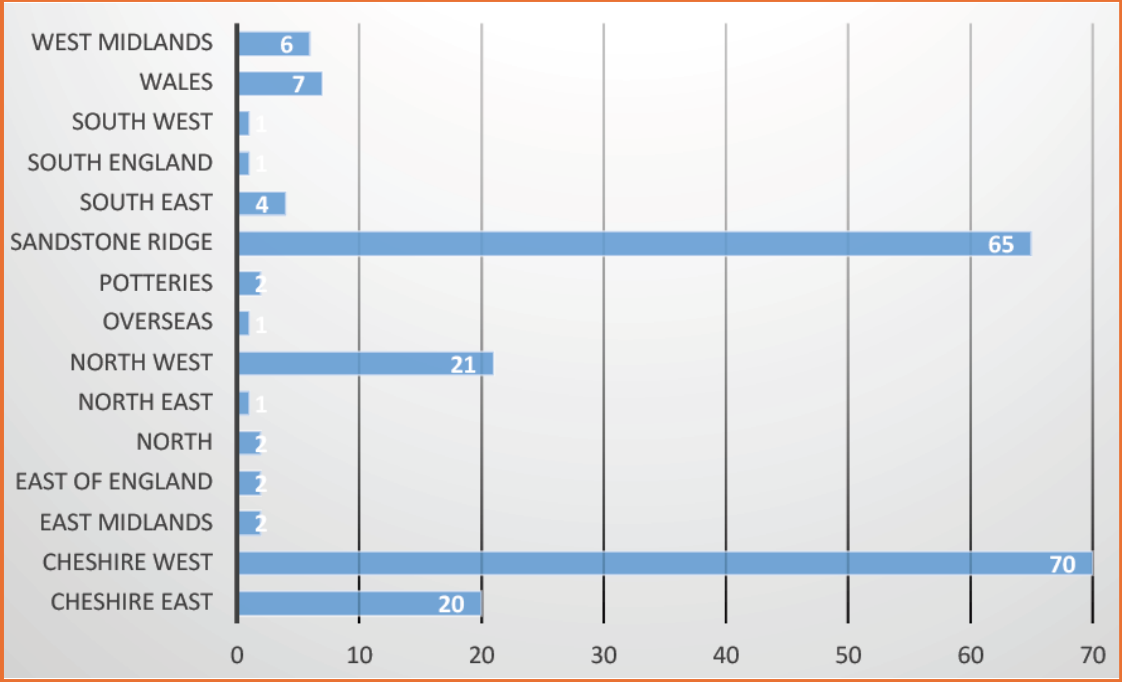


Home Location of Visitors

Home location of visitors 2024



Home location of visitors 2017

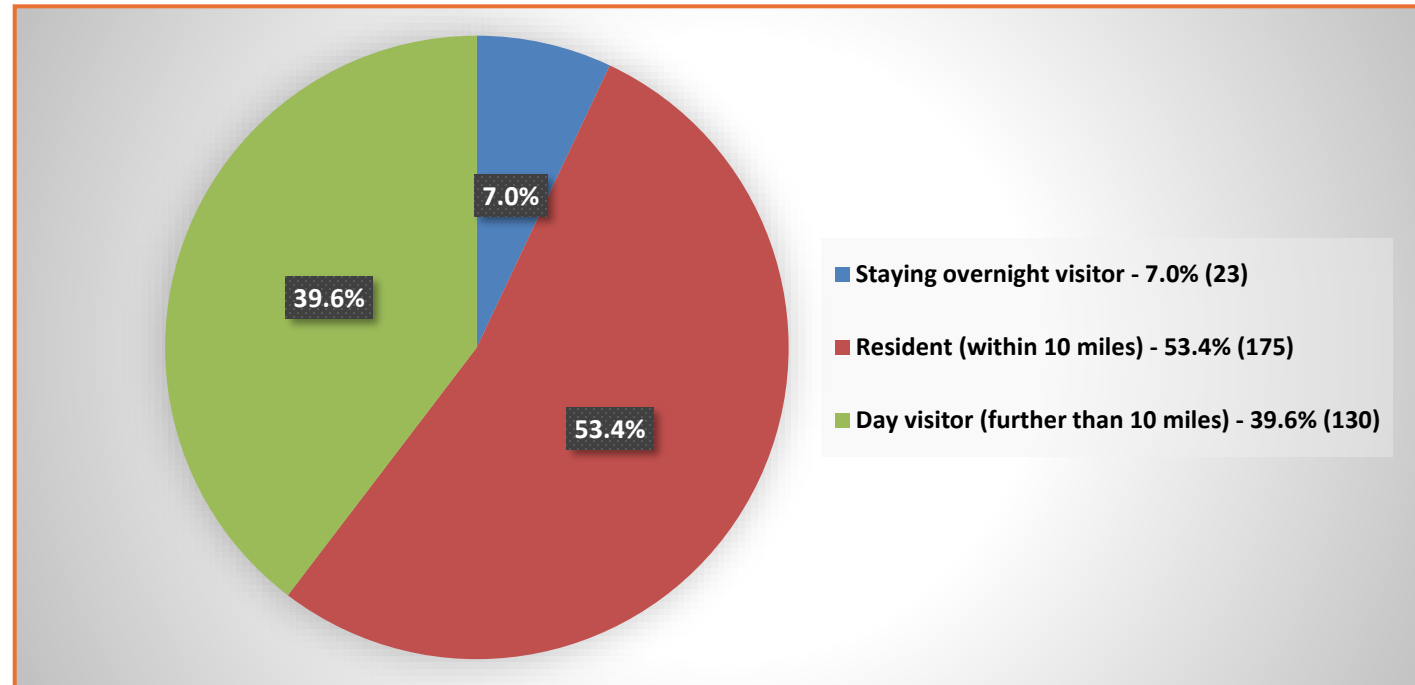


As highlighted on the map previously, the home location of visitors to the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge is predominantly from across Cheshire and the North West, with only a smaller proportion currently visiting from the rest of the UK or internationally (above left).

This profile is very similar to the visitor home locations from the 2017 survey (above right). This highlights that the majority of visitors and their home location profile has changed little in the last 8 years. There is therefore a potential need to review and develop new marketing materials and campaigns to aid in attracting a wider number of visitors from across the North West and UK as a whole, particularly if the Ridge is designated as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty by Natural England, as well as managing the Ridge for future generations.

Home Location of Visitors

Proximity of visitors to the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge



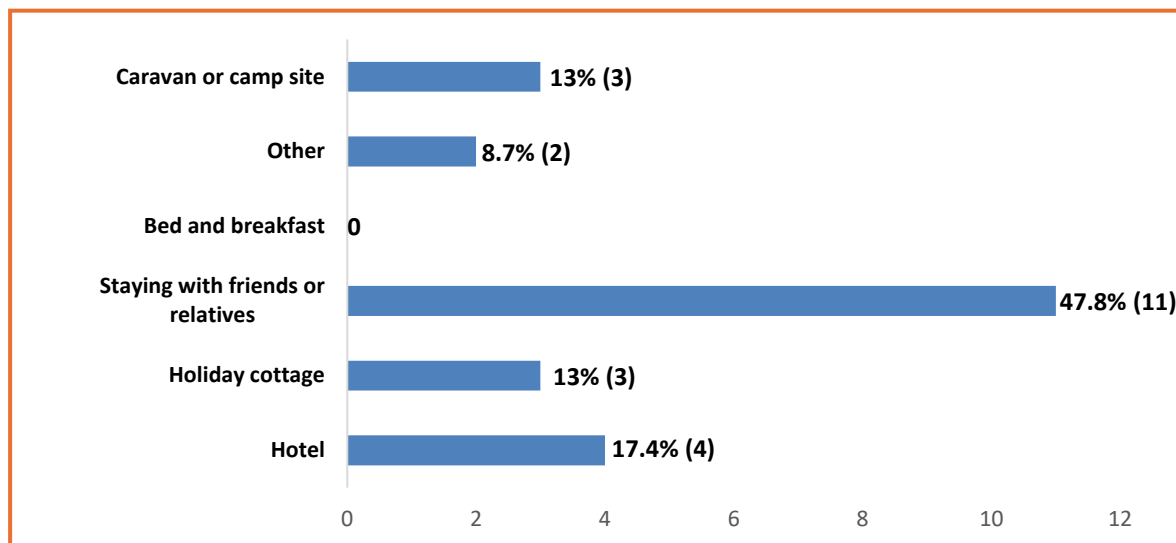
Visitors were asked to indicate their proximity to the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge to aid in profiling the types of visitors that use the Ridge. Some 53.4% indicated that they lived within less than 10 miles of the Ridge, which were therefore classed as being 'resident'. An additional 39.6% outlined that they were a 'day visitor' having travelled further than 10 miles to access the Ridge, and the final 7% were 'overnight visitors'.

From a visitor economy perspective the 7% who were 'overnight visitors' have added some additional insights as to how and where they were staying and therefore contributing to the region's visitor economy. The value of the regional visitor economy is now estimated to be over £3.9 billion annually, with over 56 million visitors across Cheshire and Warrington each year (Enterprise Cheshire and Warrington, 2024).

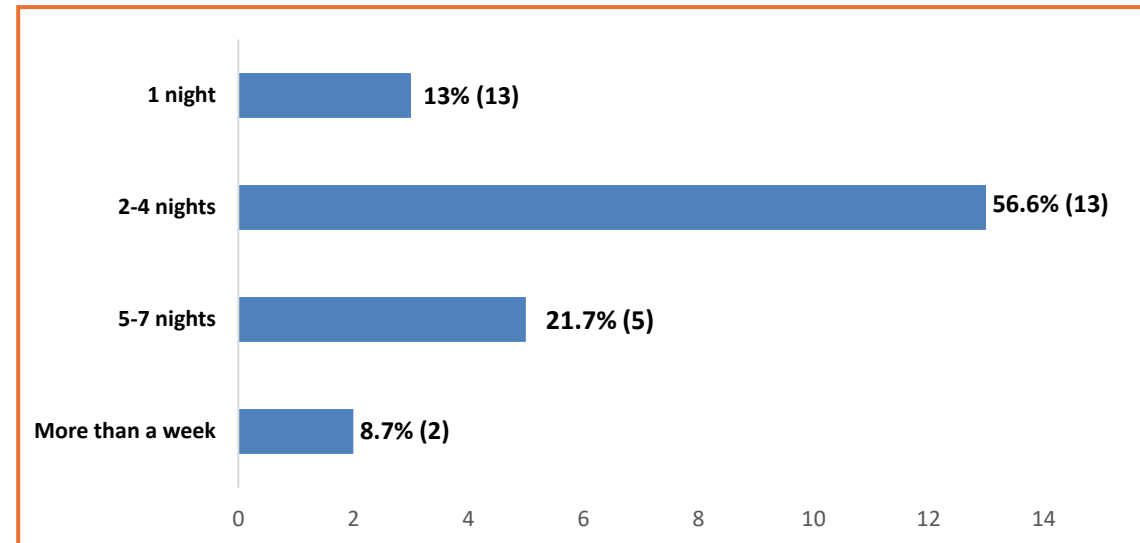
As outlined by the Sandstone Ridge Trust it is estimated that the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge attracts over one million visitors per year, and if the Ridge achieves Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty status, this will likely have a positive impact on visitor numbers. This will need to be balanced with conservation and management of the Ridge, ensuring that appropriate visitor infrastructure is developed.

Overnight Visitors

Accommodation of overnight visitors to the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge



Duration of visit



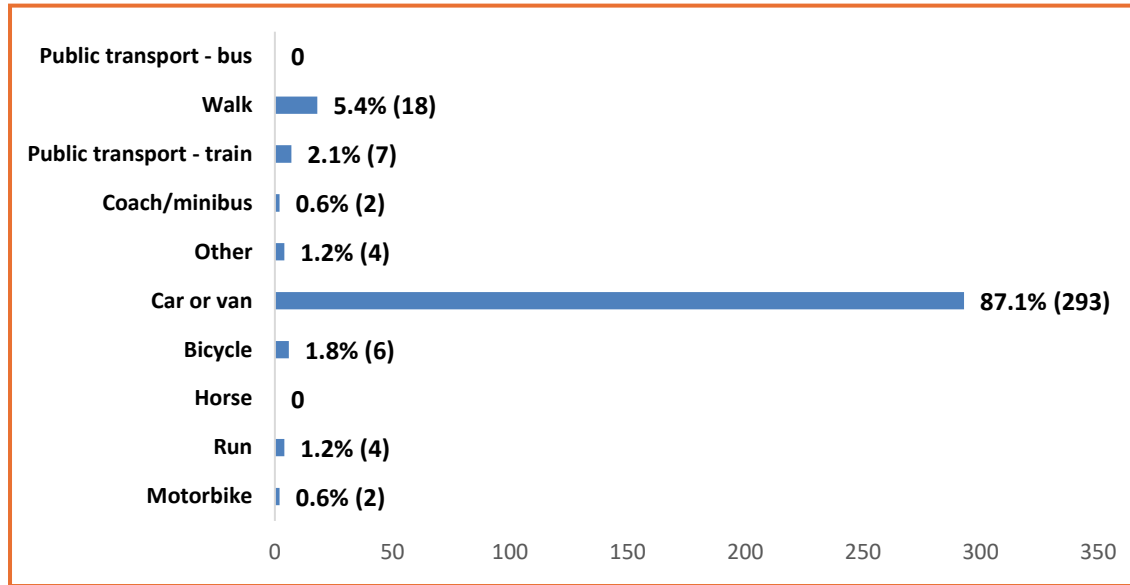
The 7% of visitors who indicated that they were an 'overnight visitor' were asked supplementary questions to help provide further insights into visitor behaviours and motivations. The visitor data emerging on where people were staying (above left) demonstrated that many opted to stay with friends or relatives (47.8%). The remaining 52.2% outlined that they were staying in a range of local accommodation, such as hotels, holiday cottages, camp sites, and narrow boats, in Chester, Liverpool, Warrington, and villages across the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge.

Additionally, 87% of the overnight visitors stated that they were staying for multiple nights (above right), with the majority staying for between two and four nights (56.6%). Whilst this data appears modest, if the 7% overnight rate (see page 16) is applied to the estimated 1 million annual visitor figure, this translates to at least 70,000 overnight stays, demonstrating the potential positive economic impact for the local visitor economy.

The quality and variety of the hospitality and accommodation on offer across the Ridge can also be used within any future marketing campaigns.

Travel to and from the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge

Transport used to access the Ridge

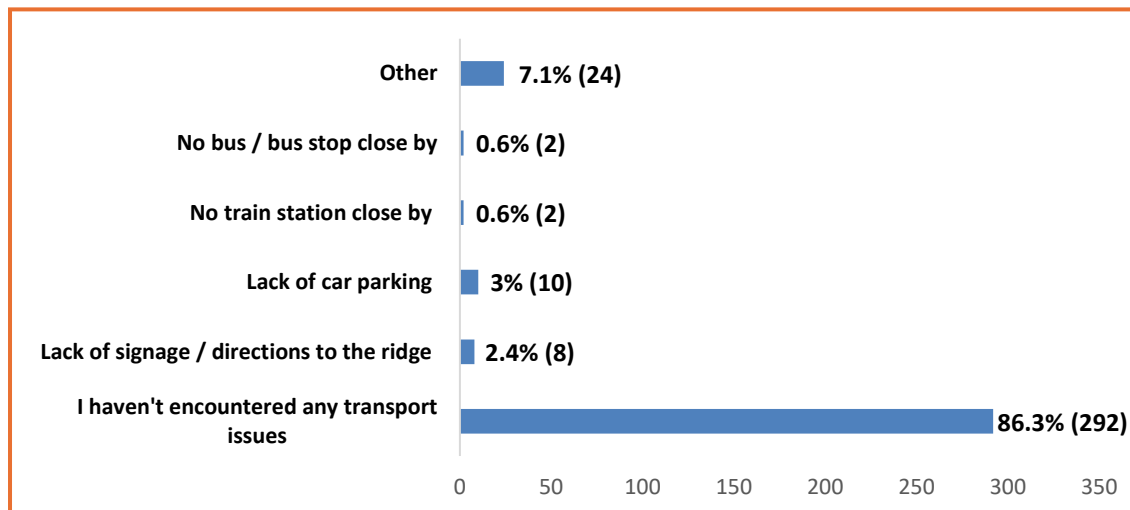


The data on how visitors travelled to and from the Ridge (top left) highlighted that overwhelmingly the majority (88.3%) used a private motor vehicle (car, motorbike, or coach/minibus) as their mode of transport. Of the remaining visitors, a small proportion walked (5.4%), ran (1.2%), or cycled (1.8%).

Only 2.1% accessed the Ridge via public transport (train) demonstrating a potential lack of accessible public transport links across many parts of the Ridge. Furthermore, a small number of visitors (1.2% 'other') outlined that the lack of a train or bus stop was a transport barrier that they had encountered.

This data also aligns to the 2017 results where 90% of visitors outlined that they had travelled by car to visit the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge, and no visitors recording the use of public transport. There is, therefore, a consistent theme emerging concerning how visitors access the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge and in identifying potential opportunities for developing some of the infrastructure, particularly around public transport links.

Transport issues encountered in accessing the Ridge



The data also demonstrated (bottom left) that whilst the majority of visitors encountered no transport issues accessing the Ridge (86.3%), the identified barriers included a lack of car parking (3%), lack of signage (2.4%), and concerns regarding the quality of some of the rural roads ('other' 7.1%).

It should also be noted that a small proportion selected more than one response to this question, for example using public transport and walking, or specific transport issues such as poor quality of local roads. This resulted in more than 328 responses being recorded for both questions, where visitors added additional information to the 'other' option.

Travel to and from the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge

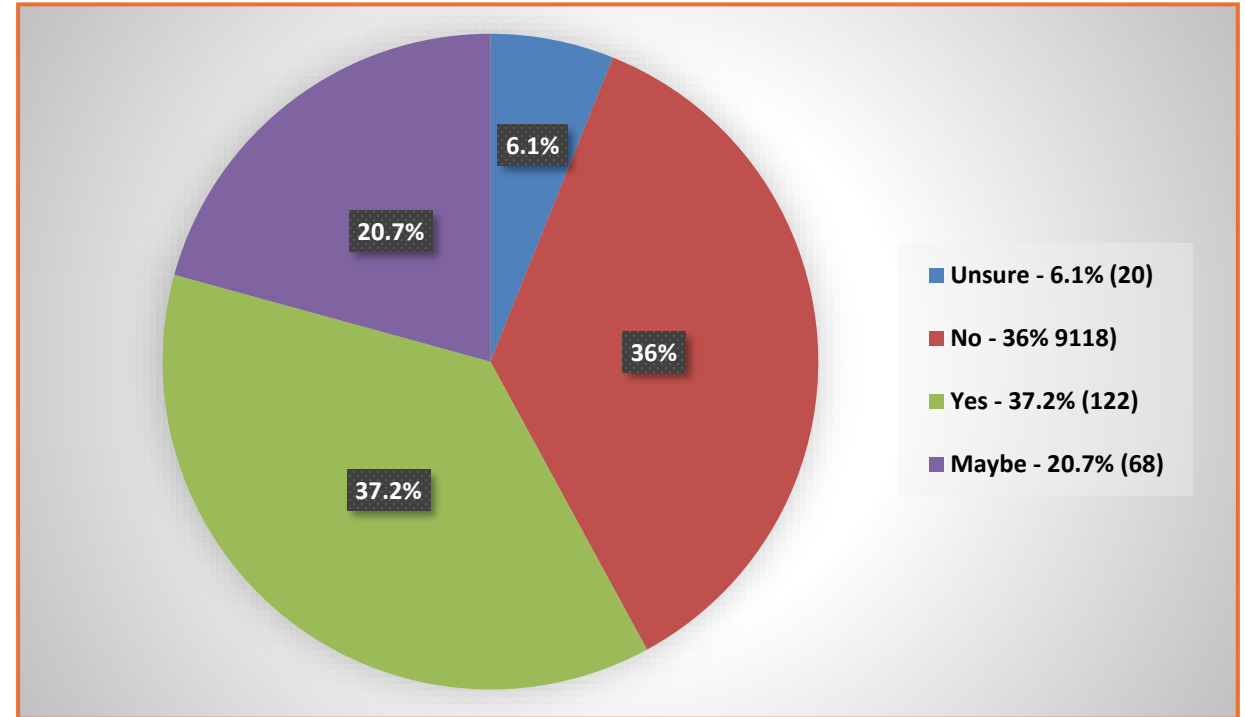
Visitors were asked their perspective about a 'Ridge bus' that would provide a hop-on/hop-off service to enable visitors to access different parts of the Ridge, as well as local transport links, such as train stations or bus stops.

A small majority supported the concept (37.2%), with an additional 20.7% who might support such a service, and 6.1% unsure.

Surprisingly, 36% of visitors did not support such a service. Given some of the barriers and issues raised within the on-site visitor survey, such as a lack of public transport services, the high cost of parking or limited parking, this warrants potential further investigation to capture why visitors would oppose such a service (as no additional narrative was captured at the time of the survey to provide additional insights).

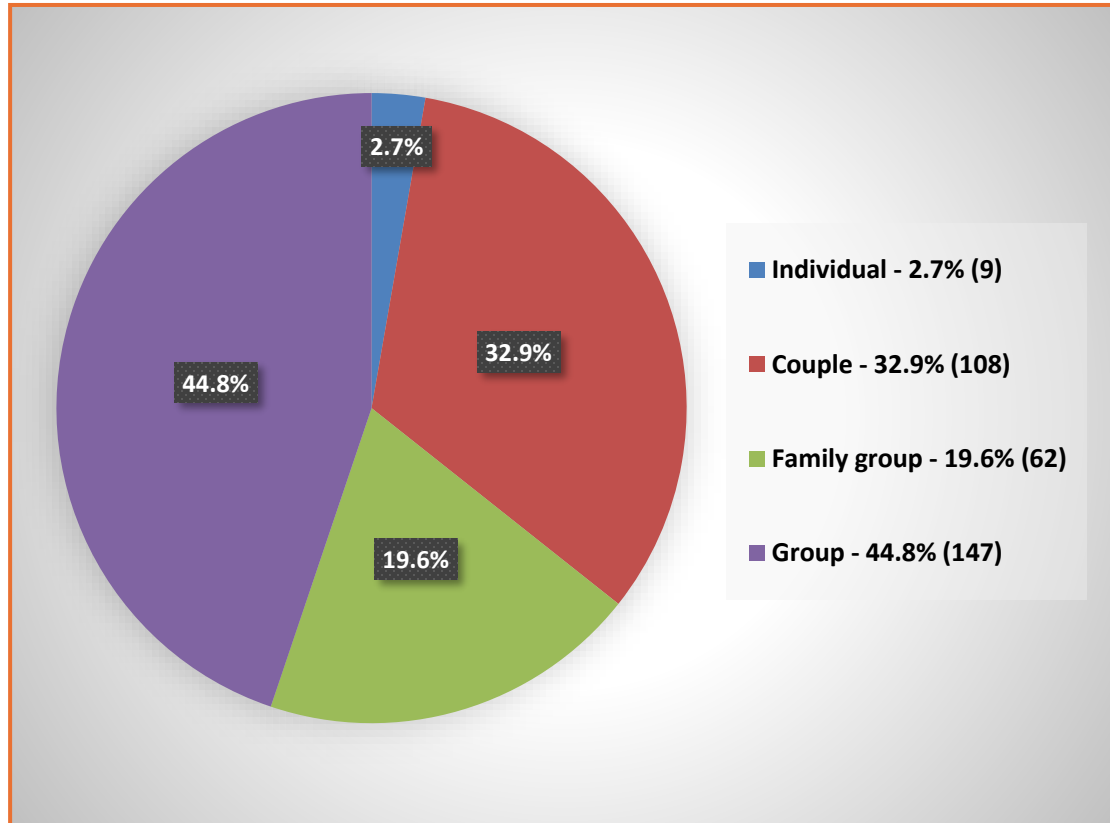
A potential opportunity could be to explore the feasibility of a seasonal Ridge bus service to increase accessibility to parts of the Ridge to encourage more sustainable transport methods.

'Ridge bus' (hop-on/hop-off) service for visitors



Exploring the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge

Visitor profiles



Visitor data was also captured to help provide an overview of Visitors Profiles

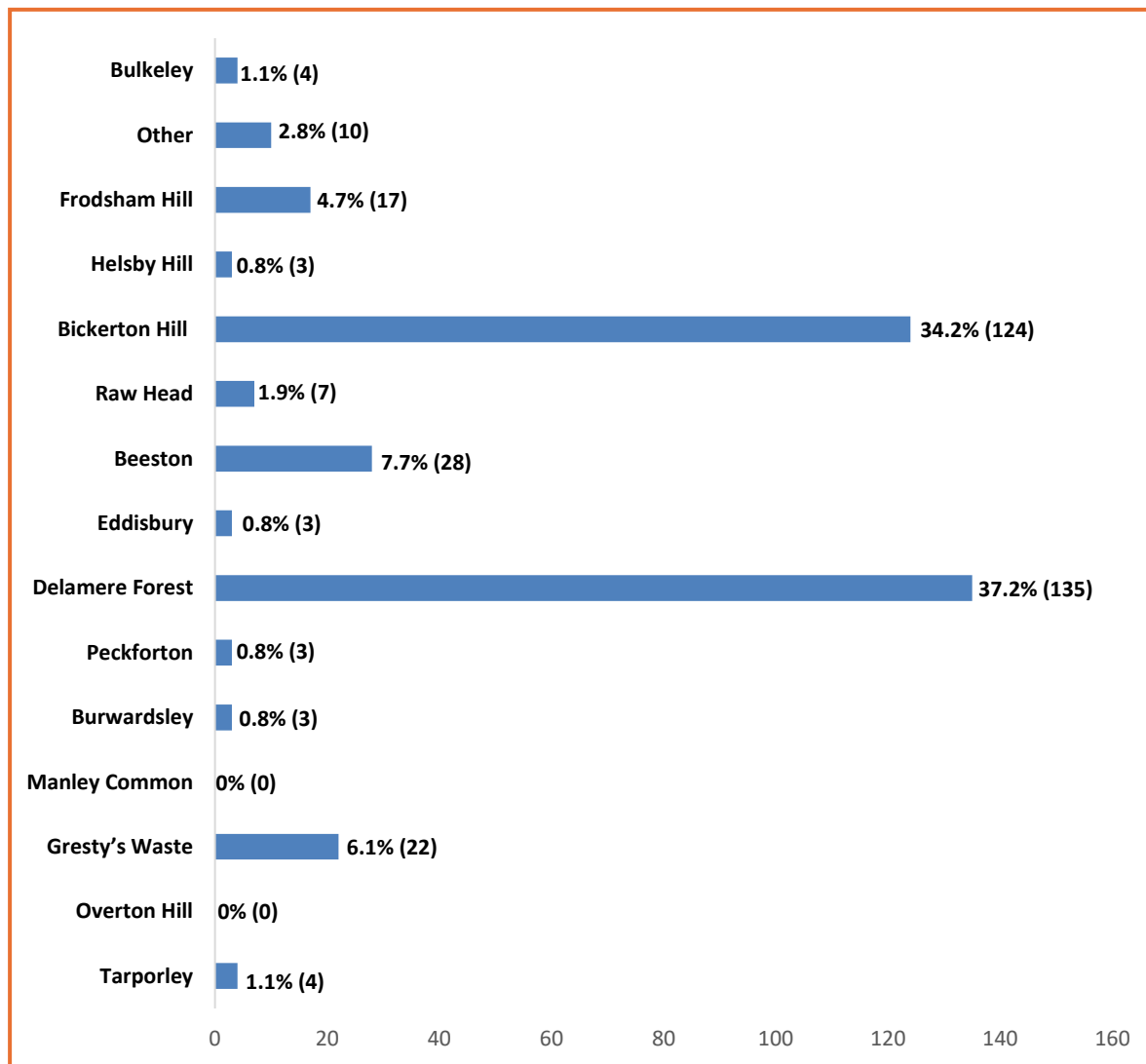
The data revealed that only a very small proportion (2.7%) visited alone, although all of these visitors did have at least one dog with them as part of their visit. Couples visiting the Ridge made up 32.9%, whilst visiting as part of a group were recorded as the highest overall at 64.4% in total. The groups were classified into two different categories, 'Groups' (such as friends or walking groups) equated to 44.8% of visitors, and 'Family Groups' (where visitors including under 16 year olds in their group) made up 19.6% of visitors.

Additional visitor profile data also recorded that there were: 213 dogs, 19 bicycles, and 3 horses.

This data is useful as it demonstrates that the core of the visitors are groups or couples (97%+), and that infrastructure projects and marketing campaigns can be developed in line with this.

Exploring the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge

Location(s) visited on the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge



Visitors to the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge were asked to outline where on the Ridge they had visited that day. As the data highlights the majority of people were visiting either Delamere Forest (37.2%) or Bickerton Hill (34.2%). A much smaller proportion were visiting Beeston (7.7%), Gresty's Waste (6.1%), or Frodsham Hill (4.7%). The remaining visitors were spread across a wide range of locations across the Ridge.

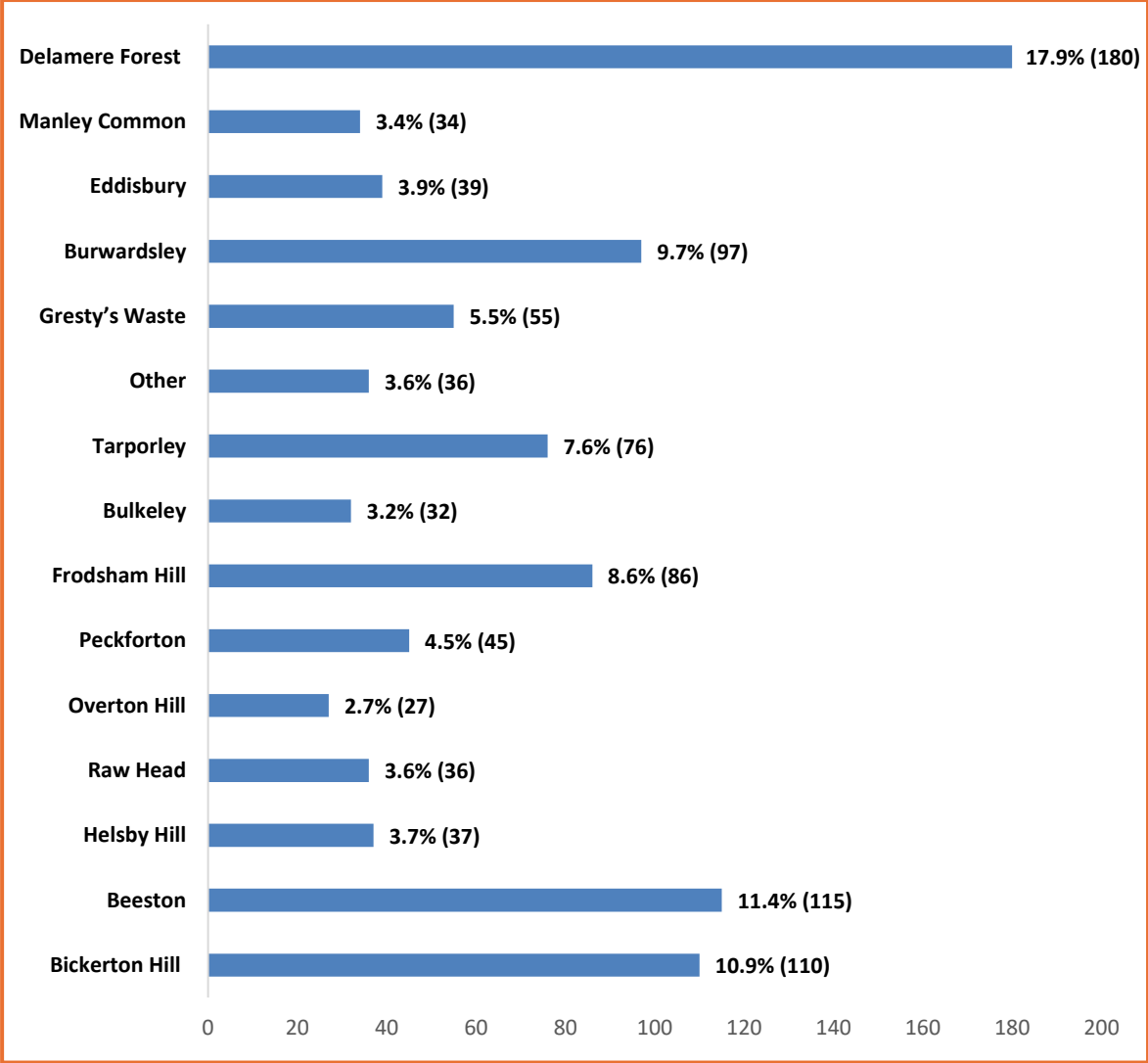
There were 363 responses in total to this question as visitors were able to indicate multiple sites that they had visited that day. This helps to highlight that visitors were accessing and visiting multiple sites across the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge as parts of their visit, with a number commenting under 'other' the different parts of the Ridge they had visited.

With 368 km of public rights of way, walking the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge is a very popular activity, especially in the spring and summer months. Whilst there are some marketing activities to promote the routes and options there is a potential to develop this more commercially with key stakeholders, including hospitality providers, to create a specific offer to walkers who wish to complete the entire trail. This could also be linked to charitable organisations who look for different challenge fundraising events (e.g. three peak challenge) as an alternative offer.

It should also be noted that this data correlates with where the majority of surveys were undertaken.

Exploring the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge

Locations visited or to be visited on the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge



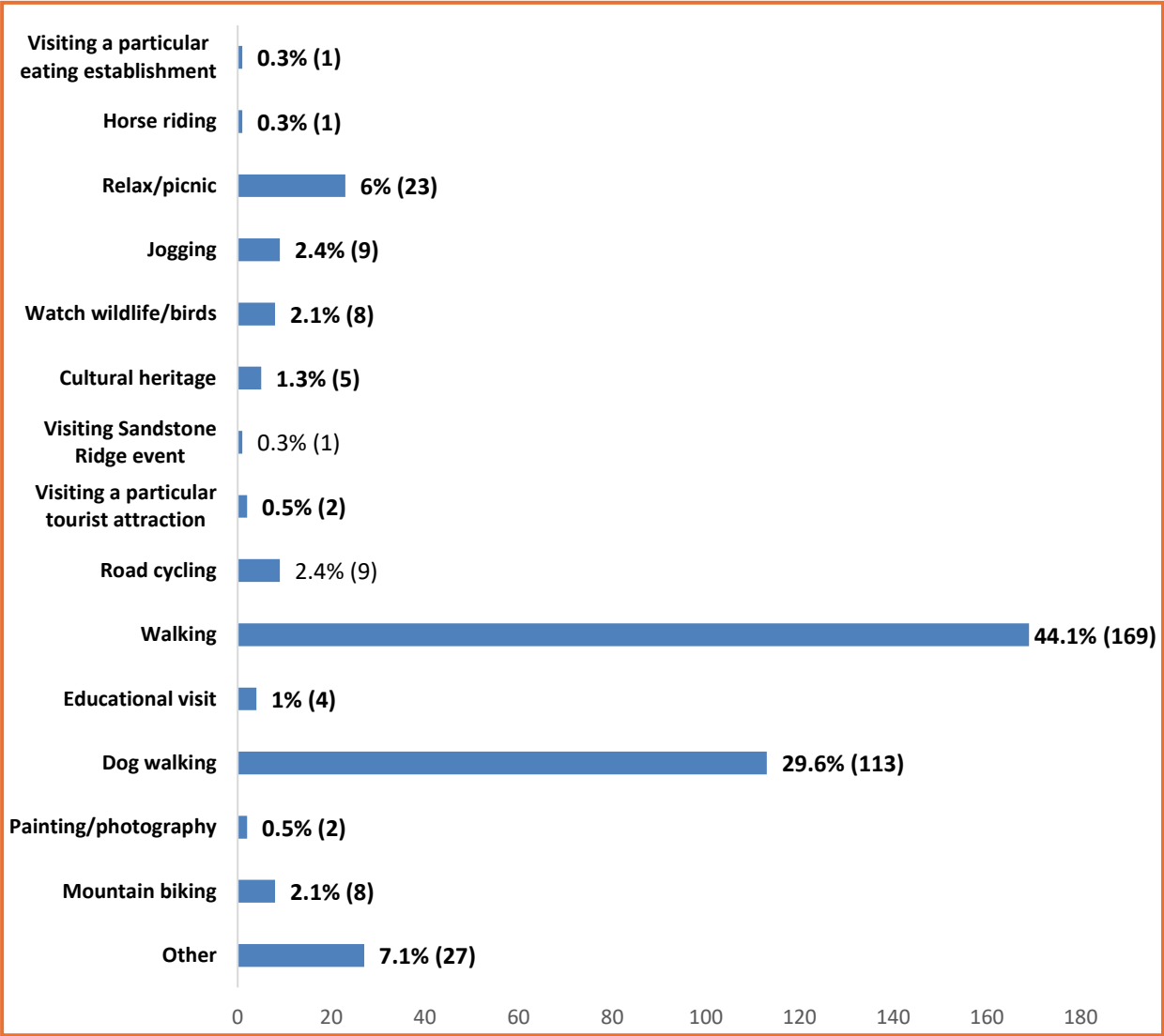
Visitors to the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge were asked to outline which parts of the Ridge they had visited in the past six months or potentially might visit in the next six months. The data show's locations across the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge which have been or will be visited, with locations such as Delamere Forest (17.9%), Beeston (11.4%), Bickerton Hill (10.9%), Burwardsley (9.7%), Frodsham Hill (8.6%), and Tarporley (7.6%), receiving the highest proportion of visitors. For those selecting ‘other’ (3.6%) the locations included Primrose Hill, Woodhouse Hill, Frodsham Marsh, Frodsham woods, Whitegate, and Wrenbury.

There were 1005 responses to this question as visitors were able to indicate multiple sites that they had visited or intended to visit. The percentages shown indicate the popularity of the multiple selections made by visitors, as well as the actual number of responses recorded for each location.

This data is very useful in highlighting the most visited sites across the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge, and therefore where any infrastructure projects, activities or events, and improvements could be prioritised. Whilst Delamere Forest and Beeston have invested in recent years into their infrastructure, other popular sites, such as Bickerton Hill, Frodsham Hill, and Burwardsley (among others), could benefit from additional infrastructure or investment, such as improved parking, repair of rural roads, or toilet provision.

Reasons for Visiting the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge

Reasons for visiting the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge



Visitors to the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge were asked to outline the reason(s) for visiting the Ridge. Overwhelmingly the reasons for visiting the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge were to walk (44.1% walking with family and friends) or for dog walking (29.6%).

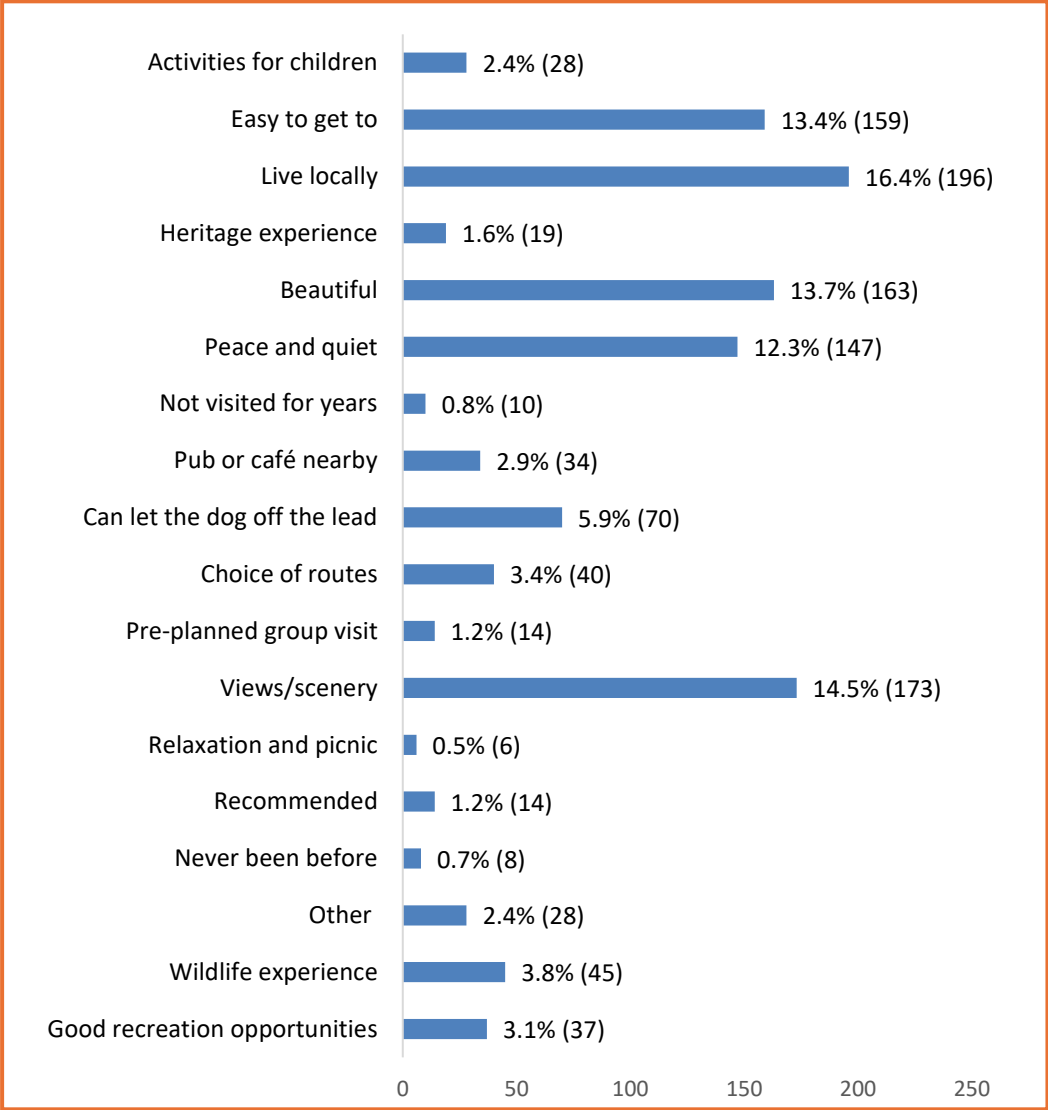
The visitors also outlined a wide array of recreational activities, including jogging (2.4%), cycling (2.4%) or mountain biking (2.1%), watching wildlife or birds (2.1%), or to relax/have a picnic (6%).

Of the 7.1% who noted ‘other’ reasons for visiting the Ridge, these included aiding mental health, volunteering, supporting activities such as Duke of Edinburgh expeditions, fitness groups, as well as to visit sites associated with family and friends who had passed away. The overall findings demonstrate the versatility of how and why people visit the Ridge.

There were 382 responses in total to this question as visitors were able to indicate multiple reasons for visiting that day.

Reasons for Visiting the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge

Reasons for visiting the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge rather than another area of countryside



Visitors were asked to indicate their reasons for visiting the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge rather than another area of countryside. Visitors could record multiple reasons for their visit, resulting in 1191 responses from the 328 interviews. The percentages shown indicate the popularity of the selections made by visitors, as well as the actual number of responses recorded for each option.

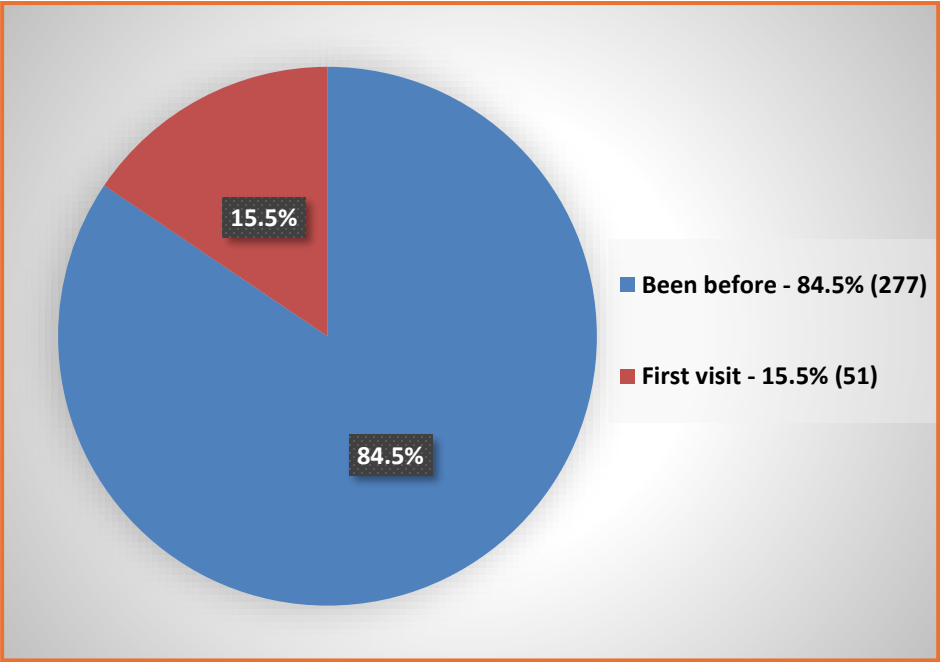
The main reasons that were expressed highlighted that visitors lived locally (16.4%) to the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge, that it was easy to get to and access (13.4%), and most importantly it was the landscape of the Ridge that attracted people to visit. For example, many of the visitors noted they visited the Ridge for its beauty (13.5%), its peace and quiet (12.3%), and its views and scenery (14.5%).

Other reasons noted for visiting the Ridge included the recreational opportunities (3.1%), activities for children (2.4%), the wildlife (3.8%), the choice of routes (3.4%), and from a dog walking perspective the ability to let the dog off the lead (5.9%).

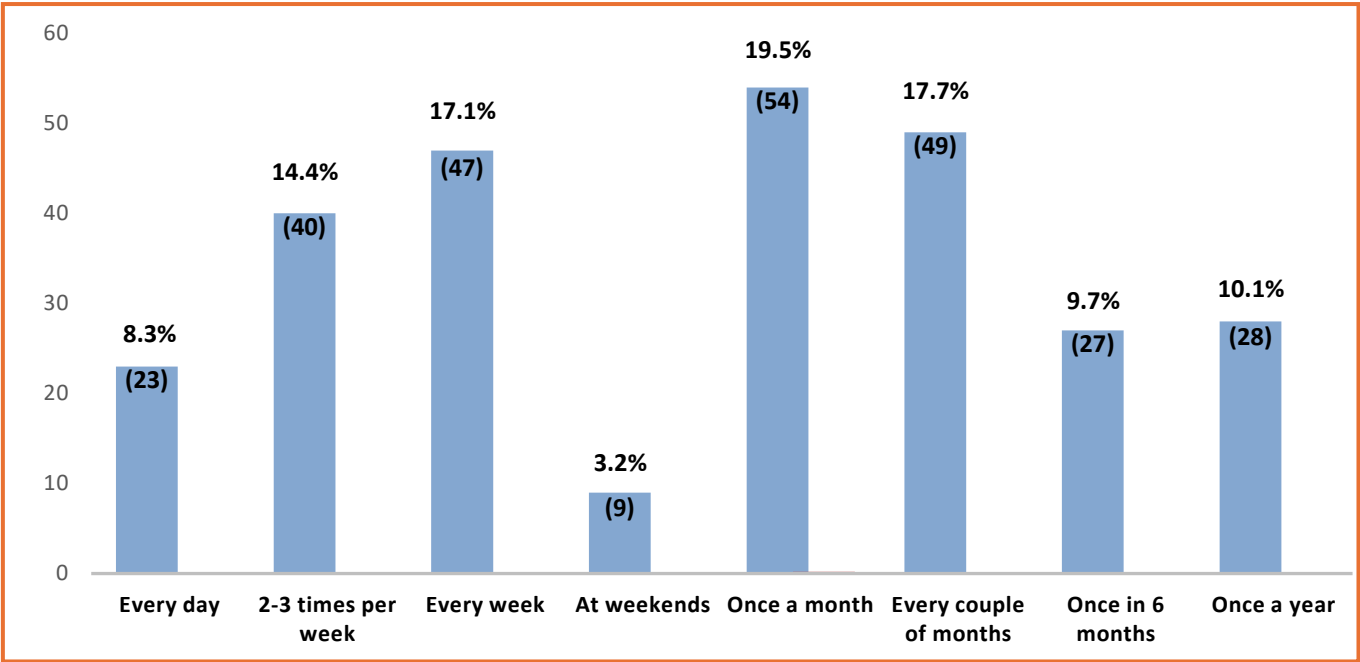
The data highlights that the ease of access and variety of activities offered on and across the Ridge, provide a very strong draw to potential visitors. This versatility should be reflected in future marketing campaigns for the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge, as well as in any future events or activities for specific parts of the Ridge.

Frequency of Visits to the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge

New or returning visitor



Frequency of visits to the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge



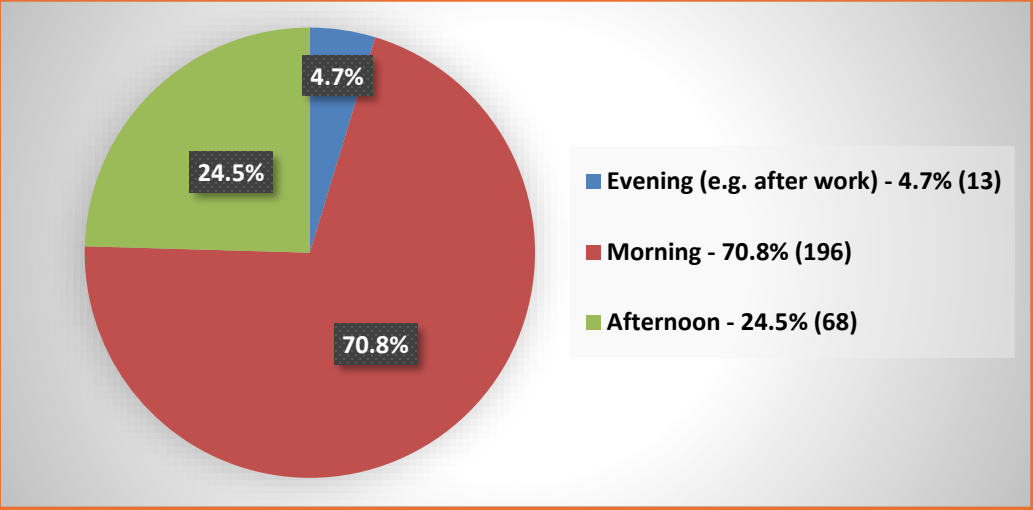
Visitors were asked to indicate if they have visited the Ridge before, and if they had, the frequency of visiting the Ridge. As outlined (above left) 84.5% of visitors had visited the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge, with only a small percentage of visitors (15.5%) indicating that this was their first visit to the Ridge.

Of the 277 who had visited previously they were asked the frequency of visiting the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge (above right). A small proportion of the visitors (8.3%) indicated that they visited the Ridge every day, and a further 31.5% outlined that they visited the Ridge at least once a week (17.1%), if not two to three times a week (14.4%). Of the remaining visitors 37.2% indicated that they visited at least once a month (19.5%), or once every couple of months (17.7%). Finally, nearly 20% indicated that they visited less frequently either once every six months (9.7%), or once per year (10.1%).

The overall findings demonstrate that 80% are visiting the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge on a regular basis of at least once every couple of months, if not more regularly. This data establishes the popularity of the Ridge as a place to visit, but as previously outlined certain sites are more popular than others (page 22). In order to maintain and protect the Ridge consideration for investment and infrastructure will need to focus on these popular areas, as well as marketing campaigns to highlight alternative sites to visit.

Dwell Time at the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge

Time of day preference for visiting the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge



Visitors were asked to express their preference in terms of when they liked to visit the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge (top right). The visitors responded that they predominately preferred to visit in the morning (70.8%), with only 24.5% indicating that they prefer to visit in the afternoon, and 4.7% preferring an evening visit.

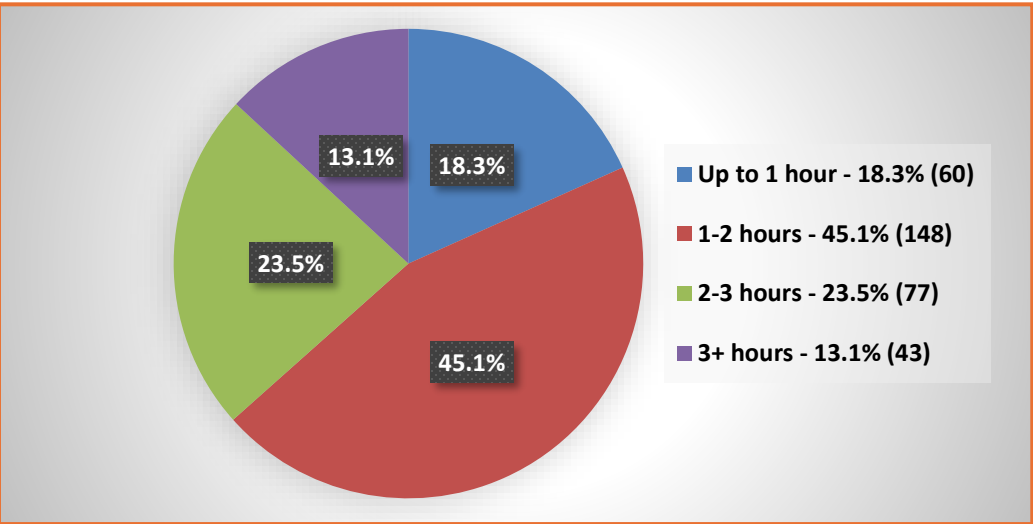
Furthermore, the visitors were asked how long they planned to visit the Ridge (bottom left). The majority (45.1%) indicated that they would spend between one and two hours at the Ridge, with a further 23.5% indicating they would spend between two and three hours at the Ridge.

This data is useful as it helps to indicate the overall dwell time on and across the Ridge which is between one and three hours in total. Given the previous data on the locations most visited across the Ridge (page 22), this will help to determine where additional infrastructure or resources may be needed to support the visitors and provide appropriate facilities for their visit, or where additional events or activities could be hosted.

The overall visitor survey data highlights that the core of the visitors were groups or couples (97%+) (page 20), out for a short day visit of between 1 and 3 hours, with walking and dog walking given as the main reasons for visiting (page 23).

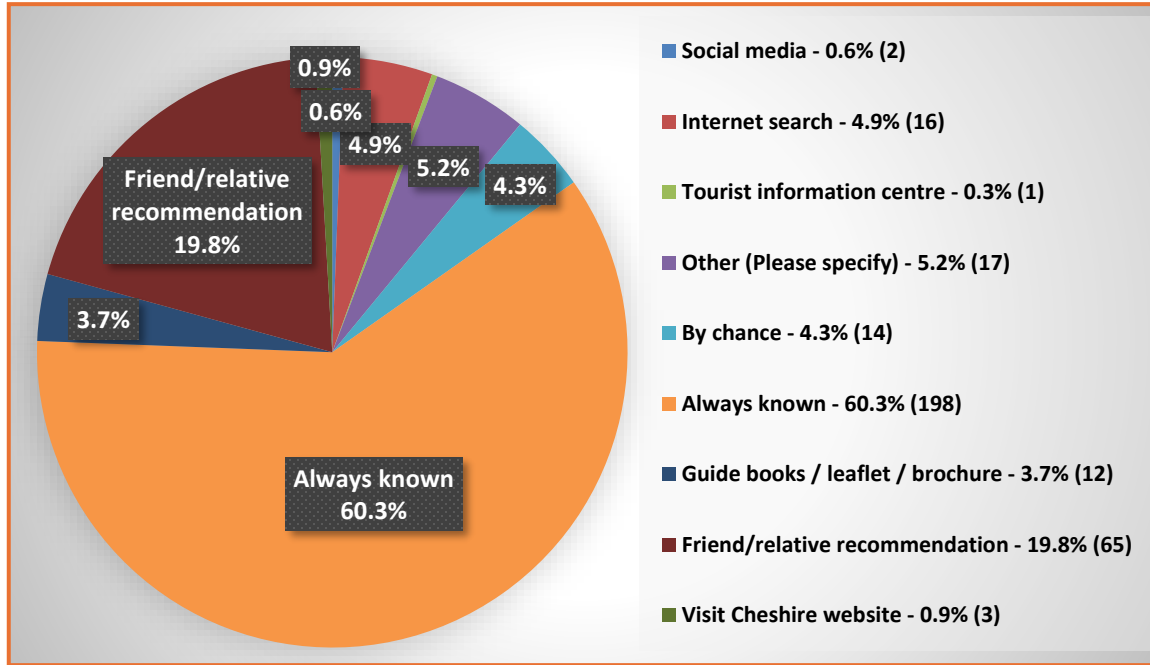
This is very similar to the 2017 survey, which showed that more than 70% of visitors were also groups or couples, coming out for short day visits (less than 3 hours), who were also predominately walking or dog walking as the main reasons for visiting (Sandstone Ridge, 2018).

Duration of visit to the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge

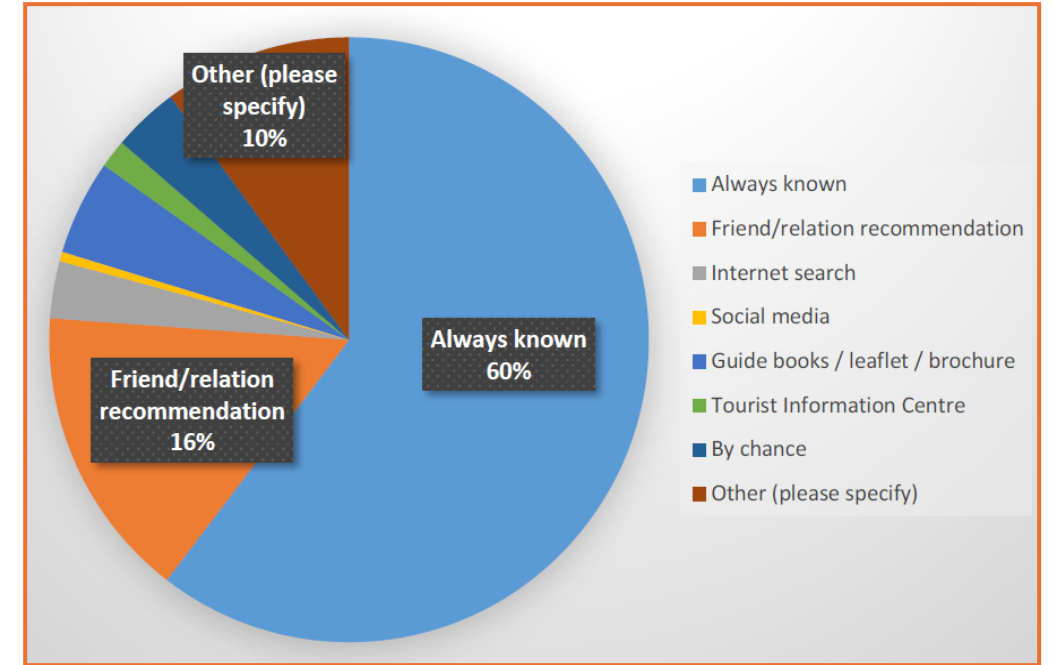


Awareness of the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge

Awareness of the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge (2024)



Awareness of the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge (2017)



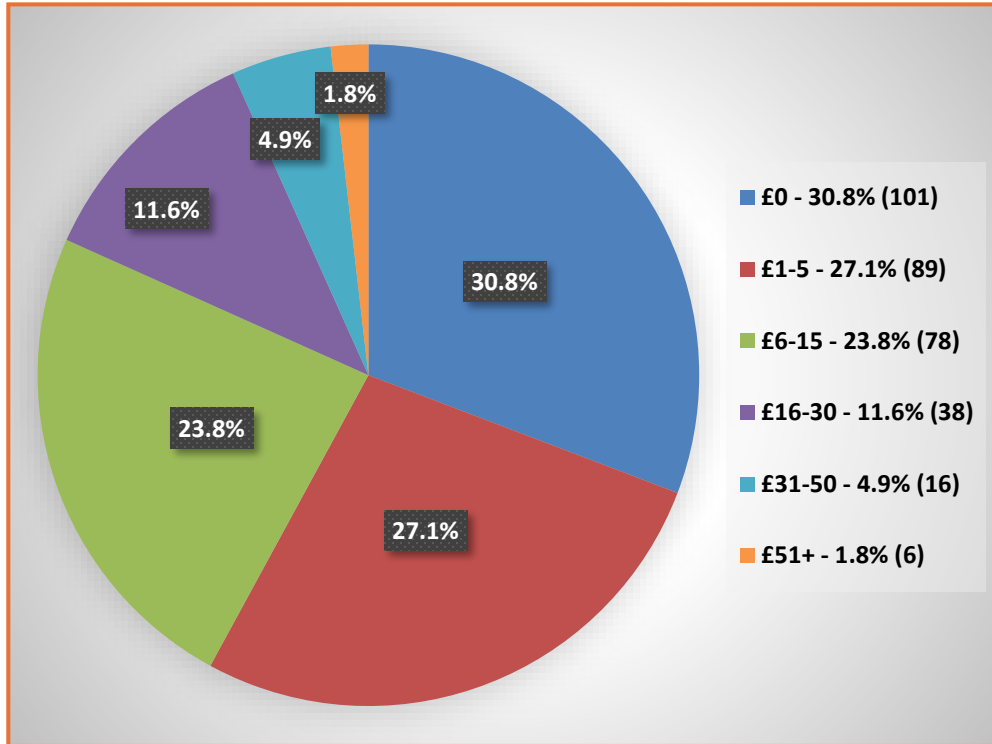
Visitors were asked to outline how they first found out about the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge (above left). This question was a repeat of the question asked in 2017 (above right) to again establish how and why visitors became aware of the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge, and therefore how the Sandstone Ridge Trust and stakeholders, can evolve their marketing.

What is interesting to note is that 60.3% of visitors commented that they had 'always known' which is nearly identical to the data emerging in 2017 where 60% of visitors commented that they had also 'always known' about the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge. Similarly, 19.8% of visitors in 2024 noted that a friend or relative had recommended visiting the Ridge, which is a slight increase on the 16% of visitors in 2017 being recommended to visit the Ridge by a friend or relative.

As per the 2017 findings the data again highlights that the low marketing visibility (internet searches, websites, leaflets, Tourist Information Centres, etc) continues to explain why the visitor profile is so local. The data can be used to develop new marketing campaigns to target more national visitors to the Ridge, as well as to review existing marketing collateral, particularly digital marketing promotions.

Visitor Spend at Cheshire Sandstone Ridge

Average visitor spend



Visitors were asked to comment on how much they had spent on their visit that day to the Ridge. 30.8% of visitors commented that they had spent nothing as part of their visit, whilst the majority of visitors (69.2%) had spent anywhere between £1 and +£51.

Overall, visitors spent between £6 and £30 (35.4%) and these results correlate to specific sites on the Ridge, such as Delamere Forest, and Beeston (Castle), where there are costs associated with the visit (such as car parking, food, and entry fees).

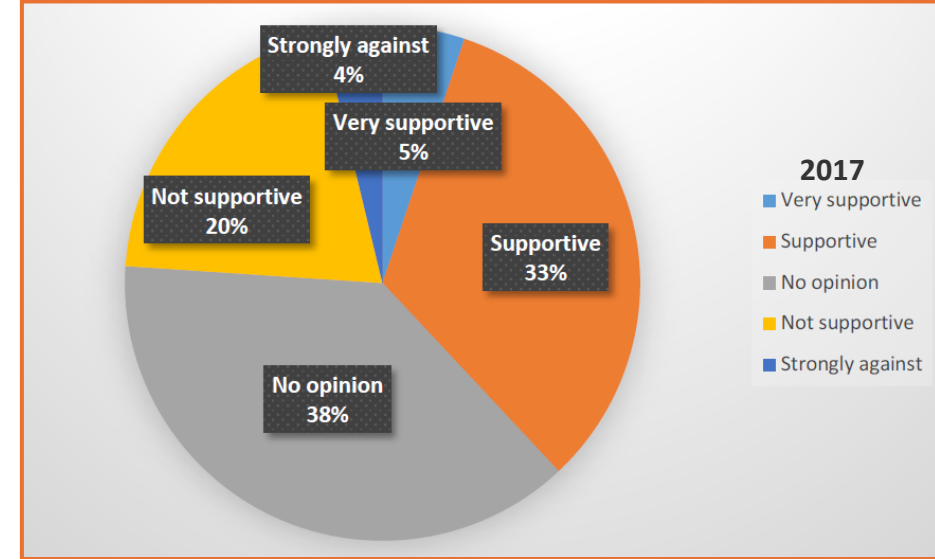
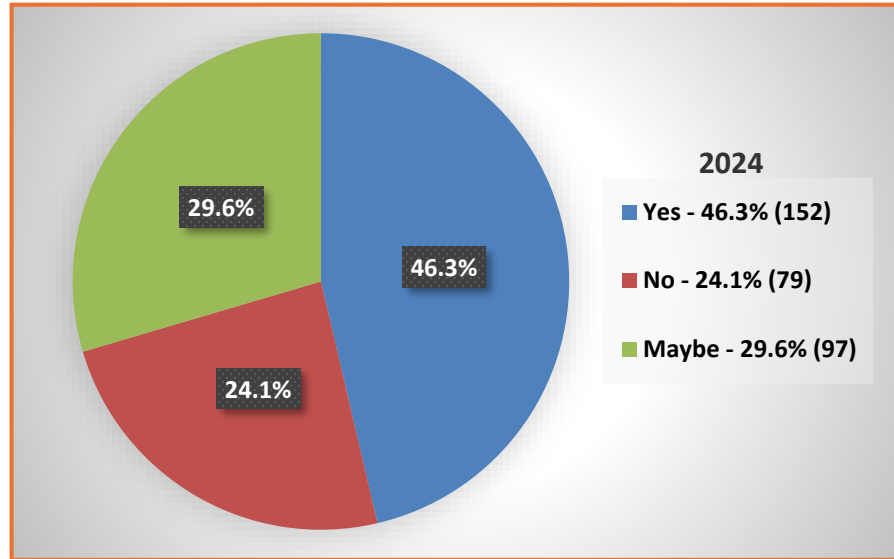
The data demonstrates that visitors are willing to spend as a part of the visit and that this will contribute to supporting the local economy across the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge.

Feedback received from visitors indicated that whilst they were willing to spend money on the visit there were some concerns at some of the parking costs at some sites, such as Delamere Forest, regarded by visitors as being very high. There is an opportunity for sites where there are associated costs (such as car parking), to highlight how the money is used to maintain the landscape and invest for future generations to enjoy.

As much of the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge is managed by a range of different organisations such as Forestry England, English Heritage, National Trust and the Cheshire Wildlife Trust, there is a need to market more clearly the work they undertake and the importance of the fundraising activities, for example parking and entrance fees, and how this money is used to maintain the Ridge.

Visitor Spend at Cheshire Sandstone Ridge

Visitors support for financial contribution to help fund the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge 2024 and 2017



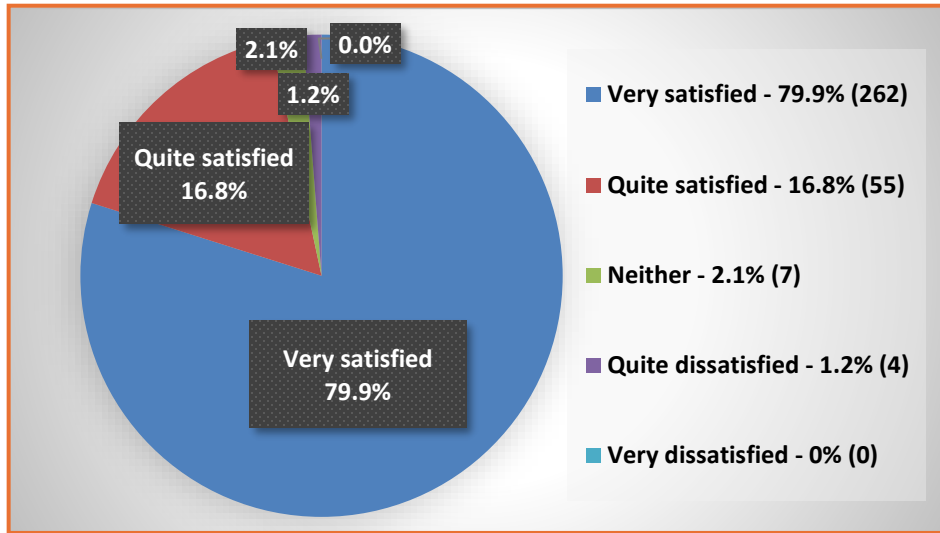
Visitors were asked to consider if they would support spending more as part of their visit, if the monies raised via parking, catering, events, activities (etc), were invested in maintaining the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge.

This question was similar in design to a question asked in 2017 to establish if visitors would be willing to financially support projects across the Ridge. The most recent 2024 results would suggest that visitors are more willing to support the Ridge financially, with 46.3% supporting spending more, compared to 38% in 2017. Similarly, 24.1% commented they would not be willing to spend more, which is near identical to the 24% in 2017, whilst 29.6% commented that they 'maybe' supportive, compared to 38% in 2017 who had no opinion (a slight difference in term but a useful insight nonetheless).

The 2017 survey report noted that *"The need for new, and innovative, investment is a recurring observation, and a number of opportunities for income generation have been put forward. These include voluntary donations from visitors through automated contactless devices at countryside locations and attractions, a voluntary bed tax from those staying in hotels within the area, adopt a footpath schemes, a penny levy on each pint sold in the area, the sale of Sandstone Ridge merchandise, the introduction of car park charges, corporate partnerships, product sponsorship, and raising a parish council precept. Any incomes generated could be ring-fenced to a Sustainable Conservation Fund dedicated for conservation, access and educational projects on the Ridge"* (Sandstone Ridge, 2018, p. 36). Whilst car parking charges are in place in a few locations many of the suggestions made in 2017 have not yet been fully implemented and warrant being reviewed and, where appropriate, adopted.

Visitor Satisfaction

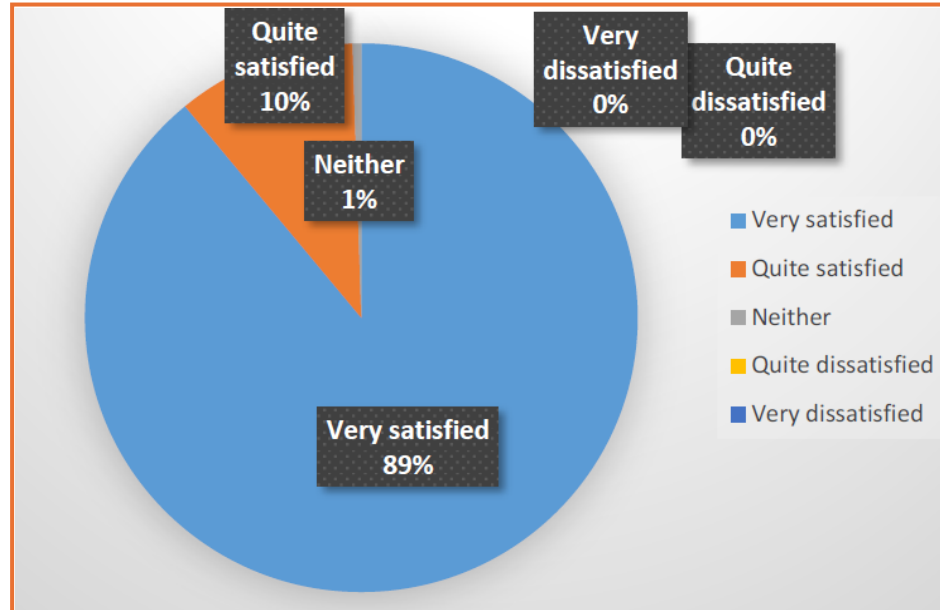
Visitor satisfaction 2024



Another really important question that was repeated in the 2024 survey was regarding visitor satisfaction. Visitors were asked to rate how satisfied they were with their visit that day.

The results (top left) were highly positive with 79.9% recording that they were 'very satisfied' and that 16.8% were 'quite satisfied'. Only a small proportion, 1.2%, indicated that they were 'quite dissatisfied' with their visit that day, with 2.1% responding 'neither'. No responses were recorded for 'very dissatisfied'.

Visitor satisfaction 2017

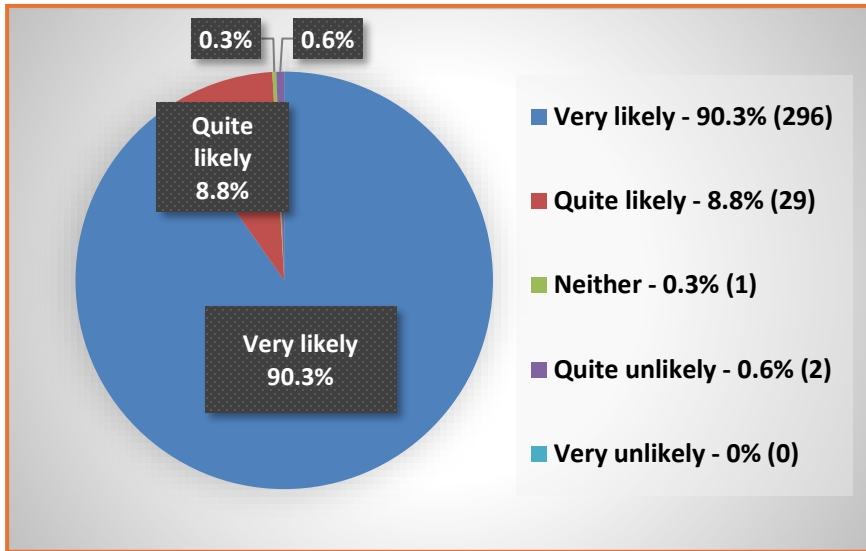


The 2024 survey results are in keeping with the 2017 survey findings and results (bottom left), whereby 89% for visitors were 'very satisfied' and 10% were 'quite satisfied'. The only difference noted in the 2024 findings was the small number (4 visitors or 1.2%) being quite dissatisfied with the visit.

This demonstrates overwhelmingly that the experience of visiting the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge is a popular and satisfying experience.

Visitor Satisfaction

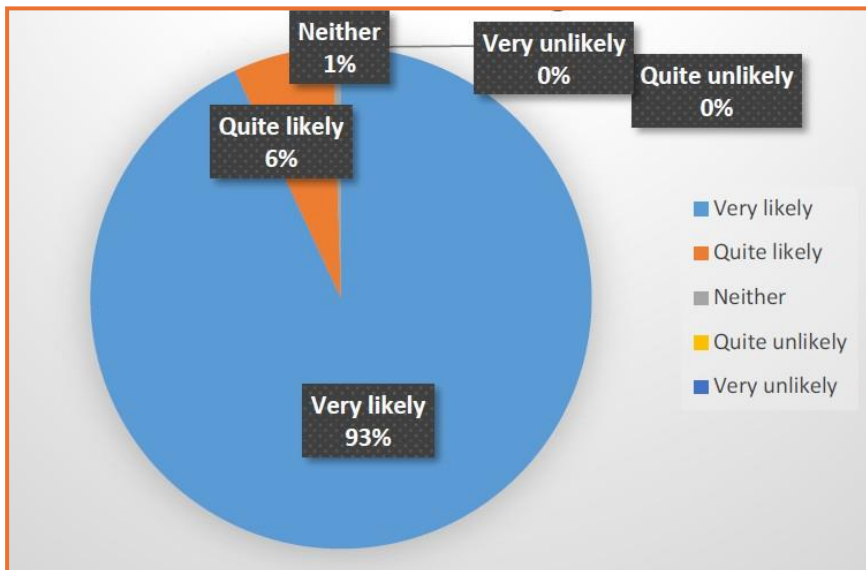
Likelihood for return visit 2024



In keeping with the visitor satisfaction questions, visitors were asked how likely they would be to return to the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge (top left). As with the highly positive satisfaction ratings, this correlates with the likelihood of repeat visits to the Ridge, with 90.3% 'very likely' to return, 8.8% 'quite likely' to return, and only 0.6% 'quite unlikely' to return.

The 2024 survey results are again very much in keeping with the 2017 survey findings and results (bottom left), whereby 93% of visitors were 'very likely' and 6% were 'quite likely' to return. The only difference noted in the 2024 findings was the small number (2 visitors or 0.6%) being unlikely to return, and these negative responses link directly to those who were dissatisfied with their visit (page 30).

Likelihood for return visit 2017



The findings demonstrate the appeal and quality of the visitor experience across the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge and that the vast majority of visitors will undertake repeat visits. This is supported by the previous data which demonstrated that 80% of visitors are visiting the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge on a regular basis of at least once every couple of months, if not more regularly (page 25). Therefore, any infrastructure projects or spend would be a beneficial investment due to the volume of visitors and regular visits to the Ridge.

Visitor Satisfaction

Below are selection of some of the comments received from visitors concerning the **best thing** about their visit to the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge:

"The beautiful views, the wandering cows and the undisputed peace"

"The views in all directions are simply stunning and the sunrises and sunsets breath-taking"

"Accessible walking and peaceful"

"Views, scenery, well marked trails"

"Accessible and beautiful"

"The beauty - views, peaceful, suitable for dogs, good for walking, the diversity of nature and terrain"

"A peaceful place which is different every day, I never walk the same route or see the same thing"

"Size and variety - accommodates lots of different activities"

"It has some of the best views in the country"

Visitor Satisfaction

Below is a selection of some of the comments received by visitors about anything visitors **did not like** concerning the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge:

"Don't charge for parking. Everywhere is charging extra for everything.... It's exhausting... Please give us something free to do!"

"Lack of public transport"

"Out of control dogs off leads. No recall. Even when it is nesting time for ground birds"

"Sections of the path need better maintenance"

"Disruption caused by parkruns"

"The entitled people who let their dogs off the lead during the nesting period, the lack of total recall many have over their dogs and the amount of poo which is not picked up!"

"No dog poo bins so people leave bags hanging on trees, or don't pick it up"

"Needs better signposts"

"Too many people on some days"

Improving the Visit

The final question that visitors were asked concerned how the visitor experience could be improved and made more enjoyable. Visitors could select multiple responses to this question, as well as provide some text (for other) to provide additional information. In total 523 responses were recorded, with a range of suggestions captured.

As highlighted previously, dog waste bins were identified as the highest priority that visitors raised (26.4%), which was also reflected throughout the ‘other’ text responses recorded (17.8%).

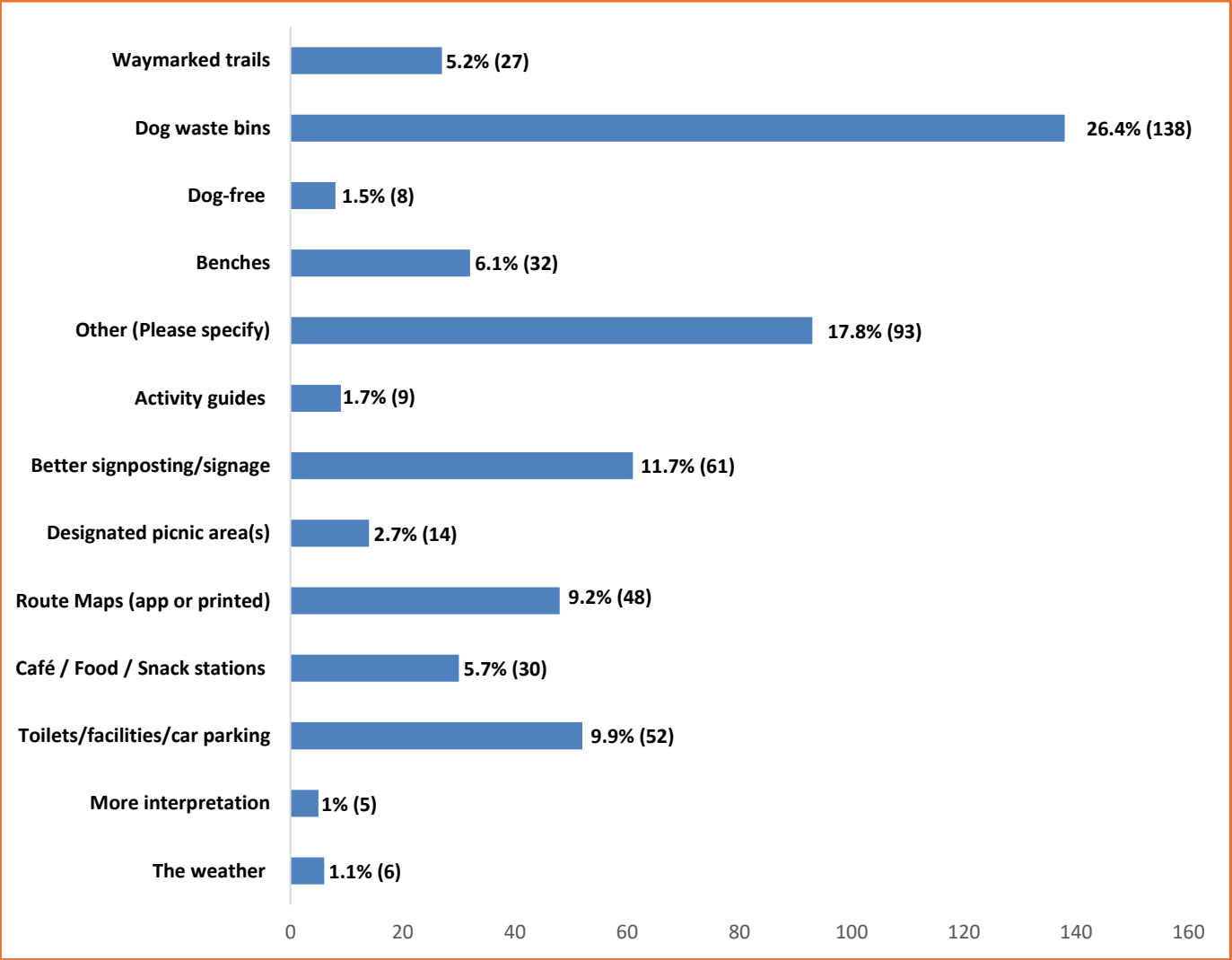
Other priorities for improving the visit included better signage (11.7%), clear waymarked trails (5.2%) and route maps (9.2%). Visitors also noted that better facilities were also required, such as toilets and better parking (9.9%), and more benches (6.1%).

The ‘other’ priorities (17.8%) also included improved path maintenance, better access and accessibility, and the reopening of some paths.

The 2024 survey results are very similar to the 2017 findings, where signage, access, path maintenance, and dog waste bins were also key priorities.

The findings continue to demonstrates the importance of investing in the infrastructure (new and existing) across the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge, in order to enhance the overall visitor experience.

Improving the visitor experience



Part 2 – Online Survey

Online Visitor Survey

To help generate additional data and insights, an online visitor survey was also conducted between July and October 2024. The questions were in keeping with the on-site visitor survey with some subtle additions to capture any barriers to visiting the Ridge, and the responses were also captured on the Jisc Online Survey application.

In order to promote the online visitor survey, the North Cheshire Community Rail team collaborated with the project and helped fund the distribution of a survey leaflet to approximately 100,000 homes within the Cheshire region. The locations targeted included Runcorn, Ellesmere Port, Northwich, Nantwich, and Whitchurch.

The online visitor survey was further supported via several stakeholders, such as Marketing Cheshire, who promoted the survey as a part of their regular direct email marketing campaigns.

The advantages of incorporating this additional online survey into the research strategy included:

- Gathering insights and data from a larger population area
- Reducing unconscious bias and providing increasing objectivity in responses
- Building a stronger understanding of the awareness of the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge
- Identifying insights that aid future strategies for marketing the Ridge
- Speed and cost effectiveness in undertaking this as an automated process
- Providing an opportunity to engage with key stakeholders to promote the survey

There were also some disadvantages which included:

- Response rates of online surveys are generally low
- Challenges in the promotion and engagement with the online survey
- Potential for some questions or surveys to not be fully completed

In total 546 responses were recorded, and whilst lower than anticipated, this response rate still provides an additional data set which will aid the Sandstone Ridge Trust and stakeholders in future projects, infrastructure, events and activities, and marketing campaigns.

Visitor Demographics

In keeping with the on-site visitor survey, the online visitor survey also captured a range of demographic data to help provide additional information on who was visiting the Ridge, and how this data might be used to inform future decisions on projects, infrastructure, and marketing campaigns.

The findings are similar for many of the demographic data points for both the online and on-site visitor surveys. The gender profile (below centre) of the online respondents is nearly identical to the on-site responses with 50.1% female and 48.2% male, with one respondent indicating ‘other’, and 1.5% opting that they ‘prefer not to say’.

The age profile (below left) of online respondents visiting the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge varied, with the majority of respondents being 51 years of age or older (77.1%), compared to the 60.1% surveyed on-site who were aged between 41 to 60 years of age. The highest proportion of respondents were aged 61 to 70 (31%), whilst those aged between 51 and 60 years old being the second highest (23.4%), with those aged 71+ (22.7%) being the third highest, and those aged between 41 to 50 years being the fourth highest (12.1%).

Furthermore, according to the data, only 4.4% of visitors were aged between 18 and 32 which is significantly lower than the 14.9% on-site survey but again reinforcing a potential gap in attracting a younger audience to the Ridge.

The variations in this data captured is most likely attributed to a disproportionate number of older and retired visitors being more willing to complete the online survey.

The ethnicity profile (below right) of the online respondents was very similar to the on-site responses, indicating that 96.9% identified as being white (compared to 95.8% on-site), with 1.1% belonging to a different ethnic group (compared to 2.4% on-site), with a final 2% not wishing to provide a response to this question (similar to the 1.8% on-site). This data is again in keeping with Cheshire Census Data where the average is 94.5% white (Varbes, 2024a) and highlighting an opportunity to potentially develop marketing campaigns to attract more diverse visitors.

Age Range	Response
18-24	1.3% (7)
25-32	3.1% (17)
33-40	6.4% (35)
41-50	12.1% (66)
51-60	23.4% (128)
61-70	31% (169)
71+	22.7% (124)

Gender	Response
Male	48.2% (263)
Female	50.1% (274)
Other	0.2% (1)
Prefer not to say	1.5% (8)

Ethnic Group	Response
White	96.9%(529)
Asian or Asian British	0.5% (3)
Black, Black British, Caribbean or African	0.2% (1)
Mixed or multiple ethnic groups	0.4% (2)
Other ethnic groups	0% (0)
Prefer not to say	2% (11)

Visitor Demographics

Aligned to the age profile of the online respondents, the employment status (below left) highlighted that only 31.5% of visitors were working full-time (compared to 50% on-site), and that 47.8% were retired (compared to 25.6%). For those working part time the data was relatively similar with 13.4% of online respondents noting that they worked part time (compared to 16.5%).

Of the remaining online visitor respondents, 3.8% outlined that they were self employed (compared to 4.9%). The unemployed 0.9% (compared to 0.6%), the student status 1.5% (compared to 1.2%), and those not working due to illness/disability 1.1% (compared to 1.2%) were very similar in profile to those surveyed on-site.

The profile of online respondents highlighted that 85.4% do not have any restrictive illness or condition (below right) which is similar to the 88% on-site, but that 14.8% of respondents do have a restrictive illness or condition, with a small number identify as having more than one long term condition (a theme that also emerged in the on-site data). Of those with a restrictive illness or condition, 7% identified mobility issues (compared to 5.4%), which is also highlighted within the 'other' category with 3.2% of respondents noting "recovering from surgery" or "fatigue" as examples of the underlying health conditions.

The main long-term condition noted was that of 'hearing' with 12.3% of online respondents recording this, which is significantly higher than the 0.6% from the on-site survey, but this is possibly linked to the older demographic of the online survey respondents. Conditions such as vision 0.7% (compared to 0.9%), and mental health 1.4% (compared to 1.2%) were very similar to the on-site data.

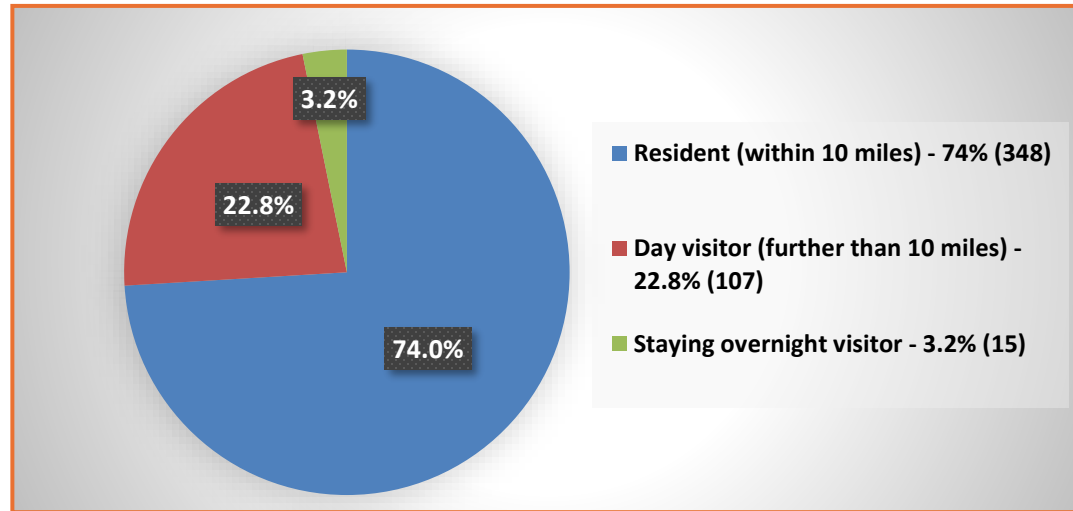
The data emerging from both the online and on-site surveys is still lower than the national average where 17.7% of the population have a disability that limits their ability to undertake some day-to-day activities (such as visiting destinations) (ONS, 2023). The overall data from both surveys is valuable as it indicates that regionally and nationally health considerations need to be factored into visiting destinations, and whilst the rural nature of the Ridge is a key part of its appeal, ensuring that parts of the Ridge are accessible will be important in attracting a more diverse array of visitors.

Employment status	Response
Working full time	31.5% (172)
Working part time	13.4% (73)
Unemployed	0.9% (5)
Retired	47.8% (261)
Student	1.5% (8)
Not normally working due to illness or disability	1.1% (6)
Self employed	3.8% (21)

Conditions or illness	Response
I do not have any restrictive illnesses or conditions	85.4% (472)
Vision (for example, blindness or partial sight)	0.7% (4)
Hearing (for example, deafness or partial hearing)	2.3% (13)
Mobility (for example, walking short distances or climbing stairs)	7% (39)
Mental health	1.4% (8)
Other	3.2% (18)

Home Location of Visitors

Proximity of visitors to the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge



The data from the responses received, outlined that the overwhelming majority of visitors surveyed online (74%) lived close to the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge ('Resident' within 10 miles) compared to 53.4% who were surveyed on-site. The difference can most likely be attributed to the online visitor survey marketing campaign that specifically targeted people living in towns and villages across Cheshire, resulting in a natural bias in this data.

From a 'Day visitor' perspective, however, there is some useful data emerging, with 22.8% of visitors coming from various parts of the UK (as outlined in the map to the right). This helps to again demonstrate that the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge attracts visitors from across the UK and has a growing national appeal as a destination.

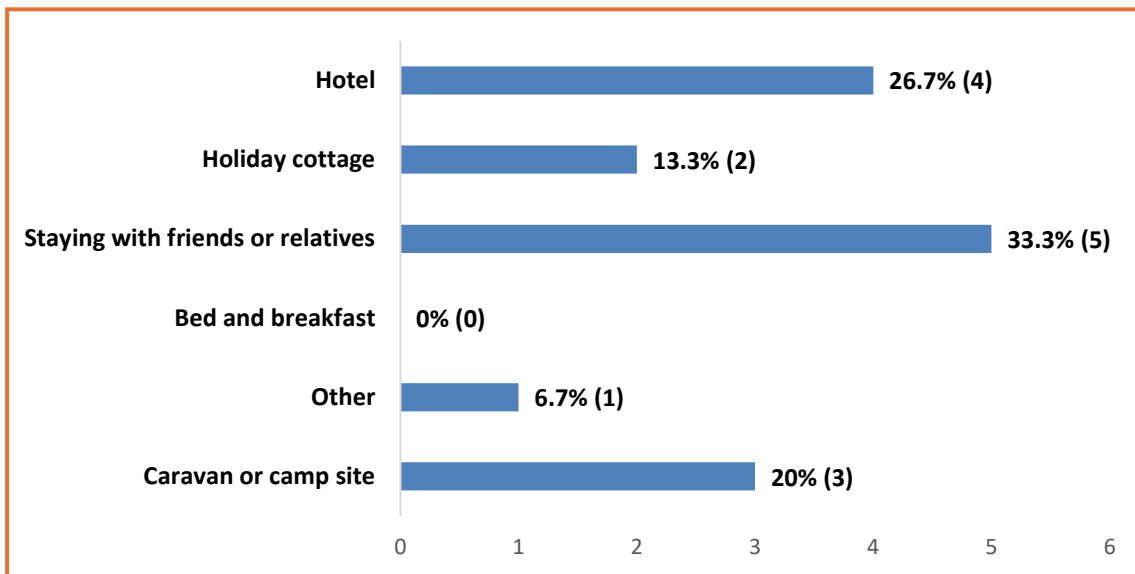
Whilst only a small number of these visitors (3.2%) stayed overnight there are again some useful insights emerging on where they opt to stay and the duration of their visit.

Map showing the home location of visitors

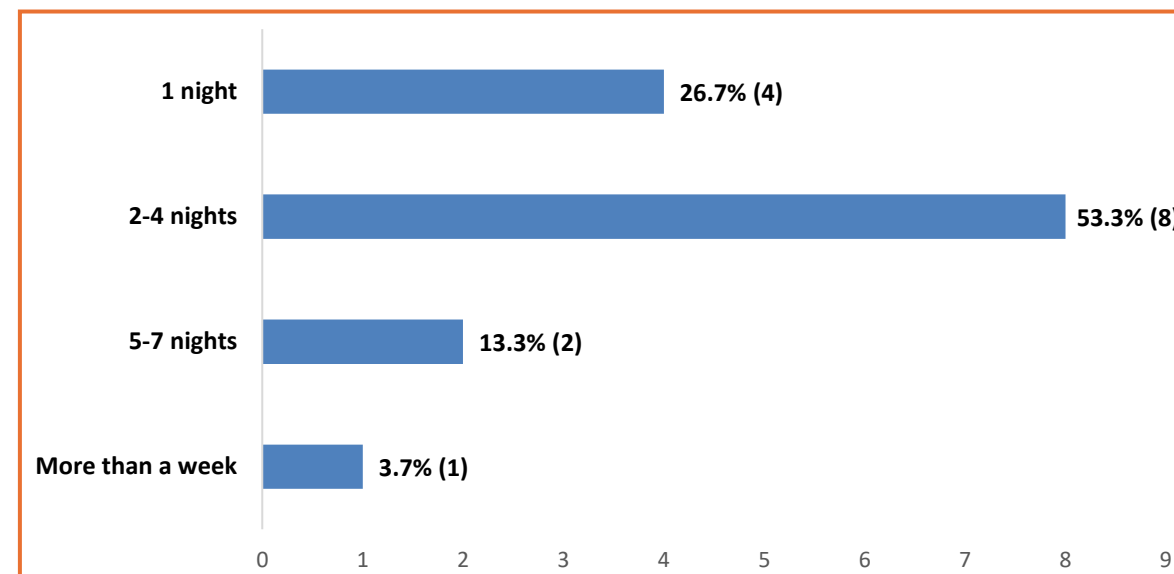


Overnight Visitors

Accommodation of overnight visitors to the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge



Duration of visit



The 3.2% of visitors who indicated that they were an ‘overnight visitor’ (page 41) were also asked supplementary questions to help provide further insights into visitor behaviours and motivations. The visitor data emerging on where people were staying (above left), as with the on-site visitor survey (page 17), demonstrated that opting to stay with friends or relatives (33.3%) was the most popular option (compared to 48% on-site). The remaining 66.7% outlined that they were staying in a range of local accommodation, such as hotels, holiday cottages, camp sites, and service apartments.

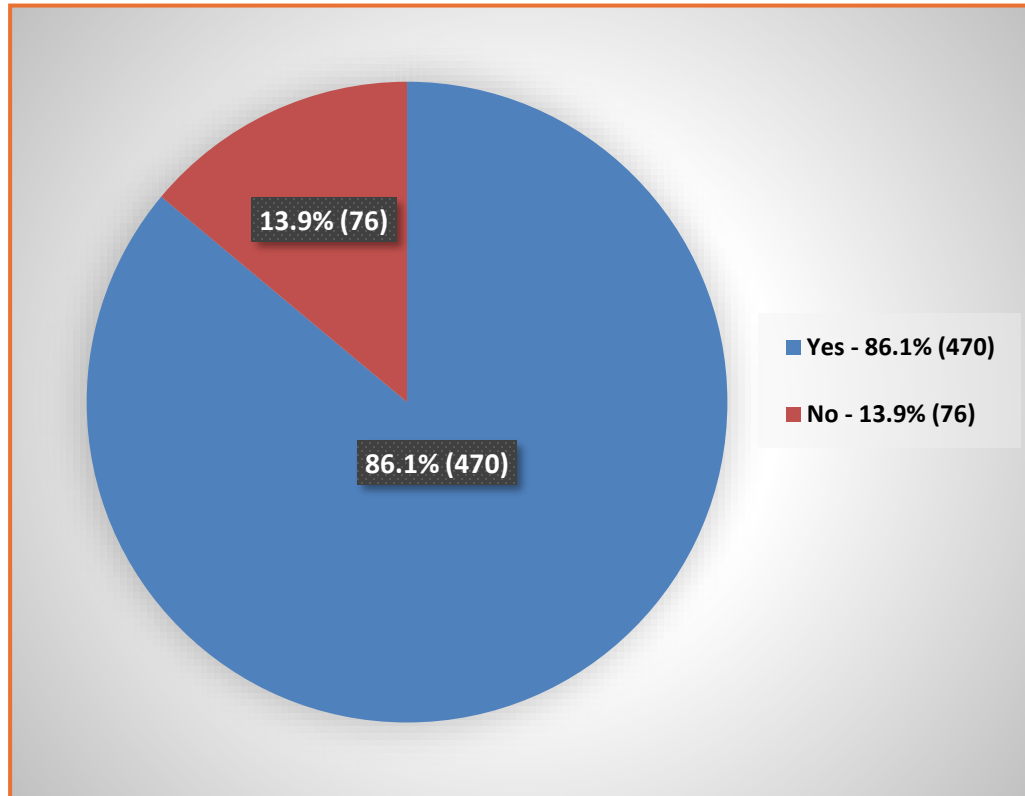
Similar findings also emerged concerning the length of stay (above right), with 70.3% (compared to 87% on-site) of the online visitors surveyed stating that were staying for multiple nights, with the majority again staying for between two and four nights (53.3%, compared to 56.6% on-site).

This overall distribution reflects diverse visitor preferences, with a notable reliance on personal networks for accommodation.

A data point of note is that in both the online and on-site surveys, no respondents were recorded as staying in a Bed and Breakfast (B&B) and given the variety of high-quality B&Bs available across Cheshire there is potentially some marketing opportunities to promote these options. Similarly, in the ‘other’ option, Airbnb was also conspicuous by its absence (although it is recognised that this is a small data set).

Visiting the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge

Have you visited the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge previously



A key question that was incorporated into the online visitor survey was to assess if visitors had visited the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge previously, and for those who had not, they were directed to a final alternative question to ascertain the potential reasons for this or barriers which existed to visiting the Ridge.

As the findings demonstrate, a significant majority of respondents (86.1%) had visited the Ridge before. This data was very similar to the 84% of on-site visitors who had visited the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge previously (page 25), indicating a high proportion of regular visitors.

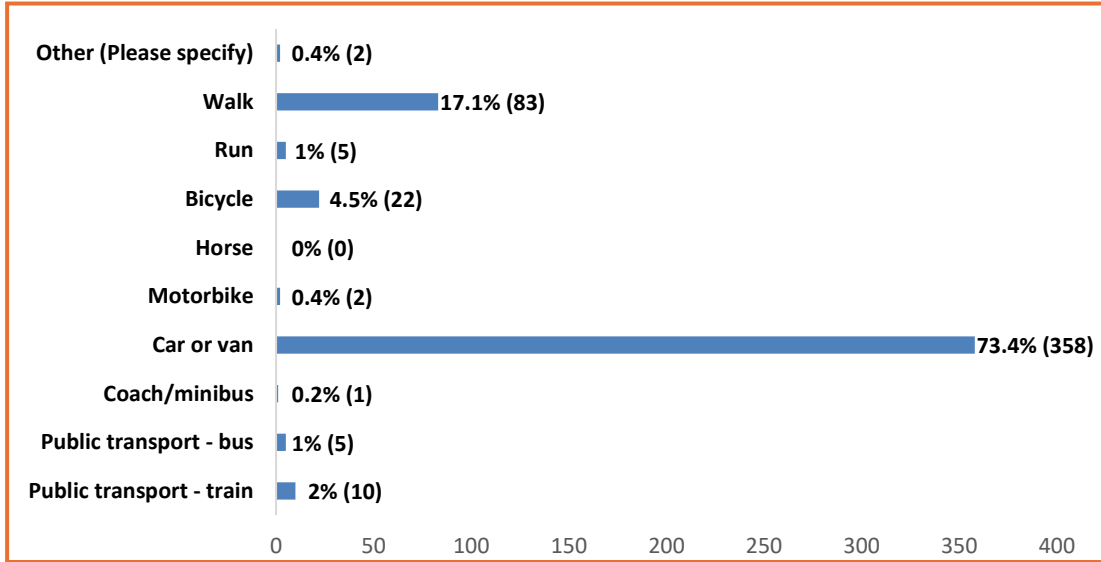
The remaining 13.9%, however, outlined that they had never visited the Ridge before, and given the high volume of online surveys completed from across Cheshire and the local regions, there is a potentially untapped visitor market.

This suggests potential opportunities for destination marketing strategies aimed at enhancing visitor retention and encouraging new and repeat visits.

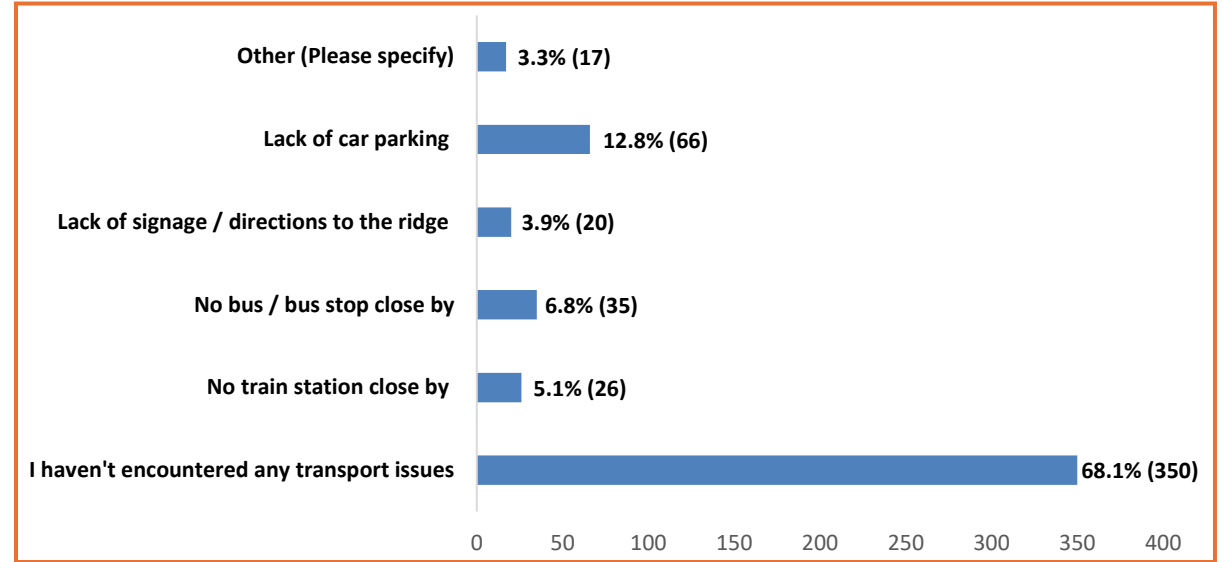
The following data (pages 44 to 58) does not include those who have never visited the Ridge before, as they were asked an alternative question to examine the reasons as to why they have never visited the Ridge (page 59). Therefore, the following sections will examine the responses from the 470 visitors who had previously visited the Ridge.

Travel to and from the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge

Transport used to access the Ridge



Transport issues encountered in accessing the Ridge



For those visitors who have been to the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge before, the data showed that the overwhelming majority (74%) used a motor vehicle (car, motorbike, or coach/minibus) as their mode of transport to access the Ridge (compared to 88.4% of those surveyed on-site) .

Of the remaining visitors, a surprisingly large proportion outlined that they walked (17.1%, compared to 5.4% of those surveyed on-site), ran (1%, which is similar to the 1.2% recorded on-site), or cycled (4.5%, compared to 1.8% of those surveyed on-site), but this data aligns with the majority of these visitors living within close proximity of the Ridge (less than 10 miles).

Only 3% of visitors outlined that they accessed the Ridge via public transport (train or bus) again demonstrating a potential lack of accessible public transport links across many aspects of the Ridge. This is further supported by 11.9% of visitors noting that the lack of a train or bus stop was a transport barrier that they had encountered in accessing the Ridge (compared to only 1.2% of those surveyed on-site). Similarly, a small number of visitors (3.3%) that noted 'other' also highlighted a lack of trains, poor train timetables, or limited bus routes as examples of transport barriers encountered.

Whilst the majority of visitors encountered no transport issues accessing the Ridge (68.1%, compared to 86.4% on-site), the barriers encountered included a lack of car parking (12.8%), lack of signage (3.9%), and concerns of the quality of some of the rural roads (other 3.3%).

It should be noted that a small proportion selected more than one response to this question, for example using public transport and walking, or more than one transport issue encountered, resulting in more than 470 responses being recorded for both questions.

Travel to and from the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge

In keeping with the on-site survey, the online visitor survey also asked their perspective about a 'Ridge bus' that would provide a hop on/hop off service to enable visitors to access different parts of the Ridge, as well as local transport links, such as train stations and/or bus stops.

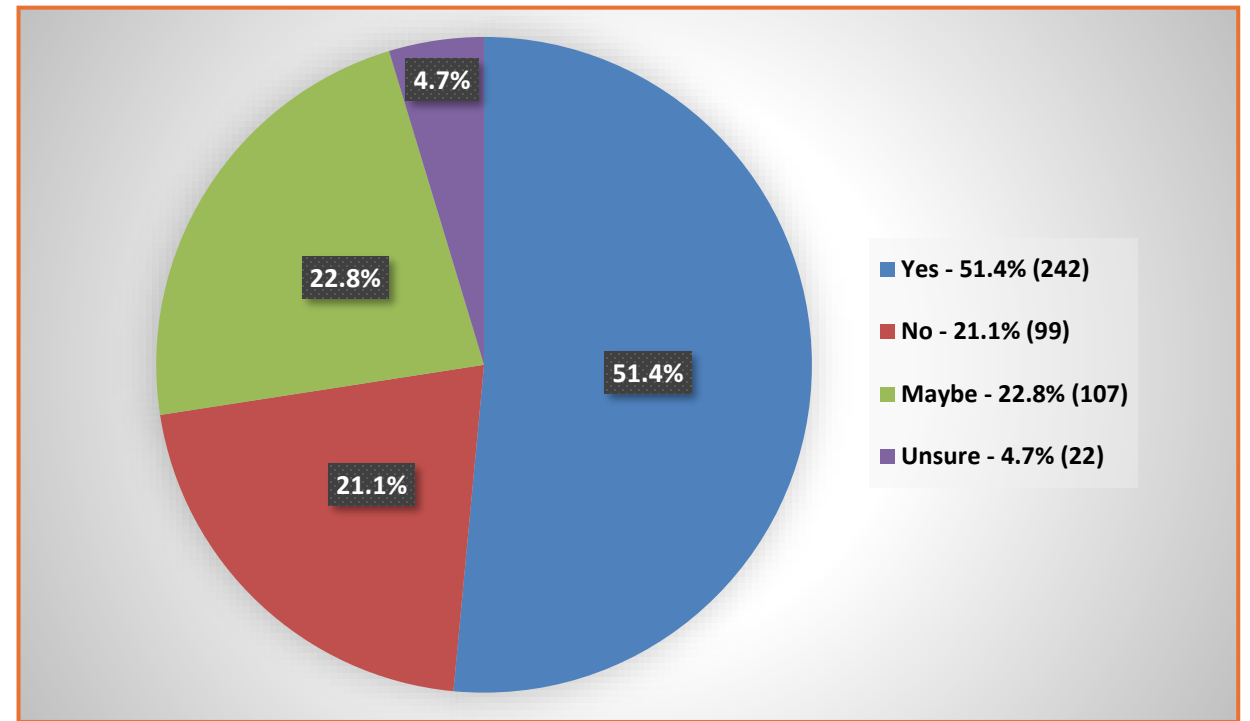
A larger majority supported the concept (51.4%, compared to only 37.2% on-site), with an additional 22.8% (similar to the 20.7% on-site) who may support such a service, and 4.7% unsure (similar to the 6.1% on-site).

In contrast to the on-site survey, the online data revealed that only 21.1% of visitors did not support such a service (compared to 36% on-site).

Given some of the barriers and issues raised within both the on-site and online survey, such as a lack of public services, the high cost of parking or limited parking, this warrants potential further investigation to capture why visitors would oppose such a service or how such a service could be made more appealing, such as a seasonal service.

Furthermore, as outlined previously (page 19), given the overall data captures, there is a potential opportunity to explore the feasibility of a seasonal Ridge bus service to increase accessibility to parts of the Ridge and to encourage more sustainable transport methods.

'Ridge bus' (hop on/hop off) service for visitors



Exploring the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge

Through the online survey, visitors to the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge where also asked to outline which parts of the Ridge they had visited in the past six months or potentially would visit in the next six months.

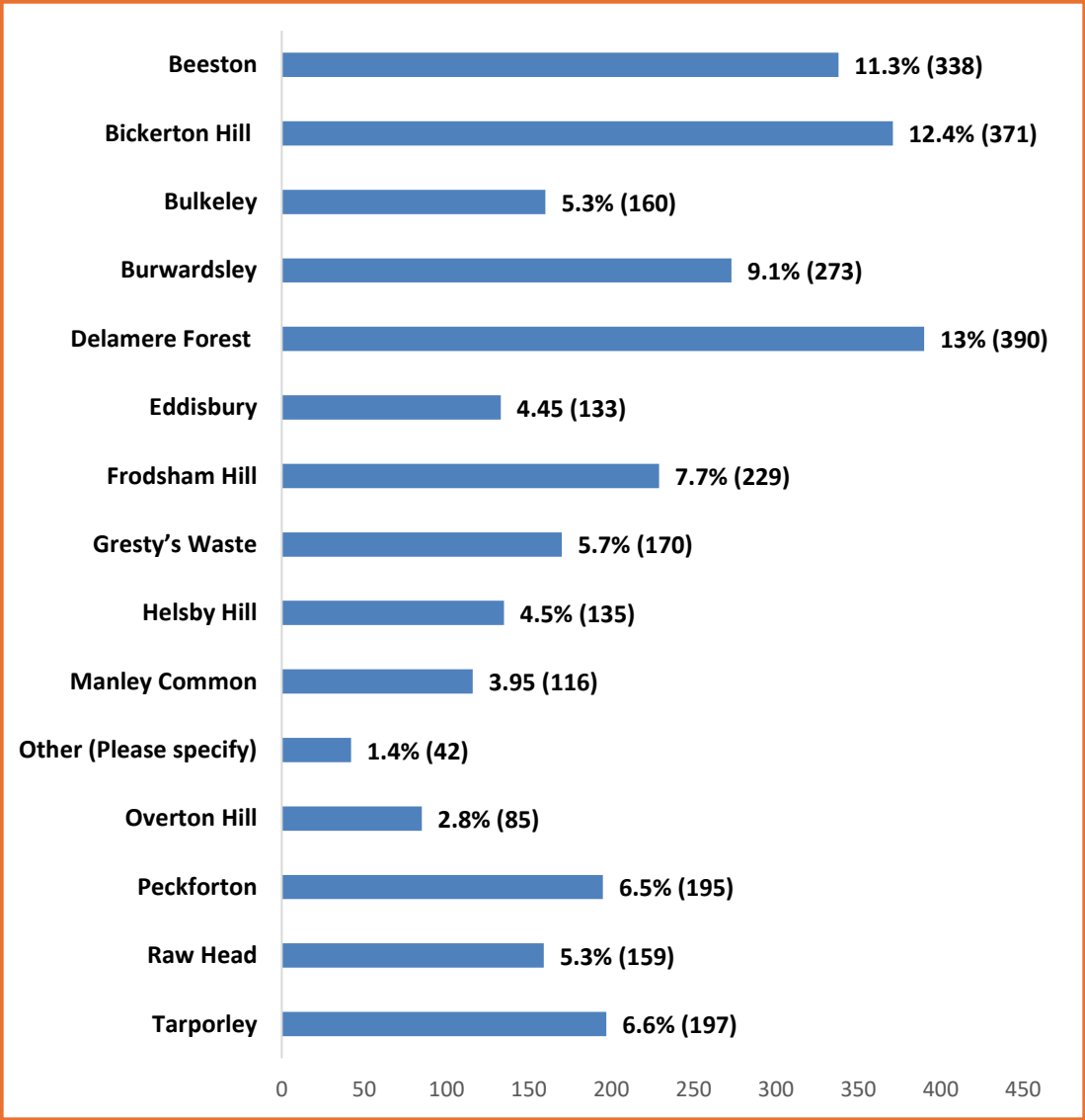
As with the on-site survey (page 22) the data again highlights that all locations across the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge have been or will be visited. The findings were also very similar to the on-site results, with locations such as Delamere Forest (13% compared to 17.9% on-site), Bickerton Hill (12.4% compared to 10.9%), Beeston (11.3% which is nearly identical to the 11.4% recorded on-site), Burwardsley (9.1% compared to 9.7%), Frodsham Hill (7.7% compared to 8.6%), and Tarporley (6.6% compared to 7.6%), also receiving the highest proportion of visitors.

For those selecting ‘other’ (1.4%) the locations indicated multiple locations in one day via walking trips with several visitors outlining that they had ‘walked the Sandstone Trail’.

There were 2993 responses to this question as visitors were able to indicate multiple sites that they had visited or intended to visit. The percentages shown indicate the popularity of the multiple selections made by visitors, as well as the actual number of responses recorded for each location.

This overall data (when considered with the on-site results) is very useful in highlighting the common most visited sites across the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge. As previously outlined (page 22) this aids in determining where any infrastructure projects, activities or events, and improvements could be prioritised.

Locations visited or to be visited on the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge



Reasons for Visiting the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge

In keeping with the on-site survey, the online survey also explored the reasons for visiting the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge.

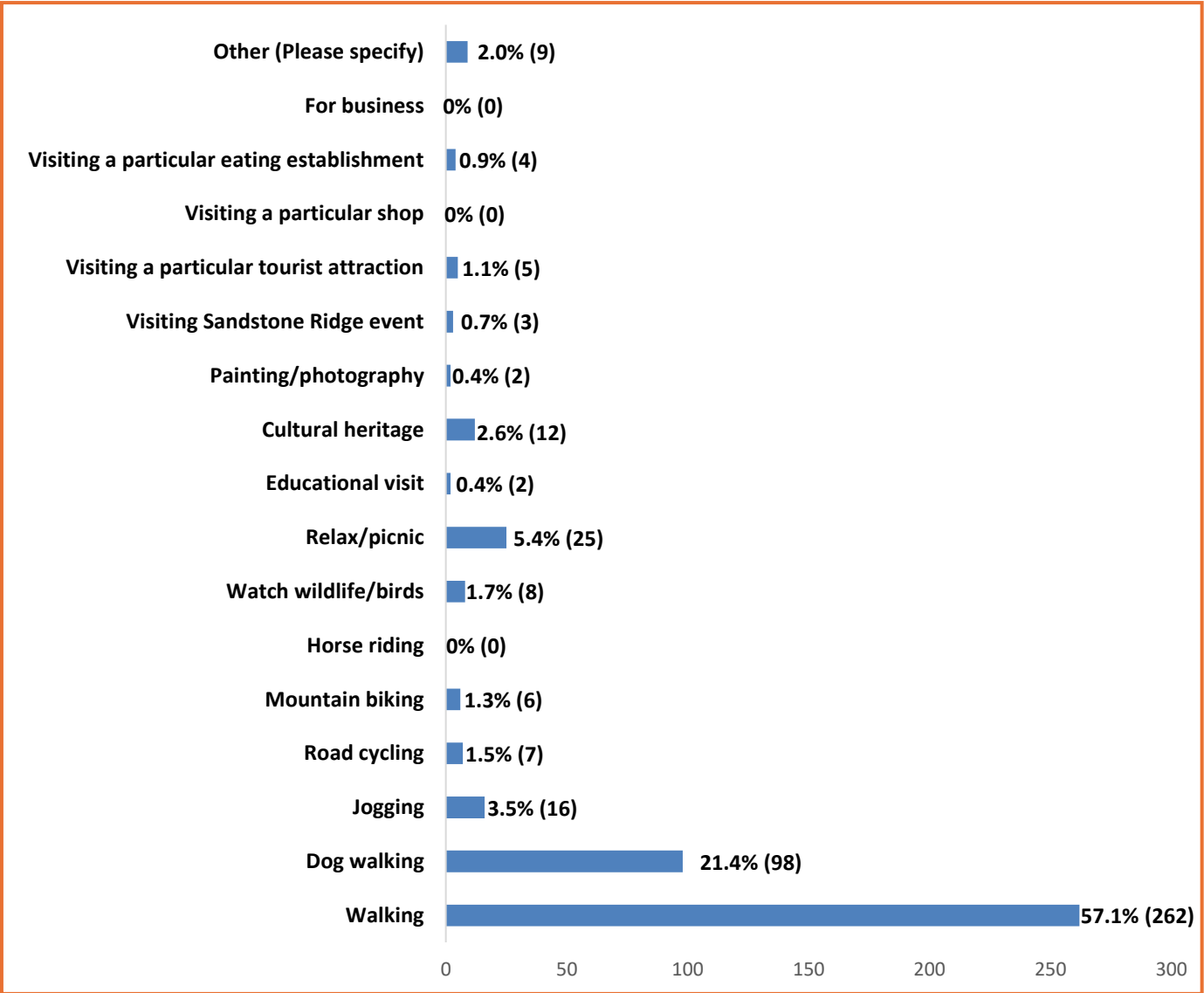
The findings are again comparable to the on-site results (page 23), which again demonstrates that the overwhelming majority visited to walk (57.1% compared to 44.1% on-site), or for dog walking (21.4% compared to 29.6% on-site).

A wide array of other recreational activities was again recorded demonstrating the versatility of how and why people use the Ridge. For example, online responses outlined that to relax/have a picnic (5.4% compared to 6% on-site), jogging (3.5% compared to 2.4%), cycling (1.5% compared 2.4%) or mountain biking (1.3% compared 2.1%), watching wildlife or birds (1.7% compared to 2.1%), and cultural heritage (2.6% compared to 1.3%) were some of the most popular reasons for visiting.

Of the 2% who noted ‘other’ reasons for visiting the Ridge, these included supporting activities such as local scout group expeditions, and commemorative events.

The overall findings continue to demonstrate the versatility of how and why people visit the Ridge.

Reasons for visiting the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge



Reasons for Visiting the Sandstone Ridge

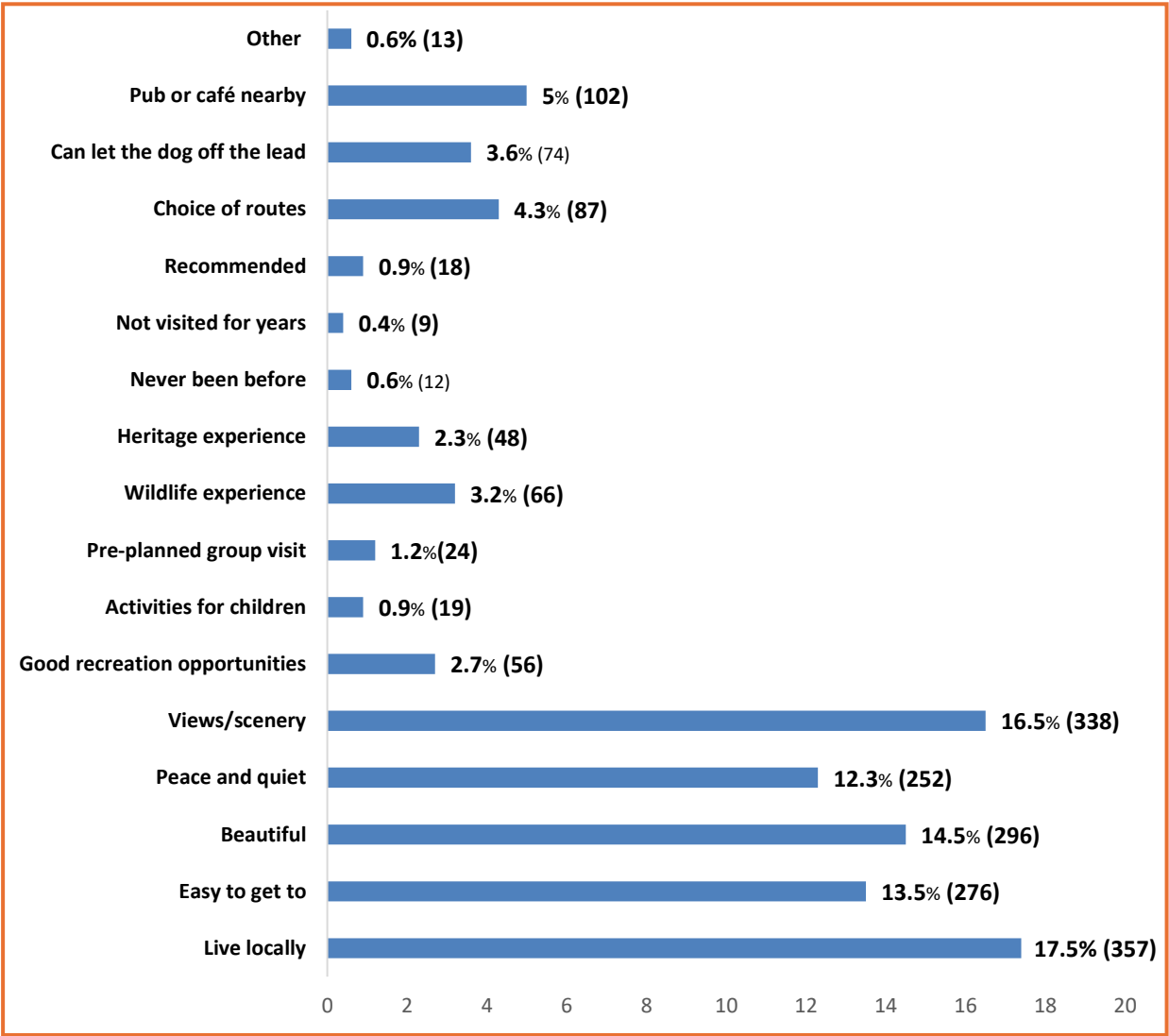
The online survey also asked visitors to indicate their reasons for visiting the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge rather than another area of countryside. Visitors could record multiple reasons for their visit, resulting in 2047 responses from the 470 respondents. The percentages shown indicate the popularity of the selections made by visitors, as well as the actual number of responses recorded for each option.

The main reasons identified those visitors that lived locally (17.5% compared to 16.4% on-site) to the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge, and that it was easy to get to and access (13.5% similar to 13.4% on-site) and, in keeping with the on-site results, that it was the landscape of the Ridge that attracted people to visit (page 24). For example, many of the online visitors also noted they visited the Ridge for its beauty (14.5% compared to 13.5% on-site), its peace and quiet (12.3% identical to the 12.3% on-site), and its views and scenery (16.5% compared to 14.5% on-site).

The other reasons noted for visiting the Ridge differed slightly to the on-site results, with visiting a pub or café (5% compared to 2.9% on-site) being one of the more popular reasons. Others again included the recreational opportunities (2.7% compared to 3.1% on-site), heritage experiences (2.3% compared to 1.6% on-site), the wildlife (3.2% compared to 3.8% on-site), the choice of routes (4.3% compared to 3.4% on-site), and from a dog walking perspective the ability to let the dog off the lead (3.6% compared to 5.9% on-site).

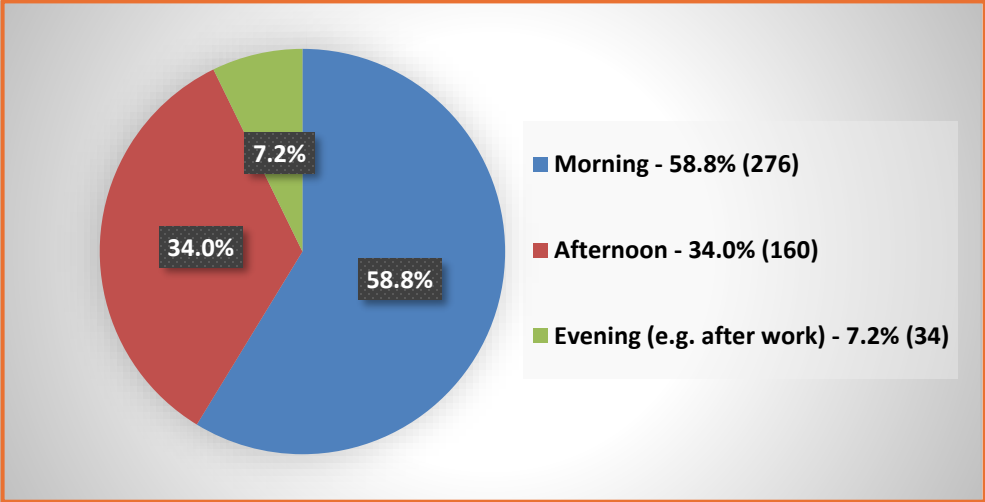
The overall data highlights that the ease of access and the variety of activities offered on and across the Ridge, provide a very strong draw to visitors. As previously stated, (page 24), this versatility should be reflected in future marketing campaigns for the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge, as well as in any future events or activities for specific parts of the Ridge.

Reasons for visiting the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge rather than another area of countryside



Dwell time at the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge

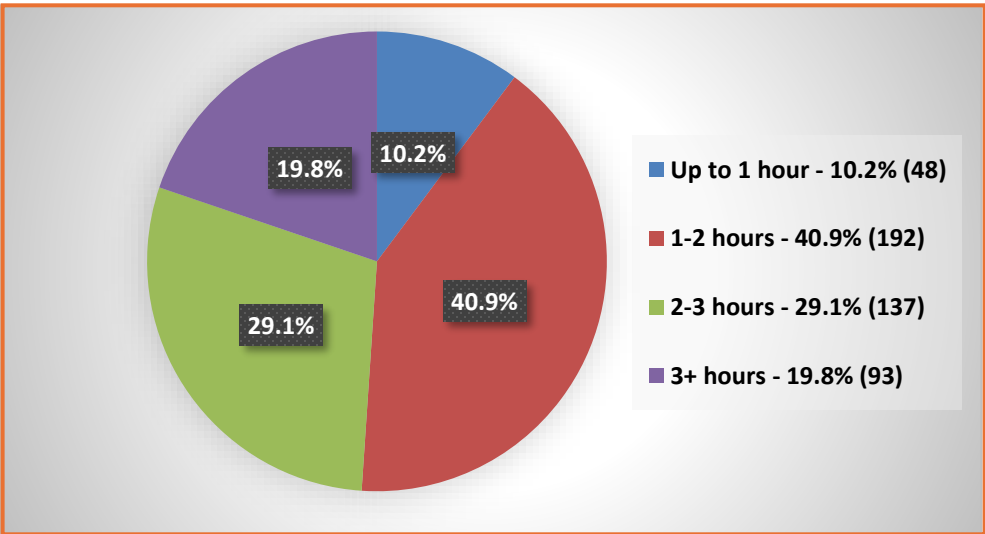
Time of day preference for visiting the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge



Visitors were also asked to express their preference in terms of when they liked to visit the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge (top left). The visitors responded that they predominately preferred to visit in the morning (58.8% compared to 70.8% on-site), with 34% (compared to 24.5% on-site) indicating that they prefer to visit in the afternoon. Similar to the on-site findings, only a small proportion (7.2% compared to 4.7% on-site) outlined a preference for an evening visit.

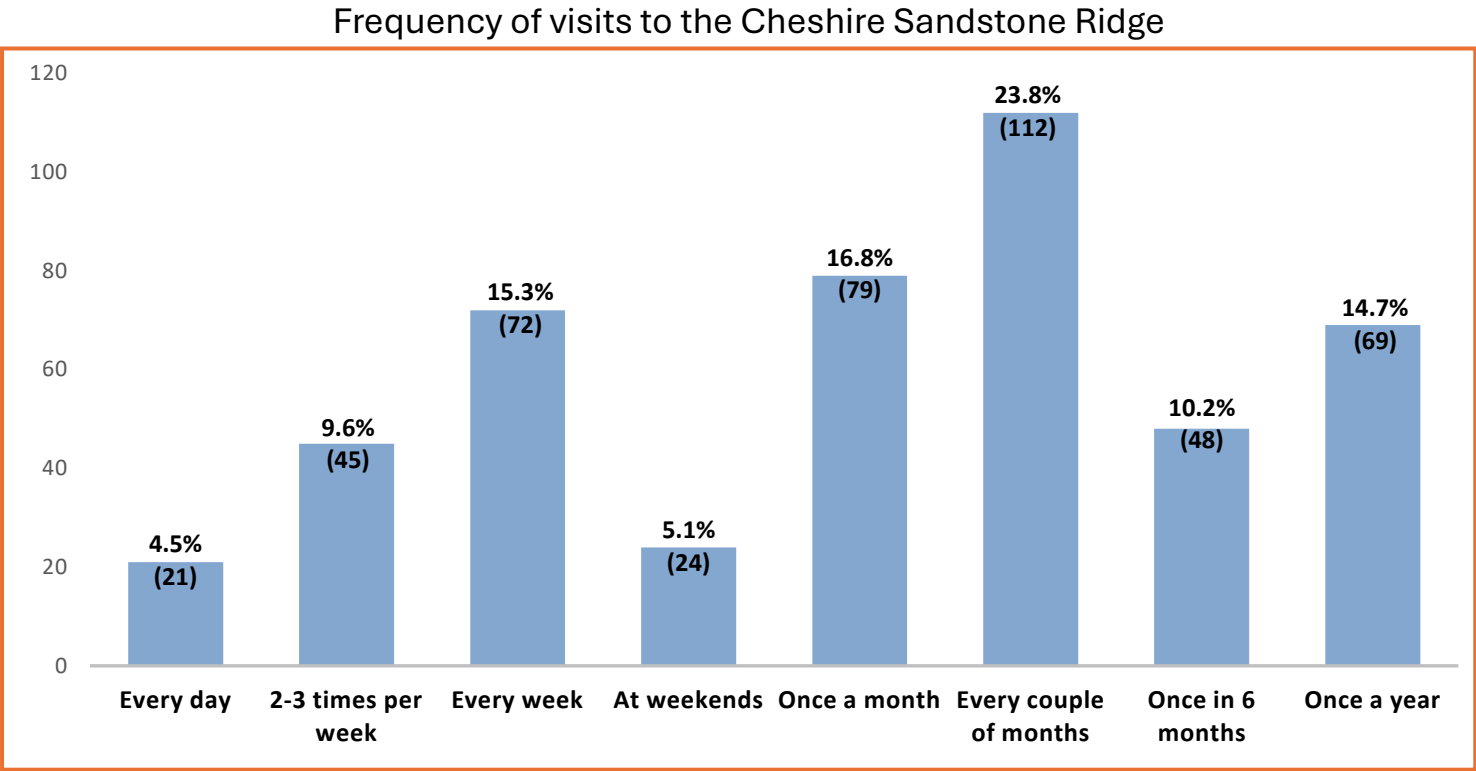
The online visitor survey also explored how long on average they visited the Ridge (bottom left). In keeping with the on-site findings (page 26), the majority (40.9% compared to 45.1%) again indicated that they would spend between one and two hours at the Ridge, with a further 29.1% (compared to 23.5%) indicating they would spend between two and three hours at the Ridge.

Duration of visit to the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge



This data is useful as it helps to indicate that the dwell time on and across the Ridge is between one and three hours in total (70%, similar to the 68.6% on-site). Given the previous data on the locations most visited across the Ridge (page 22 and 46), this will aid in deciding where additional infrastructure or resources may be needed to support the visitors and provide appropriate facilities for their visit, and/or where additional events or activities could be hosted.

Frequency of Visits to the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge



As outlined previously (page 43), 86.1% of the visitors who had visited the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge, were asked the frequency of their visits.

A small proportion of the visitors (4.5% compared to 8.3% on-site) indicated that they visited the Ridge every day, and a further 24.9% (compared to 31.5% on-site) outlining that they visited the Ridge at least once a week (15.3% compared to 17.1% on-site), if not two to three times a week (9.6% compared to 14.4% on-site), or just at weekends (5.1% compared to 3.2% on-site). Of the remaining visitors, 40.6% (compared to 37.2% on-site) indicated that they visited at least once a month (16.8% compared to 19.5% on-site), or once every couple of months (23.8% compared to 17.7% on-site). Finally, 24.9% (compared to 19.8% on-site) indicated that they visited less frequently either once every six months (10.2% compared to 9.7% on-site), or once per year (14.7% compared to 10.1% on-site).

The overall findings clearly demonstrate that the majority of visitors (75%+) are visiting the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge on a regular, i.e. at least once every couple of months, if not more regularly. It is important, therefore, the key stakeholders work collaboratively to maintain and protect the Ridge, investing in improvements and infrastructure, as well as marketing campaigns to highlight different aspects of the Ridge to visit.

Awareness of the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge

Online visitors were asked to outline how they first found out about the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge.

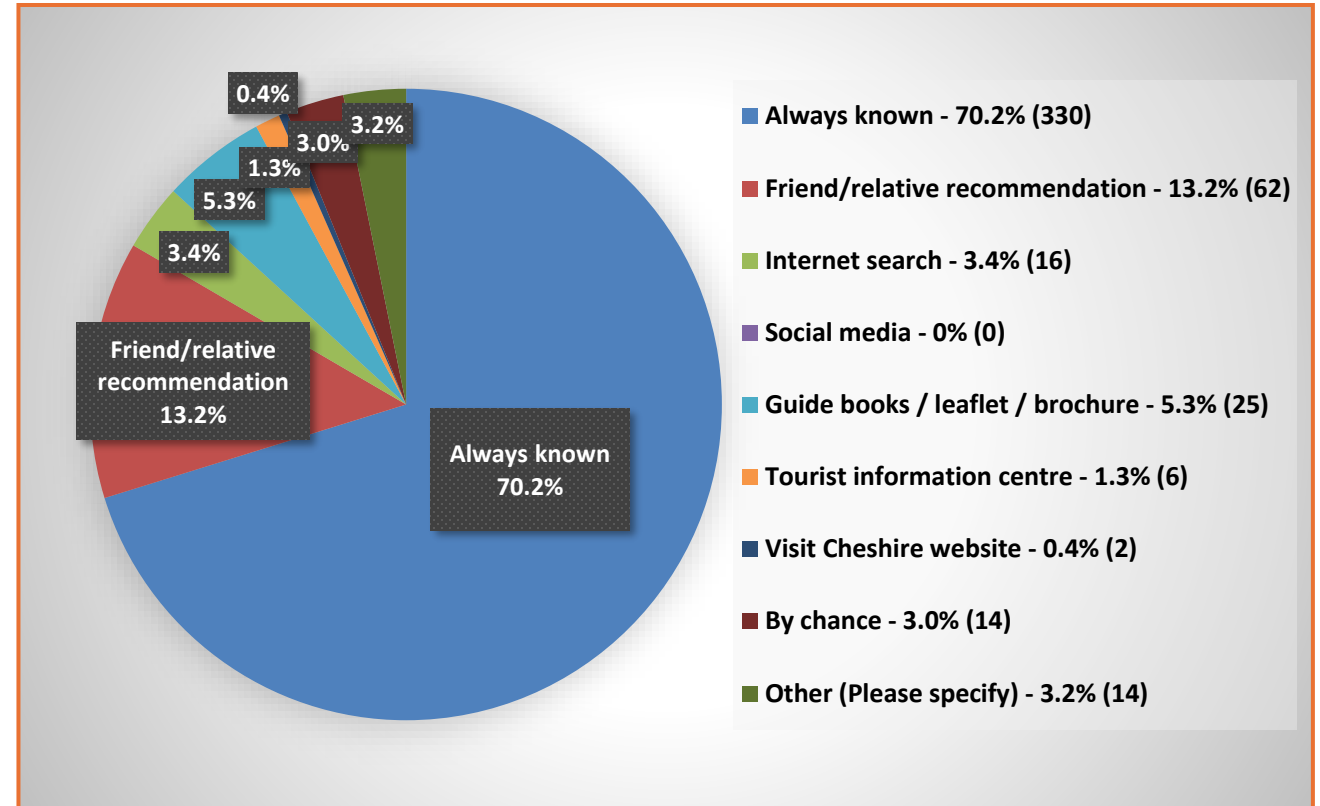
In keeping with the on-site findings (page 27), The majority of respondents (70.2% compared to 60.3% on-site) reported that they had always known about the Ridge, indicating strong local or longstanding awareness. Meanwhile, 13.2% learned about it through friends or relatives (compared to 19.8% on-site), highlighting the role of word-of-mouth in spreading information.

Furthermore, the data also indicates that 5.3% had discovered about the Ridge via a guide book, leaflet or brochure (compared to 3.7% on-site). A further 3.4% discovered the site through an internet search (compared to 4.9% on-site), and 3% came across it by chance (compared to 4.3% on-site).

For the 3.2% noting 'other' (compared to 5.2% on-site), the awareness was recorded from a variety of sources which included but not limited to: 'visiting through an organised trip', 'discovering via OS Maps', 'moved to the area recently', via a 'television programme', and 'visiting with fellow ramblers'.

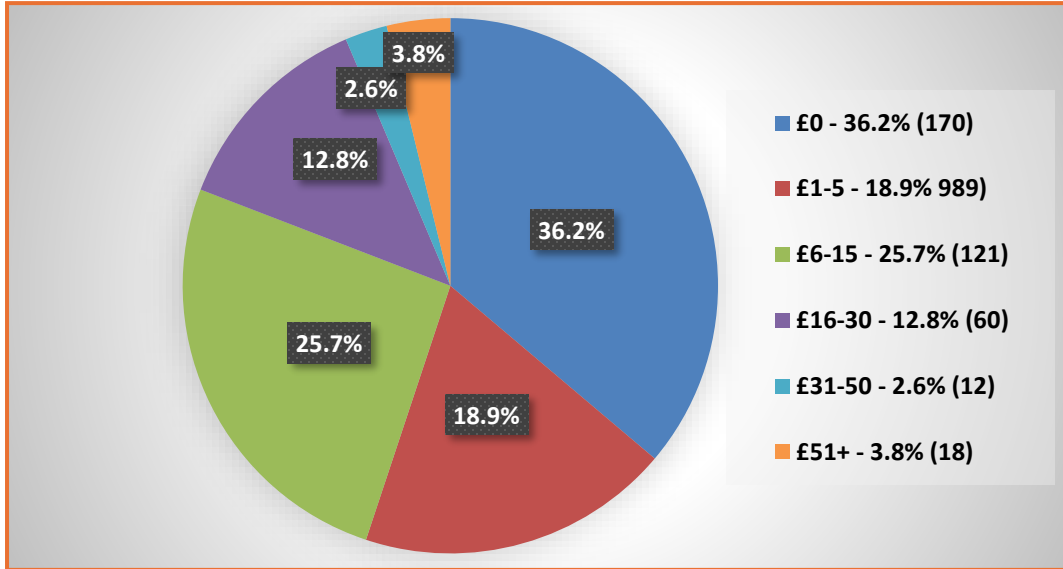
These results suggest that while inherent awareness is high, digital visibility remains limited, presenting an opportunity for improved online promotion. The overall data can be used to develop new marketing campaigns to target more regional and national visitors to the Ridge, as well as to review existing marketing collateral, particularly digital marketing and platforms.

Awareness of the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge (2024)

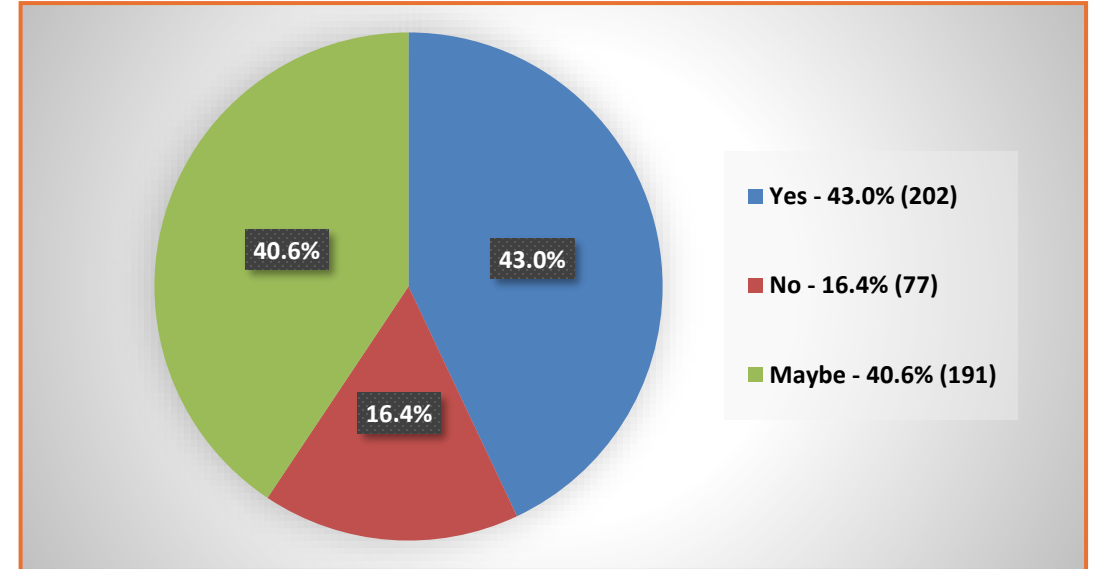


Visitor Spend at Cheshire Sandstone Ridge

Average visitor spend



Visitors support for financial contribution to help fund the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge



Online visitors were also asked to comment on how much they spend on average when they visit the Ridge, and if they would support spending more as part of their visit, if the monies raised were invested in maintaining the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge. Similar to the on-site findings (page 28) 36.2% (compared to 30.8% on-site) commented that they did not spend anything as part of their visit, but that the majority of visitors (63.8% compared to 69.2% on-site) had also spent between a modest £1 to £5, up to and in excess of £51.

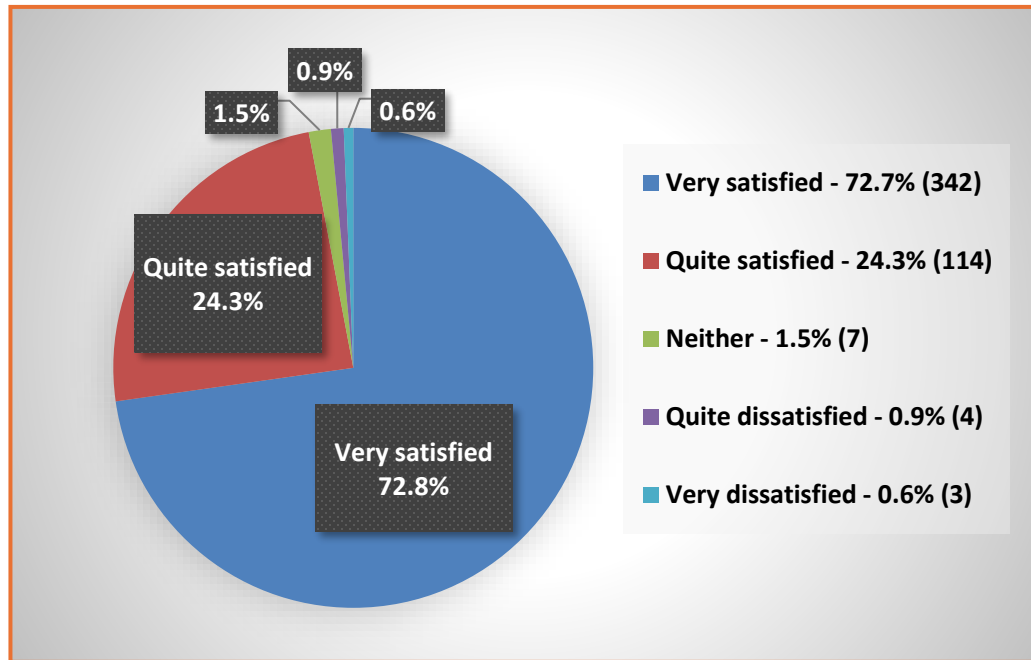
In general, the visitor spend was between £6 and £30 (38.5% compared to 35.4% on-site) and these results again correlate to specific sites on the Ridge, such as Delamere Forest, and Beeston (Castle), where there are costs associated with the visit (such as car parking, food, and entry fees).

In terms of supporting spending more as part of their visit, 43% (compared to 46.3% on-site and 38% in 2017) support spending more (page 29). Furthermore, 40.6% (compared to 29.6% on-site and 38% in 2017) commented that they 'maybe' supportive, demonstrating a positive trend in terms of a willingness to consider increased financial support for the Ridge. Finally, only 16.4% (compared to 24.1% on-site and 24% in 2017) commented they would not be willing to spend more.

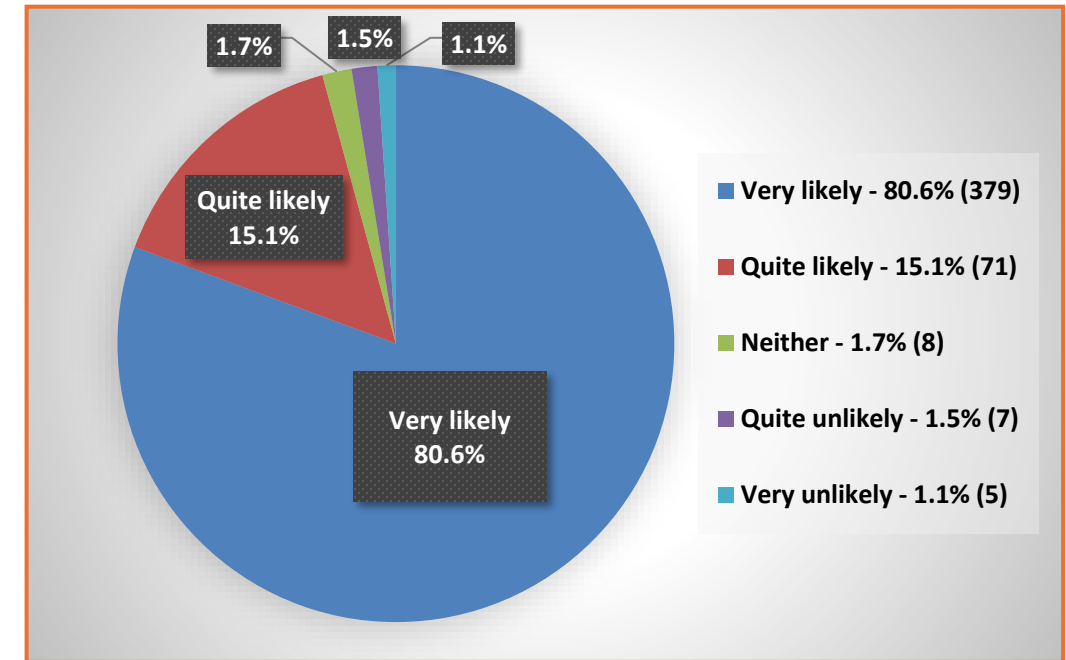
The overall data emerging suggests that value-driven spending, particularly for conservation and local development, could be an effective approach to encourage greater financial contributions from visitors.

Visitor Satisfaction

Visitor satisfaction



Likelihood for return visit



The final questions focussed on overall visitor satisfaction, and the likelihood to return to the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge.

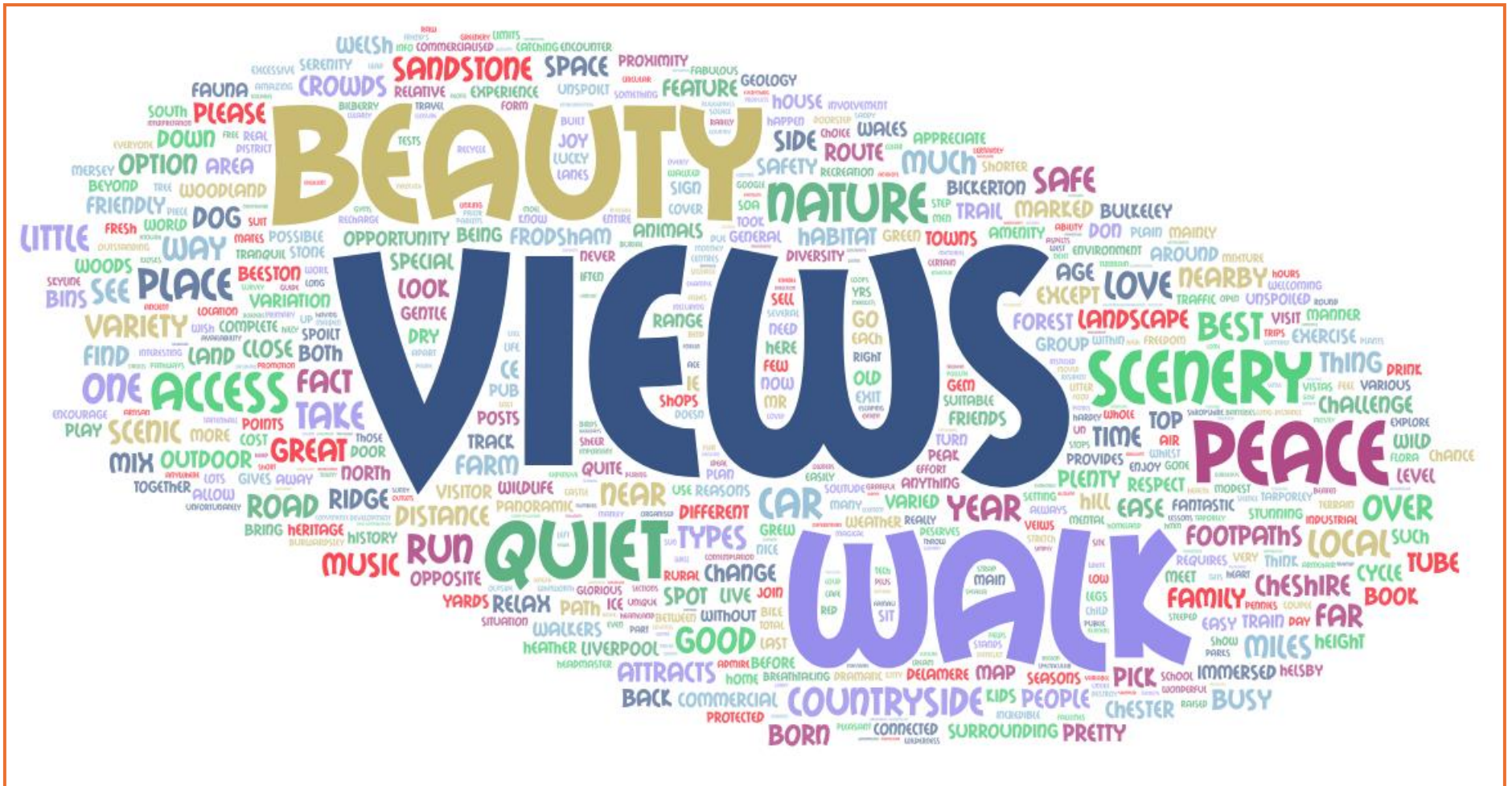
The results (above left) were highly positive with 72.8% (compared to 79.9% on-site and 89% in 2017) reporting that they were 'very satisfied' with their visit, and that 24.3% (compared to 16.8% on-site and 10% in 2017) were 'quite satisfied'. Only a very small proportion 0.9% (compared to 1.4% on-site), indicated that they were 'dissatisfied', and 0.6% 'very dissatisfied' with their visit. In keeping with the on-site findings (page 30 and 31), the positive satisfaction ratings also correlate with the likelihood of return visits to the Ridge, with 80.6% (compared to 90.3% onsite and 93% in 2017) 'very likely' to return. 15.1% (compared to 8.8% on-site and 6% in 2017) outlined that they were 'quite likely' to return, and 1.5% (compared to 0.6% onsite) 'quite unlikely' to return. Of note is a small number of visitors (1.1%) outlining that they were 'very unlikely' to return.

Whilst the overall data appears to maintain a positive visitor experience overall, there does appear to be a decline in these satisfaction levels. Some of the reasons are outlined in how the visit could be improved (page 54 to 58) but this is an aspect that will need to be monitored to ensure this is not a continuous decline, which could have implications on return visitors and economic impacts in the future. Despite this potential concern, the findings highlight the Ridge's continuous appeal and suggest a high potential for repeat visitation, reinforcing the importance of maintaining and enhancing visitor experiences (page 30 and 31).

Visitor Satisfaction

Online visitors were also asked to comment on what they felt the **best thing** about the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge was. The themes emerging highlighted the views, scenery, peace, landscape, beauty, and quiet, as well as the diversity of nature, and the variety of activities available.

The word cloud to the right illustrates these findings.



Visitor Satisfaction

Below is a selection of some of the comments received from visitors concerning the **best thing** about their visit to the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge:

"The quiet tranquillity and natural beauty of the countryside"

"Beautiful countryside, Immersion in a wild place with dramatic Sandstone Ridge providing fantastic views over the Cheshire Plain and beyond"

"Great walking routes with interesting history and two castles to visit"

"Nice roads, hills and tracks to cycle on"

"It is beautiful and peaceful and also if you meet people, they are generally friendly and also appreciate the surroundings."

"Natural unspoiled landscape"

"Outstanding views and great for dog walks"

"The variety and extent of walks, either short strolls for all capabilities but also challenging long ridge walks that can take days to complete is unique."

"It's sheer beauty and tranquillity"

Visitor Satisfaction

Below is a small selection of some of the comments received from visitors about anything visitors **did not like** concerning the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge:

"A shortage of car parking combined with no, or very little rural public transport"

"Lack of public transport to access from Liverpool"

"Lack of toilets or refreshments stops along Sandstone trail itself"

"Crowded at weekends"

"Dog walkers leaving poo bags on the floor or hanging from trees"

"Car parking can be expensive"

"Need a road crossing at Gretty's Waste as its a very busy road"

"In Summer the paths can become overgrown restricting access."

"Lack of maintenance on less travelled sections make it impassable at certain times of the year"

"Not enough parking in some spots and certainly not enough public bus service to give you confidence to use it".

Improving the Visit

The final question that online visitors were asked (again aligned to the on-site survey, page 36) concerned how the visit could be improved and made a more enjoyable experience. Visitors could select multiple responses to this question, as well as provide some text (for other) to provide additional information. In total 1,033 responses were recorded from the 470 respondents, with a range of suggestions captured.

As highlighted within from the comments concerning ‘anything visitors didn’t like’, dog waste bins was the highest priority that visitors raised (13.7% compared to 26.4% on-site), which was again reflected throughout many of the ‘other’ text responses recorded (6.3%).

Other priorities for improving the visit included better signage (11.7%, identical to the 11.7% on-site findings), better facilities such as toilets and better parking (13.6% compared to 9.9% on-site), route maps (13.5% compared to 9.2% on-site), better waymarked trails (10.7% compared to 5.2% on-site), more benches (8.6% compared to 6.1% on-site), and more catering options (8.4% compared to 5.7% on-site).

The ‘other’ priorities (6.3%) also included improved footpath maintenance (including managing overgrown sections) and linking of paths, better transport links and accessibility, and more information points (such as on conservation activities).

The overall 2024 survey results (both online and on-site) are similar to the 2017 findings, where signage, access, path maintenance, and dog waste bins were also key priorities.

The findings demonstrate the importance of investing in the infrastructure (new and existing) across the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge, in order to enhance the overall visitor experience.



Barriers to Visiting the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge

As previously outlined (page 43) those visitors (13.9%) who noted that they had never visited the Ridge before, were asked an alternative question to examine the reasons as to why they may have never visited the Ridge.

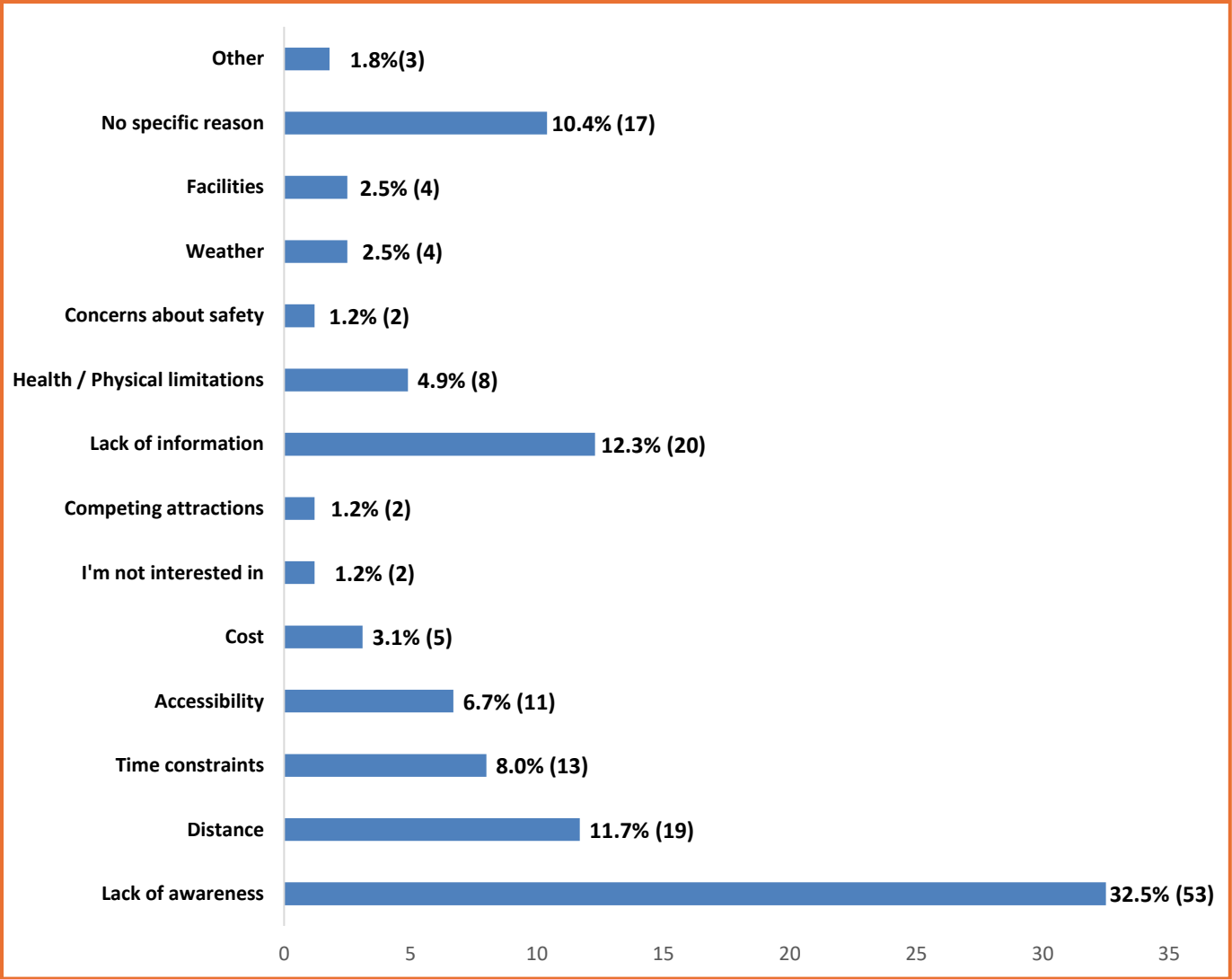
The primary reason emerging from the respondents as to why they had not visited the Ridge was due to a lack of awareness (32.5%). Additionally, 12.3% mentioned a lack of information about the Ridge, highlighting a need for improved promotional efforts, including digital information (such as websites and social media).

Other barriers included distance to the Ridge (11.7%), time constraints (8%), accessibility issues (6.7%), and cost (3.1%). Health or physical limitations were also a factor for 4.9% of respondents, while 10.4% had no specific reason for not visiting.

These findings suggest that increasing awareness and providing clearer information about the site could significantly improve visitation rates, potentially overcoming many of the barriers identified.

Furthermore, ensuring the Ridge is accessible from both a transport and disability perspective will also be key to opening up the Ridge to new visitors.

Barriers to visiting the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge



Part 3 – Recommendations

Recommendations

The two visitor survey's have provided a wealth of useful data and information that stakeholders who support the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge can utilise to help determine where investment and/or new infrastructure may be needed. The table pulls together the key areas for consideration and recommendations arising from survey findings:

Areas for consideration	Recommendations
Travel and transport	
1. Car Parking	I. Clearer parking signage and information on any fees and how monies raised are used to support the maintenance of the Ridge, and specific sites. II. Improve access to parts of the Ridge, such as fixing potholes and improving signage. III. Improve parking across the Ridge, such as creating clear parking bays and/or designated parking sites (to prevent congestion in rural villages in the summer months).
2. Cost of car parking (and how money raised through this is used)	I. Provide information on how parking charges are used to maintain the Ridge and infrastructure by the organisations and charities that manage the Ridge.
3. Public transport links to and from the Ridge	I. Work with local council and transport providers to try and improve train and bus services and increased timetabling, particularly during the summer months. II. Explore the feasibility of a seasonal hop-on and hop-off Ridge bus.
Visiting and experiencing the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge	
4. Challenges with multi-purpose use of the Ridge (such as dog walking, cycling, park runs, and family activities)	I. Work with key stakeholders to review how the Ridge is used, where pinch points exist, and plan/promote different routes for different activities.
5. Dog walkers and behaviours (dogs off the lead, not under control, and dog waste)	I. Improved signage at key points (car parks, path start points, etc) reminding visitors of controlling dogs and disposing of all waste. II. More bins at key points on routes. III. Enforcing fines to aid in changing dog owners' behaviours around waste and control of dogs.

Recommendations

Areas for consideration	Recommendations
Marketing and branding of the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge	
6. Ridge signage and route guides	I. Review and improve route paths across the Ridge to ensure these are clear and easy to follow. II. Potential to develop a 'Ridge App' for suggested guides and routes. III. Review and enhance current printed guides and routes that are available at key locations and online.
7. Attracting a diverse array of visitors	I. Review the marketing campaigns, messaging and imagery to help attract a wider audience to visit the Ridge. II. Develop marketing campaigns that highlight the accessibility of the Ridge, and/or key sites that are the most accessible. III. Develop marketing campaigns that target specific demographic groups, such as those aged 18 to 32, to encourage a younger and more diverse audience to visit the Ridge, and help to influence their networks.
8. Marketing campaigns to raise awareness locally, regionally, nationally in partnership with key stakeholders.	I. Marketing activities can include: i. How and where to visit the Ridge. ii. Activities and events taking place on and across the Ridge. iii. Develop digital marketing presence on platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and/or Tik Tok. II. Market and promote the amazing work of the organisations that manage the Ridge, projects that are planned, and seeking additional feedback and suggestions. III. Work with key stakeholders to create broader regional and national marketing campaigns – such as Marketing Cheshire, Cheshire and Warrington LEP, Cheshire West and Chester Council, Cheshire East Council, regional train and bus operators, as well as organisations such as Forestry England, English Heritage, National Trust and the Cheshire Wildlife Trust. IV. Work with hospitality and/or tour guides to create more official 'Ridge Walks'.

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Further information

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