Priory Fields User Survey Report

Executive Summary

A journey of about half a mile, crossing just one road, will take a walker from Hitchin Market Place, through the town's historic heart, to the bridge over Hitchin bypass which leads to Priory Fields. With its 11 rights of way (9 footpaths, 1 bridleway and 1 byway) exceeding 2.5 miles in total length, Priory Fields is popular with walkers, runners, cyclists and horse riders.

In the absence of any publicly available study (other than cumulative figures for the 3 regular Countryside Management Service Health Walk attendances) the Hitchin Town Action Group (HTAG) has carried out a survey to quantify the use of the area and attempt to investigate possible impacts on recreation and quality of life for local people if the area were to be developed for housing.

The survey followed a walk in July with over 300 attendees, and was designed, conducted and analysed by volunteers recruited from those who attended that walk. The survey was carried out in early morning, lunchtime and early evening on Tuesday 30th September, Thursday 2nd October and Sunday 5th October 2014. The 7 multiple choice questions were designed to be answered in about 1 minute. The results are summarised in tabular form in appendix A.

The main findings are as follows:

- During the survey, a total of 661 *visits* were logged, and 463 questionnaires were completed. This equates to an average of 49 visits per hour over the survey period.

- Each user only completed the questionnaire once, but may have visited the area twice or more in separate sessions. The number of *users* within the periods covered was therefore within the range 463 to 661.

- Over 60% of questionnaire respondents during the two weekdays lived in the SG4 9 and SG5 2 postcode areas. The most frequent sub-divisions logged were SG4 9A, B, and E, followed by SG5 2A - all very close to Priory Fields, and suggesting that these people would have walked to the area. On the Sunday, the pattern of use was different, with numbers being swelled significantly by an increase in users coming from further afield (just over 9% during the week to 41% on the Sunday).

- The area is used almost exclusively for recreational purposes. Over 90% of users described the reason for their use of the area as either exercise, dog walking or enjoyment of the countryside, and invariably identified it as a combination of these.

- About 85% of respondents reported that they use the area frequently – at least twice a week; 44% (of which just over half are dog walkers) said that they use the area at least once a day.

- Users were overwhelmingly between 31 and 60 years of age. Sunday users were of a slightly younger age profile largely due to an increase in the numbers of the 19-30 age group, and reflecting the higher proportion of couples and family groups.

We believe that the survey provides evidence that the use of the area for housing would have a number of negative consequences for the local community, although we recognise the limited nature of some of the questions. Responses point to the likelihood that a change in the character of the area would result in:

- Displacement of dog-walking and other informal recreation activities to other areas – Oughtonhead was mentioned a number of times. These areas are already intensively used in this respect. This displacement is also likely to be accompanied by increased car use.
- A potential reduction in activity with impacts on quality of life and health. Only 30% of respondents reported that they are members of sports clubs or gyms. For the majority, the area offers a safe, convenient and open-access recreational opportunity.

Many respondents in discussion with the survey team said that it was the attractions of a small market town set in *beautiful and accessible* countryside that brought them to live here, and that this area was a very important part of their day to day lives.

Our conclusion is that the recreational use of this area strengthens the case for protecting Priory Fields from development for housing, and should be taken into account by Councillors as they consider the full range of its vital functions as part of the Green Belt.

Main report

Scope and Procedure

Timing and checkpoints

The survey was conducted on Tuesday 30th September, Thursday 2nd October and Sunday 5th October. Volunteers manned 4 checkpoints for periods of 90 minutes commencing at 07.00, 12.15 and 17.00 hours.

Avoidance of double counting

Users of the area were approached and logged, irrespective of whether they chose to respond to the survey questions. To avoid double counting within any session, each user, on approaching a checkpoint, was asked whether they had been logged at a different checkpoint that session, and not counted again. Users who had been logged during any previous session were logged in subsequent sessions, but did not answer the questions again. Questionnaires were therefore completed only once by each respondent during the 13.5 hour survey period**.** ***The key measurement was of the number of visits to the area (uses), rather than the number of users. The number of completed questionnaires is the lower bound of the number of users.*** A summary of results appears in appendix A.

Position of checkpoints

The position of the checkpoints is shown in appendix B. Since, as long as users remained on the rights of way, it was hard to avoid passing a checkpoint, we have a high level of confidence that few users were missed.

Questions

The survey questions are in appendix C.

How representative were the sampling periods?

Weather was fine, dry and warm for all of the weekday sessions, but fine, dry and cool for the Sunday session. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the times chosen were not those of highest use. Local residents suggest that a slightly later time for the sampling of Sunday at lunch time might have been busier, and the morning session was felt to be rather earlier than the peak time on all 3 days. However, the good weather may have helped to balance the under-reporting resulting from the sampling times.

Overall Numbers

During 9 sampling periods of the survey over a period of 13.5 hours, a total of 661 *visits* were logged, and 463 questionnaires were completed. This equates to an average of 49 visits per hour over the survey period, or nearly 1 person every minute passing a survey point. Use was highest on the Sunday with 329 visits over 4.5 hours (73 uses per hour) and 222 questionnaires completed. Thursday had the lowest use – 147 visits (33 visits per hour) and 104 questionnaires completed.

Comments on the Questionnaire Responses

Important note. We have used the term **users** to mean questionnaire respondents (although there were some users who did not respond to the questionnaire). The term *uses* refers to visits to the area. One user may have made more than one visit to the area during the 13.5 hour survey period. Percentages, where given, are as a proportion of questionnaire responses for any given question. Since a few respondents did not answer all questions, there was a slight variation in sample size for each question, but we do not consider this to be significant.

Question 1. Group size.

This question was included primarily to capture numbers if a large group was encountered whose members did not answer the questions. We know of a number of organised groups which use the area (see appendix D) although none of these was encountered during the survey periods. Particular mention should be made of the regular, and well-attended Health Walks, organised by the Countryside Management Service. Figures for the annual number of participants for the Health Walks involved also appear in appendix D.

During the week, groups larger than two were rare, but on the Sunday there was an increased prevalence of informal groups. The number of solo users during the survey period (57.3% overall, higher during the week) testifies to the perceived safety of the area.

Question 2. Age range.

During the week, users tend to be older with just under a quarter of all users over 60. At the weekend, the age profile is slightly younger, with an increase in the representation of the 19-30 age group.

Question 3. Use.

When asked to describe their use of the area respondents frequently did not wish to distinguish between exercise (A), dog walking (B) and enjoyment of the countryside (C). Such responses were recorded as B (dog walking) if a dog was present unless the respondent said otherwise. Those without dogs invariably cited exercise and enjoyment of the countryside and were asked to choose one of these. This approach almost certainly resulted in under-representation of response C. It is clear that the appeal of the area cannot be associated with a single response. We therefore believe it is legitimate to consider these responses as a whole. The 6% of users selecting response D ('other') were made up of students walking to school, a few commuters walking to the station or work in town, and (rarely) people who were working in town and who had parked (Gosmore Road was mentioned as a parking place by one respondent). Two horse riders using the byway and bridleway were also recorded. It is clear that the exercise and well-being benefits of the area implied by the response to this question are highly valued by users.

Question 4. Frequency of use

About 80% of respondents use the area frequently – twice each week or more. Over 40% of respondents use the area at least once each day. This suggests that use of the area is deeply embedded in the majority of users' daily routines.

Question 5. Alternative Uses

Our intention was to find out more about the impact of development, especially in terms of impacts such as changes in car use, impacts on other local areas and on health. Unfortunately, this question has limitations in at least 3 respects – it is hypothetical, respondents could not visualise what density of housing might be built, and a baseline for car use in getting to the site should have been established in a separate question. However, with only just over 11% of respondents saying they would still use the area, it is clear that its attractiveness will be markedly reduced. Postcode information (see 7 below) showing that a high proportion of users live locally implies that many users walk to the site.

Question 6. Gym or sports club membership

Only about 30% of users are members of a gym or sports club. A number of respondents made clear their reliance on the area for their main exercise. Runners were often among the most passionate. Asked if she was a member of a gym or sports' club, one replied 'This is my gym'. In response to the question 'What would you do if…?' one veteran runner responded 'I'd be in despair.'

Question 7. Postcodes.

See appendix A for graphical representation of postcode data. The most frequently encountered postcodes were SG4 9, SG5 2 and SG4 7. These areas accounted for 75-80% of the postcodes recorded during the week, and almost 60% on the Sunday. The most commonly recorded sub-divisions were SG4 9A (Park Street, Gosmore Road, Newlands Lane area) SG4 9B (Priory Way, Standhill Close area), SG4 9E (London Road, Blackhorse Lane area) and SG5 2A (Charlton village, The Limes area).
These are all within 1 mile of Priory Fields. Assuming that the majority of users from these sub divisions walk to and from Priory Fields, and that many are multiple users, we believe that a change in its character will have significant effects for these people in particular. It is also clear that the area is known and valued for its attractiveness by people living outside Hitchin. Visitors were recorded from Milton Keynes, Wood Green and as far afield as Nottingham.

Anecdotes and comments.

Although not formally recorded, respondents often made comments about their attachment to the area and their views were echoed by visitors from further afield. In an emailed comment, a recently arrived local resident spoke of the role of the area in generating a sense of community 'We moved to Hitchin in 2013 and our new community based around visits to Priory Fields has welcomed us.' Quite apart from this, all the volunteers manning a checkpoint spoke of the welcome they received, and the gratitude that people expressed for our initiative in conducting the survey.

Main Conclusions

Our survey provides quantitative evidence that Priory Fields, because of its extensive network of rights of way, position and topography is an attractive and extremely well-used recreational area for Hitchin residents. The majority of users visit twice each week or more, and a very high proportion of these use the area at least once a day. Due to the concentration of users within sub divisions of two local postcode areas, our evidence suggests that many users walk to the area. If the area is developed for housing, a number of negative impacts are probable. These are

- Reduced activity levels in an ageing population, which tends not to belong to gyms or sports clubs
- Loss of a safe, traffic-free area for exercising dogs
- Displacement of these activities to other areas, themselves already intensively used, and almost certainly entailing an increase in car use.

We believe we have demonstrated the value of Priory Fields as a recreational open space in its current state to the people of Hitchin. This evidence should be taken into account by Councillors as they consider the full range of its vital functions as part of the Green Belt.

Keith Montague and Bill Sellicks

On behalf of HTAG Steering Group

Acknowledgements

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Adrian Gurney
Jennifer Hughes
Maggie Killingbeck
Chris Langley
Gill Langley
Steve MacSweney
Pansy Mitchel
John Pearce
Jenny Sheach
John Skeeles
Anne Steel
William Steel
Lesley Stevens
Mags Sykes
Barbara Thomas
Valerie Thorning
Malcolm Todd
Joan Underhill
Julie Zirngast

Appendix A Summary of results

Total visits recorded during 4.5 hour sampling sessions each day	Tues	Thurs	Sun
	185	147	329
Total users completing questionnaire	137	104	222

Total visits recorded during 13.5 hours of sampling over 3 days	661

Total questionnaires completed	463

Average visits per hour	Tues	Thurs	Sun
	41	33	73

Average visits per hour overall	49

Questionnaire summary

Question 1

Group Size	Tues	Thurs	Sun	Overall
	% of users	% of users	% of users	% of users
1	68.6	74.8	43.2	57.3
2	25.9	19.0	41.3	16.0
3	0.0	6.1	8.2	1.8
4	0.0	0.0	7.3	0.9
5	5.4	0.0	0.0	0.3
>5	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Total uses	185	147	329	661

Question 2

Age range	Tues	Thurs	Sun	Overall
	% of users	% of users	% of users	% of users
Under 11	2.2	4.8	4.5	3.9
12 to 18	8.0	6.7	5.8	6.7
19-30	13.1	10.6	16.1	14.0
31-60	54.7	51.0	53.6	53.3
61+	21.9	26.9	20.1	22.2
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Total respondents	137	104	224	465

Question 3

Use	Tues	Thurs	Sun	Overall
	% of users	% of users	% of users	% of users
Exercise	34.1	41.2	26.3	31.9
Dog walking	49.3	42.2	37.9	42.2
Enjoyment of countryside	6.5	7.8	33.0	19.6
Other	10.1	8.8	2.7	6.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Total respondents	138	103	224	465

Question 4

Frequency	Tues	Thurs	Sun	Overall
	% of users	% of users	% of users	% of users
Less than once per week	4.4	4.9	25.0	14.4
Up to twice per week	19.0	12.6	24.1	20.0
Up to 5 times per week	26.3	25.2	23.7	24.8
Once a day	28.5	38.8	16.5	25.0
More than once a day	21.9	18.4	10.7	15.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Total respondents	137	103	224	464

Question 5

Alternative	Tues	Thurs	Sun	Overall
	% of users	% of users	% of users	% of users
Still use	16.8	10.7	8.1	11.1
Alternative without driving	35.2	34.0	30.5	32.6
Drive to alternative	38.4	35.0	49.3	43.0
None of above	9.6	20.4	12.1	13.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Total respondents	125	103	223	451

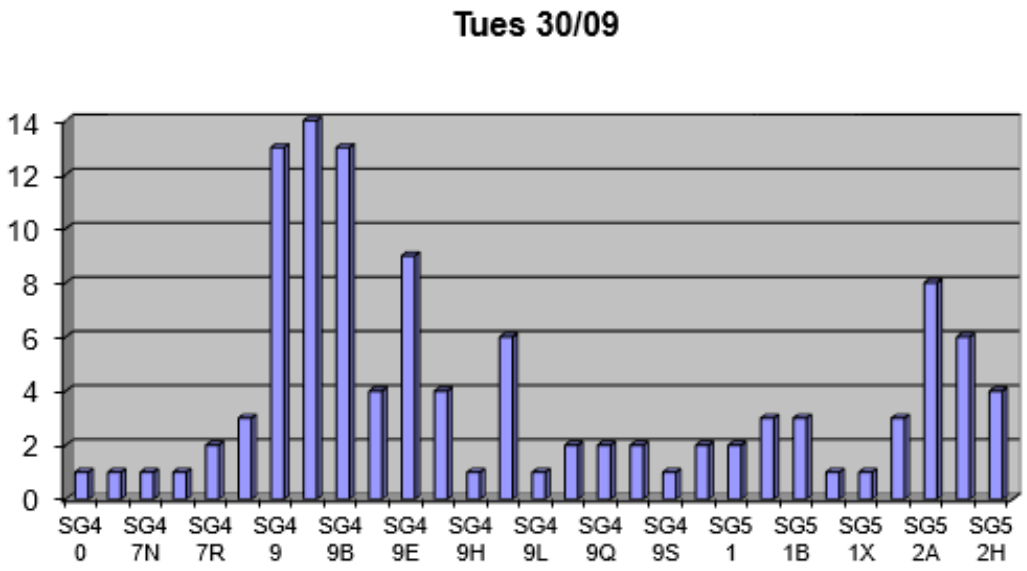
Question 6

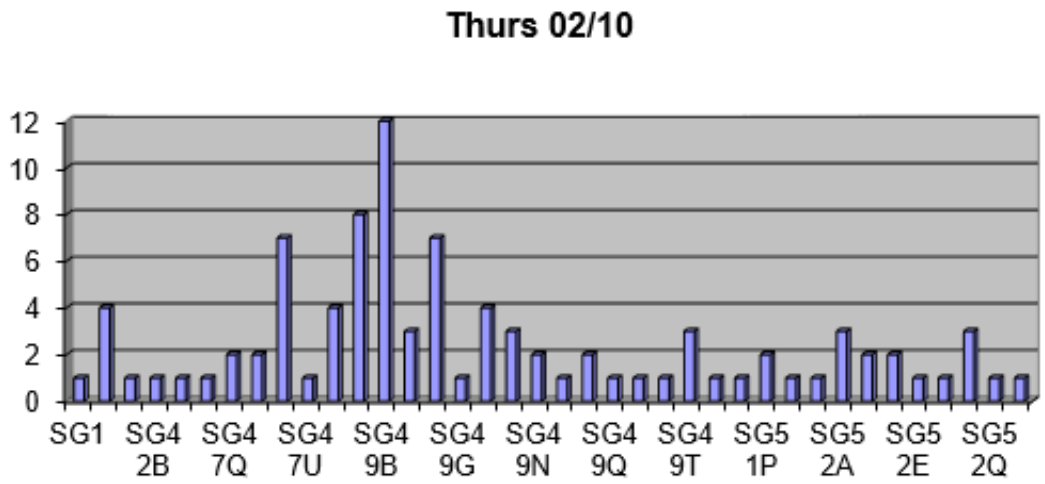
Gym or sport club	Tues	Thurs	Sun	Overall
	% of users	% of users	% of users	% of users
Yes	32.6	25.2	28.6	29.0
No	67.4	74.8	71.4	71.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Total respondents	132	103	224	459

Question 7

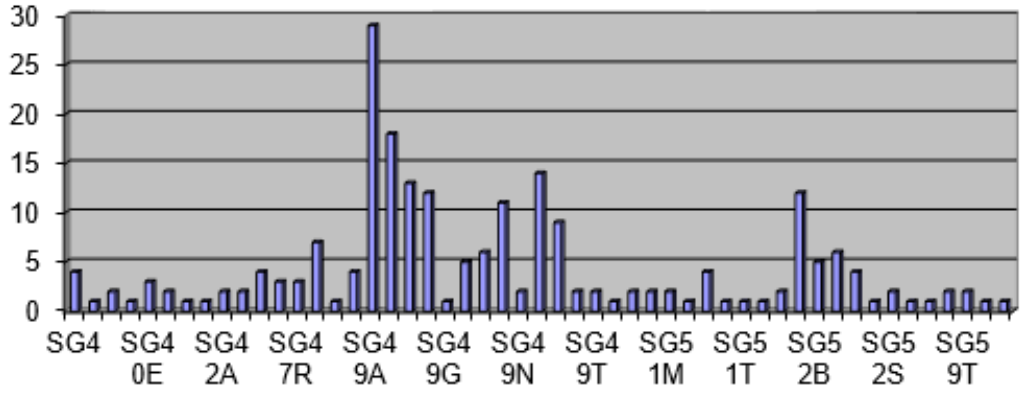
Post code	Tues	Thurs	Sun	Overall
	% of users	% of users	% of users	% of users
SG4 0	0.7	1.0	2.2	1.5
SG4 1	1.5	0.0	0.0	0.4
SG4 2	0.7	2.0	0.0	0.6
SG4 3	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
SG4 4	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
SG4 5	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
SG4 6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
SG4 7	8.1	13.1	5.7	8.0
SG4 8	2.2	0.0	0.0	0.6
SG4 9	54.1	53.5	36.2	45.1
SG5 0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
SG5 1	6.7	5.1	3.1	4.5
SG5 2	15.6	14.1	10.9	13.0
SG5 3	3.0	0.0	0.0	0.9
SG5 4	0.0	0.0	0.9	0.4
SG5 5	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
SG5 6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
SG5 7	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Other	7.4	11.1	41.0	24.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Total responses	135	99	229	463

Charts showing numbers of respondents against postcodes.

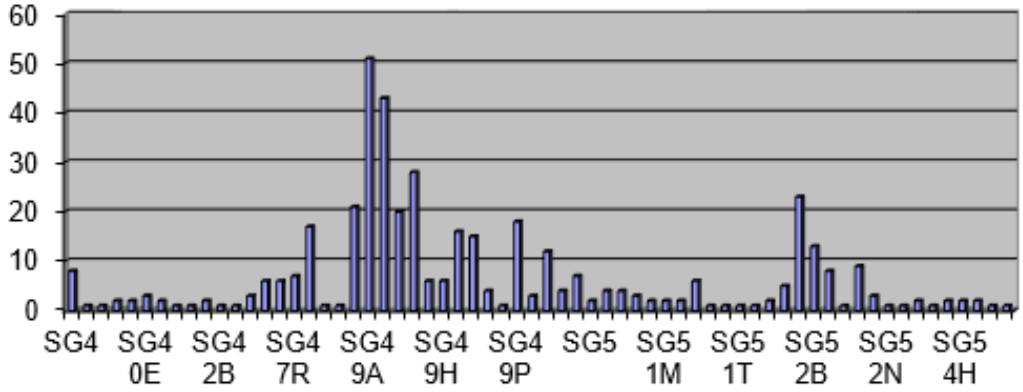




Sun 05/10



All



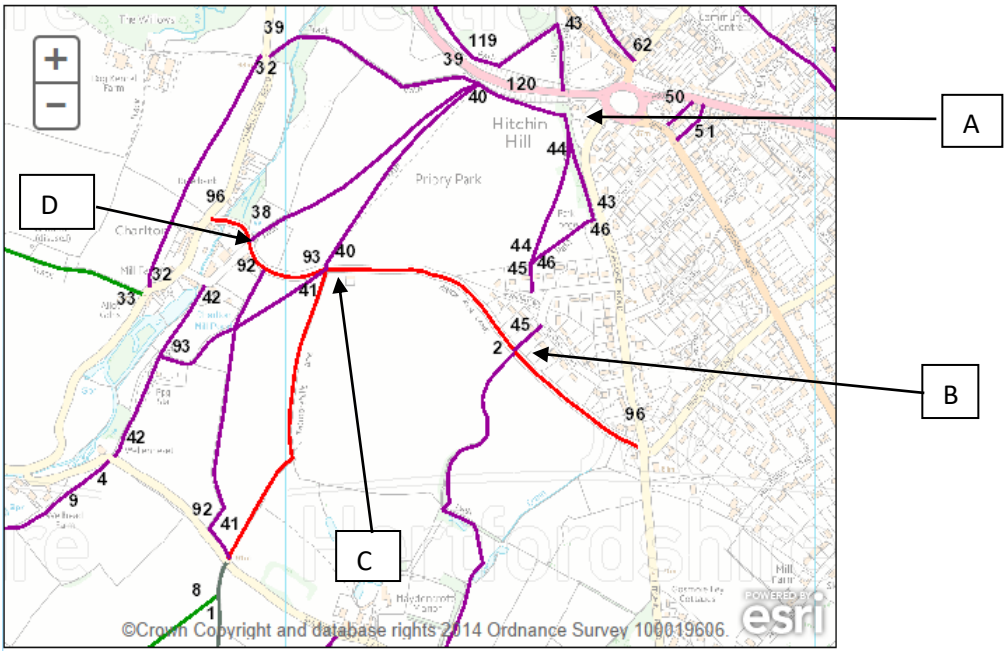
The most popular areas from which visitors came (more than 10 individuals across the three days) were:

SG4 9A Park Street, Gosmore Road, Newlands Lane area
SG4 9B Priory Way, Standhill Close area
SG4 9E London Road, Blackhorse Lane area
SG5 2A Charlton village, The Limes area
SG4 9 undifferentiated SG4 9 area
SG4 9D Stevenage Road, Folly Path area
SG4 9P Wymondley Road area
SG4 7S St Ippolyts area
SG4 9J St John's Road, Pulters Way area
SG4 9L Broadmead, Passingham Avenue area
SG5 2B Cranborne Road, Meadow Way area
SG4 9R Benslow Lane area

As well as those from Hitchin and the surrounding towns and villages, visitors came from as far afield as Milton Keynes, Much Hadham, Wood Green, Hoddesden and Nottingham.

Appendix B

There were 4 checkpoints as shown below. Each was manned by one volunteer, and two where possible.



Appendix C Survey Questions

Q1. How many people are in your party?

Q2. Please choose the letter that represents your age range

A	Under 11	**B**	12-18	**C**	19-30	**D**	31-60	**E**	61 and over

Q3. Which one of the following words best describes your use of the area today?

- **A.** Exercise
- **B.** Dog walking
- **C.** Enjoyment of countryside
- **D.** Other

Q4. In a typical week, which of the following best describes how often you use the area

- **A.** Less than once a week
- **B.** Up to twice a week
- **C.** Up to 5 times a week
- **D.** Once a day
- **E.** More than once each day

Q5. Which of the following best describes what you would do if this area was used for housing?

- **A.** Still use it
- **B.** Use an alternative local site (without driving)
- **C.** Drive to an alternative site
- **D.** None of the above

Q6. Are you a member of a gym or local sports club?

Q7. What is your post code?

Appendix D Groups using the area.

Countryside Management Service Health Walks
Greyhound Rescue Club
Windmill Cycling Club http://www.windmillcc.co.uk/
Walking group

Health Walk participation 2013-2014

The Three Moorhens, alternate Thursdays. Between 1/9/13 and 1/9/14:
Attendances: 329
Individual walkers: 44

The Three Moorhens, every Tuesday. Between 1/9/13 and 1/9/14:
Attendances: 735
Individual walkers: 86

The Windmill, alternate Mondays. Between 1/9/13 and 1/9/14:
Attendances: 613
Individual walkers: 69