

Results of Tackley Heath Questionnaire

5 November 2023

A total of 50 responses to the Questionnaire were received from an eligible population of c.1200 (2021 census).

Please note in instances where a household completed a single form together, their responses have been separated out and counted individually (i.e. a household with four people in on a single form has been turned into four identical (apart from age) responses to the questionnaire).

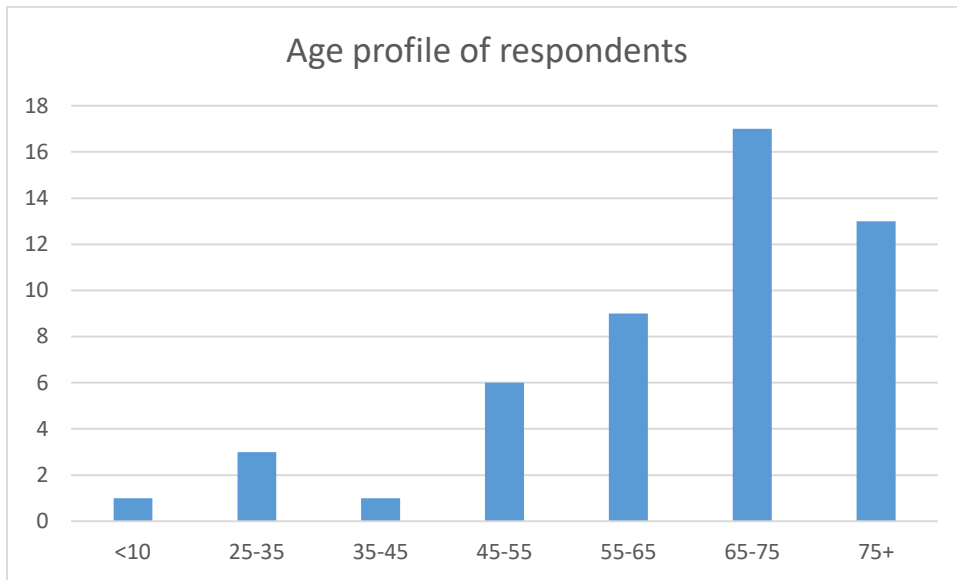
Overall observations:

- The questionnaire responses are skewed towards the views of the over 45s and especially the over 55s
- A clear majority are broadly happy with levels of accessibility at the present time.
- A very narrow majority are against gated entrances to the Heath from the Fox Hill road.
- A small majority are aware of what acid grassland heath should look like without bracken
- There is no majority either way as regards restoring the acid grassland heath, with a considerable number responding 'don't know'.
- In the absence of an overall majority, the supporters of acid grassland heath restoration represent the largest minority view; this is followed by advocates for bracken who are the next largest minority; and then those who favour woodland expansion.
- There is a small majority in favour of restoration of the hedges using native species.
- There is an overwhelming majority in favour of the overall approach being to keep the Heath as 'wild as possible', rather than taking the more formal approach.

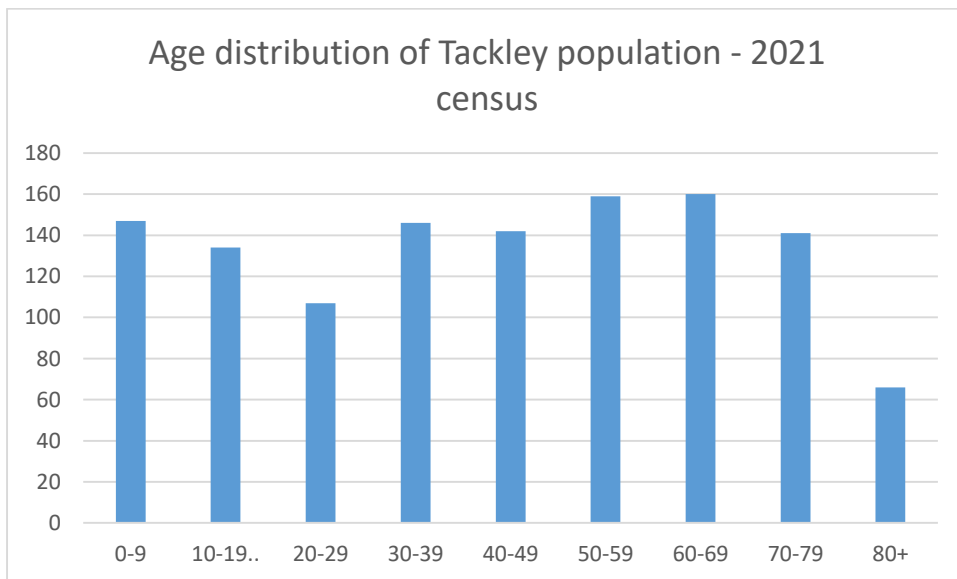
The free text comments reveal substantial divisions over how the management of the Heath should be approached. There is a group who wish the Heath to be entirely left alone (for a variety of reasons), but equally others express concern that lack of action in the past is resulting in serious problems (of various kinds). There are those who fear improving access will result in greater numbers of people using the Heath and/or lead to undesirable behaviour, but equally there are others who see the merits of improved access on grounds of disability, age (young and old), and in order to enhance the range of activities that might take place there (e.g. reading books/resting while walking).

However, there were some areas of greater consensus. A concern regarding the aesthetics/look/feel of the Heath, especially the need for it to remain a natural/wild space as much as possible, is evident both from those who feel no management is required and from those who expressed a desire for (sensitive/sympathetic) intervention (either on grounds of accessibility or ecology). It would appear there is a common desire to avoid the Heath feeling like a public park. At the very most, some signage, as in other nature reserves, was suggested as a potential improvement, but this was not a widespread or popular opinion.

Q1: How old are you?



This should be compared for reference to the 2021 census information for Tackley, which unfortunately uses different age cohorts, but gives a basic idea of the age demographic of the population:



As these charts indicate, the consultation process has largely failed to engage members of the community below the age of c.45. The results of the consultation are thus skewed towards the views of the over 45s and especially the over 55s.

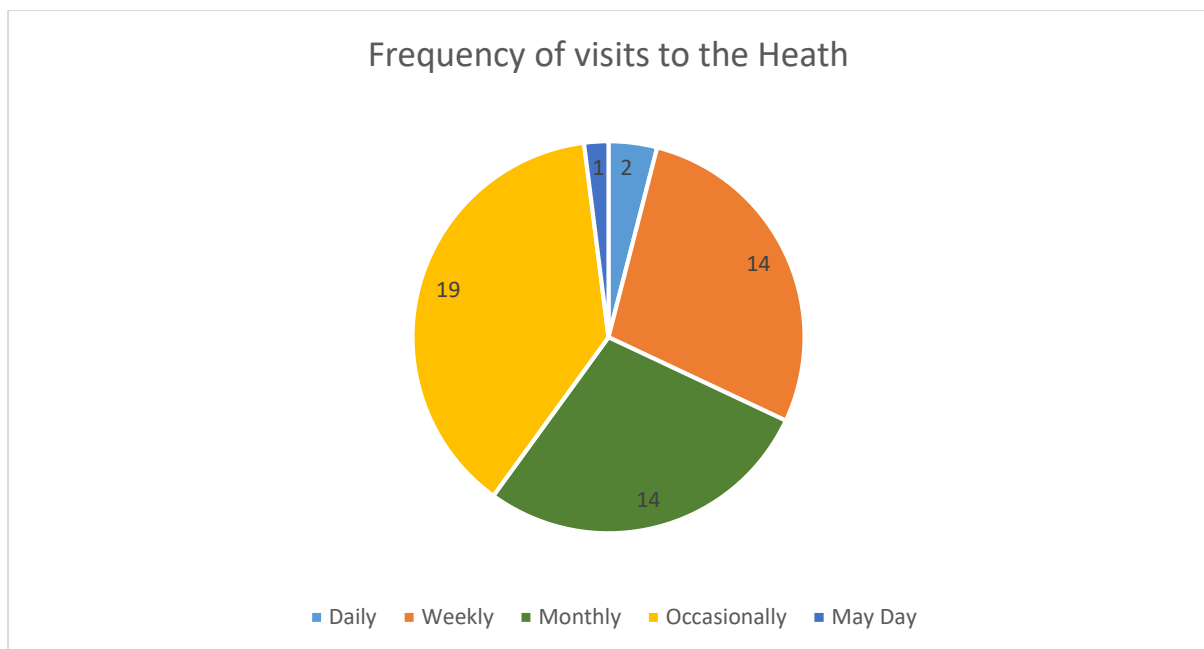
Q2: Did you go to the consultation in the village hall or read the information on the website before filling in this questionnaire?

No: 17 (34%)

Yes: 31 (62%)

Left blank: 2 (4%)

Q3: How often do you visit the heath?



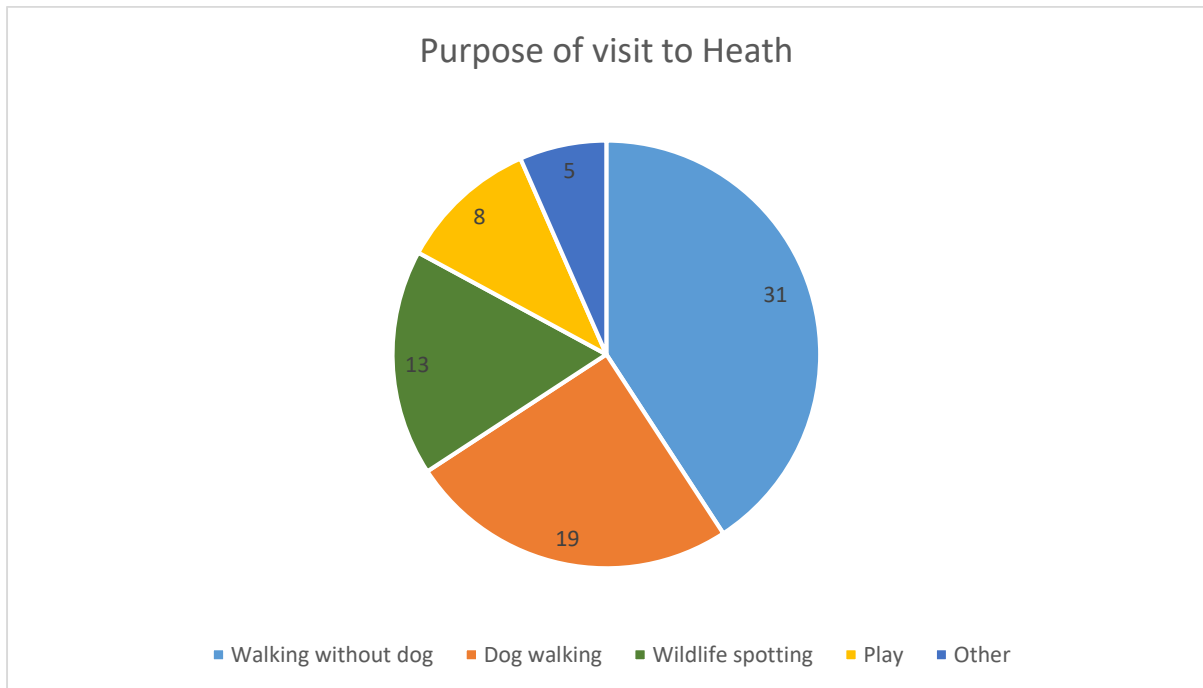
Q4: How long do you visit for at a time?

<1 hour: 28 (56%)

1-2 hours: 22 (44%)

No one reported visiting for longer than 2 hours.

Q5: Why do you visit?



In the 'other' category, respondents mentioned:

- Picnicking
- To see the bluebells
- Breakfast on the Heath
- Scouts
- "Forest bathing" (i.e. to aid mental health)

Q6: How do you find accessibility?

Good: 31 (62%)

Adequate: 18 (36%)

Poor: 1 (2%)

Q7: What changes in accessibility would you like to see, and why? E.g. seats, gated entrances from Fox Hill road, surfaced parking, changing stiles to kissing gates on footpath from Ball Lane.

Please note the following percentages are not mutually exclusive (people could choose more than one option).

Seating: 9 (18%)

Surfaced parking: 10 (20%)

Kissing gates on footpath from Ball Lane: 12 (24%)

Gated entrances from Fox Hill: 3 (6%)

Path improvement: 2 (4%)

14 respondents (28%) expressed an opinion that no improvements to accessibility were required/desirable.

13 respondents (26%) left this section entirely blank.

Those respondents who did express an opinion often volunteered further information, summarised as follows:

General: 'Please keep it as wild and tranquil as it always has been'; 'I think it should be kept as natural as possible'; 'Happy as is – don't want it to become too manicured'; 'I am young and able-bodied but I can see how the above would be helpful'.

On specific issues:

Seating: 'rustic design, with backs for less mobile'; 'Simple seats like wood across two large tree stumps or tree trunk logs'; 'A few places to sit, even if just upturned logs etc.'; 'No benches heath isn't a park'.

Gates from Fox Hill: 'Gates to deter misuse'; 'No gated entrances'; 'Definitely no gates'

Kissing gates from Ball Lane: 'Kissing gates to facilitate access for less mobile/those carrying children'; 'Kissing gates good for older people'

Surfaced parking: 'No surface parking in case it increases traffic'; 'Parking – large concrete slabs with holes in so grass grows through them'; 'Any surfacing would need to be done sympathetically without affecting drainage.'

Paths: 'Pathways clearer but natural, perhaps an online map for phones'

Q8: Should entrances from Fox Hill road be gated?

Yes: 15 (30%)

No: 25 (50%)

Don't know: 10 (20%)

Q9: Are you aware of what the acid grassland heath should look like without bracken?

Yes: 28 (56%)

No: 22 (44%)

Q10: Do you think we should try to restore the acid grassland heath?

Yes: 22 (44%)

No: 17 (34%)

Don't know: 11 (22%)

One respondent who was in favour of restoring the acid grassland heath also added as free text: 'But maintain some bracken – it is an important environment in its own right'.

Q10a: If no would you keep the bracken or allow/encourage the woodland to spread?

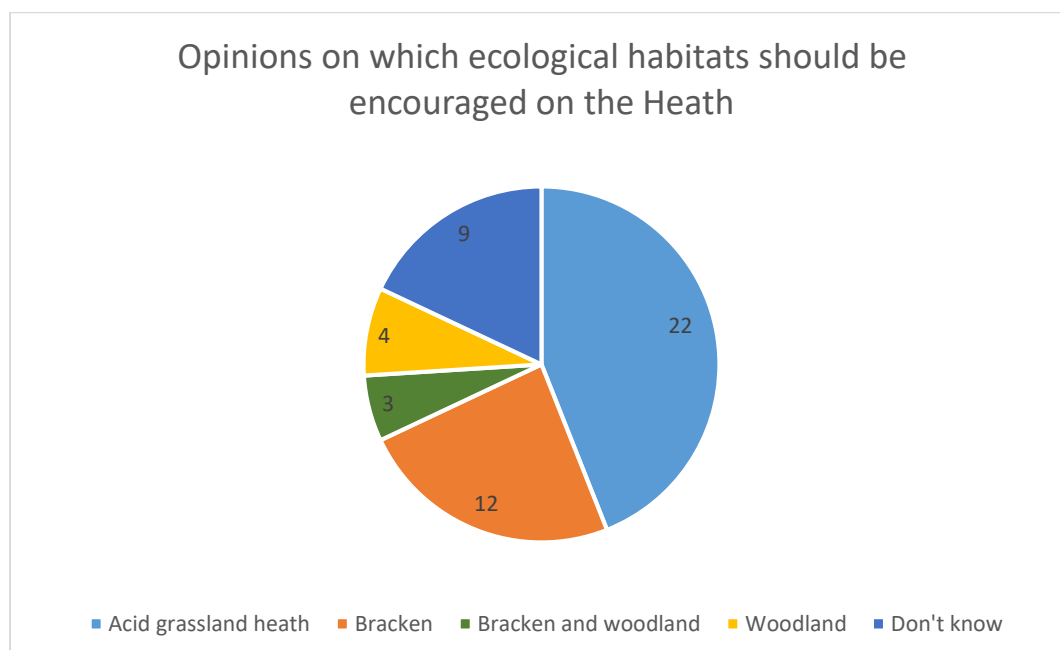
19 respondents offered an answer to this question as follows:

Bracken: 12 (63%)

Woodland: 4 (21%)

Bracken and woodland (i.e. respondent ticked both boxes): 3 (16%)

This should be set alongside the opinions of the other 31 respondents, who either expressed an opinion in favour of restoring acid grassland heath, or said they didn't know. The pie chart below illustrates these different groups:



Q11: Would you like to see the boundary hedges restored with native species?

Yes: 28 (56%)

No: 13 (26%)

Don't know: 9 (18%)

One respondent who was in favour added as free text: 'Yes, but gradually to fill in gaps'.

Q12: Tackley Heath is a County Wildlife Site (Nature Reserve) but would you like it to be kept as wild as possible or be more formal with information boards, waymarking, maps etc?

Wild: 40 (80%)

More formal: 8 (16%)

Wild and more formal (ticked both boxes): 1 (2%)

Don't know (created their own box): 1 (2%)

Some respondents added free text comments to their response to Q12:

'More formal to help people new to village'

'Prefer wild but need structures to aid access and appreciation/protection of wildlife'.

Free text comments:

I have loosely grouped these under thematic headings. Some comments appear under more than one heading.

Aesthetics/look/feel:

'Please don't manicure it – A special place in a special village. It's not a tourist attraction.'

'Part wild, part more formal – it needs to look as if someone is taking care of the heath'

'Heath needs to be taken care of, and to look that way to deter further damage/nature depletion.'

'Avoid any "development". Gentle management of paths/entrances/borders and the pond.'

'Please don't sanitise this one place, it will break my heart.'

'Some accessibility for wheelchairs, but not over done. Its beauty is the natural environment.'

'Boards would have to be suitable for surroundings. The ones in Blenheim were horrid (I think they have been removed now).'

'I think the Heath should be left for natural habitat as it has always been. I feel it is counter-productive to leave large areas i.e. playing field/verges etc with long grass all through the summer which I feel makes the village look a mess, and then start trying to manage & control somewhere that provides natural habitat.'

'Definitely not urbanisation with boards etc – waymarking not necessary.'

'There is obviously lots I don't know about the Heath and the importance of managing it – so sympathetic information boards and waymarkers would add to the walks I do.'

Expressions of ecological concern and thus in favour of action to protect nature:

'The Parish Council needs to act on its legal duties to conserve and enhance biodiversity here, and act on Local Nature Recovery Strategies. The Heath is one of the best sites in the parish for this due to its varied habitats and their current and potential biodiversity.'

'Fallen trees should be left, the habitat they provide as they degrade is invaluable.'

'The top corner large pond is virtually inaccessible – needs access path, and tree reductions from water surface. Presently, fallen branches into the pond just produce methane! Only a very tiny minority of the village have ever visited it.'

'The Heath should be maintained as a wild area as far as possible while not allowing one habitat to spread to the detriment of any other.'

'We need to protect the trees and allow them to regenerate. If it's not happening enough, it would be good to plant saplings by transplanting self-sown ones from nearby. They could be in small groups in the open areas of bracken. They would have to be protected against deer and weeds suppressed to begin with. But in a few years they would out-compete the bracken & allow woodland herbs to increase.'

Bracken

'You will never control the bracken effectively!'

'I also love that during some months the bracken makes it almost impassable, and for a short time it is given back to nature with no human interference possible.'

'The bracken needs controlling.'

'Concerned brambles could take over once the bracken has gone so will need continual management.'

Concern over improper/increased usage

'No benches or parking – we are already seeing people using the heath for camping & parties, don't encourage them please.'

'It would be a shame to spoil the peace and tranquillity of the heath by encouraging too many visitors'.

'Less dog poo would also be appreciated.'

'Very concerned that it clearly is a dog walking place – dog poo is an issue.'

'How about a little notice at the entrance, politely telling people who come to the heath the rules? It might be a good idea to point out in this way that it's owned by local people and that they really do care about it as a nature reserve.'

The 'Leave it alone' argument

'Please leave the Heath alone. It's a beautiful place and has been for many years. It doesn't need controlling or managing. There are plenty of spaces in Tackley for you to itch that scratch. Why do we need to change anything about this beautiful natural place??'

'I have lived in Tackley all my life, and think the Heath should be left alone'.

'As a lifelong resident of Tackley I love the heath just as it is... Please don't get carried away with the idea that all areas need to be managed and leave the heath alone.'

'This wonderful area in Tackley has been a playground/nature study/safe camping area and wood store for the 30 years I have lived here! Leave it alone.'

'Do not try to change nature.'

'I think the Heath should be left for natural habitat as it has always been. I feel it is counter-productive to leave large areas i.e. playing field/verges etc with long grass all through the summer which I feel makes the village look a mess, and then start trying to manage & control somewhere that provides natural habitat.'

'I feel strongly that the Heath should be left alone and not interfered with. Reason for this is because I have lived in the village all my life, prior to that my mother & grandfather. The Heath has also been allowed to mature naturally.'

Desire to improve accessibility/usability

'I would like it wild, but it might also be nice if there were an area of land that's suitable for sitting down on? e.g. to read a book, have a picnic... This might not be possible if it's a conservation area. But moving here from Oxford, where there are several parks & Port Meadow, it does strike me that there aren't many green spaces for people to sit and just "be" (only really paths for walking).'

'Information would be good. Some accessibility for wheelchairs, but not over done. Its beauty is the natural environment.'

'The top corner large pond is virtually inaccessible – needs access path, and tree reductions from water surface. Presently, fallen branches into the pond just produce methane! Only a very tiny minority of the village have ever visited it.'

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'The more paths the better'.

Thanks

'Thank you for taking on this challenge.'

Appendix A

Below are all the free text comments in their original form, for reference. Each paragraph is a separate respondent:

'Please don't manicure it – A special place in a special village. It's not a tourist attraction.'

'Part wild, part more formal – it needs to look as if someone is taking care of the heath'

'Heath needs to be taken care of, and to look that way to deter further damage/nature depletion. The Parish Council needs to act on its legal duties to conserve and enhance biodiversity here, and act on Local Nature Recovery Strategies. The Heath is one of the best sites in the parish for this due to its varied habitats and their current and potential biodiversity.'

'Avoid any "development". Gentle management of paths/entrances/borders and the pond. You will never control the bracken effectively! No benches or parking – we are already seeing people using the heath for camping & parties, don't encourage them please.'

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'I have lived in Tackley all my life, and think the Heath should be left alone'

'As a lifelong resident of Tackley I love the heath just as it is. I also love that during some months the bracken makes it almost impassable, and for a short time it is given back to nature with no human interference possible. Please don't get carried away with the idea that all areas need to be managed and leave the heath alone.'

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