



The Parc y Bwlch Forestry Questionnaire results: Rhiwlas

Report of a questionnaire survey by young people in the Youth Club of Rhiwlas, Gwynedd of community views of the WAG Parc y Bwlch forest.

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With support from: Robin, Claire, Gwenlli, Kirsten, Wayne, Jenny, Karen and Steven

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GwirVol



Comisiwn Coedwigaeth Cymru
Forestry Commission Wales

Why we did a questionnaire about the forest

Coetir Mynydd has been working with the Forestry Commission to consult with local communities in our area for a number of years. Parc y Bwlch is our local forest which belongs to the Welsh Government and is managed by the Forestry Commission. Like most Forestry Commission forests it is a dense block of Sitka spruce which was planted in the 1960's and is now at the age when the trees are felled and re-planted. These activities are done according to a Design Plan which is revised every five years. When these plans are revised the Forestry Commission invite comments and ideas from the local community – usually this means the Community Council but it can also be a public consultation.

The Design Plan for Parc y Bwlch expired in May 2009 and preparation of the next Design Plan has been delayed to allow for an in-depth public consultation as part of the Forestry Commission Pathfinder study. In 2009 the Mynydd Llandygai Youth Club did a questionnaire survey of people living in their village but this does not represent the views of everyone living around the forest. So after getting funding from GwirVol and the Forestry Commission, Coetir Mynydd came and offered us in Rhiwlas Youth Club the opportunity to do a forest consultation in our village. We agreed to do the consultation for Rhiwlas because we thought it would be something interesting to do.

The questionnaire results will be used by the Forestry Commission and will be used in the preparation of the next Design Plan. The results are also for people in Rhiwlas as a record of how they use the forest and what they value in it. For us, the project will be a success if we can get more people to help with the forest.

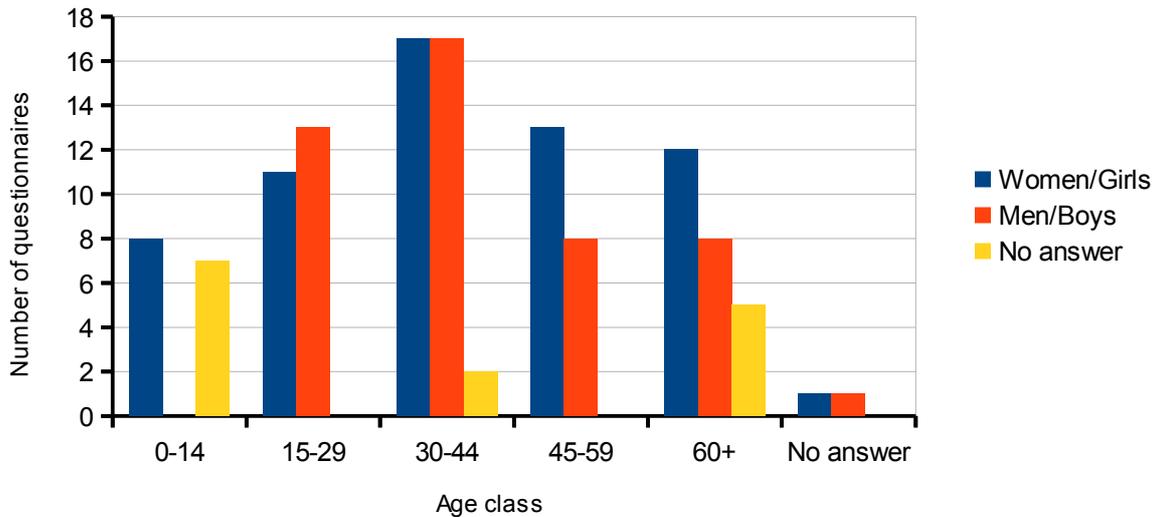
What we did

The project took the form of 12 sessions with Robin, Claire and Kirsten of the Wales Youth Forum for Sustainable Development at the Thursday Youth Club from January to May 2011. The initial sessions were concerned with learning more about the forest, the Forestry Commission and questionnaire techniques. We then designed our own questionnaire and printed out a few hundred copies in English and Welsh. These were delivered it around the village, knocking on doors to explain what it was all about. We returned later to each house to collect the questionnaires.

The information on the filled in questionnaires was typed on a computer over two Youth Club sessions and turned into the bar charts and figures in this report. We then thought about what our results mean and sorted out the key messages to pass onto the village and Forestry Commission. We turned these ideas into a presentation which was shown at a village meeting on the 31st May 2011 to which we invited the Forestry Commission. This report has been prepared as a record of the project and what we found out for everyone in the village. It is also for the Forestry Commission so they know what the people of Rhiwlas think of the forest.

We hope that this will be the starting point for greater interest and involvement in the forest by the community of Rhiwlas. It is one of three community reports prepared for Parc y Bwlch and joins those for Mynydd Llandygai and Tregarth.

Chart 2: Age and gender of people who filled in the questionnaire



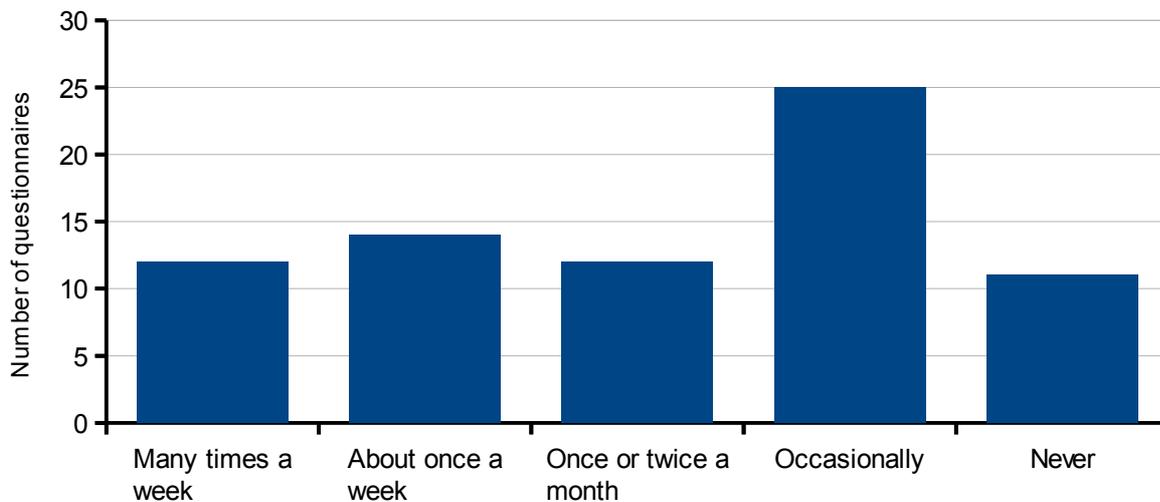
Altogether 74 questionnaires were returned but some people did not tick to give their age or gender. Of the people we know about, 26 were male and 38 were female which means we are short of males as most populations are 50:50 men and women. Looking at the different ages we can see that we are missing boys from 0-14 years old but it is possible that the children who didn't tick the gender boxes were boys. Generally though we have a very good cross-section of all ages and genders in Rhiwlas. This is very encouraging as it means our results should be reliable.

Thank you to everyone who supported us and filled in a questionnaire!

Q1: How often do you visit the forest?

All 74 people who filled in a questionnaire answered this question (Chart 3) and 85% said they visited the forest at least 'occasionally'.

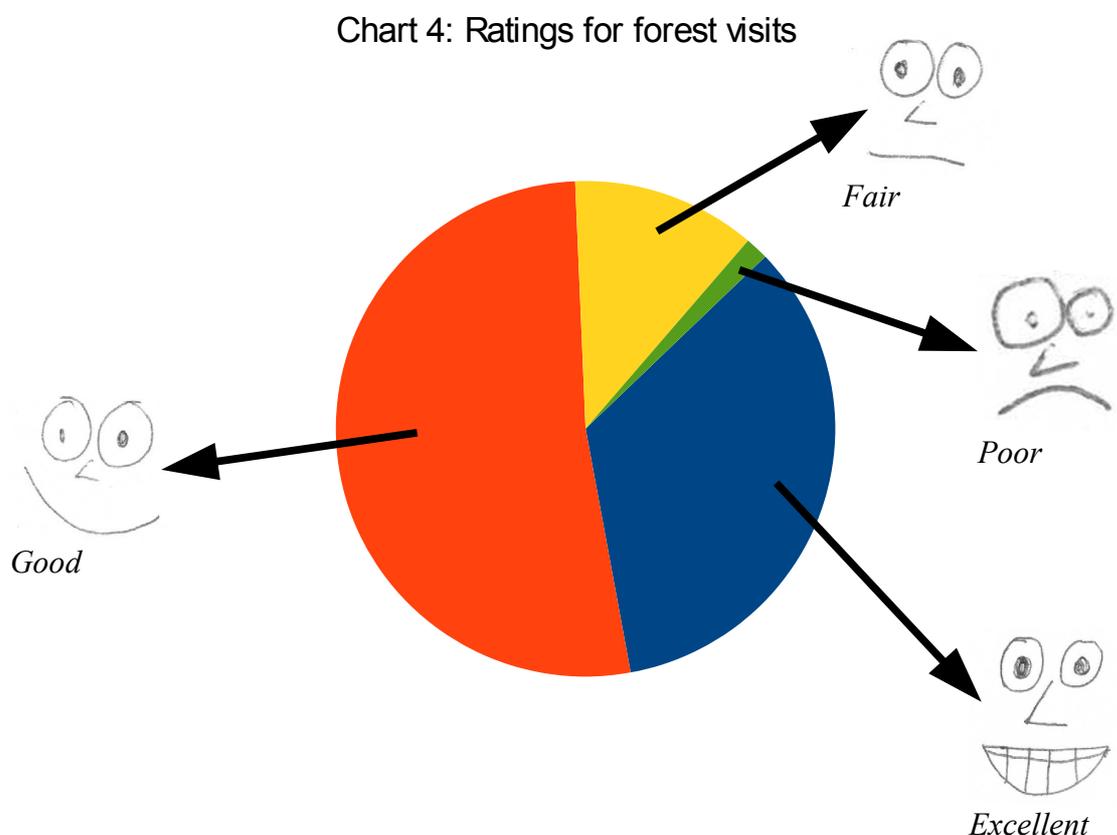
Chart 3: Number of times people visit the forest



We expected people who are more interested in the forest to fill in the questionnaire so this doesn't mean that 85% of everyone in the village visit the forest but 63 is a good number of people especially if they take their families along or visit with friends who didn't fill in a questionnaire. Most people visit the forest less than once a month but there are quite a lot who go there regularly. We wondered why the 8 people who don't visit the forest returned the questionnaire – we thought of two possible reasons for this: Maybe they wanted to show their support for an activity done by the Youth Club? Or maybe they want to go there but, for some reason, don't at the moment?

Q2: How would you rate this as a place to visit?

Out of the 74 questionnaires, 7 people didn't answer this question but only 3 people who said they never visited the forest. This means that 4 people thought it was a good place to visit but never went there – we think these people may like to visit but but are unable to do so for some reason.

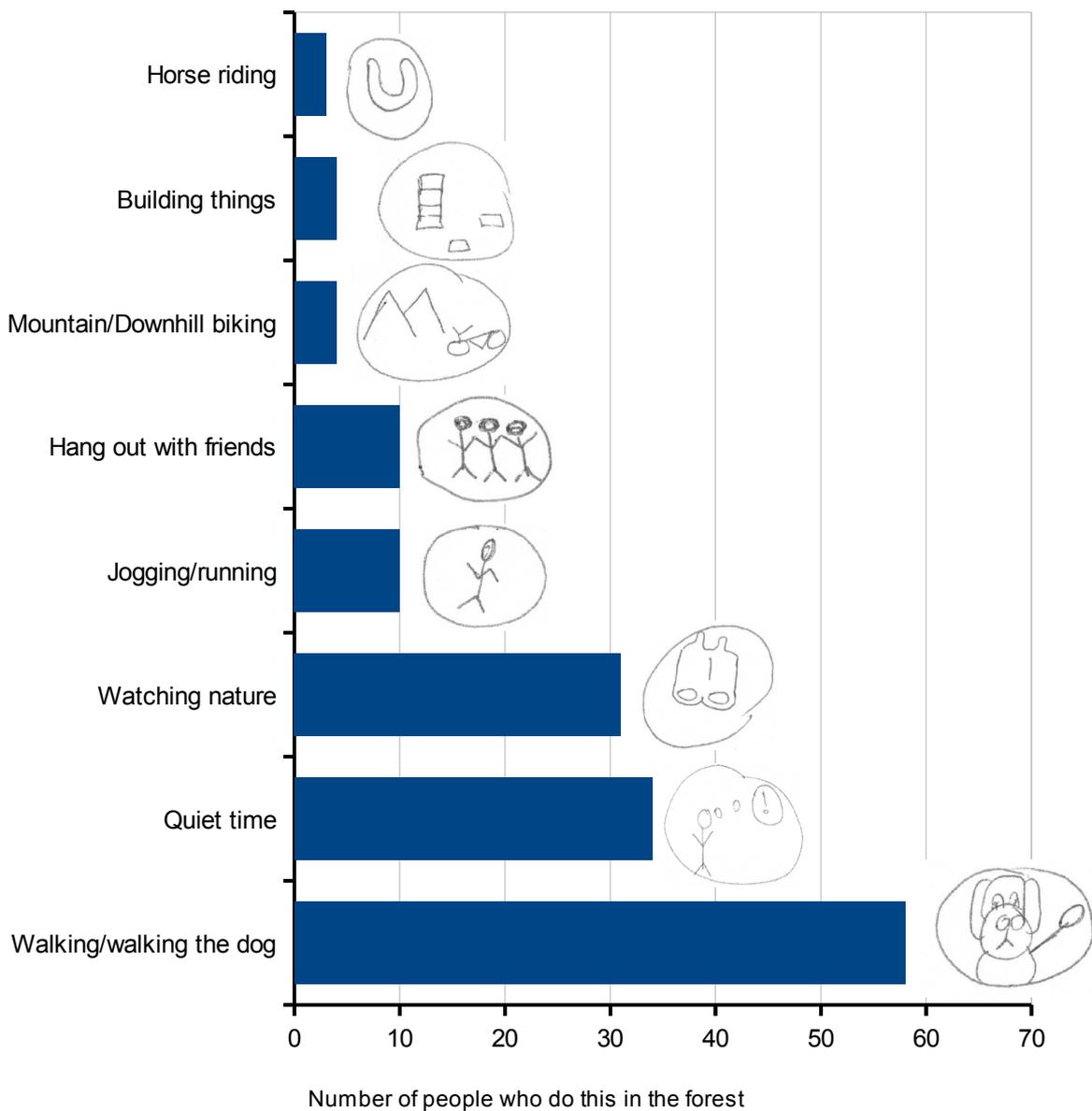


Of the people who rated the forest 86% thought it was Good or Excellent. Although this means that most people like the forest as it is now, there is some room for improvement.

Q3: What do you do in the forest?

This question provided a list of 8 activities or reasons why people might wish to visit the forest along with a box for other suggestions. People could choose more than one box as they may visit the forest to cycle as well as run (but not usually at the same time!). Of the 67 people who visit the forest, 75% do so to do so for more than one reason. Chart 5 shows the counts of each activity and it is very clear that nearly everyone who visits the forest will go for a walk there (86% of the 67 people who visit the forest).

Chart 5: Popularity of forest activities



In this questionnaire going for a walk was grouped with walking the dog but in the Mynydd Llandygai survey these were separated and there it was clear that there is a difference between

going for a walk and 'taking the dog for walk'. Most of the more popular activities are done as part of walk especially the search for a 'quiet time'. A closer look reveals that the most common (40% of visitors) combination of activities is a quiet walk in nature. Active 'sports' such as mountain biking, running and horse riding done by relatively small numbers of people.

Other things that people said they did in the forest include:

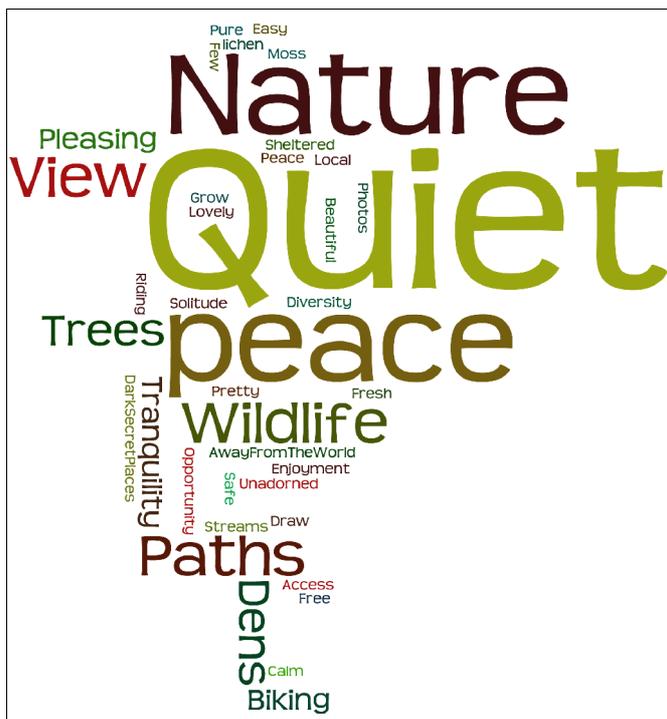
- Tawelwch
- Picnic
- Meditate
- Lle i gerdded a gwyllo natur
- Health; fresh air
- Gwneud tan
- Football; Shooting
- Canlyn

Q4: What do you like best about the forest?

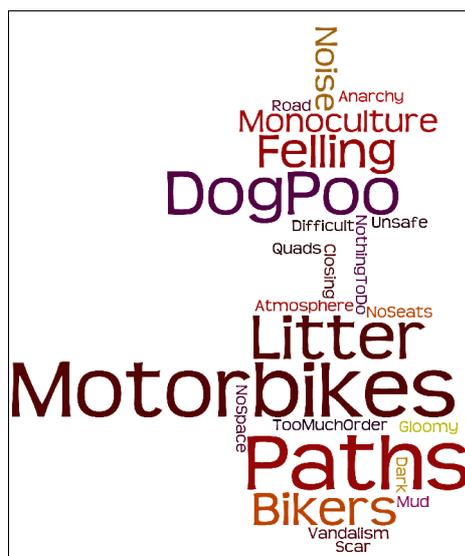
What don't you like?

This question was open so people could write what they wanted. The comments are very interesting but can be difficult to summarise. We therefore counted up the number of times people mentioned a particular word such as 'quiet' with the idea that the more times a word was used the more useful it is as a description of how people see the forest. The word-pictures below show the words sized according to the number of times they were mentioned. The boxes are also sized to represent the overall number of good and bad words we found in people's answers to this question.

We like...



We don't like...



There are clear themes which emerge from the lists of likes and don't likes. Perhaps the most obvious is noise – with most people liking quiet and disliking motorbikes because they are very noisy. In the same way diversity is good while monotony is bad, peace is better than anarchy and nature is valued over evidence of people's disregard in the form of litter and vandalism. There are also some apparent contradictions – how are paths both good and bad? Looking at the comments people made, paths are good because they allow people to walk in the forest but they can be muddy or don't go in the right direction or there aren't enough of them.

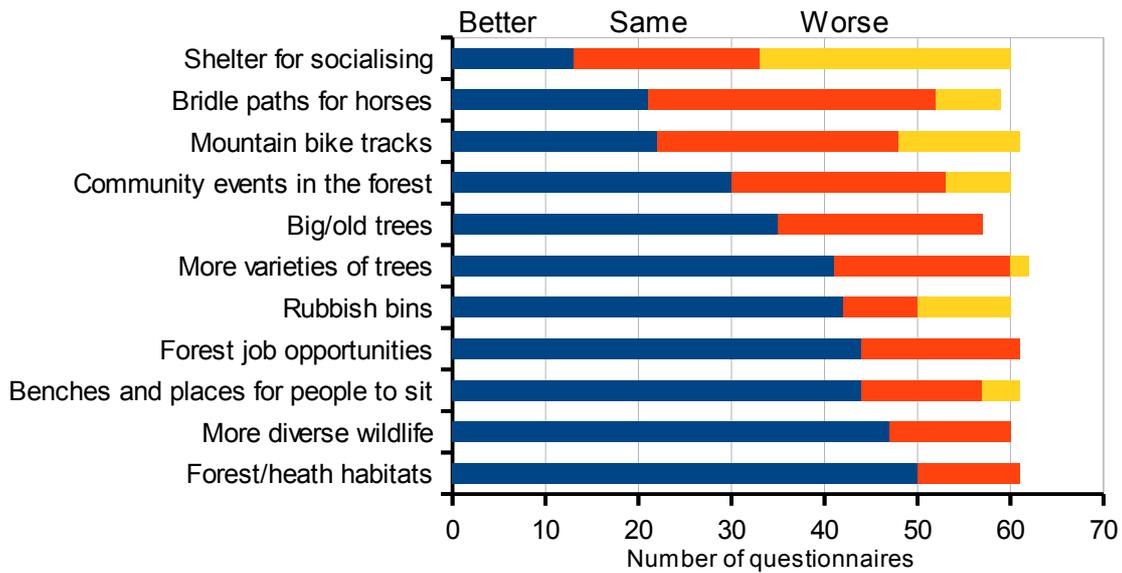
Q5: Think about possible changes in the forest. How would they affect your opinion of the forest and how much you use it?

This question tried to provide an opportunity for people to indicate their reaction to a range of ideas which have been suggested for the forest. The question was in two parts, the first asked whether the forest would be better, the same or worse as a consequence of a list of possible changes as shown in Chart 6. The blue bars on Chart 6 show the number of people who view this change as improving the forest, the red bar those who reckon it wouldn't make much difference and the yellow those who think it would make the forest worse. So things with the longest blue bars give a big payback while those without any yellow are the ones that wouldn't cause an argument and everyone could probably agree on. Looked at this way, Chart 6 shows us that there are just 4 ideas which are popular with everyone. Three of these are to do with improving wildlife and natural habitats within the forest and allowing the trees to grow older and bigger which are two ways of saying that everyone agrees that managing the forest for nature would improve it. This fits with people approving of changes which would enhance the nature, peace and quiet of the forest which Question 4 showed are valued by many people. The fourth change which everyone could accept is creating local forest job opportunities which would help tackle problems with unemployment in Rhiwlas.

Putting in rubbish bins would help tackle litter which no-one likes but the presence of a yellow bar shows that some people wouldn't like bins. Why is this? There is the practical reason that someone (who?) would have to empty them but also objections because it would make the forest look more like a park than a wilderness. There are also a few people against benches probably because they are associated with urban parks. However, benches are a very popular suggestion so to avoid upsetting people, if these are put in they should be carefully sited and perhaps take the form of a shaped log than a classic park bench.

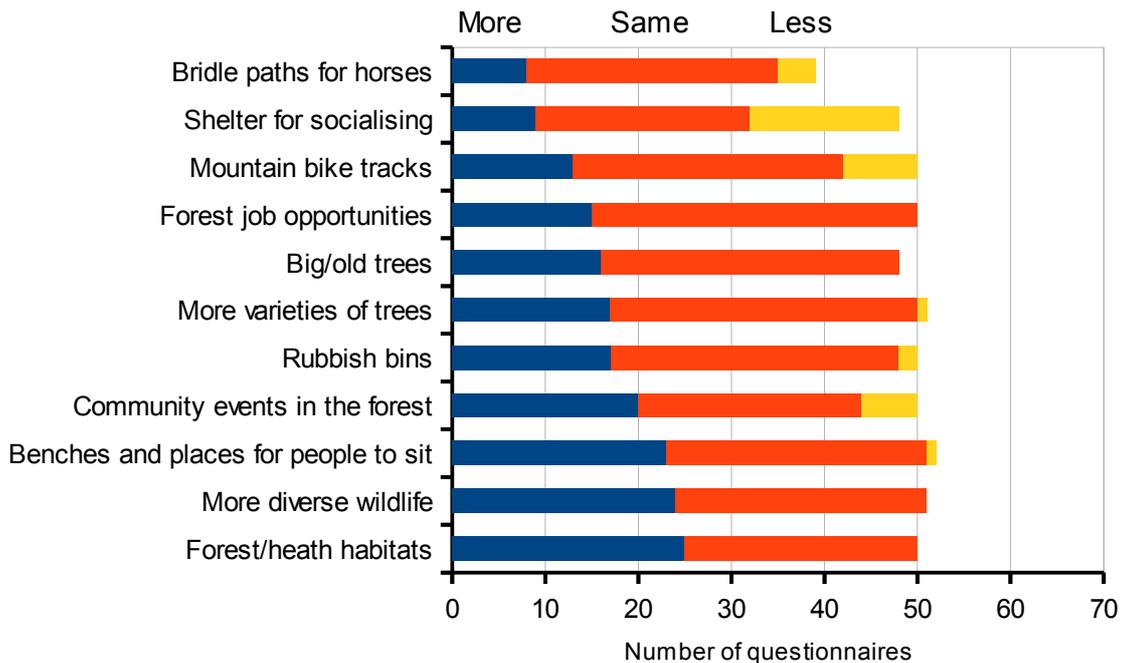
The change which are least popular are those with the longest yellow bars and are a shelter for socialising and mountain bike tracks both of which would bring more young people into the forest. People seem to be afraid that this would lead to more litter, vandalism and noise which Question 4 and 6 show people really don't like. But maybe even these facilities may be possible if the forest is zoned into quiet areas and those where more noisy activities can take place. We also found that 27% of people aged 15-29 also went to the forest for a quiet time so not all would be noisy.

Chart 6: If there were... The forest would be...



The second part of Question 5 tried to determine how the suggested changes might increase or decrease the use of the forest. Compared to the first part of the question the response to this was poor, perhaps because the way the question was laid out was confusing because it appeared to ask the same thing twice or because more information was needed before people could make this judgement. The answers we got are much as we expected; that people would visit more if the most popular and least controversial suggestions were done. These actions are improvements to wildlife habitats. Even the provision of benches would not be welcome by all because they represent creeping urbanisation and some people presumably wouldn't attend a community event in the forest (perhaps too noisy?).

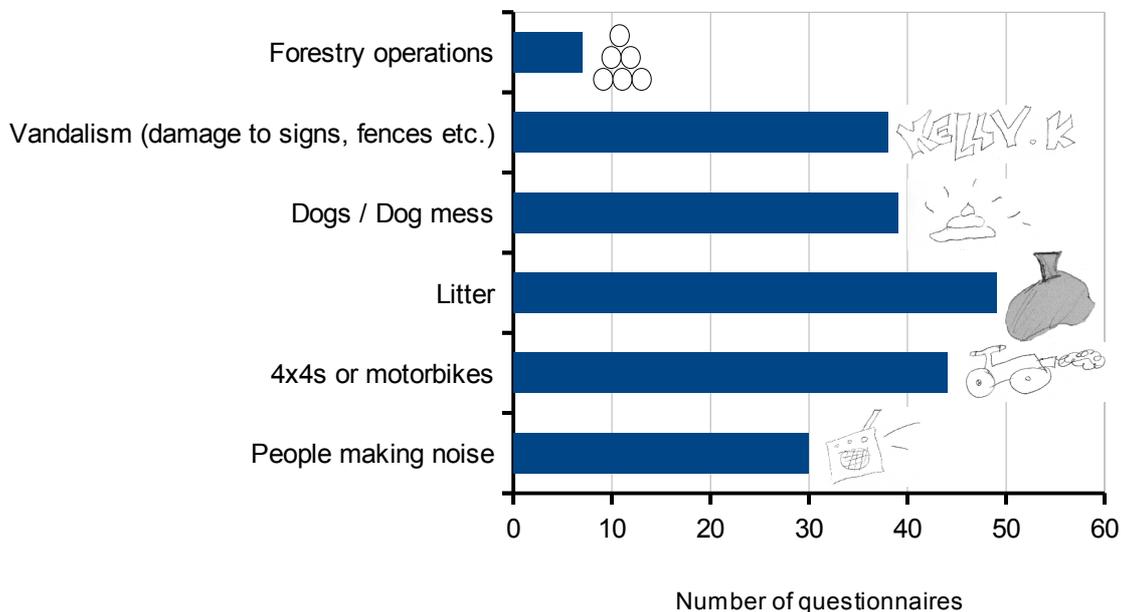
Chart 7: If there were... I'd use the forest...



Q6: Do any of the following make you enjoy the forest less?

This question asked people to tick off things they don't like in the forest from a short list of alternatives. This turned out to repeat many of the things which people listed under Question 4 but this time, as shown in Chart 8 in a way which allows us to do counts to find out which are the things people like the least. If we get the same answers from questions asked in different ways is a social science technique called 'triangulation' which means we can be more confident that the combined results are true. Here we found that the things that people really don't like are litter, vandalism and dog mess all of which show a disregard for the environment and the enjoyment of other users. Noise is also unpopular though few people objected to forestry operations as they recognise that they are part of what needs to happen in a forest even if it is noisy and disruptive when it takes place. The things which upset people most are litter and motorbikes.

Chart 8: Things which reduce people's enjoyment of the forest



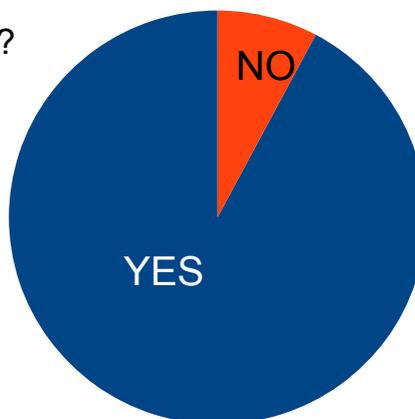
Other things which people didn't like were:

- Cyclists on the footpath
- Dense trees
- Litter has destroyed path from Rhiwlas to Beran
- Livestock straying into forest – unsafe for bikers and a nuisance
- Mountain bikes
- Horse riders
- Too much perfection. It doesn't need taming!

Q7: Does the forest seem safe and welcoming? Why?

Given the answers to the other questions it was no surprise to find that the vast majority (92%) of people thought the forest was a safe and welcoming place. This is very encouraging and suggests familiarity with the forest and a sense that it is part of the village.

Chart 9: Is the forest safe and welcoming?



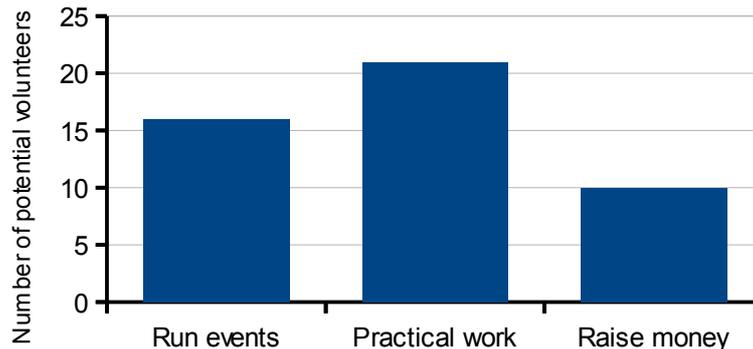
Why? Comments from people who said the forest was..

Safe & welcoming	NOT safe & welcoming
Because it does not attract antisocial behaviour Because it's very peaceful Clear paths Familiar like minded people Familiar place used it for years Have walked through it for many years, so feel I know it I love being under a canopy It's a forest It's a natural environment; I'm familiar with the forest It's our forest. It offers quiet time, fresh air & a place from which to observe our environment. It's quiet Litter makes it a bit of a mess Lle tawel braff Places to hide Quiet & natural The woods are lonely dark and deep etc. There's a comfort about trees	Never use Too dark

Q8: Would you be willing to volunteer?

Many of the ideas proposed can only be done if people in Rhiwlas are prepared to help – in other words volunteer to make things happen. We therefore included a question asking people if they would be prepared to volunteer for forest activities. We got a great response and many people said they would be willing to help. Practical work is the most popular with a suggestion that people would be willing to help with improvements to nature and with awareness raising and making benches etc..

Chart 10: Would you be willing to...



Things potential volunteers suggested:

- Contribute ecological expertise towards management plan
- Create habitats
- Interested but due to age and health have limitations
- Posibiliadau i ysgolion lleol
- Seating areas
- Take photographs
- To make people aware of each other and be considerate of other users
- I would like to be kept informed and consulted

It is very encouraging that people are willing to help do something positive in the forest. However, to make this happen we need to generate a plan for activities which everyone is happy with and then get people to sign up to make them happen.

Q9: If you could change one thing about the woodland, what would it be?

This was another free question where people could suggest the most important thing they would like to see happen in the woods. 29 people made suggestions which we have grouped into three categories. The largest group is concerned with improving access to the woodland – by advertising it, signposting and path and track works. As shown in Question 5, many of the suggestions in this category are controversial or at least would require careful consideration and planning to be sure that doing something to favour one set of users did not compromise the enjoyment of others.

The second group of priorities is to do with silviculture which is the growing of the trees that form

the forest. People would like to see the forest changed (gradually) so it has more light and glades (open spaces), a greater variety of species and more native trees and wildlife. An appreciation of nature is a strong theme in the whole consultation and there are a number of people willing to volunteer to make this happen and it may also provide opportunities for local employment. As shown in Question 5, most of these suggestions are supported by everyone in Rhiwlas but may be more of a problem for the Forestry Commission as it would require changes in the way they manage the trees.

The third group is concerned with facilities such as bins and benches in the woodland. As we've seen earlier the thought of these makes some people unhappy and would need to be carefully considered. Bins in particular only work if there is a commitment to maintaining and emptying them.

Access

- (Make it) bigger!
- Atal beiciau modur a 4x4s
- Better access, publicise the facilities better
- Clear trees away from paths
- Designated area for bikers where they wouldn't have to worry about walkers?
- Dim defaid ar y llwybr
- Have paths made in different areas
- Hysbysebu'r goedwig
- Lle I reidio ceffyl
- Llwybrau i geffylau
- Marking it (signposts)
- Maybe improve paths as they are pretty muddy in the winter
- More paths for walking not biking
- Mwy o "footpaths" traciau bach I gerdded – access i "pushchairs" - slightly widen the gates
- The road in the middle. It is too wide and no real need.

Silviculture

- [Get rid of] monoculture conifer stands, especially along heathland boundary
- Greater variety of trees
- Introducing a more varied selection of trees
- More deciduous trees please in the fullness of time.
- More light
- More native species and glades
- More varieties of trees and wildlife
- Thinking of trees, create space and light
- More diversity to trees; otherwise don't interfere too much

Facilities

- Bins would lead to much more mess but one is needed at car park area
- Meinciau
- Secure boundaries between woods and the foel.
- Shop (in the village not the forest!)
- Something to do with a shelter

What we thought of the results

We are very pleased that so many people supported us and filled in the questionnaires. The answers people gave makes it very clear that the forest is used and much appreciated by the community in Rhiwlas. There is a lot of information in the questionnaires and a lot to think about but we have identified a few key issues and some suggestions of things that could be done in the forest which would benefit the people of Rhiwlas.

Summary of key results

- The forest is a resource for the community of Rhiwlas (85% of a sample of 74 visit the forest).
- The majority of the people who rated the forest said it was a good place to visit (86%), but only 34% thought it was excellent. We think this means the forest is more of a good place than bad, but there is room for improvement.
- Just about everyone (92%) view the forest as a safe and welcoming place to visit.
- The majority of people walk (86%) in the forest with small numbers who run (15%), ride bikes (6%) or ride horses (4%) in the forest. There are a number of complaints when these activities interfere with the enjoyment of a quiet walk especially with the dog.
- Most people use the forest as opportunity to immerse themselves in a peaceful, quiet place close to nature.
- People don't like litter, vandalism, dog mess and noise in the forest.
- There is a particular problem with noisy motorbikes and quad bikes in the forest.
- Everyone is in agreement that increasing the variety of trees and allowing them to grow to larger sizes would improve the forest – not many would increase the number of visits as a result as it would take time for the trees to grow.
- Everyone is also in agreement that habitat and wildlife improvements would be good and several people have said they are willing to volunteer to do practical work to make this happen.
- There are a number of facilities such as rubbish bins which are popular as they address things lots of people don't like but are impractical – who will empty the bins?
- There are some reservations about putting in benches but it may be possible to design these in a way which will keep everyone happy.
- There is interest in more footpaths, bike tracks and bridle-paths but these need to be carefully planned to keep activities in different parts of the forest so they don't disturb each other.
- The least popular ideas are those which may increase the number of users who may disturb the peace and quiet such as mountain bike tracks or a shelter for socialising. Doing these might mean a lot of negotiation with other users.

Suggestions

We looked through our results and have come up with a few suggestions for things which could be done in the forest:

- We thought more about people visiting the forest and think that it is quite far from the village and the way to get there from Rhiwlas isn't clear. Some people are also unsure what there is to do once they've got there. We think that more people would visit the forest if it was clearly signposted from Rhiwlas with a notice to say what was there: "This way to our forest where you can walk, enjoy peace and quiet and see wildlife"
- Rubbish bins won't work because they need to be emptied – but maybe if people care more about the forest then they wouldn't drop litter. Although some people will not care and drop litter anyway, we need to try something. So we need to think about how to raise awareness of the good things in the forest.
- Although it looks as if everyone wouldn't come to a community event in the forest we think a Forest Festival would be a good idea. It would help raise awareness of the forest, provide something which people could do and be fun! A festival for some people means lots of beer, music and a barbecue while for others it could include an 'ecofriendly fashion show', nature walk, face painting, bird watching/bird hide making musical instruments... We would need help to plan and organise a festival if this is possible.

What should happen next

Things shouldn't just stop with this report. We see that what needs to happen next is:

- ask people to write out short statements about what they want
- ask the Forestry Commission what is possible and get their help to get the point across
- agree a plan for what can be done
- get people to sign up to help with their contact details

We need the support of the village to go forward and our project will only be a success if more people help with the forest.