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Therfield Heath Access Study

Chris Panter & Durwyn Liley

Timing and aims for today

Aim: to review visitor survey results and discuss implications

- 12:00-13:00
  - Introduction from Natural England
  - Footprint Ecology draft survey results
    - Results presented are draft and open for discussion
- 13:00-13:45
  - Lunch
- 15:00 – close
  - Feedback and discussion on future management options



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Housing growth in Southern England

National policy for continued growth (Housing white paper published Feb. 2017)

- Since the 1970s on average 160 k new homes per annum
- current estimate of annual housing necessary for population : 225 k – 275 k houses per year



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Royston growth

- Currently 7,337 residential properties (2017) and population of 15,781 (2011 census).
- North Herts Local Plan sets out over 1,000 new homes (13% increase) for 2011-2031.
- Some key housing developments are adjacent to Therfield Heath (e.g. RY1: 279 dwellings to north).



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More housing brings more people and a range of pressures









‘Urban Effects’

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Disturbance to wildlife in many forms



Avoidance of Suitable habitat



Direct mortality

Pop Impact?

Stress



Behavioural response





Importance of access to nature

- Physical activity
- Mental health & well being
- Inspiration and spiritual
- Engagement/support for nature conservation





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…wider importance

- Sport – physical and mental health
- Social aspects and use of community space
- Direct economic benefit - supporting businesses

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Footprint Ecology's role

- Natural England commissioned Footprint Ecology to:
  - Help understand current access
  - Consider any conflicts with the nature conservation of the SSSI
  - Suggest ideas for future management.
- The challenge: how to have increased growth, with impacts on nature?
- Footprint Ecology work across UK on a wide range of sites to resolve nature conservation and access issues.
- Our approach typically involves visitor surveys to understand patterns of access and then to link visitor survey and ecological data.
- Other sites where we have worked / are working include Hatfield Forest, Soham Commons, Epping Forest, Suffolk Sandlings, the Brecks, the Wash and the North Norfolk Coast.

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Our access study approach

- On site automated visitor counters
- Face to face interviews with direct site users
  - Opinions of site users
  - Recording postcodes to understand catchment
  - Visitor counts to estimate total visitor numbers
- Online visitor survey
  - Opinions of wider community, infrequent visitors, user groups less likely to be interviewed.
- Stakeholder interviews
- Wider stakeholder event

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Automated counters

- 5 automated counters on site
- on site for at least two weeks
- But logging issues and vandalism



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Face to face interviews

- Standard methodology
  - 8 hours a day at survey points
  - Weekday and weekend
  - 6 survey points in autumn, 3 in winter
  - Interviews and counts of people passing



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Tally counts

- 1773 people (212 minors), 1104 dogs [over 144 hours]
- Average group size of 1.7 people per group, and average of 1.1 dogs per group.
- Busiest location, close to the café = 22.8 people per hour. Quietest opposite end of the car park = 7.5 pph.
- Weekends showed consistently higher use at all locations
- Golfers accounted for c. 40% of traffic from golf club access point
- Runners for 14% of traffic at Jubilee woods and 11% at central heath car park.

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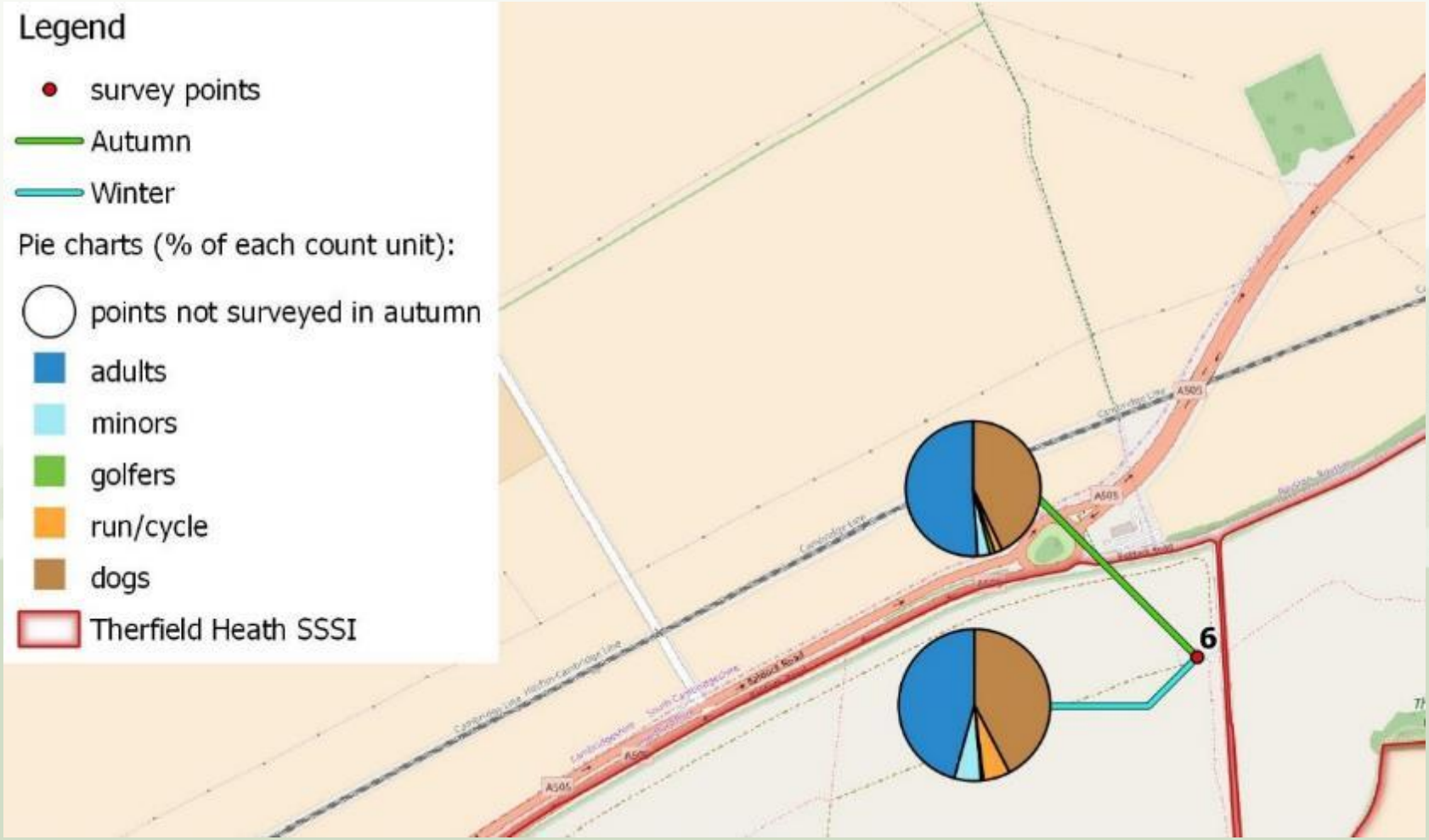
Tally counts



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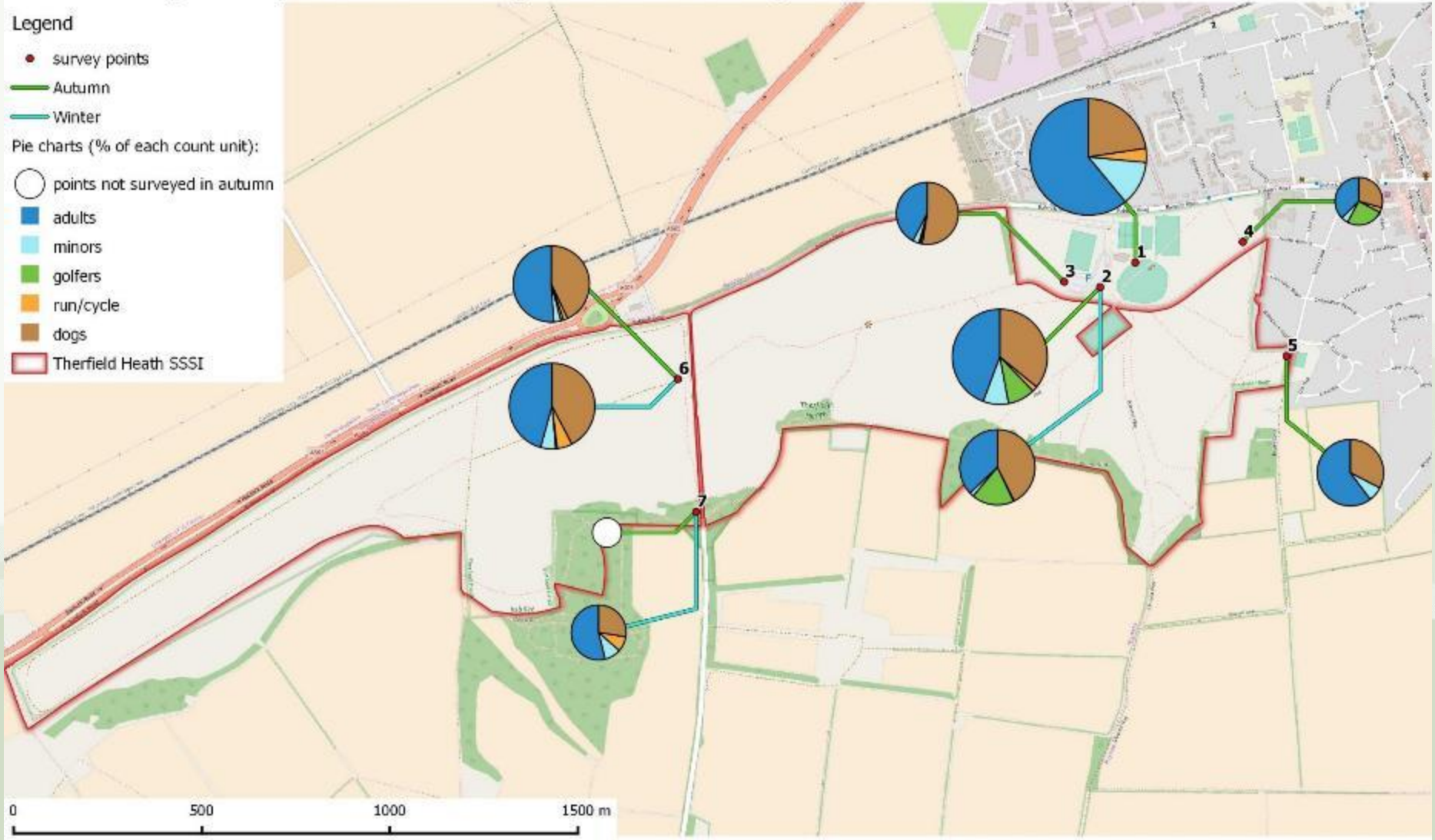
Map 5 : Pie charts to show a summary of the tally counts. For points with winter repeats (blue lines), these are shown below the autumn result (green lines). Pie charts are sized by the total number of tally items counted.



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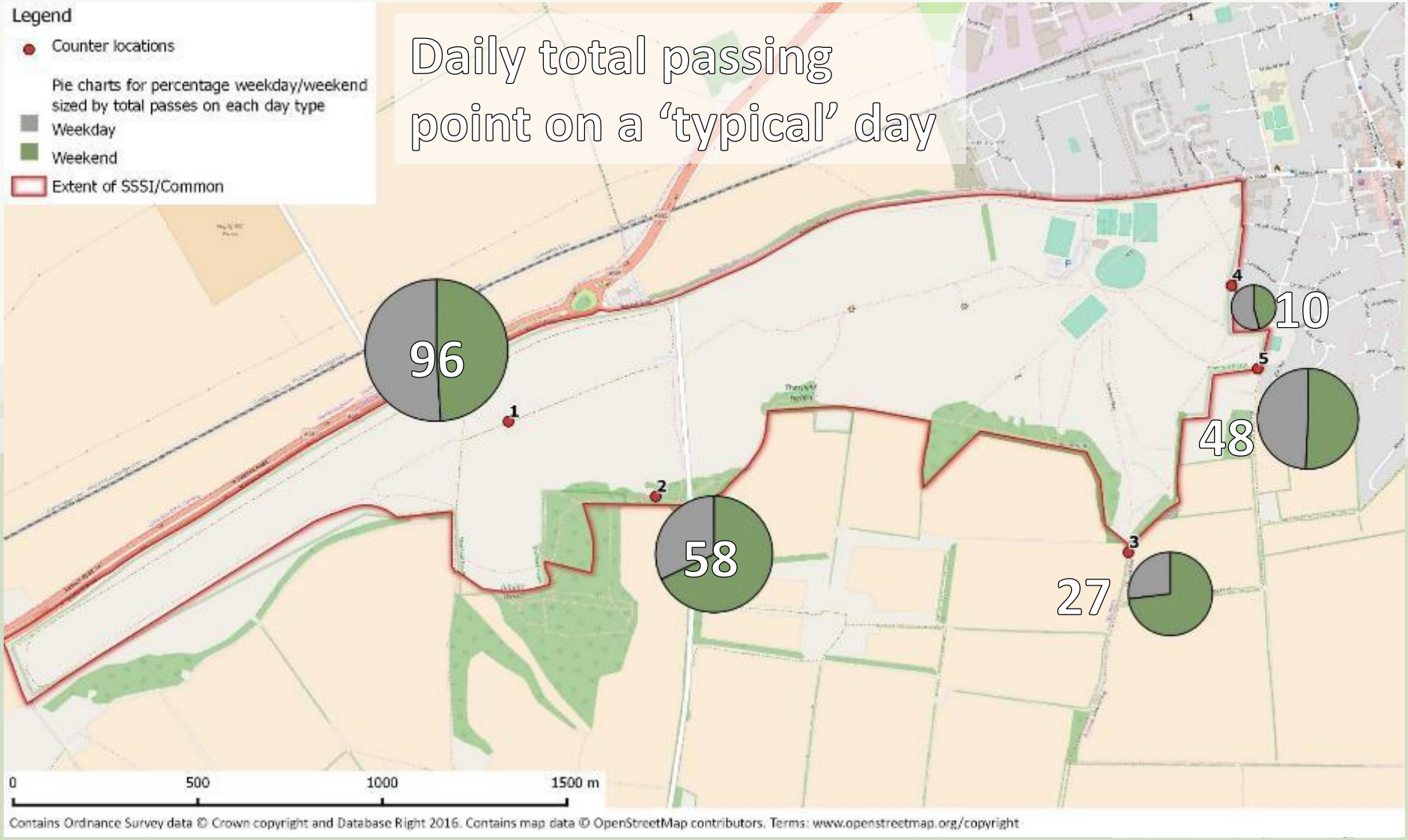
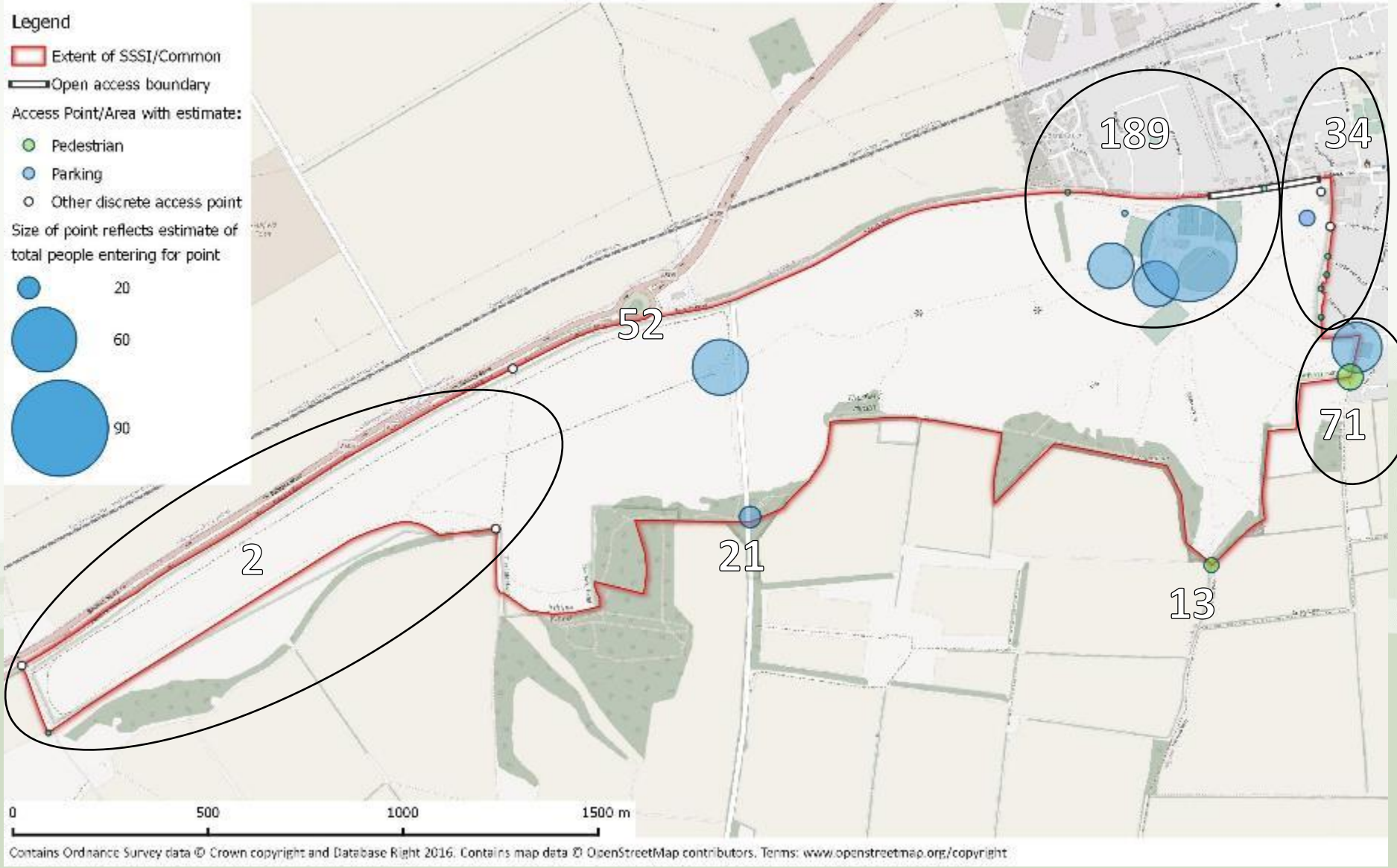
Automated counters



Map 6 : The location of access points and estimated values of people entering at each on a typical day, shown by the sizing of points.



Estimate of 383 people entering on a typical day in autumn/winter. Therefor conservative estimate -> 140 k people. Clearly summer much greater.

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Interview data

- On site survey (268): 71% dog walkers, 16% walkers, 4% golfers, 2% families
- Online survey (219): 32% dog walkers, 19% walkers, 9% runners, 9% sports/fitness, 8% families, 5% golfers, rugby, wildlife watching, 4% café.

- Use of café/sports centre – 38% face to face, 54% online
  - Families – 83% did, Dog walkers – 31% did (face to face data)

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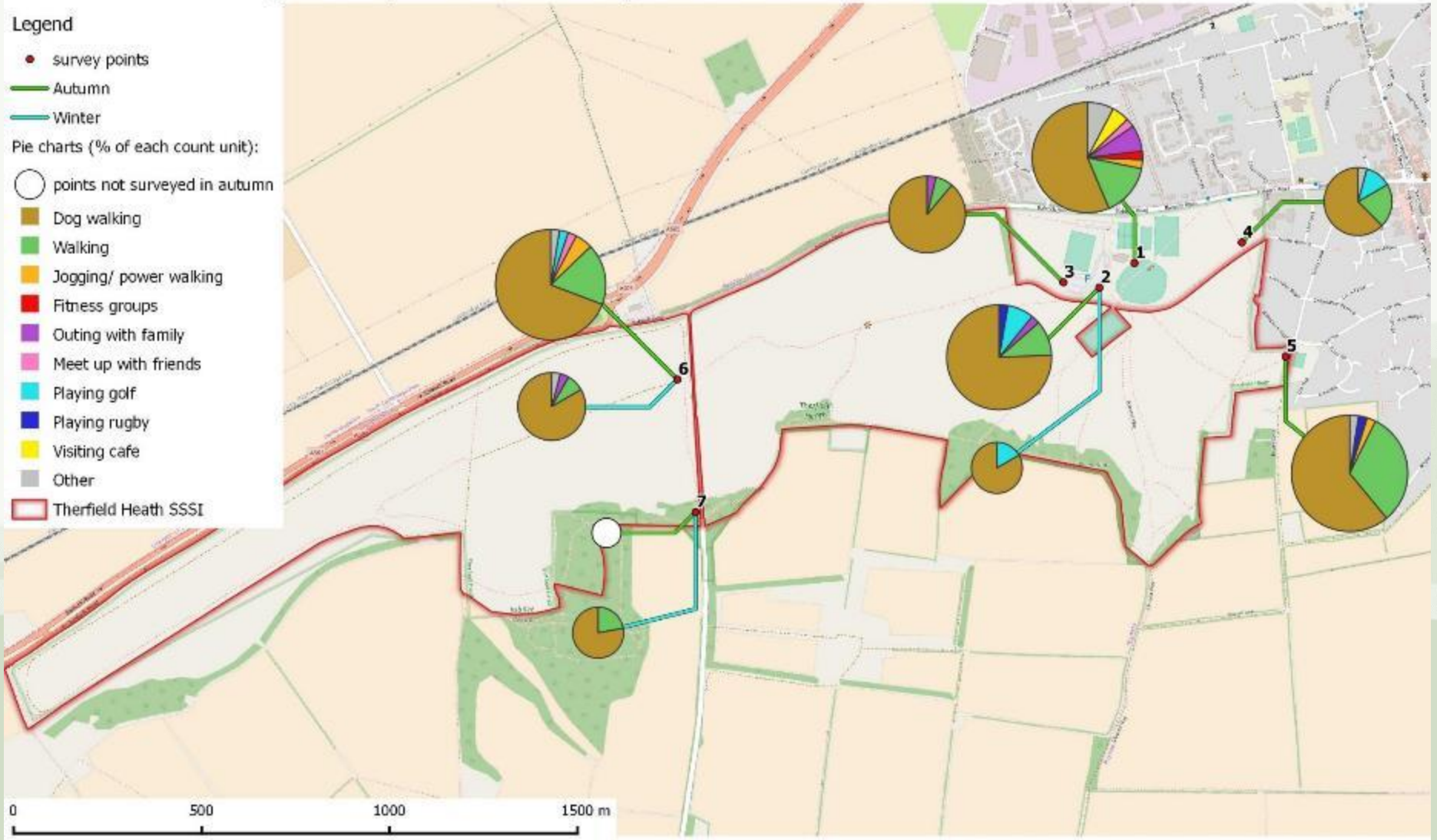
Map 7 : Pie charts to show a summary of the activities being undertaken. For points with winter repeats (blue lines), these are shown below the autumn result (green lines). Pie charts are sized by the total number of interviews conducted.



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Visit patterns

- 57% less than 1 hour (21% in the online survey)
- 37% and 85% at least once a week (12% daily and 63% at least once a week from online)
- Most access by car (around three quarters in both surveys)
- Reasons for visiting:
  - Face-to-face: Close to home (44%), then scenery/views (16%)
  - Online: Close to home (22%), then good for dog (10%)

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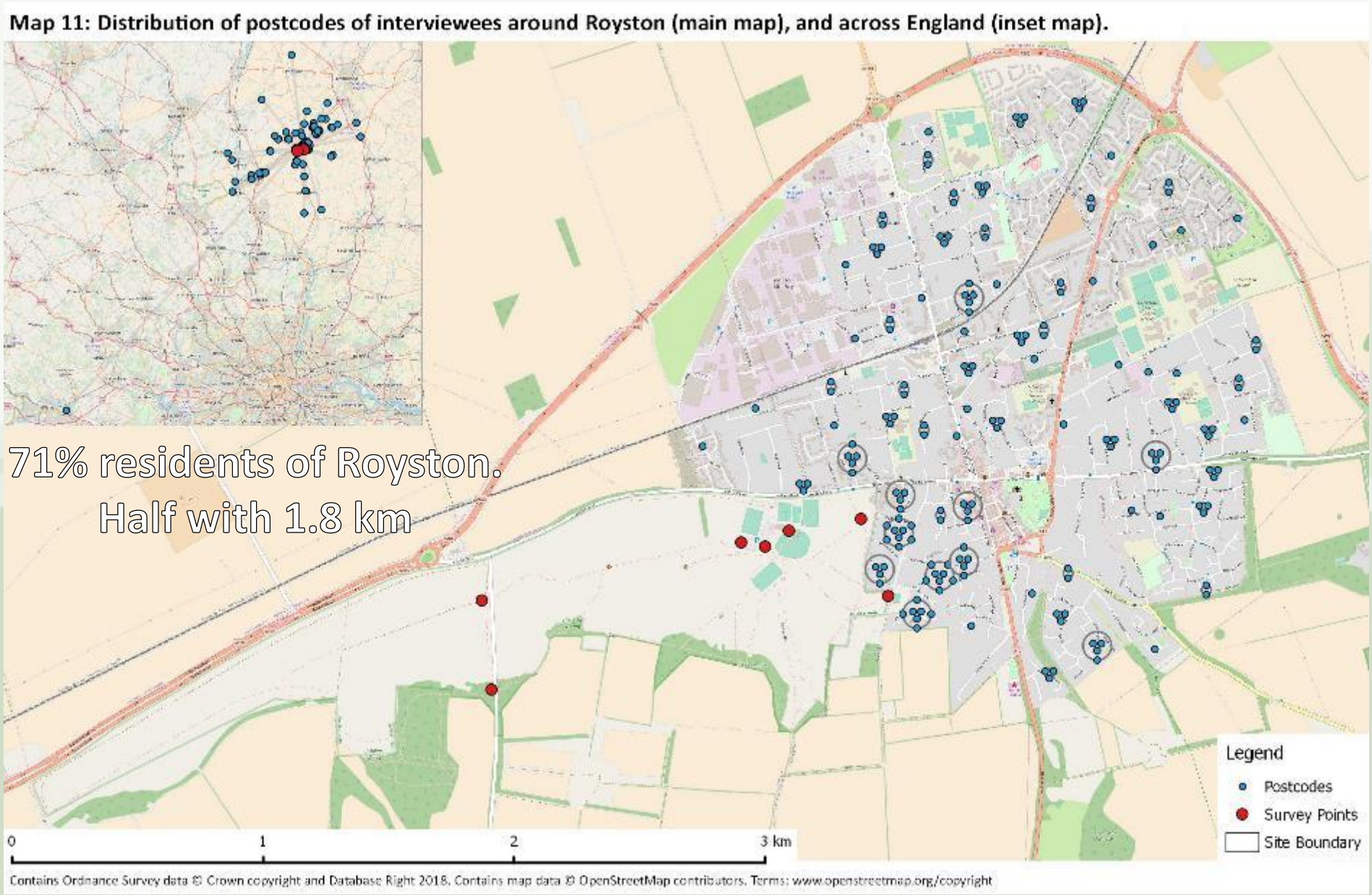
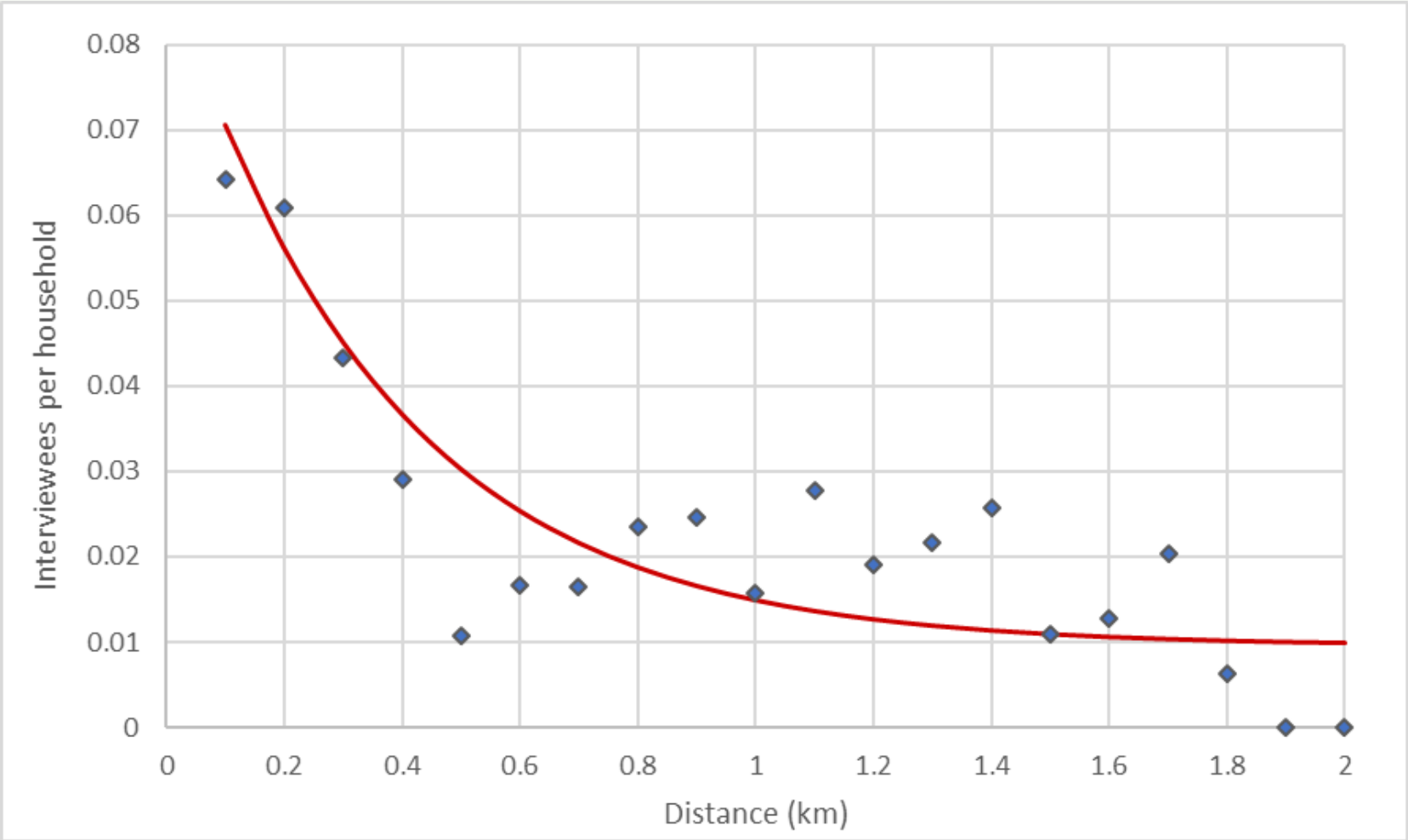
Home postcodes



Visit rate



Visits accounting for housing - 3 times more likely to visit within 300 meters

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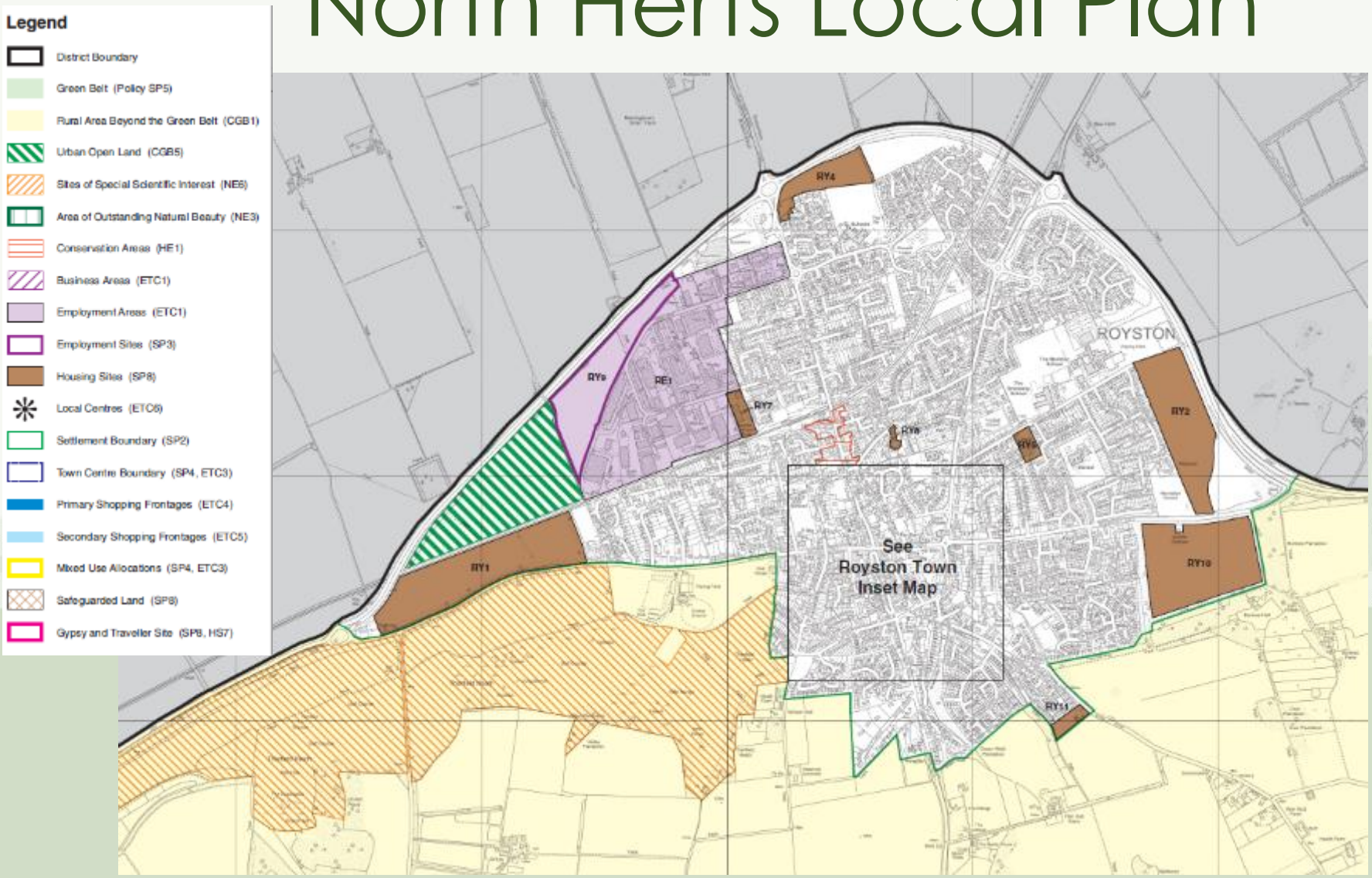
North Herts Local Plan



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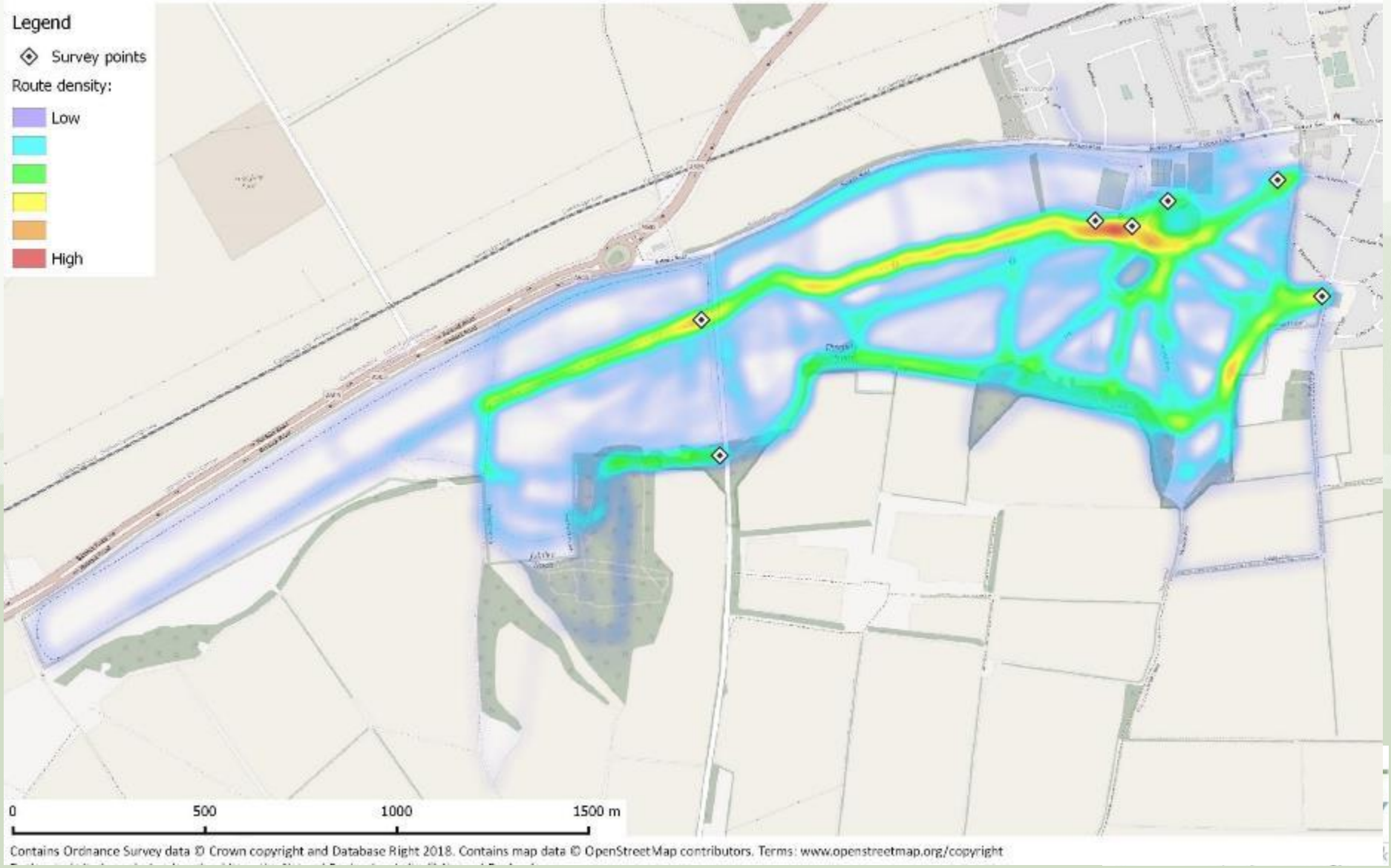
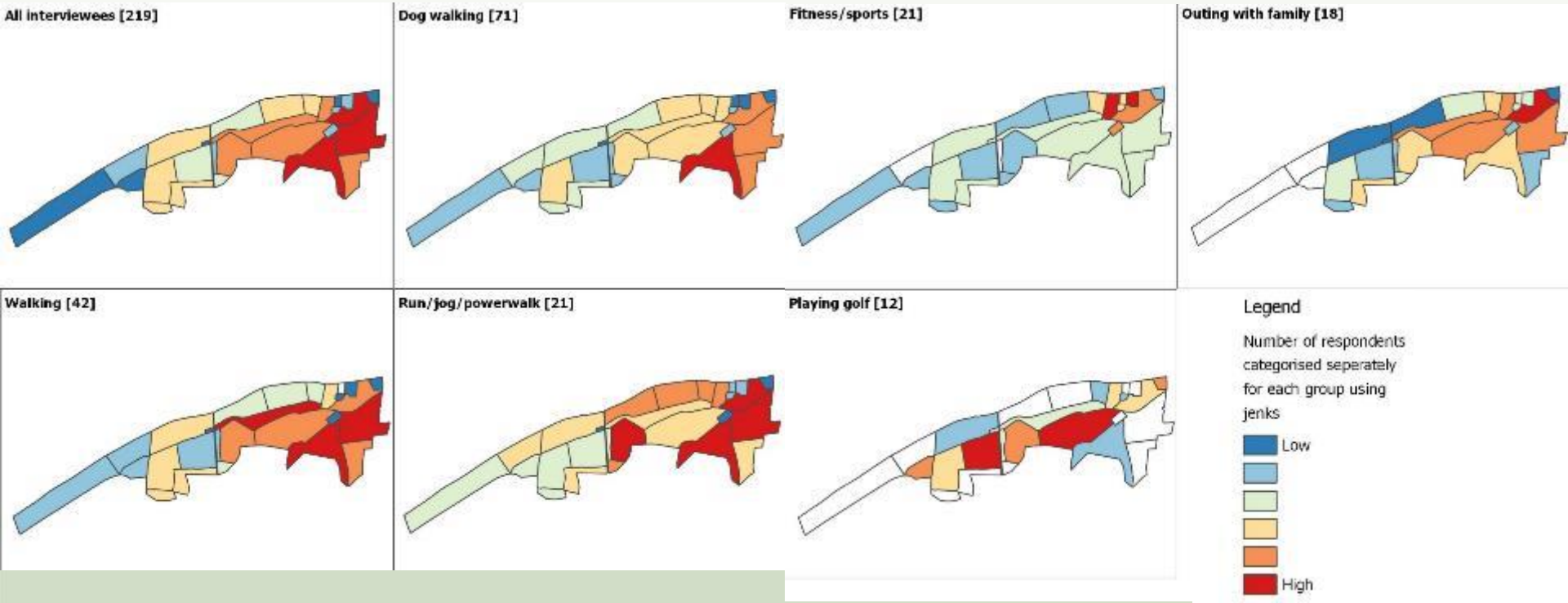
Routes

Map 9 : Route density shown as a heatmap.



Routes

Online survey



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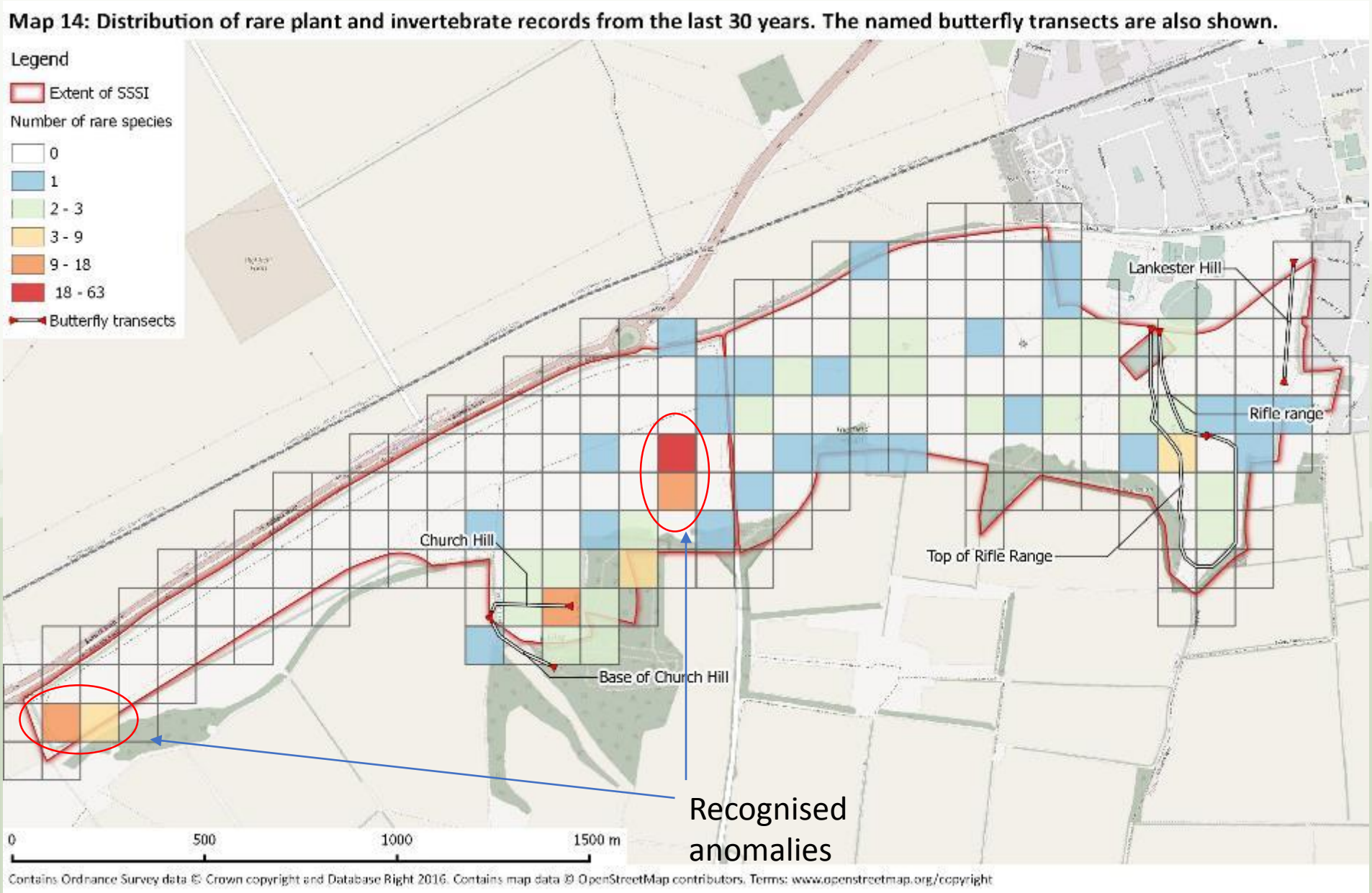
Distribution of rare species



Improvements to this site

- Face-to-face (43% no improvements)
  1. Better car park
  2. More bins (mostly dog poo)
  3. Paths
  4. Resolve conflicts
  5. Signage/ dog mess

- Online
  1. Better car park
  2. More responsible dog owners/control of dogs
  3. More interpretation
  4. Marked routes
  5. Less golf course/ more natural

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Stakeholder interviews

Current access issues

- Busier on site, more people and more dogs
- Uncontrolled dogs, dog fouling
- Conflicts between users – dog walkers with fouling and off-lead dogs, walkers and golfers
- Grazing is difficult (vandalism & worrying)
- Minor issue - Litter, anti-social behaviours
- Confusing messages

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Stakeholder interviews

Conservation importance

- Butterflies fluctuate but appear stable – little concern
- More concerns regarding changes in flora and disturbance to ground-nesting birds
- Dog fouling and erosion concerns
- Few concerns on direct damage to pasque flowers
- Almost all felt conservation importance was poorly explained

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Stakeholder interviews

Solutions

- Better signage – replace old, complicated signs
- Direct engagement most effective
- Marked routes, maps and waymakers
- Other options: Fencing, alternative greenspaces, zoning of the site, interpretation shelter, sculptures

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Mitigation options

- Wardens
  - Cost: full time? Vehicle?
  - More volunteers generally
- Routing
  - Signposting? Routes? Routes for different user groups? Map? Boardwalks? Zoning? Temporary signs?
- Interpretation / engagement
  - Boards? Visitor hub? Location?
  - Community engagement
  - Groups to engage with – dog owners? Schools?
- Charging?
  - How? Where? Consequences?

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‘Strategic Solutions’

- Thames Basin Heaths
- Dorset Heaths
- Cannock Chase
- Solent
- Poole Harbour
- South Devon

- Per house tariff collected by local authority for every dwelling.

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Examples of mitigation elements at other sites:

- Wardens





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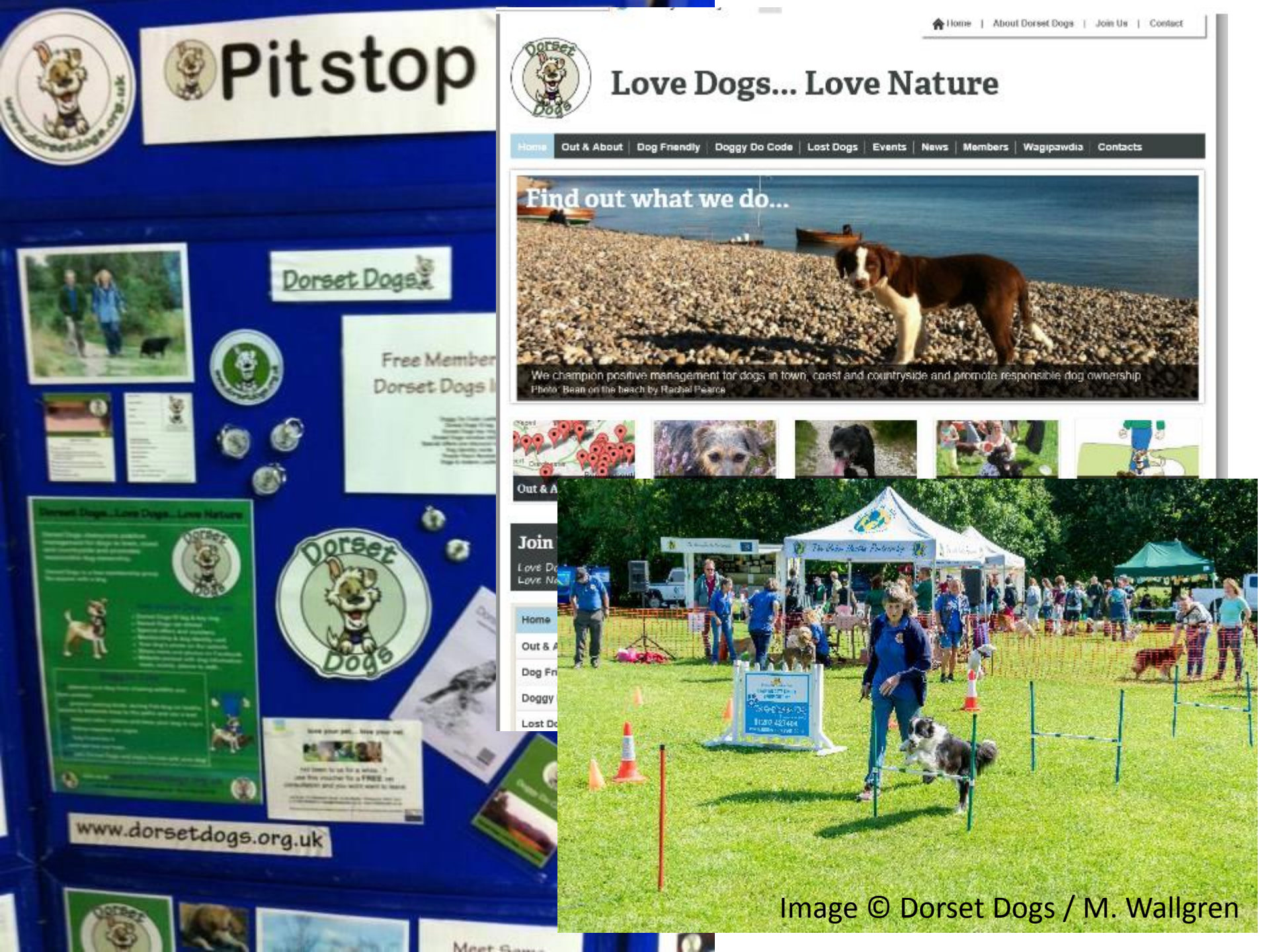
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Love Dogs... Love Nature
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Find out what we do...
We champion positive management for dogs in town, coast and countryside and promote responsible dog ownership
Photo: Bean on the beach by Rachel Pearce
Image © Dorset Dogs / M. Wallgren






Dog Training Area




Forestry Commission
England
Please keep to the main tracks
If you have a dog, keep it close by - if necessary use a lead.
Between March and July rare birds nest on the ground in this area.
Disturbance to the birds will leave eggs and chicks vulnerable to predators.
Thank you
forestry.gov.uk/england
Wildlife only beyond this point
rspb
giving nature a home
We live here
Please keep your dog on a lead at all times

Lunch

- Please aim to finish for 13:45

- After lunch we would like to gather your feedback on the results and discuss the implications



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After lunch

- Thoughts and feedback on survey results
  - Any surprises?
  - Anything missed?
  - Particular issues we need to bring out or highlight?
- Thoughts on potential interventions?
- Monitoring?

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Thanks

Your participation today has been invaluable. Many thanks for your input.

Any further comments or thoughts, please contact us directly:

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Durwyn@footprint-ecology.co.uk



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