

Visitor Transport Practices in the New Forest National Park: Insights from older visitors.

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Introduction

This research stems from developments in the New Forest; its designation as a National Park in 2005 and more recently, the New Forest National Park Authority's (NFNP) receipt of Local Sustainable Transport Funds (LSTF) in partnership with the South Downs National Park. The research provides a contextualised analysis of how visitors use transport both to reach and to travel around the New Forest with the overarching objective of identifying where interventions can be used to increase the sustainability of visitor travel. This paper provides an overview of these existing practices and discusses the additional insight offered by older visitors. Research into the visitation patterns in 2004 estimated that the New Forest area received 13.5 million visitor trips per annum (Tourism South East 2004), comprising of staying visitors, day trippers and more routine leisure visits from the local population. The 2004 visitor survey data identified a private motor vehicle (cars, vans, campervans, motorcycles) modal share of 85% for travel by all visitor types to sites across the New Forest. The LSTF provided the opportunity to develop schemes which aimed to reduce car dependence, albeit with a short timeframe for delivery. Schemes included the development and expansion of the New Forest Tour (see **figure 1**), rebranding of the X6 bus service between Southampton and Lymington (**figure 2**), support for additional seasonal bus services (Beach Bus Baby), the expansion of cycle hire facilities and extensive marketing and promotion of car free travel to visitors (New Forest National Park Authority 2017). Survey work undertaken in 2015 as part of this study indicates that modal shift has taken place; when individual survey sites are compared over the peak summer period, for example in 2015 50% of visitors travelled to Brockenhurst in private vehicles compared to 65% in 2004 (Unpublished).



Figure 1 Visitors boarding the New Forest Tour at Lyndhurst



Figure 2 Re-branded Blue Star 6 bus service

The research uses Social Practice Theory as a lens through which to explore and understand visitor transport use in this context. The potential for Social Practice Theory to move transport research beyond the limitations of the behavioural change paradigm has been identified (Cairns et al 2014; Cass and Faulconbridge 2016) however empirical transport studies are limited. Rather than focusing on individual behaviour and motivations, a Social Practices approach focuses the analysis on practices, or in this context on ‘transport activities’ (Mattioli et al 2016), and addresses social norms and values. Reckwitz’s comprehensive definition of a practice is frequently cited:

“A ‘practice’ (*Praktik*) is a routinized type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one other: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, ‘things’ and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge.”

Reckwitz 2002. P249

The research draws upon Shove’s (2012) articulation of the above definition of a practice with the identification of three constituent elements (The Three Elements Model); materials, competence and meanings:

- *materials* – including things, technologies, tangible physical entities, and the stuff of which objects are made (e.g. road and rail infrastructure, cycle routes, cycle hire facilities);
- *competences* – which encompasses skill, know-how and technique (e.g. knowledge of local routes and transport choices); and
- *meanings* – in which we include symbolic meanings, ideas and aspirations (e.g. motivations for travel).

Shove (2012, p14).

Identifying the constituent elements of visitor transport practices provides the opportunity to consider the extent to which existing practices meet sustainability objectives by potentially presenting a different problem framing than commencing with observable behaviour (Strengers and Maller 2015).

The research employed mixed-methods which comprised of a quantitative visitor travel survey (n. 664) undertaken in summer 2015, in-situ semi-structured visitor interviews conducted in 2015 and 2016 and on-site observations. The findings of these methods are brought together to identify visitor transport practices in the New Forest context.

New Forest Visitor Transport Practices

Visitors to the New Forest were represented by four main groups:

1. Local day visitors living in and around the National Park making regular leisure visits;
2. Tourism day visitors (visiting from their home and returning the same day) largely drawn from surrounding urban centres;
3. Day excursions by staying visitors with accommodation away from the New Forest area (e.g. Bournemouth);
4. Visits to New Forest sites made by visitors staying within the Park and around its periphery.

Local day visitors are more readily described and accounted for within daily personal travel patterns as local populations exploit the benefits of living within proximity to forest trails and scenic outdoor space, to exercise themselves and their dogs. They represent significant transport demand in the New Forest with an estimated 5.8 million trips made by the local population annually (Tourism South East 2004). These visits are largely made within the visitor's 'usual environment' (TNS 2014) falling outside of the definition of tourism and are therefore beyond the scope of this study. For tourism day visitors, proximity remains an important factor; National Parks close to urban centres of population attract higher numbers of day visitors (Lane 1994). The effects of distance decay on day visitor origins were observed; the 2015 visitor survey established that 94% of day visitors to the New Forest were drawn from Hampshire and Dorset. However, unlike local visitors, the existence of some spatial separation lends meaning to the visit and therefore contributes to the elements of the day visitor practice. For day visitors part of the definition of tourism: 'being outside of their usual environment' is key as they seek 'otherness' in the context of rural tourism. The visit provides an opportunity to 'get away from it all' in a natural setting (Jepson and Sharpley, 2015). For visitors on holiday or staying with friends and family with accommodation away from the New Forest (for example Bournemouth), a visit to the New Forest represents an excursion, possibly one of many visitors will make during their stay, to destinations within a comfortable distance of their accommodation as the principles of distance decay still apply. This pattern of leisure travel is defined by Lue et al (1993) as a 'base-camp' trip typology. For visitors staying in the New Forest and around its periphery this 'base-camp' trip typology is more focused on the rural experiences sought when staying in a National Park. Differences in transport use amongst these visitor groups were apparent within the Visitor Survey. **Table 1** shows lower car modal shares for visitors staying within the National Park for travel to the survey sites compared to day visitors and visitors staying elsewhere. Visitors staying in the New Forest were able to move around without their cars although 93% had relied on private vehicles to reach their accommodation at the beginning of their stay.

Table 1 Summary of visitor modal shares for travel to New Forest survey sites

Mode of travel to survey sites	Day visitors (n. 330)	Staying Visitors		
		New Forest National Park (n. 202)	Periphery of New Forest (n. 57)	Nearby urban and other areas (n. 73)
Private vehicles (car/van, campervan/motorhome, motorbike)	78%	45%	65%	47%
Bus/Train (including New Forest Tour)	4%	7%	11%	8%
Bicycle/on-foot	15%	47%	16%	4%
Coach/minibus/other	3%	1%	9%	41%

Visitor Transport Practices

Visitor transport practices are identified in terms of their constituent elements based on the 3 Elements Model (Shove 2012). These are the attributes related to the meanings associated with visitor's use of transport, the degree of competence or know-how which they are able to employ and the materials and structures which are necessary to undertake the activity.

Competence

Relative familiarity with the New Forest underpinned the extent to which visitors brought with them existing competence in using transport to reach and travel around the area. 86% of survey respondents had visited the area previously. Those who had never visited before largely comprised of visitors from overseas and staying visitors from other regions of the UK. Visitor familiarity manifested itself in route planning, for example visitors used their existing knowledge and experience to avoid traffic congestion in Lyndhurst effectively spreading the impacts of traffic across a wider area. Visitors described how they had developed routing strategies to avoid Lyndhurst following previous experiences of lengthy delays:

"...because this place is a nightmare to drive through, this is the obvious route [through Lyndhurst] to get off the M27 and drive through here but we actually went round through Holbury down towards Hythe and then cut across through Beaulieu and then Lymington"

(repeat visitor describing their route to reach accommodation near New Milton)

61% of all respondents visited the New Forest at least a few times a year and from the interviews it was evident that visits to the New Forest were intergenerational and that families developed traditions and favourite places to visit. These traditions were typically facilitated by car and represented a usual and unquestioned basis of a visit. In contrast, less familiar visitors sought out information with respect to the available choices for places to visit:

"We are staying at Holmsley and we looked at the leaflet that had the bike map routes on it"

(first time visitor describing why they had chosen to cycle to Bolderwood that day)

The role of competence extended to the ability of group members to use different transport modes, for example groups with children were more limited in terms of the distance they could travel by cycle and visitors also expressed concerns about their ability or willingness to cycle on road with traffic. Visitors travelling by rail to reach the area were found to have built up considerable knowledge of ticketing, routes and how to transport bikes by train compared to non-rail users who in contrast expressed uncertainty on these requirements.

Meanings

Visiting the New Forest by car allowed for flexibility in terms of linking the trip with other purposes, enabling unrestricted itineraries, multiple stops and visits made in passing. 7% of all survey respondents visiting the New Forest had stopped at other locations before reaching the survey site and 23% planned to stop off elsewhere afterwards. 8% (n. 28) of staying visitors were visiting the New Forest on route to or from another destination, examples of which were found amongst interview groups:

“Yes, it was three days, two nights and we are now on our way home but they have stopped to go cycling, so we are having the day here”

(Visitors describing how they had stopped in the New Forest on their way home from a short-break in Bournemouth)

Visitors attributed meaning to the transport they used. Driving in the New Forest represented an enjoyable activity with the presence of animals on the road contributing to the novelty of the experience. Conversely for some visitors using the car during the stay was contrary to the overall rural experience which they sought:

“It's a shame because it would have been nice to be car free as well but it's just not completely practical, is it?”

(Visitors describing their preference for not using the car during their camping holiday in the New Forest)

Travelling by train was considered a relaxing and stress-free alternative to the car and the New Forest Tour was valued by visitors for providing a break from driving. Staying visitors using their own bikes embraced them both for the leisure experience and as a means of travel, whereas visitors using hire bikes were predominantly undertaking an activity constrained by the requirement to return bikes to the point of hire within a specific timeframe.

Materials

Materials and structures shaped how visitors used transport. Private vehicles enabled visitors to transport their own cycles to use in the New Forest (15% of visitors surveyed were using their own bikes) and the network of 134 free car parking areas provided opportunities to park and cycle and to park and walk. Visitors had vehicles which specifically supported their leisure activities (e.g. campervans and vans). Cars facilitated camping trips and picnics which typically required large amounts of equipment and they also allowed for the carriage of multiple passengers at the same cost (the average car occupancy was 3). Private vehicles were used to overcome barriers to cycling enabling visitors to avoid cycling on busier roads and to reduce overall cycling distances:

“We literally get to the first car park and unload... we see the car as a pain in a sense we are just wanting to be shot of it as soon as we can but very definitely not wanting to be on open roads with heavy traffic dashing in and out of cars.”

(Visitors describing how they transport their bikes by van to the New Forest to avoid the busy road out of Lymington)

Private vehicles also allowed visitors to reach destinations in the New Forest which were inaccessible by public transport and also from origins from which the New Forest was not readily accessed. Structures influenced how transport modes were used. Pricing and supply of cycle hire limited their utility value and the pricing, routing and promotion of the New Forest Tour made using it an activity for the whole day:

“We just did the full circle didn't we because it was Lymington to Lymington, stopped changed at Lymington onto the green. [Today] well we have done part of the Blue, we picked the Red up...we went to Burley...”

(Visitors describing their use of the New Forest Tour's three colour-coded circular routes)

Transport practices amongst older adults

25% of visitor groups within the survey sample included one or more adult aged 65 or over. 48% of groups including older adults comprised of couples aged 65 and over. Adults in this age group are over-represented in the survey sample when compared to the population in general. This trend is also apparent within National datasets with 23% of domestic tourism overnight trips and 18% of domestic day visitor trips to rural destinations in 2015 being undertaken by adults aged 65 and over (Visit England 2017). Furthermore, older adults represent a growth area in leisure travel in respect of the ageing population (Glover and Prideaux 2009). However, it was noted that the use of the age group '65 and over' as the highest bracket in the survey did not allow for the exploration of declining mobility amongst higher age groups as one interview illustrated:

“Bus, now since Christmas when we had a car, when you get to ninety you feel it's time to stop...no unless somebody offers to take us [on holiday] I don't think we would because even coach trips are difficult nowadays”

(Couple both aged 90 describing their more general use of transport)

The effects of reduced mobility were however less apparent within the survey data with no significant difference in the use of private vehicles between groups which included adults aged 65 and over and groups with no adults from this age group. Within the survey sample use of local bus services to reach the survey sites was limited to just 1% (n. 8) of cases, of these, five comprised of couples aged 65 and over which while not statistically validated highlights a greater propensity for use of local bus services with this group benefiting from free travel by this mode. Walking and cycling was also comparable to other age groups (see **Table 2**).

Table 2 Summary of modal shares for visitor groups by age

	Private vehicles (car/van, campervan/motorhome, motorbike)	Bus/Train (including New Forest Tour)	Bicycle/on-foot	Coach/ minibus /other
All visitor groups (n. 662)	63%	6%	24%	7%
Groups including people aged 65 and over (n. 166)	63%	7%	20%	10%
Groups excluding people aged 65 and over (n. 496)	64%	5%	25%	6%

Whilst the transport practices of older adults when visiting the New Forest varied little from other adults, the interviews highlighted how their transport practices for other activities were more distinctive.

'Bolderwood 8' were a couple aged 67 and 69 (both bus pass holders) who were interviewed whilst enjoying a picnic at the Forestry Commission site at Bolderwood. They visited the New Forest for day trips on a roughly monthly basis by car, travelling from their home in Highcliffe located on the periphery of the National Park. Typically, they would park in one of the Forestry Commission parking areas to undertake a circular walk. Similar to the visitor transport practices described above, driving through the Forest had intrinsic meaning and allowed them to have a loose itinerary such as on the day of the visit when they were contemplating stopping at a country pub on the way home. From experience, they avoided driving as far as Lyndhurst. However, when asked about their use of transport for more general purposes they described how they combined other modes and limited their car use:

"We walk, drive but we try not to use the car unless we have to. I used to walk, probably a bit far at the moment, from Highcliffe to Lymington along the coast 11 miles and then catch the bus back and we walk round. Quite often we get the bus into Bournemouth and then the 50 bus. Or walk to Bournemouth and get the bus back. The bus to Swanage and we walk all the way from Swanage back to Bournemouth."

When questioned on their desire to use their car less the requirement to park the vehicle was cited and they went on to identify a hierarchy of modes:

"Well you have got to park it, it's just the footprint as well. You are using it really when you don't need to. My first option is walk and if I can't walk it I cycle and if I can't cycle then I will drive but we will drive obviously if we are going somewhere together further distance."

The researcher questioned whether they were particularly aware of the impact of their car. Their response suggested a concern about driving in traffic and referred to alternative modes for some journeys with less overall use of the car since retirement:

"I don't know, I suppose there is no point sitting in the traffic when we can walk. We both don't work so we don't use the car for work so it doesn't get used that often and quite often we will walk up to the village so we won't use the car then. I walk to Christchurch or up to

Sainsbury's. We don't use it that much. If we go to our son's in Poole we have to use it or if we go home to Watford or I should say where we used to live in Watford to the other children so that's how we do it."

'Lyndhurst 6' was a man over the age of 65 who was visiting alone from his home in Wimborne, approximately 16 miles to the west of Lyndhurst. He had stopped off at the New Forest village of Minstead on the way and planned to call at Ringwood on the return journey. He visited the New Forest "six to eight times a year" and was very familiar with the local road network describing in detail his planned route which avoided main roads as much as possible. Although he had used his car to travel to the New Forest stating that there was no other way of getting there, he described how he limited his car use for other journeys:

"...I use the bus as much as I can, because of parking really I wouldn't think about parking down in Bournemouth because I can use the bus to get in there I don't have to worry about time restrictions and they are fairly regular so I would tend to use buses rather than my own car."

For journeys to other local towns he combined car use with bus travel making use of free parking close to the bus routes:

"...if I lived in Blandford which is about ten miles up the road, they have got more choices of buses for Salisbury, Shaftsbury...Weymouth than I have... So, when I go there I might drive to Blandford, catch a bus to Dorchester and Weymouth, from Blandford to Salisbury or whatever because it's easier. I am still going to have to drive that bit... and its now free parking in Blandford, it didn't used to be but it is now, it has been for over a year and that makes it easier for us to catch the thing so you make use of both things really."

'Brockenhurst 3' were a couple both aged 65 and over who were visiting for the day from their home in Fareham. They had travelled by train as part of a series of day excursions using a rail rover ticket. It was evident from their explanation of their motivation for their visit to Brockenhurst and description of transport use for other journeys that they had significant knowledge of public transport routes and ticketing whilst also using their car for some journeys or parts of journeys. They used their visit as an opportunity to extend this knowledge further by investigating how to take bikes on the train:

"It's really our first ever visit to have a look around Brockenhurst isn't it? ...we have been doing sort of a recce because...we have got mountain bikes, and we want to bring our bikes down here probably in September and we are investigating how to put them on the train because its quite a drive down here its nearly 40 miles each way so its 80 miles we might as well, alright we will have to pay for the train ticket next time, a normal day return but with our senior citizen's railcard we can probably get down here for about £20. £10 each. And that's less than the price we would have to pay for bicycles, so we can bring our own bikes and they are free on the train which we found out...Yes we found out the trains where the cycles are and we only live about half an hours walk from the station anyway at Fareham but if necessary we can take the car and put them in the back of the car and park near the Fareham railway station."

Their planned visit would be likely to incorporate car use with rail. Whilst they would make savings by not hiring bikes, travelling by train to the New Forest would be comparatively more expensive than using their car for the whole journey particularly given the likely diminished value of a vehicle upon which their reliance has been reduced following retirement and issue of bus passes. Their purchase of railcards reflected their commitment to rail travel whilst they expressed a reluctance to drive.

They made use of their car alongside local bus and train services for other journeys:

“We use the bus because we have a concessionary bus pass, we use the bus a lot, we use it loads, we go quite a distance now, we use the car and we use the train ... sometimes I go on the train, yes, half and half. I mean we use the train a lot now because the roads are getting so congested that its so busy nowadays we often go from Fareham into Southampton on the bus its much easier without parking and its free, takes about an hour. We go on the bus to Winchester, don't we? Our age group travel a lot on the bus, the buses wouldn't survive without our age group.”

A Social Practice lens can be used to explore the more general use of transport by these groups of older adults.

Competence:

The accounts indicate in-depth knowledge of public transport services that stretches beyond their own localities and the propensity to research and plan, evaluating the options available for a journey. This existing knowledge includes an understanding of the choices for travel from their homes to the New Forest. For both ‘Bolderwood 8’ and ‘Lyndhurst 6’ alternatives to car travel were extremely limited even if they had combined car travel with other modes. From previous visits to the New Forest, they knew how to avoid areas with heavy traffic and that parking would not be problematic. For ‘Brockenhurst 8’ travelling by car from their home in Fareham would mean avoiding traffic would be more difficult and the visit provided an opportunity to extend their existing knowledge and plan for a future visit.

Meanings:

No longer using the car for the daily commute presents driving as one of many options rather than a necessity due to time constraints. Given the reduced reliance on the car the likelihood of investing in a new vehicle is reduced (Rye and Mykura 2009) therefore further reducing the commitment to driving. However, for ‘Bolderwood 8’ and ‘Lyndhurst 6’ visiting the New Forest by car allowed for a flexible itinerary and without the car the feasibility of their visit would have been significantly reduced.

Structures:

The structures experienced by the three groups underpinned the transport practices that they subsequently developed. The availability of free bus travel and the removal of time constraints increased the feasibility of using different modes, including walking and cycling. The presence of traffic congestion reduced the attractiveness of travelling by car reinforced by the control of parking availability. Conversely the easy availability of parking and the availability of quieter rural routes supported visiting the New Forest by car.

Discussion

Social Practice Theory, and specifically the ‘3 Elements Model’ encourages the identification of the meanings that are attributed to an activity and the degree of know-how or competence that makes it possible (or in some cases impossible) alongside the materials or structures that underpin a practice. The three interviews highlight the contrasting travel practices that exist within the different contexts. Whilst competences and meanings are significant, it is the materials or structures which are fundamental to variation in practices and the subsequent development of those associated meanings. The New Forest is perhaps atypical with its widespread provision of free parking areas; their creation represents the Forestry Commission’s initial reconciliation to the encroachment of vehicles on the Forest with increasing numbers of visitors arriving by car with the rise of car ownership in the 1960s and 70s. This initial open access for vehicles, followed by the creation of the parking areas have

formed the basis of visiting practices across generations, picnics, walks and cycle rides in the Forest have centred around the availability of these spaces and driving to the New Forest has allowed for the relaxed itineraries, typically involving a stop at a pub or tearoom which are associated with a visit to the area. The three visiting groups identified that they readily made use of bus services to access towns and cities. This wider use of bus services is partly explained by the availability of free travel and more frequent services but is also attributable to the reluctance to drive in traffic and seek and pay for parking which may also reflect a reduced confidence when driving and/or less enjoyment. Based upon the existing knowledge and experience which is held by the majority of visitors to the New Forest disincentives such as traffic congestion and parking limitations are reduced. Therefore, in contrast with access to urban centres, the availability of parking and ease of access by road to the New Forest has laid the foundations for car-based visiting practices even amongst visitors who are particularly receptive to the use of other modes.

Whilst concessionary bus travel primarily represents a measure aimed at reducing social exclusion (Andrews et al 2012) studies have identified the growing propensity for a modal switch to bus travel amongst older car owners. Within their study of the use of the multi-modal Wayfarer ticket, Lumsdon et al (2006) identified that 61% of all respondents had chosen public transport for their tourism day visit despite having access to a private car (68% of respondents were retired). Parking problems and congestion represented significant reasons for their choice alongside the identification of public transport as providing stress-free travel and an improved travel experience. Similar to the interviewee above, Andrews et al (2012) found evidence of older adults using their cars to reach bus services which were beyond their immediate locality indicating that the scope of bus travel is wider than it is typically understood. Furthermore, the new cohort of passholders comprises of more car-owning, wealthier pensioners with the effect transferring car trips to bus:

“Generally the elderly will not acquire a car but, as their age increases, they will continue to have a car which they acquired at a younger age (the ‘baby boomer’ generation will join the elderly fully equipped!)”

(Rye and Mykura, 2009 p453).

A fifth of tourism day visits to the countryside are made by people over the age of 65 (Visit England 2017). The potential exists to develop rural visiting contexts that capitalise on the multi-modal transport practices of this cohort to achieve a reduction in vehicular movement to the benefit of the overall rural tourism experience. For example, a strategic approach to parking and access across the area could provide opportunities to park and bus with respect to main visitor origins tapping into existing rural bus services whilst applying traffic management and parking measures to discourage access to more sensitive locations, thus continuing the on-going case for traffic management measures in National Parks to support their overarching legislative purposes.

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