

FAQ: Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment (MENE): The national survey on people and the natural Environment

This list of frequently asked questions (FAQs) has been compiled in an effort to improve transparency around the running and reporting of the MENE survey. If you cannot find what you are looking for please email: MENE@naturalengland.org.uk

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Q: Have there been any previous surveys of this kind in England?

Aside from MENE in 2009/10, a series of surveys were carried out by Government and its partners to track participation in leisure day visits. The leisure day visits survey series (undertaken in 1994, 1996, 1998, 2002 and 2005) collected information on the extent of participation in leisure day visits and provided estimates of the volume of visits.

Changes to the survey questions and methodology year-on-year, meant that there was a lack of reliable trend data on patterns of use and non-use.

Q: Why did we need another survey?

- To obtain accurate, up-to-date, data on how and why people access the natural environment.
- To assess the impact of previous policy interventions
- To enable all those engaged at a national or a local level to make informed decisions in developing or promoting access to the natural environment.

The five broad objectives of the survey are to:

- provide estimates of the number of visits to the natural environment¹ by the adult (16 years and over) population in England;
- measure the extent of participation in visits to the natural environment and find out the barriers and drivers that shape participation;
- provide robust information on the characteristics of visitors and visits to the natural environment;
- measure other ways of using and enjoying the natural environment; and
- find out patterns in use and participation for key groups within the population and at a range of spatial scales.

Q: How is MENE different from previous surveys?

While earlier surveys included 'days out' in the countryside, they did not provide up-to-date and robust information on people's day to day use and enjoyment of the natural environment.

Robust evidence is needed to inform future investment strategies, to help bring private money into the natural environment sector, and to help service providers better tailor their offer to the needs of local communities and tourists. To that end, this survey provides the most comprehensive dataset yet available on people's use and enjoyment of the natural environment. It includes information on visits to the natural environment (including short, close to home visits) as well as other ways of using and enjoying the natural environment such as watching wildlife and volunteering.

¹ For the purposes of this survey the natural environment is defined as the green open spaces in and around towns and cities as well as the wider countryside and coastline.

Q: Can we compare the results of MENE with earlier surveys such as the England Leisure Visits Survey?

Due to differences in survey scope and methodology the results from MENE cannot be directly compared with results from the 2005 England Leisure Visits Survey (ELVS). However a calibration exercise was undertaken to enable some results from ELVS to be adjusted to make them more comparable with results from MENE 2009-10. The results of this exercise can be found at <http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/enjoying/research/monitor/default.aspx>

Q: What are the benefits of MENE?

There is a growing body of evidence which suggests that access to the natural environment and green space can increase mental and physical health, wellbeing, and reduce the adverse health effects of social and economic inequalities, in turn contributing to improved quality of life. A report in 2005 showed a 1% reduction in the sedentary population of the UK could provide for a £493 million saving in averted healthcare costs. Therefore by providing local opportunities for exercise there is a significant benefit both in health and monetary terms.

The MENE data can help potential providers to deliver opportunities for outdoor recreation that would stimulate greater engagement with the natural environment. By providing information about people's day to day use and enjoyment of the natural environment, MENE enables investors and service providers to base their future investment strategies on quality evidence and to provide improved service to local people.

Q: Who paid for the survey?

The survey was funded in partnership by Natural England, the Department for Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) and the Forestry Commission.

Q: How did we achieve value for money?

To ensure value for money, we carried out extensive planning work, including a scoping study during 2007. This study involved consultation with civil society groups and wildlife NGOs ("the sector"²) to understand and clarify data needs. Because the requirements of the sector were identified at an early stage, only essential questions were included in the survey. We were also able to optimise the survey by setting the frequency with which we asked questions to reflect the required accuracy/confidence. As not all of the questions were asked every week, this helped to reduce survey costs

² The 'sector' ranges from groups or organisations with a specific recreation/access interest to those with a broader interest. The sector includes but is not limited to: Defra family NGOs, DCMS family NGOs, local authorities, National Park associations, regional observatories, Countryside Recreation Network, academics, devolved administrations and agencies

To achieve value for money, the survey was commissioned as part of a larger omnibus survey. These are a cost effective approach to survey research because the costs of survey administration, sampling and standard classificatory questions are shared across multiple clients.

Q: What benefits will the sector get from this survey?

MENE provides a major new source of evidence that will help the sector to shape and deliver services that meet the needs of local people.

This is the most up- to-date and comprehensive survey of its kind. It includes a wide range of information on how people enjoy and experience the natural environment. It captures information on all visits to the natural environment, including visits to local informal green space which were under recorded by previous surveys.

Our stakeholders benefit from more accurate estimates of the volume of visits to the natural environment, because the survey runs throughout the year rather than being a one-off snap shot in time.

Q: How does the data benefit those involved in delivering opportunities/services?

The information provided in MENE gives local people, local government and other organisations the ability to address local issues, confident in the knowledge that they are making decisions based on high quality, robust evidence.

Data is collected at a range of different spatial scales and amongst different socioeconomic groups. The MENE survey includes information on visits to the natural environment (including short, close to home visits) as well as other ways of using and enjoying the natural environment such as gardening, watching wildlife and volunteering.

Q: How does the data benefit those promoting engagement with the natural environment?

The survey collects a range of information about people's visits to the natural environment. This includes where they go and what they do while they are there, and also their motivations for engaging with the natural environment. However, the data is not limited to understanding how people interact and engage with the natural environment. It is also important to understand why people don't visit, so the survey collects this data too.

This new information is a valuable tool for those people who promote engagement with the natural environment. A better understanding of the public's motivations and current engagement habits will enable organisations to tailor their promotional activity to the specific requirements of the local population. This will ensure maximum positive benefit both to the public who wish to participate in an activity and to the land upon which that activity takes place.

Q: The MENE survey results are designated as ‘Official Statistics’ -- what are they?

The Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 brought all ‘Official Statistics’ under the remit of the UK Statistics Authority. The purpose of the Act is to improve public trust and confidence in official statistics by increasing transparency and independence in the way they are produced,

Official statistics are not only those produced by statisticians, or from statistical surveys but can also include figures which use administrative or management data.

Q: Why is some data designated as Official Statistics and others not?

The main criteria to consider are whether the statistics are produced using widely accepted statistical methods; whether they are nationally representative; whether they form part of a time series which is likely to continue; whether the results are likely to assist in the development and evaluation of public policy, and whether they are likely to attract public attention. MENE was designated as official statistics because it satisfied these criteria.

Q: How did the Statistics Act influence the production of MENE?

The production of MENE was influenced by the Code of Practice for Official Statistics, and the Pre-release Access (PRA) Order 2008.

The Code of Practice for Official Statistics contains eight principles, and a statement of associated practices. Taken together, the principles and practices of the code are intended to ensure that the range of official statistics meets the needs of users; that the statistics are produced, managed and disseminated to high standards; and that the statistics are well explained.

The Pre-release Access (PRA) order 2008 drastically limits the circulation of official statistics prior to publication. The intention is to avoid any perception that the figures have been influenced for policy or political purposes. Aside from those people involved in the collection, analysis and quality assurance of official statistics, prior access is limited to a strict maximum of 24 hours (actual not working), and anyone with access prior to publication must not disclose any values, or indicate size or trend.

It is Natural England’s view that MENE fully complies with the Code and Pre-Release Access order, and a separate document available on Natural England’s website has been produced in support of this.

Q: How were the MENE results obtained?

The MENE data used an in-house Omnibus survey to ask respondents about the visits they had taken in the seven days prior to the interview, as well as a series of other questions about their engagement with the natural environment.

Data collection began on the 6th March 2009 and is on-going. It involves weekly waves of interviews with a representative sample of the English adult population (aged 16 and over) in each wave. Each weekly wave achieves around 800 interviews across England.

Q: How was the survey developed?

A scoping study was undertaken in 2007 to identify the most appropriate way of measuring engagement with the natural environment.

The scoping exercise involved consultation with key stakeholders, and qualitative research with members of the public to test survey concepts. Pilot surveys using online, telephone and face-to-face methods were also undertaken.

The final methodology uses face-to-face because it was felt to be most cost effective, providing the best quality data, with interviewers able to clarify points to respondents and also use show prompts and lists of answer options.

Q: Does the MENE survey use a random sample?

No, the MENE survey uses a form of quota sampling as the basis for contacting members of the public.

Using the 2001 Census and the Royal Mail's Postal Address File, Great Britain, south of the Caledonian Canal – was divided into 600 areas of equal population. From these 600 areas, a master sampling frame of 300 sampling points was selected to reflect the country's geographical and socio-economic profile.

These areas were further subdivided into 12 sub-samples of 25 points each. Each point in itself being representative of the geographical and socio-economic profile mentioned above.

In each weekly wave around 800 interviews are undertaken across at least 100 sample points. Within each sample point, only one interview is undertaken per household and a minimum of six households is left between each interview. This ensures that interviewing is not clustered around small areas with similar demographic and lifestyle characteristics.

To ensure a balanced sample of adults a quota is set by gender (male, female housewife, female non-housewife), within the female housewife quota, presence of children and working status and within the male quota, working status. In each weekly wave a target of surveys is set, and the survey data is weighted to ensure it is representative of the English population.

Q: Why wasn't a random sampling approach used?

The scoping study determined that the chosen sampling approach would deliver the best value for money compared to other methodologies.

As a rough guide, the sample size achieved for MENE would have cost approximately £2.5 million if a random sample had been used. This is mostly due to the need to contact the addresses selected in the random sampling procedure on numerous occasions, normally because someone is not available on the first contact. This results in the need for much more interviewer time and therefore a higher cost to conduct the fieldwork.

Q: Why did you need to sample so many people when opinion polls normally only sample around 1,100?

The MENE survey included 48,514 people in the first year, and 46,099 people in the second.

The sample size simply reflects the need to have confidence in the findings at a local level. While 1,100 may give a reliable estimate for the whole country, there will be little useful detail at the local level. As such, the information provided in MENE will give local people, local government and other organisations the ability to address local issues, confident in the knowledge that they are making decisions based on high quality, robust evidence.

Q: Is the data representative of the English population?

Yes it is - in addition to the large sample the findings have also been weighted to reflect various facets of the demographics of England. Weighting effectively aligns the results so they more closely match the results had it been possible to ask everyone in the country for their views.

The weighting takes account of age and gender, region of residence, social grade, and presence of children in the household, gender and working status, presence of a dog in the household and rural/urban residence. The weighting targets used are representative of the English adult population and use the latest information.

These weights are used in conjunction with a weight which corrects for the number of visits respondents claim to have taken divided by the number they were able to recall specific details for. A further weight is then added depending on whether the question being weighted was asked weekly, monthly or quarterly.

Further information on the weighting procedure can be found in the Technical Report – including a review of the weighting from the first year of the study. This is available on the Natural England website.

Q: How accurate are the results in MENE?

Certain results are based on different sized samples depending on whether the questions were asked every week, every month, or every quarter.

Results reported on respondent based data will generally be accurate to the following margins.

- Where the sample size exceeds 40,000 respondents, the data will generally be accurate to around +/-0.6%
- Where the sample size is around 10,000 respondents, the data will generally be accurate to around +/-1.3%
- Where the sample size is around 5,000 respondents, the data will generally be accurate to around +/-1.8%
- Where the sample is around 1,000 respondents, the data will generally be accurate to around +/-4%

Results based on all visits taken are generally accurate to around the same margins, while results based on a single selected visit have slightly wider margins.

The margins above are typically 1.3 times wider than those that would have been obtained using a simple random sample.

Q: What happens if errors are found after the report has been published?

Although we are confident that the findings are accurate given the rigorous quality assurance, any errors subsequently found will be notified on the Natural England website.

Q: What is meant by “visits to the natural environment”?

Respondents were asked to think about occasions when they had spent time out of doors, which was defined as “open spaces in and around towns and cities, including parks, canals and nature areas; the coast and beaches; and the countryside - including farmland, woodland, hills and rivers”. A visit could be anything from a few minutes to all day, and could include time spent close to home or workplace, further afield or while on holiday in England. Respondents were asked to specifically discount routine shopping trips, or time spent in their own gardens.

Q: What else does MENE include?

The survey relates to engagement with *the natural environment*. By natural environment we mean all green open spaces in and around towns and cities as well as the wider countryside and coastline.

The main focus of the survey is on *visits to the natural environment* (see above). However the survey also includes a smaller section of questions regarding engagement with the natural environment *other than that experienced during visits*. This includes activities such as time spent in private gardens, watching nature programmes on television and undertaking pro-environmental activities such as recycling.

Q: What other outputs from MENE are available to download?

Aside from the second Annual Report, several additional outputs are available to view on the Natural England website.

- **1st Annual Report:** On the 6 September 2010 Natural England published the first MENE annual report. Published alongside the annual report were summary data tables as well as a technical report which provided full details of the survey methodology including approaches to sampling, grossing and weighting, and estimates of confidence intervals. The technical report has been updated to reflect the second year survey work.
- **ELVS Comparator:** ELVS 2005 collected information on the extent of participation in leisure day visits and provides estimates of the volume of visits. Although not directly comparable with MENE a comprehensive statistical exercise was undertaken in order to adjust certain key ELVS results so they can be considered comparable with the equivalent MENE findings. The report was published in January.
- **Spatial Analysis Report:** In the Summer, Natural England will publish a highly visual report which showcases what Natural England is able to do with the data.
- **On-line data viewer:** In line with NEs commitment to share its evidence more widely, an online data viewer is now available which replaces the need for extensive data tables. It allows stakeholders and members of the public to view and cross tabulate the data by a large number of variables. Initially the viewer included year one data only, but after the publication of the year two annual report, year two data will be added, as will year three data as it becomes available. The viewer can be accessed via www.naturalengland.org.uk/mene.
- **Monthly reporting:** In order to better comply with the Statistics and Registration Services Act (by making the data available as soon as it is ready), we intend to produce monthly headline reports during survey year three onwards.
- **Attitudes Report:** To supplement MENE and to contribute to various internal Natural England products, additional attitudinal questions were asked on six separate occasions in 2009/10. The results collected via this additional analysis have been summarised in this Attitudes Towards the Natural Environment Report.