

Epping Forest District Tourism Strategy

Epping Forest District

Epping Forest District is an area of predominately green belt and farm land on the north eastern edge of London. As well as the London boroughs of Havering, Redbridge and Waltham Forest, it is bordered by Hertford and Essex. It is a dormitory district with most of its residents living in the south taking advantage of underground and road links into London where they work. Consequently house prices are high as are standards of living. Both the M25 and M11 pass through the district with two junctions on the M11 and one on the M25. Transport for London tube and bus routes connect with the south of the district but public transport elsewhere is limited.

Epping Forest District is made up of a number of scattered towns and villages with its administrative centre in the town of Epping which named for the ancient forest that extends out of London through the centre of the southern half of the district. Its western border with Hertford is defined by the Lee Valley Park which overlaps both counties. The district has no significant industry, leisure or retail offer but these can be found in Harlow, a densely populated new town to the north west of the district with expansion plans and enterprise zone status.

Visitors

The district has a small visitor accommodation offer and therefore most people coming into the area are day-trippers to a specific destination or for a specific event. Despite this, the annual economic benefit from visitors is over £200m. Many of the bigger attractions are on or just outside the district's border. These include Lee Valley Park and the White Water Centre, the most visited parts of Epping Forest and Kelvedon Nuclear Bunker/Races/Rope Runners. Popular destinations within Epping Forest District are the Epping Ongar Railway, Waltham Abbey (with its church, gardens and museum), The Royal Gunpowder Mills, Ashlyns Farm and North Weald Airfield which hosts a regular outdoor market and numerous events throughout the year as well as being home to a museum, cafes/bar and heritage aircraft. Other notable destinations include Greensted Church, Redwings Horse Sanctuary and the numerous country pubs and fine dining restaurants across the district.

Value

The latest visitor figures* for the district show that annually:

£204 million spent in the local area as result of tourism
£14 million spent on average in the local economy each month.
8% of local jobs are tourism related with 3,595 jobs supported
3.5 million trips undertaken in the area (3.4 million were day trips)
£28 million generated by overnight visits

**Figures relate to 2015 commissioned by Visit Essex and produced by Destination Research*

Growth

Currently, and for the foreseeable future, the main areas for growth lie on or beyond the district's borders. A key exception is North Weald Airfield which has the capacity to host more and bigger events and grow its existing offer. Two major destinations, Lee Valley Park and Epping Forest have programmes to develop income from visitors. Lee Valley in particular have ambitious plans for the White Water Centre and surrounding area to attract and retain visitors by developing a destination that could benefit Waltham Abbey and beyond

into the forest buffer lands. The City of London, who own Epping Forest, are looking to create added value as they balance maintaining open access and conservation with new products and services. Further afield, Stansted Airport is predicting a growth in passenger traffic and, although not impacting the district directly, Cross Rail and other rail improvements will make the surrounding areas better connected than ever.

A lack of accommodation has been seen as a barrier to growth in the lucrative overnight stay market and recent research has shown that although there is increasing demand, residential values have pushed land costs beyond the reach of hotel developers. There is however interest in small scale alternative accommodation such as clamping and shepherd's huts amongst scattered rural land owners looking to diversify and Airbnb is a growing but hidden accommodation alternative. Hotel growth is also forecast for Harlow, driven primarily by business growth.

It has been recognised that the tourism sector in Epping Forest District is under developed and this is confirmed by the 8% local employment figure which is below national average. Three areas of opportunity have been recognised and each offers their own unique challenge.

Challenge and opportunity 1 – growth through development

A lack of growth within the district may be balanced by increased growth from outside. The challenge is to take advantage of this investment by attracting visitors into the district. For those in close proximity this will involve developing a complementary offer matching the expectations generated by the new destinations. For those further afield, trails (both physical and illustrative) could extend visitor's options beyond their starting point to additional places of interest. This might include places to visit, places to eat and drink or places to return to. This will require an awareness of the aims and aspirations of developers and a partnership approach with joint initiatives.

Challenge and opportunity 2 – growth from London

A lack of accommodation puts an emphasis on growing day trips both in terms of numbers and duration/spends. The district's proximity to London means a potential rich source of visitors from both residents and tourists. Growth plans by Lee Valley and the City of London already envisage increasing numbers of visitors travelling from London. Epping Forest and the surrounding district has traditionally been a playground for east end Londoners and there's never been a greater desire to escape to the countryside. Two challenges are building awareness in a complex and expensive marketplace, and getting people to attractions which are beyond the ends of the transport links. Illustrative trails and itinerary suggestions could build awareness and demand but the physical links will prove more of a barrier to be overcome.

Challenge and opportunity 3 – growth by special focus

Areas that are currently on the tourist map will continue to offer opportunities for growth. Two areas for special focus are Waltham Abbey and North Weald. Waltham Abbey already has built tourism infrastructure through its rich heritage connections. This combined with the expansion plans within neighbouring Lee Valley make it a prime area for cross-border collaboration and a defined role within the development of the wider area as a visitor destination. North Weald has the airfield, a destination in itself with a growing programme of activities and events, and the Epping Ongar Railway running events at the station and its heritage line linking Ongar and possibly Epping and the Central Line.

Vision

To be the place where people come to **relax, unwind** and **play**.

Strategy

The current strategy has brought the district's tourism businesses and professionals together to coordinate offers and inform the future direction of tourism and visitor development. This has been facilitated by a Tourism and Visitor Board and annual tourism conference and workshops. Promotional material has been produced and distributed within the district via tourism and visitor outlets to build awareness of the range of attractions, destinations and events to both locals and visitors. A new tourism website has created a focus for information and inspiration and provided an enhanced event listing (the most visited section of the previous website).

The new strategy will continue to provide promotional material with the website providing the main source of information, expanding as necessary to cover new areas of opportunity.

The strategy will continue to support the Tourism and Visitor Board and annual conference.

Cross Border work and working with Partners will have an increasing importance as developing areas offer opportunity within the district and work is required to unlock this potential.

A new campaign will target London aiming to attract day trippers from amongst residents and tourists. A primary focus will be those travelling via public transport or accessing the district through the Lee Valley and Epping Forest.

"Trails" will be created linking destination areas both commercially and physically by creating trails, guides, packages and transport links. These trails will be themed to visitor types – ie those looking for heritage, nature, adrenaline, family activities etc.

The local plan will be used to reinforce the district's commitment to building the visitor economy, to encourage growth and secure the existing offer. It will support those looking to diversify into the tourism/visitor sector and discourage the loss of existing infrastructure such as accommodation.

The strategy will recognise the barrier to growth caused by a lack of public transport between attractions and look for solutions that have a green approach that is sensitive to the natural environment that defines the district.

The strategy will aim to develop a quality all year round offer.

The sensitive development of the green nature of the District will be encouraged and promoted and opportunities to develop a green tourism offer will be explored.

The strategy will encourage a coordinated approach to tourism and visitor development and promotion with our neighbours within SELEP, WEA and LSCC.

The strategy will encourage and support the production of major events in the district that will have regional appeal and attract visitors from outside of the district.

The strategy will continue to identify and disseminate emerging opportunities from increased numbers through Stansted and Crossrail / four-tracking of overground services.

The strategy will continue to seek, identify and signpost / secure capital investment.

Key messages

Primary focus: visitors from London. Residents and tourists

Message to Londoners:	The place Londoners come to relax, unwind and play.
Message to Londoners:	The Garden of London
Message to London tourists:	Explore rural England as well as the capital
Message to London tourists:	Stay in/near Epping to get the best of both worlds – and save money

Sub-focus: Visitors to Waltham Abbey and surrounding area (Lee Valley and Epping Forest)

Message to visitors:	So much to see and do
Message to visitors:	History and Heritage (WA, Museum, RGM, Copped Hall)
Message to visitors:	Natural beauty, woods, countryside, water (LV / EF)
Message to visitors:	Sports and adrenalin (WWC / EF horse and bike riding)

Marketing by Vibrant Partnerships (Lee Valley) and City of London (Epping Forest) will also be reflected and incorporated as appropriate in the messages from Epping Forest as part of partnership working.

Sub-focus: North Weald

Message to visitors:	The airfield as a major venue – so much going on
Message to visitors:	EOR London's nearest heritage railway
Message to visitors:	EOR connectivity (train and bus links, Epping and Ongar)
Message to visitors:	The airfield as a heritage destination, museum and flying