

Landscape Questionnaire Report

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Old Chalk New Downs Project
Hosted by Kent County Council
Authored by: Jenny Price



Landscape Questionnaire Report

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1.0 Background

The Old Chalk New Downs project covers almost 10,000 hectares along the North Downs from Kemsing to Detling. Much of the natural downland landscape in this area has been lost or become fragmented, making it difficult for its unique wildlife to spread and survive. Many people have lost connection with nature and their local environments.

The Old Chalk New Downs (OCND) project looks to address these issues through work to improve, restore, and reconnect threatened chalk grassland habitats, while addressing the loss of people's connection with their natural environment through a variety of awareness raising and engagement schemes.

The Heritage Lottery Fund awarded the OCND project a £1.4m grant to focus on the revival of chalk grassland and the knowledge and skills required to protect it for future generations. Between 2017 and 2022, the project has actively worked with landowners and communities.

In March 2020, the Coronavirus pandemic caused disruption on a mass scale. For many of our landowners and the local community, new challenges arose. Public sites and PROW saw record numbers of visitors. Public and private landowners reported increases in rural crime and anti-social behaviour. Our communities saw a new level of engagement with our public greenspaces whilst so many other activities were being curtailed.

As a response to these changes, in 2022 OCND worked with landowners to run community litter picking events, a dog awareness day and school sessions focused on the Countryside Code. In addition, OCND promoted responsible use of the countryside through 3 further pathways:

- promotion of the Country Eye app (part-funded by project money) for reporting on rural crime and PROW issues
- funding the Securing the Landscape Toolkit, aimed at advising landowners and managers dealing with rural crime
- funding of shared signage for use on rights of way and public sites across the project area.

From July – September 2022, OCND carried out a landscape questionnaire to capture data on recreational use of the Kent North Downs. The questionnaire also captured data on public awareness of the Country Eye App and the Securing the Landscape Toolkit. The findings are presented here.

2.0 Survey Methods

We carried out a Landscape Questionnaire between July and September 2022. The aim was to target recreational users of the North Downs in addition to landowners and land managers who lived or worked within the Downs.

Questions referred to the Kent North Downs, rather than specifically the OCND project area, as the project boundary was not deemed to be well known to the public. It was also anticipated that the questions and answers were likely to be of similar relevance to both within and outside the OCND project boundary. However, all physical interviews were carried out within the OCND project area. The full survey is available in Appendix 1: OCND Landscape Questionnaire Survey Form.

Answers were obtained via 3 sources.

1. Interviewing visitors to the OCND stand at the Kent County Show 2022
2. Interviewing attendees at OCND public events in July, August and September 2022
3. An online version sent via email and social media to the OCND contacts list.

(Appendix 2)

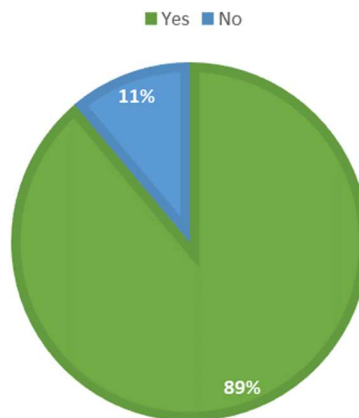
The busiest of these was the Kent County Show, where 58 interviews were conducted. A further 22 interviews were carried out at OCND events, and 19 were completed online. In total, there were 99 responses to the questionnaire.

3.0 Results

Q1) Have you made a recreational visit to the North Downs in the last 12 months?

The majority (89%) of respondents had made a recreational visit to the Kent North Downs in the past 12 months. As many of the responses were obtained at recreational sites within the North Downs, this was expected. The remaining respondents are those who said they live and work in the North Downs (rather than visiting it) or those who responded to the online version of the questionnaire.

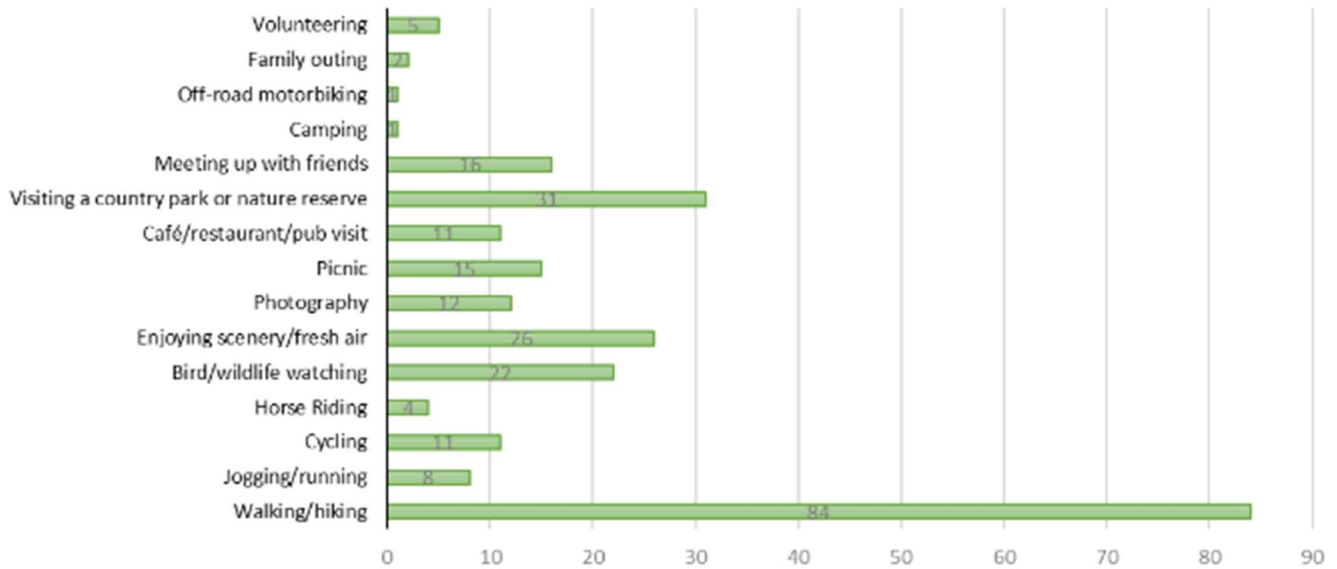
FIG. 1. HAVE YOU MADE A RECREATIONAL VISIT TO THE NORTH DOWNS IN THE LAST 12 MONTHS?



Q2) Which recreational activities have you undertaken in the North Downs?

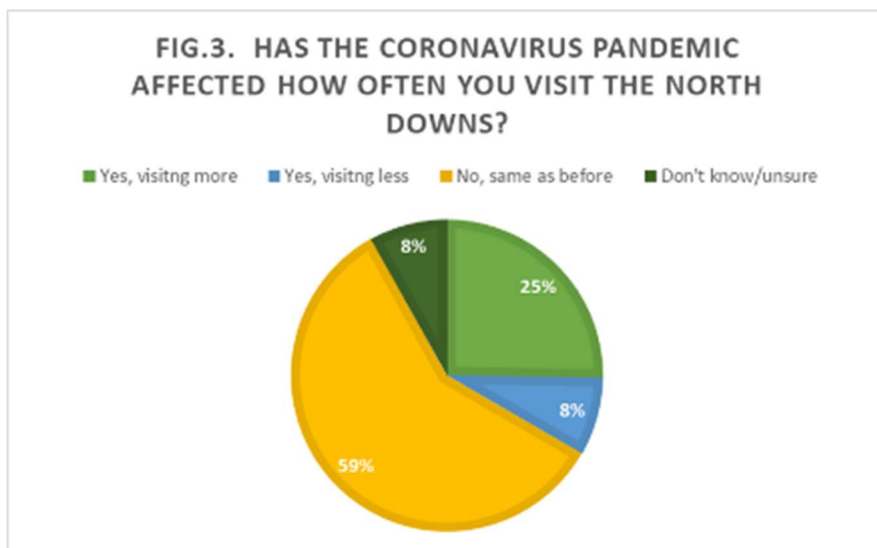
Respondents were able to give multiple answers. 15 different recreational activities were given as reasons for visiting the North Downs. Of these, walking/hiking (including dog walking) was by far the most popular activity with 84 respondents including it. The second most common reason was to visit a county park, nature reserve or wildlife site, which 31 respondents included. Enjoying the scenery/fresh air and wildlife watching were other activities mentioned more than 20 times.

Fig.2. Recreational Activities undertaken in the North Downs



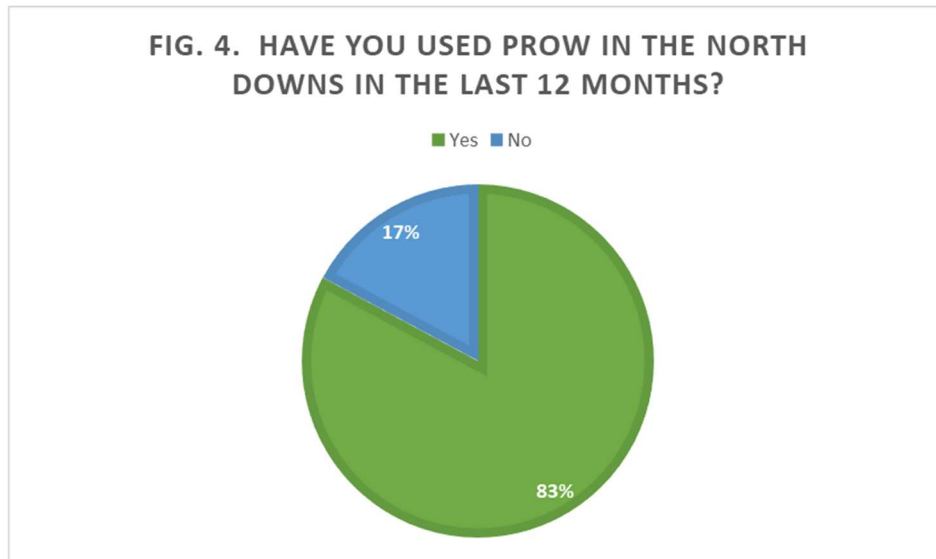
Q3 Has the Coronavirus pandemic changed how often you visit the North Downs?

Most respondents (59%) did not feel that the Coronavirus pandemic had changed how often they visited the North Downs. 8% did not know or were unsure. Of those that felt the frequency of their visits had changed, a larger percentage (25%) thought they were visiting more compared with those who felt they were visiting less (8%), suggesting that within this sample there is an overall net increase in use in 17% of visitors.



Q4) Have you used signposted footpaths or trails, or the North Downs Way National Train in the past 12 months?

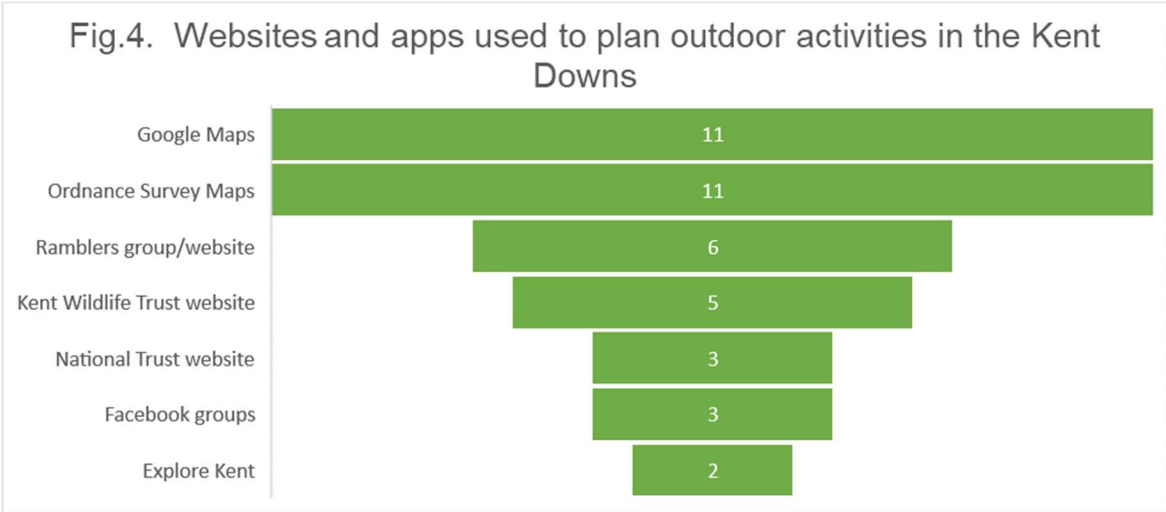
83% of respondents said they had used signposted footpaths or trails, or the North Downs Way National Trail over the past 12 months.



Q5) Do you use information from any specific groups, websites or apps to plan your activities?

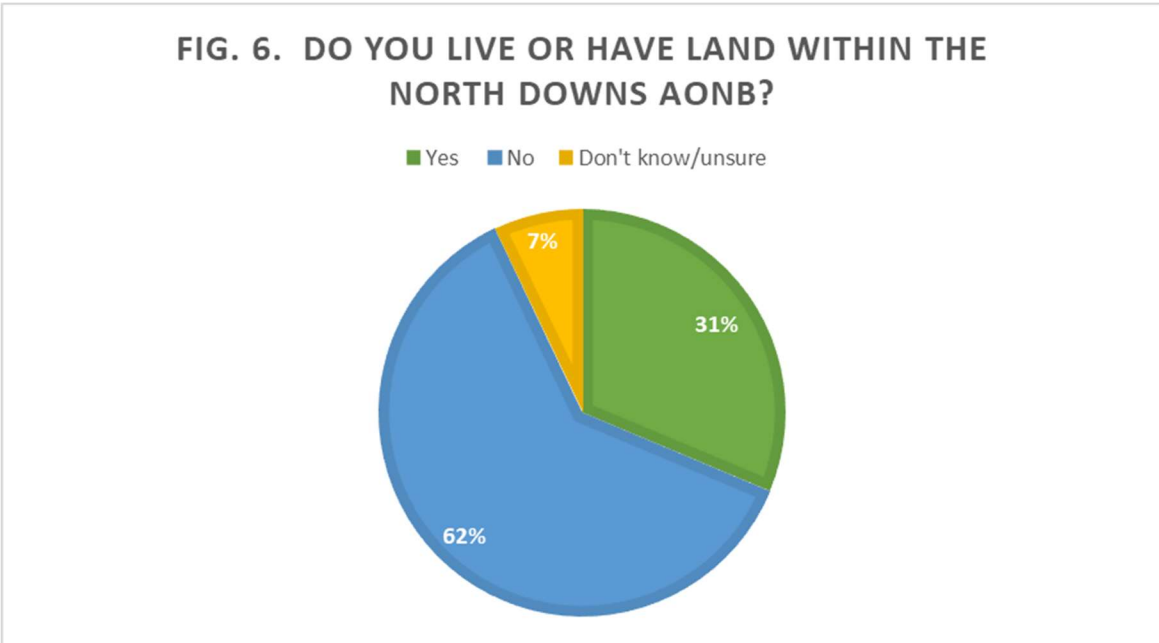
43% of respondents said they did not use any resources to plan their outdoor activities. Of the 57% that do, Google maps and Ordnance Survey maps were the resources named most frequently to plan outdoor activities. The most common answers given are summarised in Fig. 5.

A range of other resources were mentioned only once, including websites (CPRE, Woodland Trust, Pitch-Up, Plotaroute.com), apps (Kamoot, Riders GPS) and local walking books.



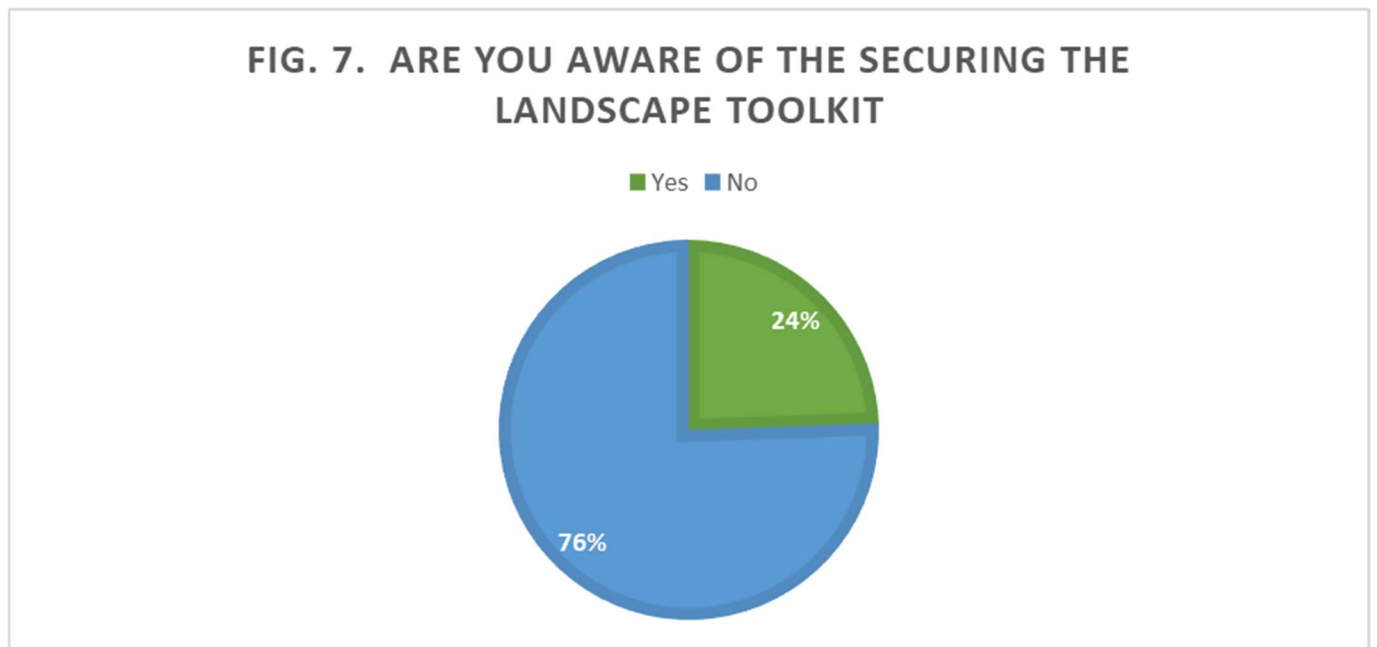
Q6) Do you live or have land within the North Downs AONB?

The majority (62%) of respondents did not live within or have land within the Kent Downs AONB. 31% of respondents did live or have land within the AONB, and therefore were asked Q7.



Q7) In you answered yes to Q6, are you aware of the advice and guidance provided by the Securing the Landscape toolkit?

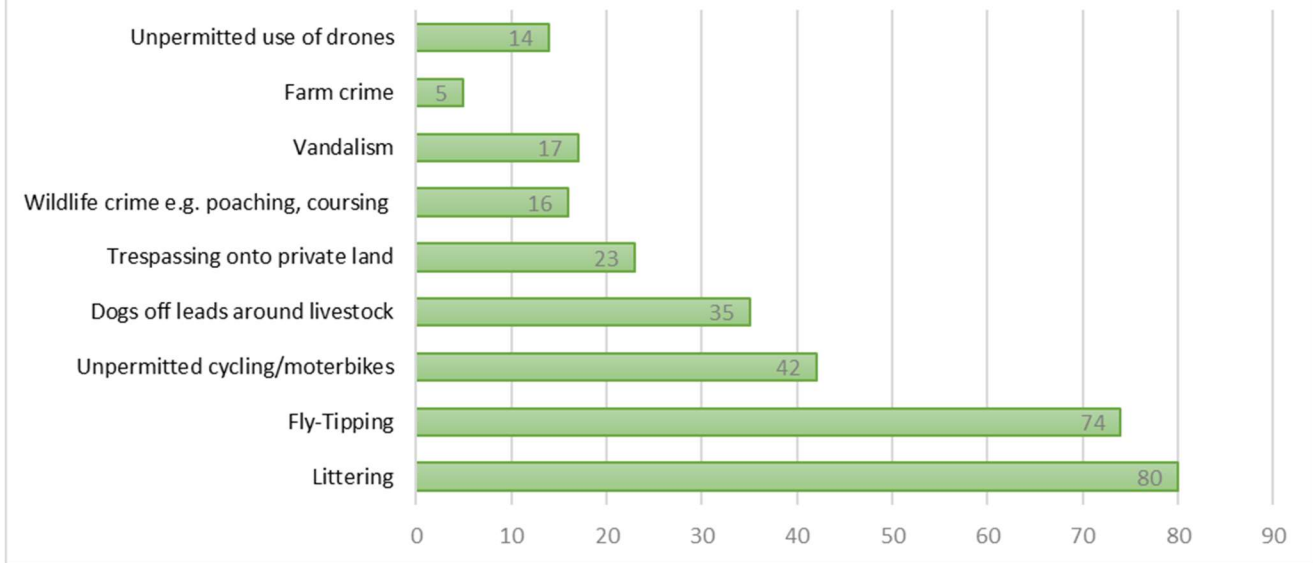
Of the 31% of respondents who lived within or had land within the Kent Downs AONB, most were unaware of the Securing the Landscape Toolkit. The toolkit was produced by Old Chalk New Downs to support home and landowners and managers deal with rural crime. 24% of respondents were aware of the Toolkit and what it was for.



Q8) Have you observed or seen evidence of any of the following activities taking place in the North Downs?

Respondents were able to give multiple answers. Of the 99 respondents, 14 (14%) had not observed any of the anti-social activities listed in the North Downs. Of the remaining 85 respondents, litter and fly-tipping were by far the most frequently observed, but all other activities (or evidence of those activities) had also been observed.

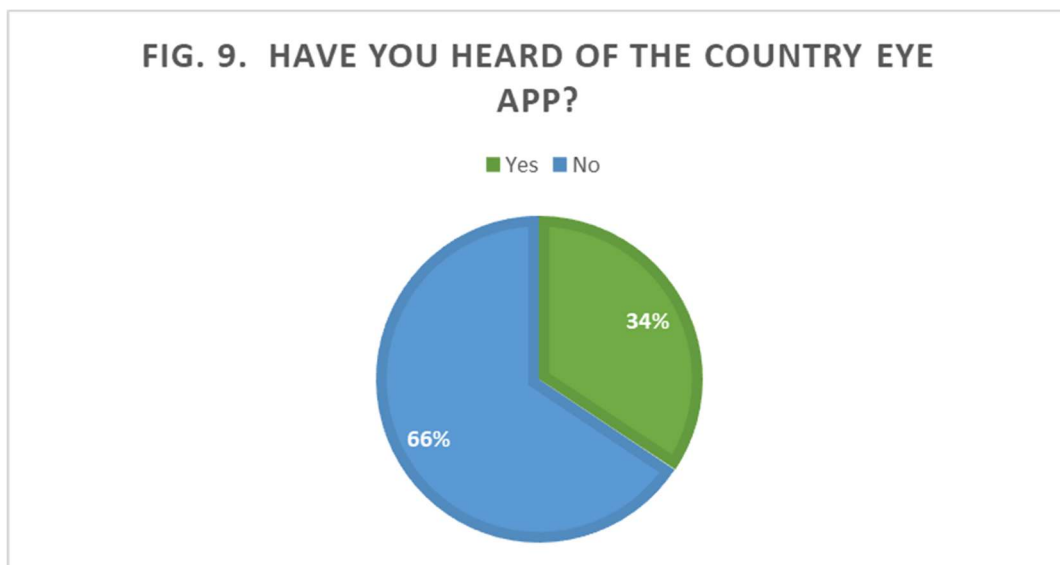
Fig. 8. Anti-social activities observed in the Kent North Downs



Q9) Have you heard of the country eye app for reporting illegal activity in the countryside?

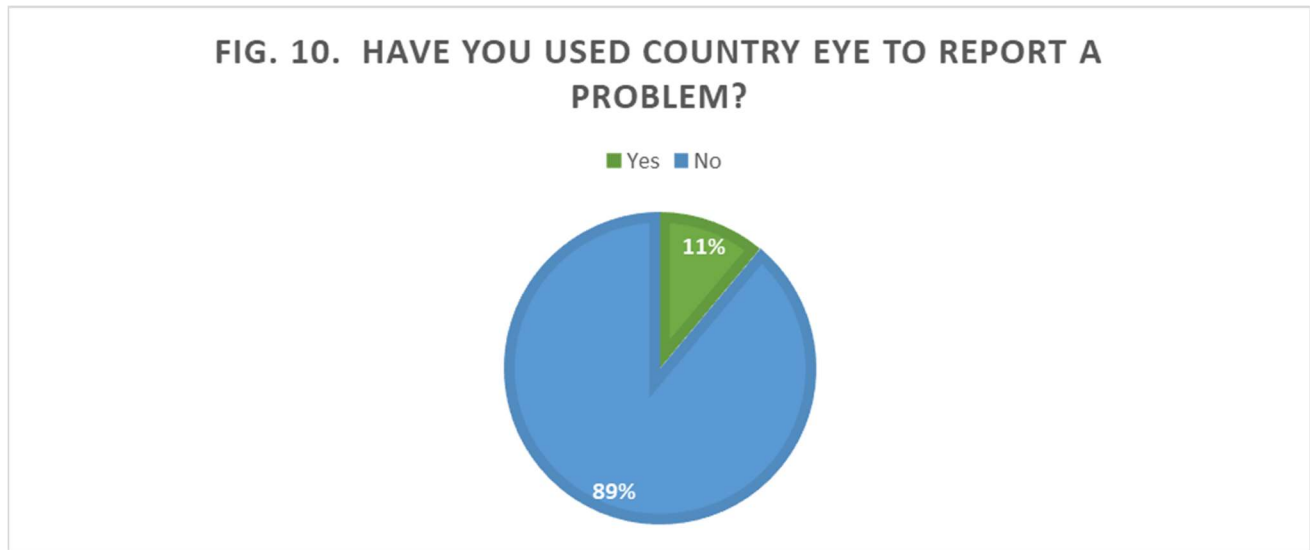
Country Eye is a smart phone app that allows users to report countryside issues and rural crime across the whole of Kent. The Old Chalk New Downs project has contributed funding to Country Eye, and promoted the app throughout the project area.

FIG. 9. HAVE YOU HEARD OF THE COUNTRY EYE APP?



Q10) Have you ever used the Country Eye app to report a problem?

Although 34% of respondents had heard of the Country Eye app, only 11% have used the Country Eye app to report a problem in the countryside.



Q11) Can you list any of the guidance included in the countryside code?

The countryside code question provoked a split response. 54% of respondents were familiar with the countryside code (able to name three, four or more pieces of guidance within it), whereas 46% were unfamiliar with it, or could only name one or two pieces of guidance.

The most familiar guidance for respondents was to leave gates as you find them, with dogs on a lead/under control and no littering also well known.

FIG. 11. CAN YOU NAME ANY OF THE GUIDANCE IN THE COUNTRYSIDE CODE?

■ unable to answer/1 or 2 correct answers ■ 3 correct answers/4 or more correct answers

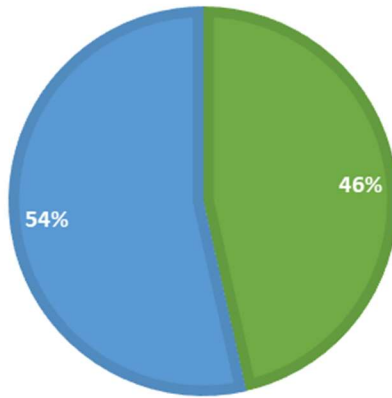
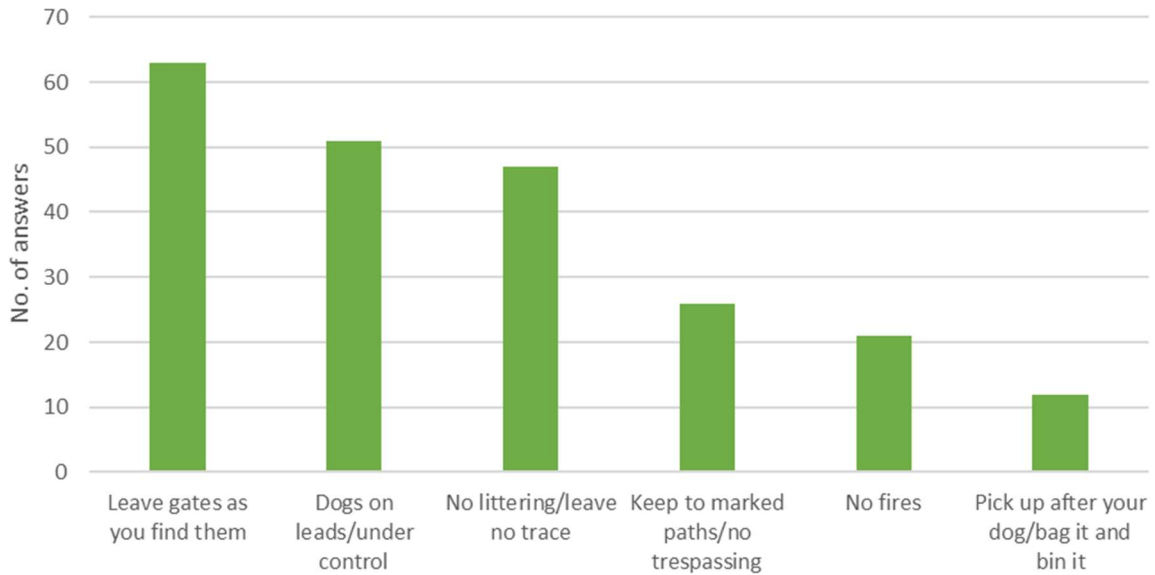


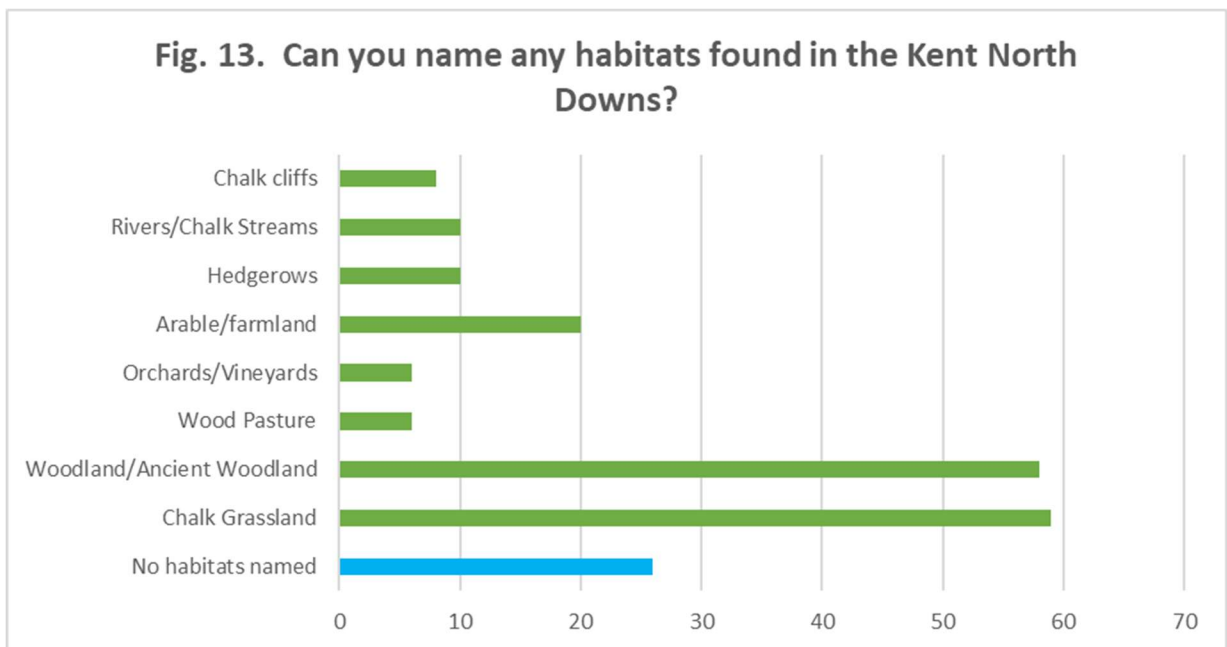
Fig. 12. Familiarity with Countryside Code Guidance



Q12) Can you name any of the habitats of the North Downs?

Respondents were able to give multiple answers to this question. Out of 99 respondents, 26 were unable to name any habitats of the North Downs. Fig.13. shows the habitats named by respondents. Woodland and chalk grassland were the two most commonly named, with arable/farmland coming in third.

Interviewers noted that many respondents needed help with this question. Many started by answering with species, rather than habitats (i.e. badgers, foxes, birds), suggesting that ‘habitat’ is not a well-known term.

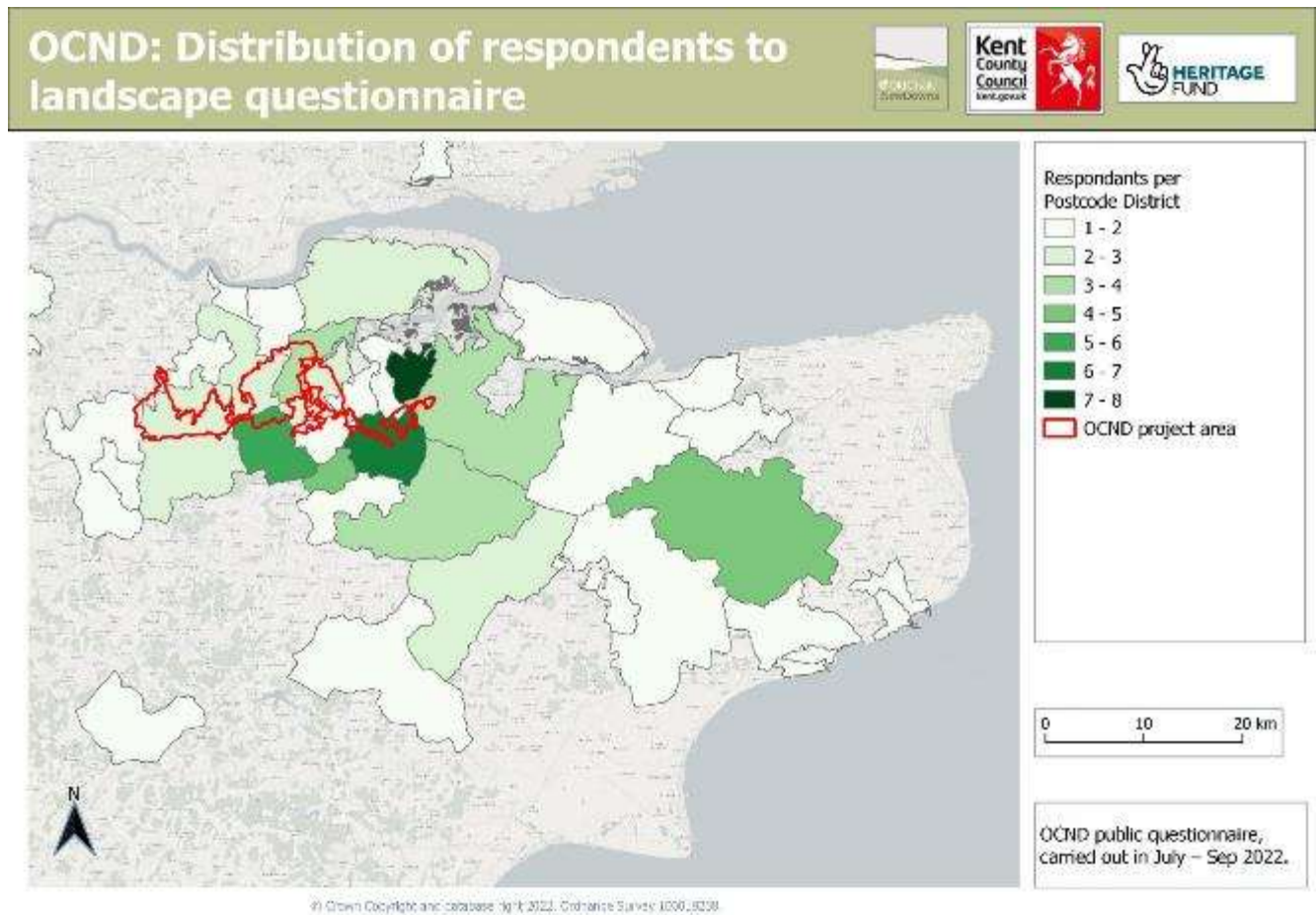


Q13) Could you give the first half of your postcode or your nearest town or village?

All respondents provided either the first half of their postcode or their nearest village or town. The distribution of respondents from Kent are shown in Map 1. As determined in Q6, most of the respondents did not live within the Kent Downs AONB, but the majority did live adjacent to it or within easy travelling distance. The highest densities of respondents were seen from Medway and Maidstone postcodes. 6% of respondents were not from Kent, with postcodes from Worthing, Leigh-on-Sea, Chelmsford, Burgess

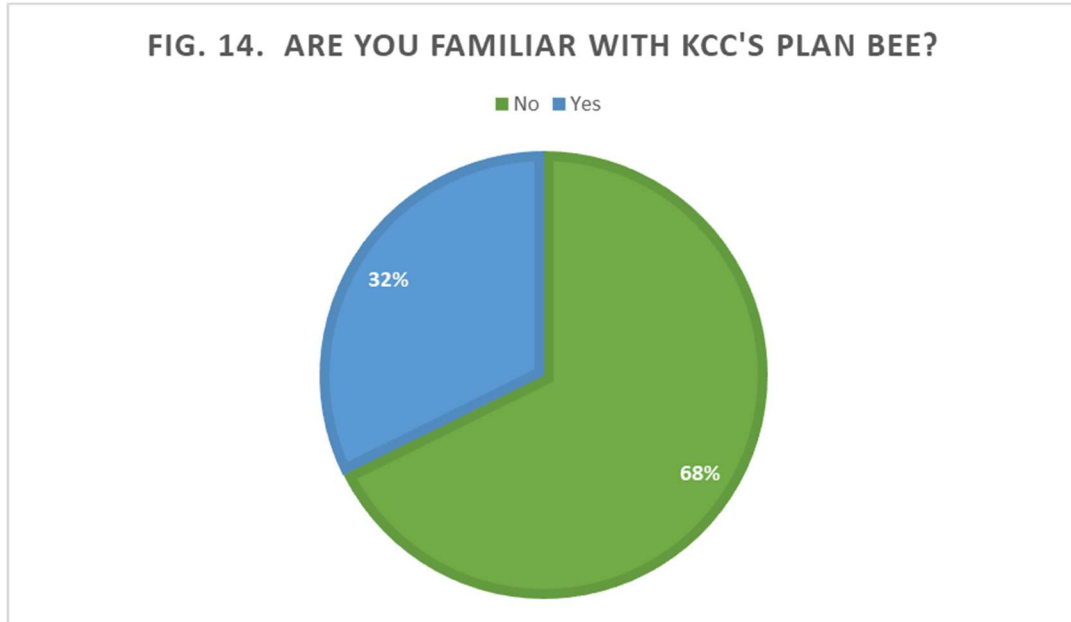
Hill, Bristol and one from Carlisle in Scotland. All of the respondents from outside of Kent were interviewed at the Kent County Show.

Map 1: Distribution of respondents to landscape questionnaire.



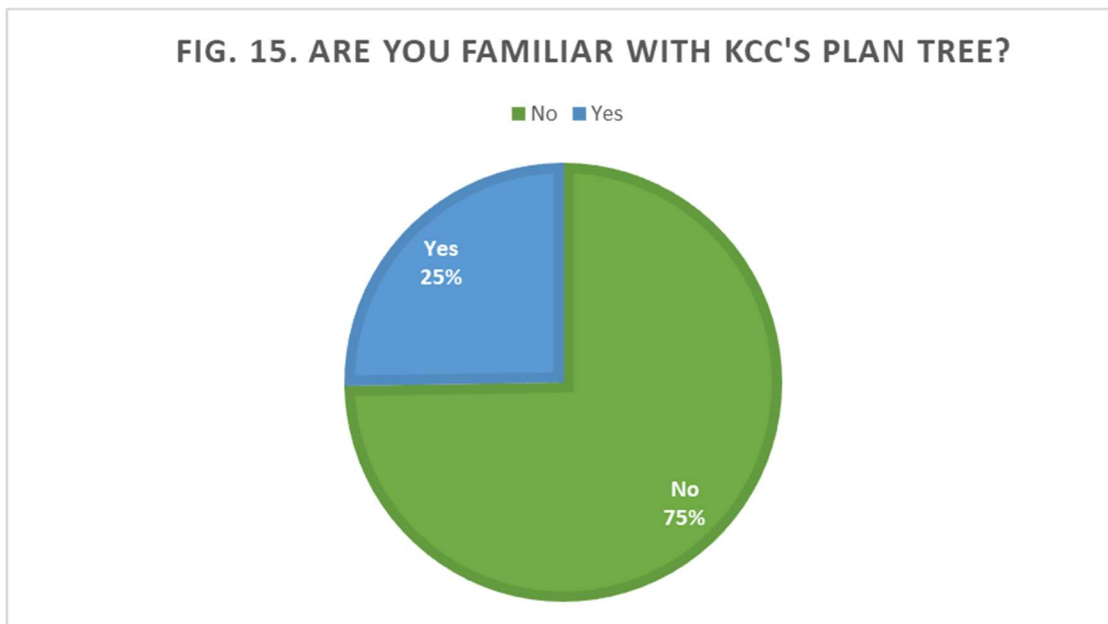
Q14) Are you familiar with Kent County Council's pollinator action plan, Plan Bee?

32% of respondents were familiar with KCC's Plan Bee.



Q15) Are you familiar with Kent County Council's tree establishment strategy, Plan Tree?

25% of respondents were familiar with KCC's Plan Tree.



4.0

Discussion

The results from the questionnaire support the view that the Kent North Downs are a popular recreation area with the public. Despite a relatively small sample size, a large proportion visited the North Downs for recreation. Outdoor activities such as walking, visiting country parks and wildlife sites, and enjoying the views and scenery appear to be the biggest draw to those interviewed. This recreational interest puts pressure on landowners and land managers. The large percentage of respondents who use signed footpaths and trails, and the North Downs way, indicate that there is a need for a robust public rights of way network to support visitors.

The response to whether the Coronavirus pandemic has changed visitors' behaviour indicates that overall, 17% of people interviewed are visiting more frequently. This survey was conducted in the summer of 2022 when pandemic restrictions had been removed and movements were getting back to normal. It is therefore likely that the increase in use was even higher during the pandemic restrictions of 2020 and 2021. Many of the OCND project partners have reported an increase in visitors, but also an increase in anti-social behaviour and rural crime since the start of the pandemic.

Anti-social behaviour and rural crime were already key issues for land managers within the Old Chalk New Downs project area. For this reason, OCND had already allocated funding to the Country Eye app for easier reporting of rural crime and public rights of way issues. OCND funded the Securing the Landscape report and toolkit, which was created in consultation with local landowners. The questionnaire results indicate that these two initiatives, whilst known to some, could be further promoted to enhance their usefulness. Reporting issues via the Country Eye app could be improved. 86% of the respondents in the survey had seen evidence of rural crime, yet only 11% had reported it via Country Eye. Similarly, the Securing the Landscape toolkit, which gives advice to landowners on managing rural crime, was only known to 24% of the landowners interviewed. Further promotion by OCND project partners may help to increase the effectiveness of these two initiatives.

The public's awareness of the issues affecting the Kent North Downs varies. When asking

respondents for their knowledge of the Countryside Code a quarter of those asked were unable to share any. 25% of respondents were unable to name any guidance included in the Countryside Code. Overall, the Countryside Code was only well known to 54% of respondents. Given that 89% made recreational visits to the countryside, this suggests a lack of awareness amongst visitors that could have a negative impact. Increased promotion of the Countryside Code is recommended to improve the relationship between visitors and land managers.

Knowledge of habitats also varied. There was overall familiarity with chalk grassland and woodland as two key habitats of the North Downs. However, over a quarter of respondents (26%) couldn't name any habitats, and many others needed help from the interviewer before answering. Outreach and engagement with recreational users based around habitats or features of the countryside may need to take this into account.

Kent County Council's strategic plans for pollinators and tree establishment (Plan Bee and Plan Tree) were relatively unknown to respondents. Plan Bee was slightly better known of the two (32% were familiar with it, in contrast to 25% familiar with Plan Tree). This could be a result of Plan Bee being established earlier and having a stronger online presence.

5.0 Conclusions

OCND project partners have reported increasing issues with anti-social behaviour, and misuse of the countryside. The results of the questionnaire suggest that further engagement with the public over countryside issues would be beneficial. The results support the view that there has been a net increase in visitors because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Old Chalk New Downs has funded initiatives to tackle this issue with the Securing the Landscape Toolkit, and the Country Eye app for reporting rural crime. However, it is clear from the survey results that these could be promoted more widely. Working with our project partners, the project has facilitated Countryside Code workshops in schools, and a

dog awareness event at Trosley Country Park. It would be of benefit to the Old Chalk New Downs community if these initiatives are promoted and/or continued beyond the project's end. There could also be the potential to expand public engagement to address wider understanding of countryside management, e.g., of habitat types and what they mean.

For more detailed information into recreational visitor use, further surveying across a is recommended. For example, a larger sample is likely to indicate more accurately where visitors come from and may provide further insight in how to target specific user groups. This could help to inform on the measures needed to reconnect people with their natural surroundings in the most effective manner.

Appendix 1 – OCND Landscape Questionnaire Survey Form

1. Have you made a recreational visit to the Kent North Downs in the last 12 months?

Mark only one oval.

Yes

No

2. If yes, which activities have you undertaken in the Kent North Downs? (If no, go to next question.)

Check all that apply.

Walking/Hiking

Jogging/running

Cycling

Horse Riding

Bird/wildlife watching

Enjoying scenery/fresh air

Photography

Golf

Picnic

Cafe/restaurant/pub visit

Visiting a country park, nature reserve or wildlife site

Meeting up with friends

Other: _____

3. Has the Coronavirus pandemic changed how often you visit the North Downs?

Mark only one oval.

- No, visiting the same as before
- Yes, visiting more
- Yes, visiting less
- Don't know/unsure

4. Have you used signposted footpaths or trails, or the North Downs Way national trail in the past 12 months?

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
- No

5. Do you use information from any specific groups, websites or apps to plan your outdoor activities?

Mark only one oval.

- No
- Yes - please give examples below
- Other: _____

6. Do you live or have land within the North Downs?

Mark only one oval.

Yes

No

7. If you answered yes to Q7, are you aware of the advice and guidance provided by the Securing the Landscape Toolkit? (If no, please direct to QR code.)

Mark only one oval.

Yes

No

8. Have you observed or seen evidence of any of the following activities taking place in the North Downs?

Check all that apply.

Littering

Fly-Tipping

Unpermitted off-road cycling/mountain biking/motorbikes

Dogs off leads around livestock

Trespassing onto private land

Wildlife crime e.g. poaching, coursing

Vandalism

Farm crime

Unpermitted Use of Drones

Other: _____

-
9. Have you heard of the Country Eye app for reporting illegal activity in the countryside?

Mark only one oval.

Yes

No

10. Have you ever used the Country Eye app to report a problem?

Mark only one oval.

Yes

No

11. Can you list any of the guidance included in the countryside code? (Do not prompt)

Check all that apply.

No littering/leave no trace

Leave gates as you find them

Dogs on leads

No fires

Pick up after your dog/bag it and bin it

Keep to marked paths/stay on footpaths

Other: _____

12. Can you name any of the habitats of the North Downs? (do not prompt)

Check all that apply.

- Chalk grassland
- Woodland/ancient woodland/beech-yew woodland
- Wood pasture
- orchards/vineyards
- Chalk cliffs
- Chalk streams
- Arable/farmland
- Hedgerows
- Other: _____

13. Could you give the first 4 digits of your postcode (e.g. ME14) or nearest town/village.

14. Are you familiar with Kent County Council's Pollinator Action Plan, Plan Bee?

Mark only one oval.

Yes

No

15. Are you familiar with Kent County Council's Tree Establishment Strategy, Plan Tree?

Mark only one oval.

Yes

No