

# NATURAL HERITAGE VISITOR CENTRE SURVEY 2012

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**200  
VISITOR  
CENTRES  
CONTACTED**

**20%  
SURVEYS  
RETURNED**

## METHODOLOGY

A comprehensive, web-based, search was conducted to identify natural heritage visitor centres within mainland UK and ascertain their location and contact details. This included centres run by organisations such as the Forestry Commission, the RSPB, the Wildlife Trusts and the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust.

A questionnaire was emailed to each centre, or their parent organisation where individual contact email addresses were not available. These were completed and returned by email. After two weeks a second set of emails were sent to those from which no reply had been had.

In total, 210 visitor centres were identified; 200 of these were emailed and 40 completed surveys received. Therefore the results in this report are based on data from 20% of the sample.

# VISITOR CENTRE ORGANISATIONS

Wildlife  
Trusts

National  
Park  
Authorities

Forestry  
Commission

Councils

RSPB

WWT

Private

National Trust

National Trust for Scotland

Groundwork Trust

BTCV

ON AVERAGE  
EACH  
VISITOR  
CENTRE  
SERVES  
**8,417 ha**

MINIMUM  
**0.4 hectares**

MAXIMUM  
**215,487 ha**

RECEIVES  
**147,190**  
VISITORS  
EACH YEAR

MINIMUM  
**2,000**  
visits/ha/yr

MAXIMUM  
**750,000**

A MEDIAN OF  
**297**  
VISITORS PER  
HECTARE  
PER YEAR

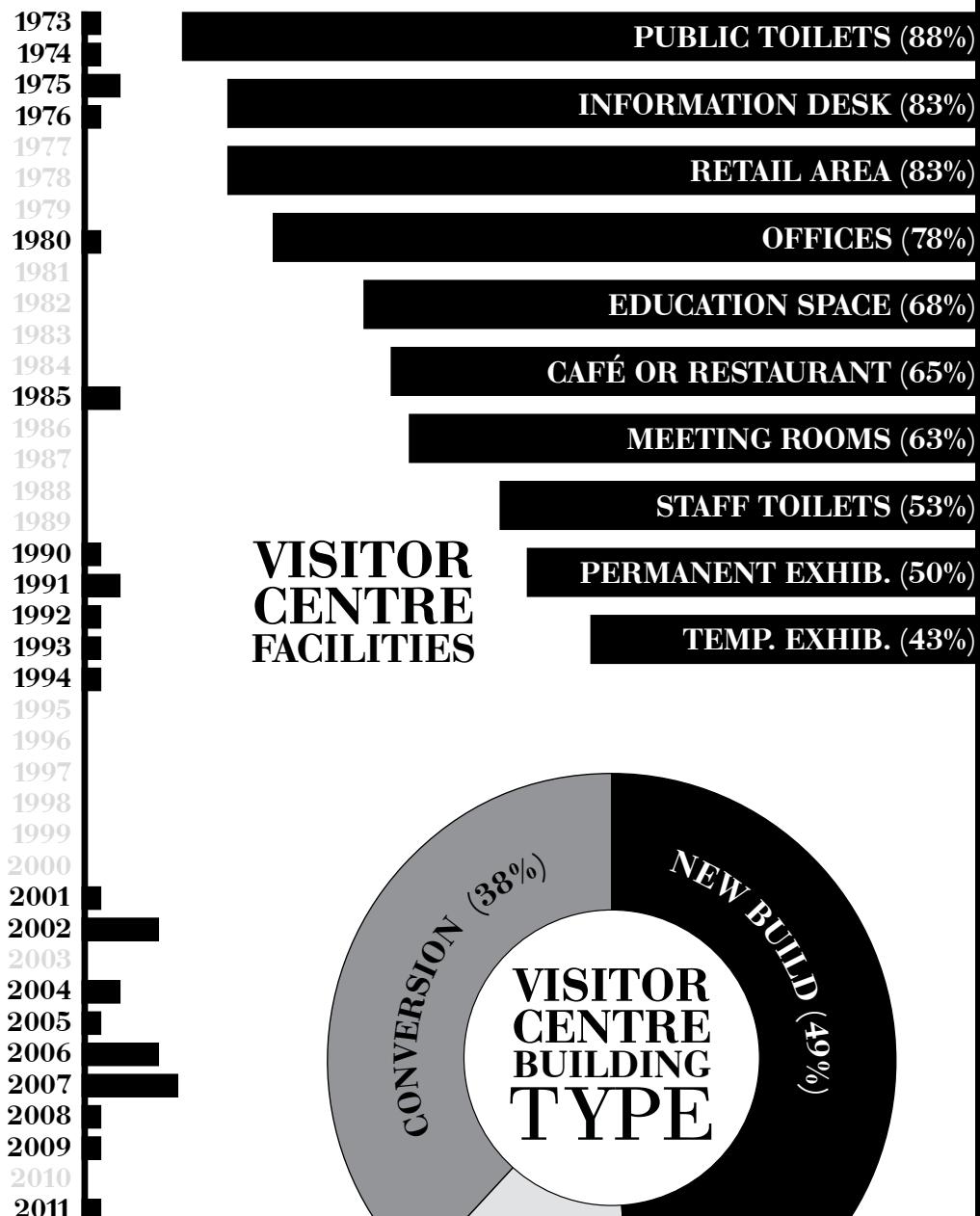
MAXIMUM  
**175,000 visits/ha/yr**

## A TYPICAL VISITOR CENTRE

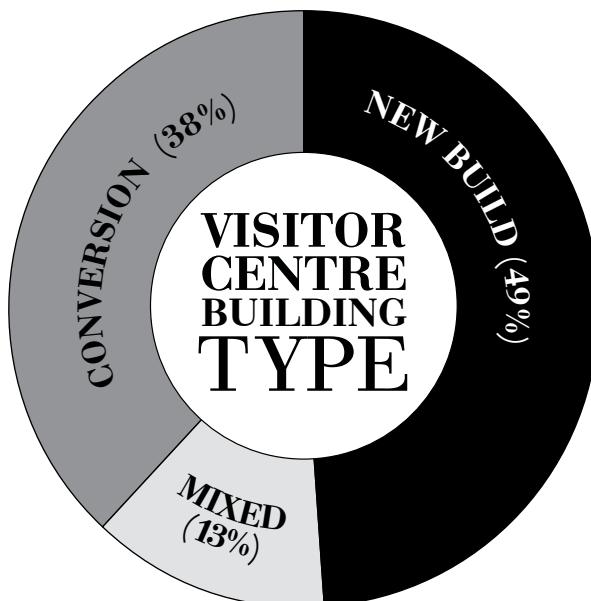
While averages for different aspects of visitor centres can be calculated, as can be seen from the maximum and minimum of the data ranges, there isn't such a thing as a typical visitor centre. Rather, there is a spectrum running from small seasonal information centres through to large visitor attractions open 364 days each year.

Almost half of all the UK's natural heritage visitor centres are run by the state through councils, national park authorities or the Forestry Commission.

The majority of the remaining are run by conservation trusts with the Wildlife Trusts being the one with the most centres. As an umbrella organisation, this accounts for the operation of 29% of the UK's natural heritage visitor centres.



**VISITOR CENTRE YEARS BUILT**



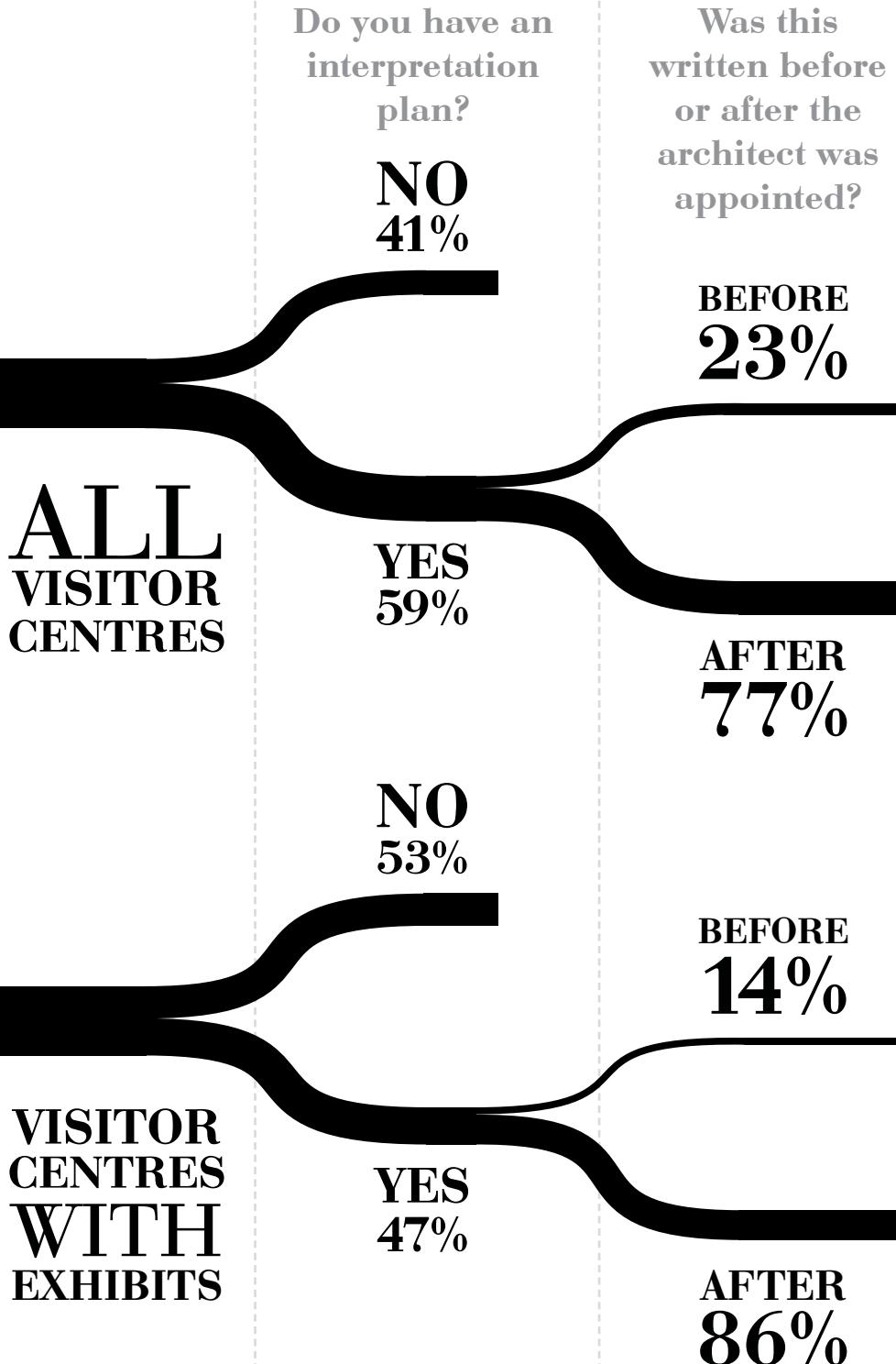
## WHEN, WHAT AND HOW

Based on the sample, the UK's visitor centre stock ranges from brand new centres to those that are approximately 40 years old.

The majority will provide public toilets, an information desk and shop. Two thirds also have catering, education space and meeting rooms, while only half have staff toilets or exhibition space, either temporary or permanent.

Approximately half of the buildings were constructed specifically as a visitor centre. 38% are housed in converted buildings while the remaining 13% are a mixture of the two..

There appears to be no correlation between the age of a centre and its building type. There is perhaps a slightly higher frequency of converted buildings among those accommodating 25,000 - 60,000 visitors per year.

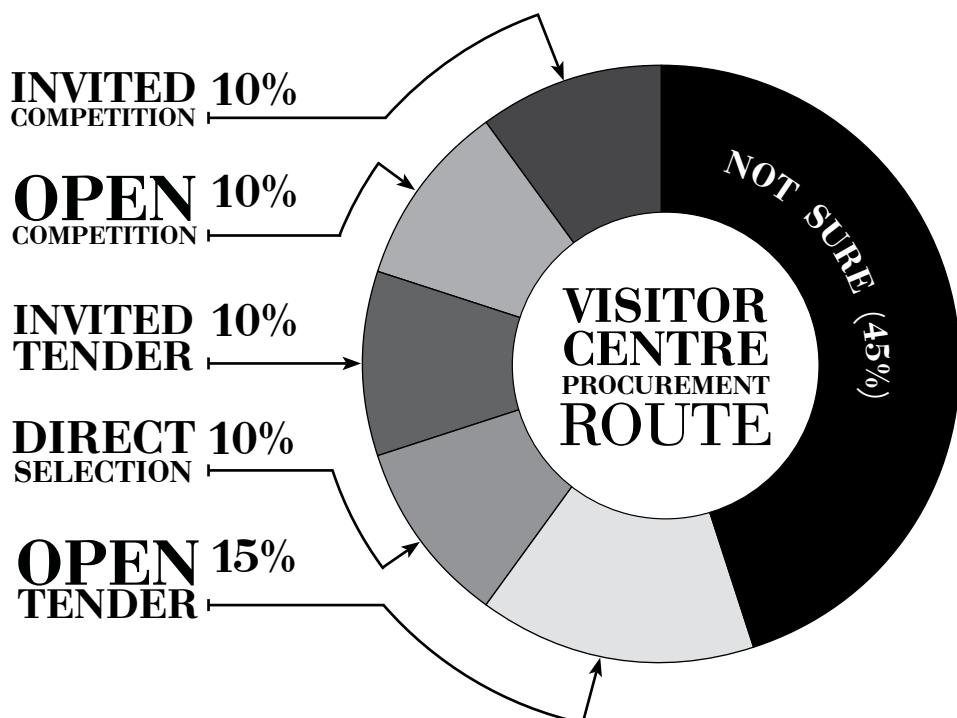
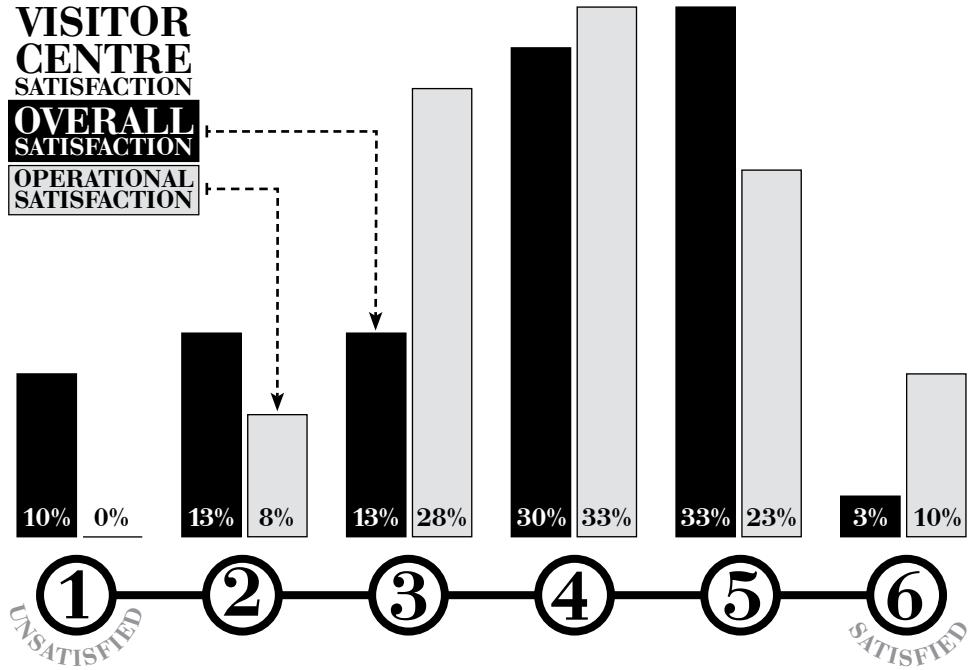


## INTERPRETATION PLANS

The survey asked whether the visitor centres had an interpretation plan that describes the messages it was to tell and how this was to be achieved. If they did, it also asked whether this was written before or after the architect was appointed.

The results are positive in that they show that approximately 60% of centres have an interpretation plan. However, what was of slightly greater concern was that, of these, over three quarters wrote this after the architect was appointed. Of those centres with exhibitions, this figure was even higher (86%).

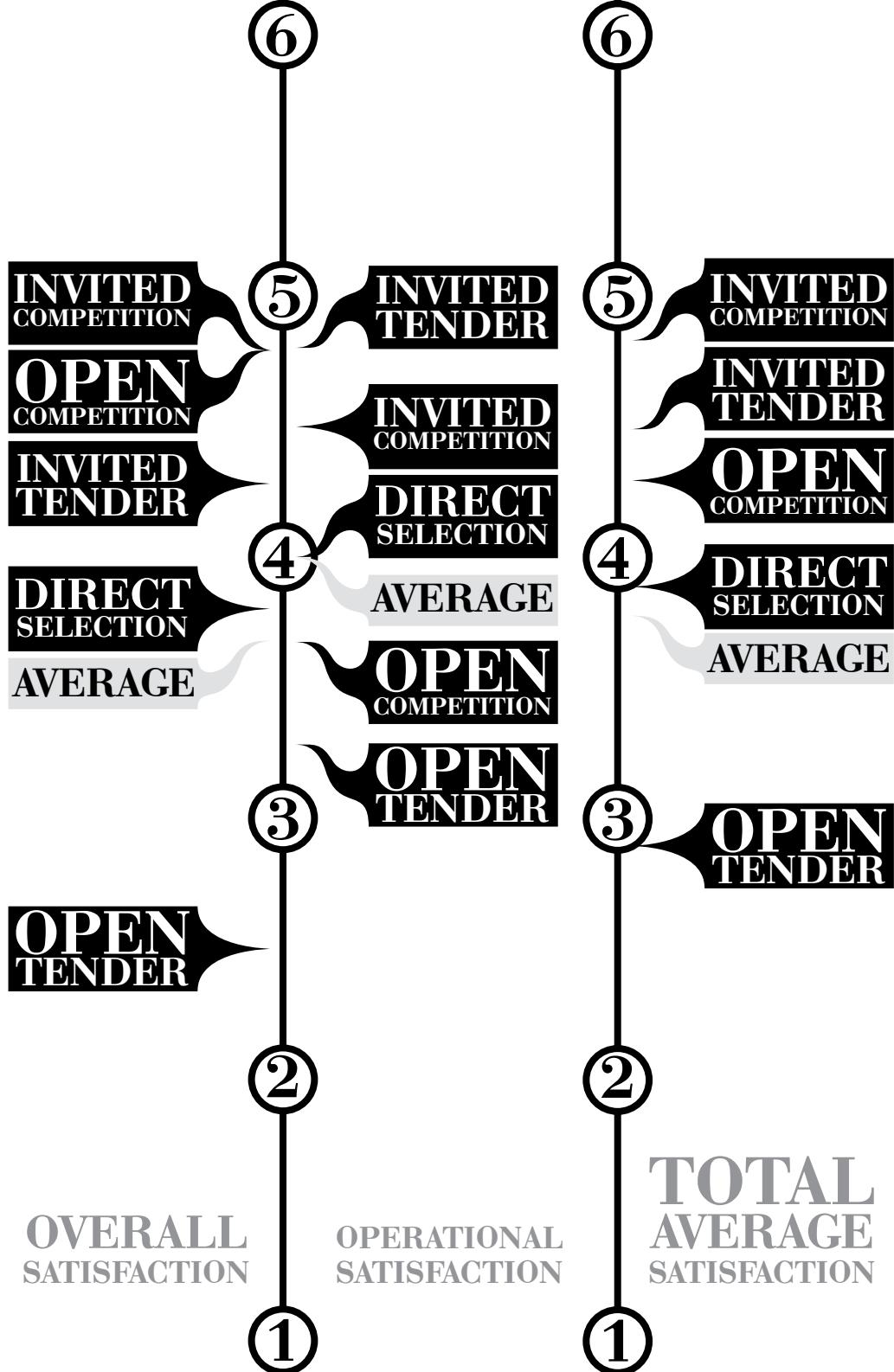
When one of the principal functions of a visitor centre is to impart information, it seems surprising that so many have been built without a thorough understanding of what these messages are and how they are to be communicated.



## SATISFACTION AND PROCUREMENT

Respondents were asked whether they were satisfied with their visitor centre building and also whether they were satisfied with how the building affected the operations of the organisation. The operation satisfaction scores are evenly distributed about a satisfaction score of 4/6 indicating that satisfaction as a whole is lower than would have been hoped. Scores for overall satisfaction are not evenly distributed around a point. Instead, fewer respondents stated they are fully satisfied, while a greater number returned scores of 1 or 2.

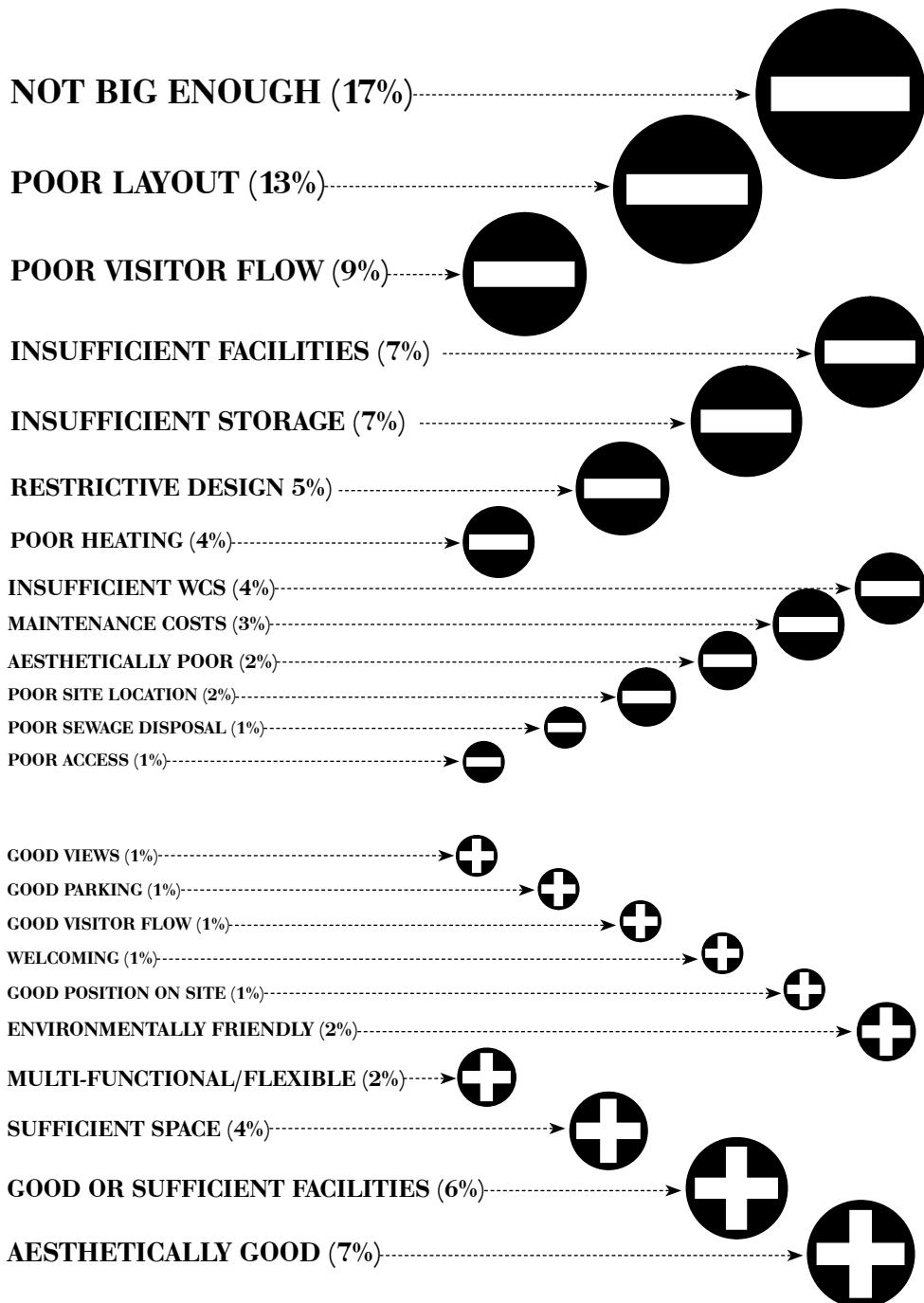
Respondents were asked to indicate how they procured the architectural services for their visitor centre. It can be seen from the diagram that the choices were evenly spread amongst the options, with open tendering being slightly more popular.



## PROCUREMENT AND SATISFACTION

This chart shows the average satisfaction scores for buildings procured using different methods. The scores ranged between 1 for 'not satisfied' and 6 'satisfied'. The furthest most labels show the averages from the question asking about general building satisfaction. The middle column are those from the question about operational satisfaction and the nearest column is an the average of these scores.

It can be seen from these that the 'open' methods of procurement seem to have resulted in buildings with lower satisfaction scores than those procured with an 'invited' method. Open Tendering consistently scores the lowest, while Direct Selection consistently has scores similar to the overall average for the group.



## POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE COMMENTS

In addition to providing scores to reflect their satisfaction with their buildings, respondents were asked to write comments explaining their reasons for the score. Individual elements of these comments were categorized and grouped by whether they were seen as being positive or negative attributes. The results of this process are given on this page. It can be seen that, overall, more negative comments than positive were received.

The three most popular comments were that the visitor centres in question were not big enough, the facilities within them were poorly laid out, resulting in operational constraints, and that the centre had poor visitor flow. These are all issues that should have been resolved by a thorough master-plan.

**CATERING (17%)**



## HOW WOULD EXTRA SPACE BE USED?

**STORAGE (14%)**



**EDUCATION (12%)**



**RETAIL (12%)**



**EXHIBITS (10%)**



**TOILETS (9%)**



**OFFICE (8%)**



**MEETING SPACE (7%)**



**RECEPTION AREA (4%)**



**CIRCULATION (4%)**



**WET WEATHER PLAY (1%)**



**FIRST AID ROOM (1%)**



As a free response question, visitor centre managers were asked to indicate how they would use extra space, if they had it. The answers were categorised and presented here in descending order of popularity. We can see from these that the space would be used to service all areas of the visitor centre's work from income generation (catering, retail and meeting room hire) through visitor facilities (toilets and first aid rooms) to those elements that improve operation (storage, offices, reception areas and circulation space) and help deliver their core aims (education and exhibition space).

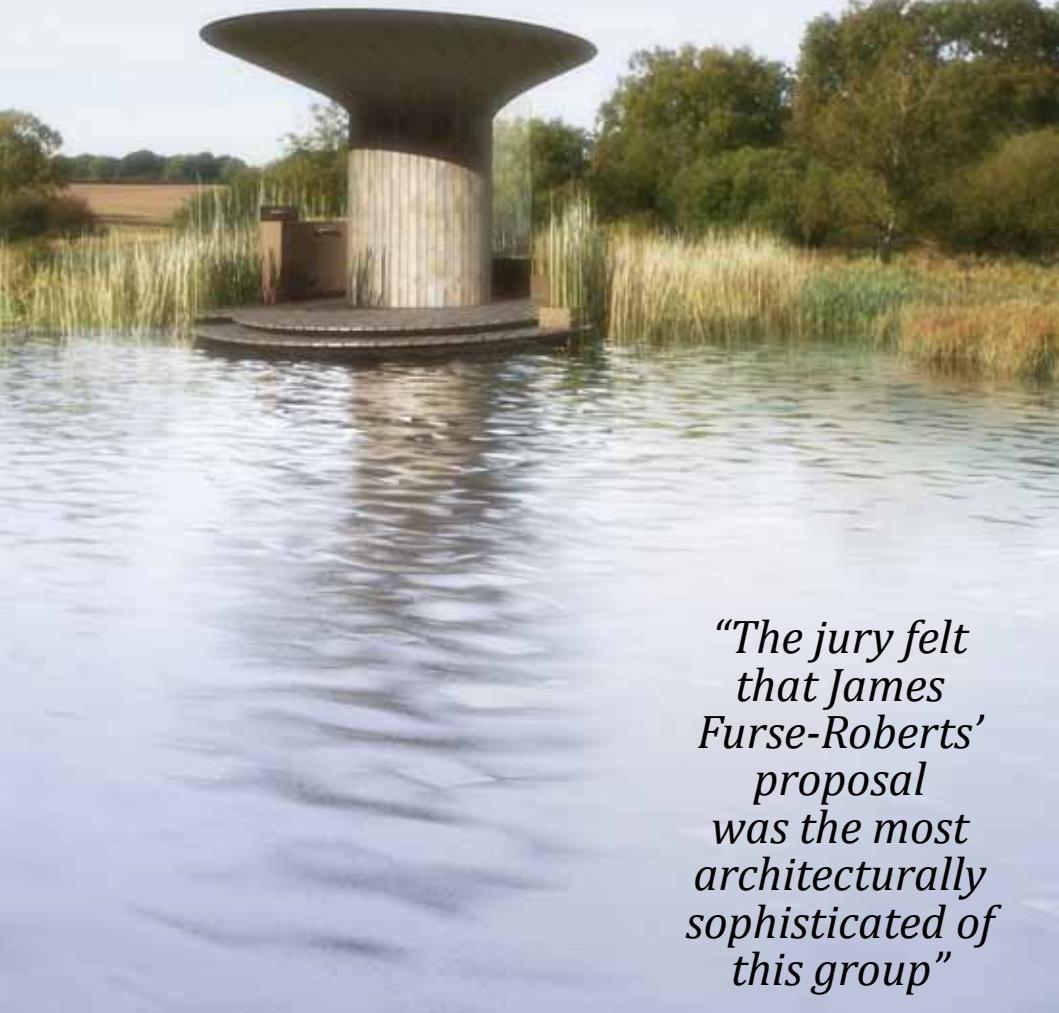
# DISCUSSION

From these results, it would appear that a significant number of heritage visitor centre managers are not satisfied with their centre buildings because they aren't big enough, are poorly laid out, have poor visitor flow or insufficient facilities for their needs. As would be expected, the age of the building does have some effect on this (i.e. there is a slight trend for older buildings to have a lower overall satisfaction than newer ones). However, this is not the case when a correlation is sought between the age of a building and its operation satisfaction score. This would strongly suggest that we are continuing to spend large amounts of money creating visitor centre buildings that are operating poorly.

When we look at the method of procuring architectural services to assess whether this might be part of the cause for this, we see that 'invited' competitions and tenders appear to result in more satisfactory buildings than those with architects procured through their 'open' equivalents. From this, we might conclude that insisting that invited procurement methods be used would result in better quality visitor centres in the future. However, this wouldn't necessarily be the case. We need to first consider why different routes of procurement are currently chosen. Although beyond the scope of this piece of work, it is entirely feasible that the more targeted, invited procurement methods are chosen by those who are more confident in knowing what they want to achieve and how; while those less confident of this opt for the open procurement routes, which would appear not to limit their options. If these two procurement routes effectively represent clients with a different clarity of the process and outcome they desire, it would also be fair to suppose that the architectural briefs produced by each of these groups would differ; one producing a tight, concise brief while the other's would be less so. Therefore, it is our hypothesis that it is the quality of the brief that effects the quality of the building rather than the procurement route itself.

*"...it is our hypothesis that it is the quality of the brief that effects the quality of the building..."*

Sustainable Education Pavilion - FRLA's  
Winning entry for the Dyson Design  
Competition uses the design of the  
structure to interpret the ecological  
processes it uses.



*"The jury felt  
that James  
Furse-Roberts'  
proposal  
was the most  
architecturally  
sophisticated of  
this group"*

Building Design Magazine  
November 5 2010

# FRLA

FRLA Ltd is a design practice that provides master-planning, brief writing, interpretation and landscape design services to natural heritage organisations.

Our staff has a thorough understanding of how natural heritage attractions operate, having spent many years working in them and creating master-plans for them. We believe that this experience, supported by a body research data gathered from real sites, allows us to provide a design and consultancy service that results in visitor destinations that fulfil both the visitors' expectations and those of the organisations' staff.

We would be delighted to discuss with you any project that you may be considering.