

Update Report from the Countryside Service

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Purpose of the Report

To update members on the work of the Countryside Service across the District over the past year and on key projects for the next 6 months.

Public Interest

This report aims to provide the highlights of the Countryside Team at South Somerset over the past year, with particular reference to the rangers based at the countryside sites. It will summarise what has been completed in terms of land management and also event delivery for the public. The countryside team manage sites, buildings & a café at Ham Hill Country Park, Yeovil Country Park, Chard Reservoir Local Nature Reserve, Sampson's Wood, Langport cycleway, Moldrams Ground Local Nature Reserve and Eastfield Local Nature Reserve.

Recommendation(s)

That members note & comment on the report.

Across the South Somerset Countryside Sites

- It has been a challenging year for the Countryside service, as a reduction in staffing cover across the sites (with the absence of the apprenticeship scheme) and other staffing absences has seen the service working at full stretch this summer. Despite this the delivery had been astonishing and there has been increased and enhanced delivery particularly across the areas of volunteering and events.
- Ham Hill, Yeovil Country Park and Chard Reservoir all again secured their Green Flag Awards in the top 2 highest scoring brackets. Ham Hill also retained its Green Heritage accreditation.
- In the last year we have delivered 110 events. This was on a range of scales (large fairs and trail events, to small play schemes and storytelling) and subjects (Halloween, medieval fairs, bat walks, sapling pre-school sessions, military style missions and popular spring and Easter events) to appeal to many residents and visitors. We estimate that 11,162 people (children and adults) attended these events, having direct ranger contact, and feedback is always positive. We organise events that are free, or low cost to attend, to ensure as many people and families as possible experience and enjoy the countryside and all it has to offer. The event delivery this last year is massively enhanced due to the appointment and delivery of the Community Ranger in Yeovil Country park; Becky Russell.

	2015	2016
Events	45	111
Events participants	5,071	11,281
Educational visits	24	72
Pupil participants	971	1,310
Volunteer days	2,387	2,711

- The Rangers at Ham Hill and Yeovil Country Park have hosted 52 formal school visits seeing 1640 pupils from mainly key stage 2, but with new interest from key stage 1 seeing pre-schoolers having their first forest school experiences. Further schools and groups access the sites to lead their own sessions, making use of our online educational & orienteering packs and Ranger Rik Nature Trail. The first Schools Day was hosted at Chard Reservoir to generate an interest in fields study sessions available on site.
- Volunteering continues to be the back bone of the countryside operation. In the past three years volunteer days donated have steadily increased from 1601 to 2387 and in the last year 2706. The diversification of volunteering opportunities is responsible for this gradual and steady increase with a popular Monday afternoon lighter duties session at Yeovil, multiple weekdays at Chard and full time project volunteering and specialist volunteering at Ham Hill linked to event development and centre improvements. Volunteers across the sites help with all aspects of practical site management, they open and close public facilities 7 days a week, monitor wildlife, litter pick and assist at events.
- In addition to the practical volunteering the Friends Groups at Ham Hill and Yeovil have donated many hundreds of hours of grant funding work, event support and research for the ranger teams. Meeting monthly the groups provide advice, support, ideas and a forum for the users of the parks. In the last year a new Chard Group has been established. The drive of the groups is fabulous, and ensures that we make best use of all opportunities presented.
- The Countryside Team continue to manage the overseeing South Somerset Countryside Steering Group; a forum where stakeholders and experts can come together to ensure success against the team's overarching delivery plan. In addition to this the specialist Park Watch group (Avon and Somerset Police, plus Rangers, enforcement team and local residents) meet for Yeovil when necessary.
- Last winter 954 native trees were planted across Ham Hill and Yeovil Country Parks. All native species, expanding the woodland size, quality and connectivity in South Somerset. The Friends Groups continue to ensure we receive the free tree packs from the Woodland Trust.
- Practical land management is delivered by the rangers and volunteers across the sites, all inline with their 5 year land management plans and the archaeological management plan for Ham Hill. Conservation targets are monitored in a range of ways including via the annual species surveys conducted for us by the Yeovil Branch of Somerset Wildlife Trust. The rangers continue to use a range of traditional countryside management techniques wherever possible including hedge laying, dry stone walling and coppicing.
- Our web and online presence continue to be well received. Bookings for events are now via www.southsomersetcountryside.com and most events were fully booked in the last year. All site literature is now available online and many visitors choose to access leaflets and guides before they visit.
- Our presence on social media continues to be well received with very successful Facebook feeds for Ham Hill, Yeovil Country Park, Ninesprings Cafe and Chard Reservoir LNR. The Friends groups and volunteers carry out most of the management of these pages, regularly posting pictures and site updates. The Twitter feed for the ranger team is @SSDCCountryside.
- Regular annual funding income from Agri Environment schemes, Yeovil Town Council, wood sales, events, grazing tenants and other licensees continues to be secured. The Rangers and Friends group continue to research and apply for a variety small grant funds for distinct and smaller enhancement projects at the sites, but as both country parks are both in the midst of delivery of larger lottery funded projects we do not currently have any larger bids submitted.

Moldram's Ground Local Nature Reserve, Pen Selwood

- Great crested newts and dormice are the priority species on site that management is directed for. The secondary pond created by the Rangers is now populated with newts and the populations are stable. A further member of the ranger team is currently undertaking their dormice handling certificate so we are able to monitor the dormouse population on site. Somerset Wildlife Trust have identified some of the priority species listed in the September State of Nature report: on SSDC Countryside Sites this means a continued focus on habitat management for dormice, great crested newts, bitterns and an array of butterflies across all sites.
- A small team of local residents continue to visit the site regularly to report any issues to the ranger team so we can ensure that the site is well managed despite working so remotely from it.
- The 5 year management plan has been updated in 2016 and the work programme will be delivered by the ranger team and volunteers for the site. The management aims for the site remain around maintaining the public facility with wildlife protection and enhancement.

Ham Hill Country Park

- The ranger team are working with the Friends group to continue delivery towards the reinstatement of a historic stream in the bottom of Witcombe Valley. All the permissions are in place but work has been delayed until Spring 2017 to allow for drier ground conditions in the valley for the main excavation works. The project is funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund and a Medieval Fair was held on Saturday 3 Somerset to celebrate its launch with information on the medieval village that used to exist in the valley. The fair was well received with over 1000 visitors in the morning, but high winds and heavy rain from 1pm sadly ended the event early.
- This coming winter the rangers will be actively working with the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group on their "Slow the Flow" project to address local flooding issues in the hamstone villages by implementation of brushwood dams and silt traps as designed this summer with their project officer.
- Project income for the year through the Friends Group included:

Curry Fund of the Geologists Association	£1,000	Geology Trail
Anonymous Funder	£1,000	Geology Trail
Stoke sub Hamdon Sports and Recreational Trust	£850	Large range of new educational equipment for visiting school groups

- Events this last year included the second annual dog show organised by volunteers, a popular range of summer holiday play schemes with the rangers and a variety of sporting events that are becoming established at the Hill including the Full Monty Race and the Ham and Lyme distance run. We took the decision to cancel the wood fair for capacity reasons in 2016 after the serious accident of our colleague Jon, we will consider our position for 2017 later this year.
- The rangers and Friends have worked together to create a new self-guided Ham Hill Geology Trail in memory of local geologist and past Ham Hill Friends Chairman Hugh Prudden. Hugh's input to Ham Hill, and Somerset geology generally, was huge and the trail seeks to take people around some of the key elements on site. Funding was secured from 2 external funders and the trail will be launched in earth sciences week this October.

Eastfield Local Nature Reserve, High Ham

- The rangers and volunteers organise practical working party days to manage the grassland habitats on site. Contact is maintained between the ranger team and Butterfly Conservation with reference habitat quality as a prospective large blue butterfly release site. Local volunteers now help to monitor site and assist with management activities.

Sampson's Wood

- The Yeovil rangers continue to monitor the tree stock and manage any issues as they arise.

Yeovil Country Park

- We have enjoyed an exceptional year at Yeovil Country Park as the Heritage Lottery delivery of the V3 InVolve, Visit, Volunteer project is fully underway. Community Ranger Becky Russell has made significant inroads to the busy delivery plan. This summer alone Becky has led school visits from 17 groups, meeting 556 pupils. The response from primary and preschool providers in Yeovil has been fantastic and as the figures show many hundreds of children are benefiting from exploring the greenspace on their doorstep, learning about the wildlife and history and getting to grips with forest school activities. Becky has made positive links with the secondary schools and run specialist pupil development weeks across a variety of curriculum areas. Additionally teacher training sessions have been delivered in science and Forest school sessions, giving teachers, and teaching assistants the confidence to use the country park resources.
- Many groups have benefited from the sessions and activities offered by the community ranger and attended across a range of developmental activities including Somerset MIND, Somerset Team for Early Psychosis (STEP) and many uniformed groups.
- The built heritage restoration work in Ninesprings has struck a chord with many people over the winter months when a great deal of clearance work and repairs were carried out by a ranger and a team of volunteers. We had an astonishing response, particularly on social media, to the work, illustrating what an important place Ninesprings is in many people's lives, and how much they are enjoying seeing it being restored. This new volunteer project is diversifying and increasing volunteering opportunities on site, it is providing skills training for the participants in woodland management, and also building techniques, as they point brickwork and replace missing masonry. Winter work will commence again in a month's time on the structures of Ninesprings including vegetation clearance and stone restoration.
- The ranger team delivered a mix of well received events, increasing their popular trail events in the last year to include a fairytale trail at May half term. Links with performing arts students at Yeovil College saw real life mermaids and costumed characters delighting the hundreds of children that came through the park that week. Additionally the V3 project has developed 36 new events that were delivered this summer, with 1,122 people benefitting from targeted and specialist activities including wood carving, printing workshops, photography, toddlers session and a whole range of other activities.
- A series of Yeovil Yaffle missions events were delivered in August for 8-12 year olds funded by the Armed Forces Community Covenant Fund. The day long events offered a variety of activities for the age group including tree climbing, fire lighting, army drill, den building and nighttime bat walks and storytelling.
- The Ninesprings Café has continued to flourish and also benefited from the array of activities and events on offer in the country park.

Chard Reservoir Local Nature Reserve

- The stone causeways have been completed leaving the site with sustainable access across the wetter areas of the reed beds. An updated site leaflet was printed reflecting the changes to the site and the 5 year land management plan revised for the coming years.
- Practical site works have included further ongoing repairs to the reservoir structures, winter woodland and reed bed management and summer shoreline works and angling pitch improvements.
- The practical volunteer team has formed a small constituted group to enable them to branch out into other projects for the site. They plan to fundraise to install a woodland play trail / learning zone near to the bird hide for school groups and visiting families. They also plan to create and erect a series of small interpretation panels throughout the site that explain the various heritage features of interest. The group has featured in the Waitrose green token Community Matters funding programme, and looks forward to using this money to start work on the site improvement schemes.
- The practical volunteers have moved onto the project of exposing and restoring the old boat house on site and have visited Chard museum to gather information for a new interpretation panel.
- Partnering with Magdalen Farm a schools day was delivered in July, when local primary aged children from the 5 closest schools were invited to site to experience a range of habitat linked field studies with educational staff from Magdalen Farm. 80 pupils attended from 2 schools and feedback from the teachers and pupils alike was very positive. It is hoped that the developing woodland learning and play zone should help encourage and support future visits from local schools.
- Volunteers are heavily involved in the management of the site for around 3 days per week. They assist on a huge range of tasks and accompany the ranger to avoid lone working. Lufton Cambian College are regular attendees and have helped across a range of practical projects.
- Chard countryside day was well received in July, and was our busiest site event yet, with an estimated 600 people through the free activity based event. The site ranger planned 4 play schemes for the various school holidays, but sadly we could not generate the interest to fill places on them, and so they didn't run. For 2017 we propose delivering a second drop in activity day in August, as this seems to be the type of event favoured by families in the area.

Headlines for the next 6 months

- The V3 Heritage Lottery project in Yeovil will continue with its winter programme of works whilst events and school visits are quieter.
- Events for 2017 will be developed taking on board feedback from this year.
- A range of small grants will be pursued with our Friends groups to help enable a variety of site improvement projects to go forward in 2017.
- The Ham Hill Witcombe stream projects contractor details will be finalised and works commence in the Spring of 2017.
- The play zone and interpretation panels will be progressed at Chard Reservoir.
- The Countryside Service maintains contact with the Somerset Local Nature Partnership and Cranborne Chase AONB on relevant items.
- We will work with Carymoor Environmental Centre to support them in their work and revision of their 5 year plan.
- We will support Yeovilton's Welfare Officer in a possible bid to the Armed Forces Community Covenant Scheme for enhanced facilities for the families at the Deansley Way development in Wincanton.

Financial Implications

In 2016/17 the Countryside Service manages 650 acres of public access land comprising land designated mainly as Country Parks and Local Nature Reserves, with two Country Park Centre's and the Ninesprings Cafe. A team of 5.8 Full Time Equivalent countryside staff and 1 Full Time Café manager plus a casual café workforce manage the service to a net expenditure budget of £237,560. The overall budget includes target annual income generation of £241,970.

Corporate Priority Implications

The work of the countryside service delivers for the following targets.

Council Plan –Environment

- Maintain Country Parks and open spaces to promote good mental and physical health.

Council Plan –Health and Communities

- Help people to live well by enabling quality cultural, leisure, play, sport & healthy lifestyle facilities & activities.

Carbon Emissions & Adapting to Climate Change Implications

The Countryside Team are aware of the challenges faced in mitigating climate change and as a team work hard to ensure that their operations have a minimal carbon footprint. We ensure that by approaching the management of the countryside sites in a traditional manner they offer the largest carbon sink for other operations.

Annually the team plants around 500 trees and these are always native, ensuring they are best suited to our current climate; providing habitats with the best chance of adaptation to future climate change.

By having site based rangers travel is kept to a minimum and carbon emissions kept low. Instead of heavy power tool use the nature of the work means that a significant volunteer work force is mobilised keeping fuel consumption low.

Annually thousands of members of the public of all ages have contact with the ranger team through organised educational events; promoting wildlife, green spaces, green living, traditional countryside management and minimising your carbon footprint.

Equality and Diversity Implications

The countryside team work hard to ensure that the countryside sites are as accessible as possible. Stiles are removed in favour of gates. An audio trail and free mobility vehicle are for hire at Ham Hill Country Park and will shortly be available in Yeovil. Easy access trails are promoted at the largest sites. The website contains relevant information and assistance for planning visits.