

## **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 and buildings 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 the report.

### **Across the South Somerset Countryside Sites**

- The largest sites have again secured 3 Green Flag Awards all in the highest scoring brackets. Green Heritage accreditation was retained at Ham Hill Country Park.
- For 2014 the team delivered 30 events across the countryside sites. Slightly lower than previous years, but we delivered a greater number of larger scale events and fewer play schemes. At Yeovil we reintroduced Well Dressing and two trail events (Halloween and Easter) and Ham Hill delivered a community bonfire and September Heritage Trail. The dog show, running races, and countryside days continue to be regular calendar fixtures.
- An estimated 11,000 visitors (children and adults) attended across the 30 events, organised by the countryside team. Further visitors attended events organised by other SSDC teams or local charities and groups.
- Delivery of Countryside Services is via a huge volunteer bank and activity is focused across the 3 strategic sites and Moldrams Ground LNR. Community support groups like the Steering Group and 2 "Friends of" Groups now bring the annual average of frequently engaged volunteers to around 70 individuals. In 2014 practical volunteering days increased as the ranger team now try to manage for two practical volunteering days each week at the three largest sites. Weekly sessions now include a less strenuous option, more like gardening, that appeals to a wide range of individuals and has given the team greater scope to accept groups of volunteers from local schools and colleges (especially Lufton College who travel and volunteer at all three sites each week). This has increased our volunteer days donated figure up from 1400 last year to over 2000 in 2014. In

addition to this further days were donated by members of our community groups including Park Watch. Two “thank you” days were organised for the volunteers; including a summer away trip to the Dorset coast.

- The Friends groups at Ham Hill and Yeovil Country Park offer tremendous support to the countryside team, especially in securing external funding for projects and events. In 2014 this has included £24K of grant funding for events and community participation to be delivered at Yeovil Country Park from 2015.
- The team continues to increase the tree stock on the sites at appropriate locations. At Ham Hill over 850 native trees were planted at Pit Wood in winter 2013/14 and at Yeovil Country Park replacement trees are planned following large losses as a result of the storms in 2013/14. Trees are grant funded by the Woodland Trust.
- The Countryside team has continued to work towards delivery of all targets in their annual delivery plan which is monitored by the South Somerset Countryside Steering Group.
- Practical land management continued including dry stone walling, hedge laying, scrub and tree stock management and grassland works, plus bin emptying and response work.
- Two apprentices successfully finished the annual training programme at the country parks and the decision was taken to start a new apprenticeship programme for level 3 students. The scheme will take 18 months to complete, and students finish with a higher level qualification, making them more suitable for work in the sector. Graduates are now eligible to apply, and this September Kristy and Andrew started with us and are already working hard on development projects for their qualification.
- The rangers continue to manage their social media feeds as free advertising and a great link to the communities of the parks. Both country parks have very popular feeds and a new Ninesprings Café feed received over 600 likes in 3 days, helping the team deliver a successful café launch.
- Shop Mobility in Yeovil, in conjunction with the countryside team, is developing two leaflets to show all ability trails at both Yeovil and Ham Hill Country Parks. Clear routes showing gradients and accessibility have been devised and hard copy and downloadable formats will be available from the early spring.

### **Challenges over the year**

- Stormy weather in February 2014 caused a large number of trees to come down across all of the sites. Trees have also been damaged with split branches and trunks causing them to be dangerous. This has resulted in a high level of work for the rangers, and SSDC Arboricultural team, who have needed to undertake the climbing works. This has caused significant financial pressure to the budget. Damaged fence lines from falling trees have also been a cost.

### **Moldram's Ground Local Nature Reserve, Pen Selwood**

- Great Crested Newt and Dormouse surveys continue on site to monitor the populations of these European protected species. In spring 2014 Great Crested Newts were found in the lower pond for the first time, indicating that habitat management on site suits the population and should continue. During nest box surveys a dormouse nest was discovered confirming their continued presence on site.
- Vegetation has been removed from the three ponds to improve breeding conditions for all species of newt living there.
- Advice has been given to a local landowner on management of his pond for Great Crested Newts. Work will continue, with the help of local residents, to identify key landowners to aid the conservation of the rarest animals that have a stronghold at

Moldrams Ground. Water and hedgerow management are essential at a landscape level to enable the small isolated populations to expand into the wider environment.

- The local community continues to be involved with the management of Moldrams. Six volunteers are now registered for the site and they help with practical management works and surveys. In 2014 this has included bracken bashing and tree clearance, particularly after the storms. A key volunteer keeps the community updated about works at Moldrams through the Pen Selwood village website.

## **Ham Hill Country Park**

- The grazing went out to tender in late 2013 and as a result Mr Wakeley from South Petherton took over the grazing rights in April 2014. The family firm has extensive experience grazing a public access site at the National Trust's Montacute estate. The new regime has brought a mixture of sheep and some cattle onto the hill. Results of the new grazing have already been positive with pasture grasslands responding well.
- Higher Level Stewardship work continues on site including putting new fence lines in and adding barbed wire to existing fences in areas where the cattle will graze.
- Communication with the local parishes has improved with regular articles included in the Hambook, which is delivered to every household in the parishes surrounding Ham Hill.
- A successful Heritage Fayre was delivered in 2013, with the public and volunteers helping to create a roundhouse frame, which was a focal point for the Fayre. The roundhouse was left in situ in the plateau fields but the roof was vandalised in January 2014. Public support on Facebook for the structure to remain meant that the rangers rebuilt it in the summer of 2014 with volunteers at a public event. It became a focus for events throughout the summer and autumn including at the September 2014 Heritage Trail.
- The rangers delivered a successful community bonfire night which again featured on the ITV local news.
- The team is working with the Friends of Ham Hill to submit a Heritage Lottery Fund bid for habitat reinstatement in Witcombe Valley and interpretation of the historic remains of the medieval village.

## **Eastfield Local Nature Reserve, High Ham**

- The ranger team continues to partner with Butterfly Conservation to improve the quality of the scarce grassland habitat on site. Somerset Rare Plants group has advised on land management and grazing regimes to retain the calcareous grassland.

## **Yeovil Country Park**

- The new Ninesprings Café, Information and Education Centre opened its doors on Tuesday 27th October, with a family launch day on Friday 31<sup>st</sup> October in conjunction with the Halloween Trail. It was an exceptionally busy and fun day and we received lots of positive feedback about the new centre. The Halloween event attracted 800 participants (and their families) and was busy from 10.30 – 3pm. The Ninesprings Café enters its second month of trading and continues to hit the business plan targets. With plenty of events planned inside over the Christmas period we are confident that the centre and café are the correct additions to the country park. The team are delighted that the centre has been so well received by the public.
- The ranger team is now focusing on finalising the round 2 submission to the Heritage Lottery Fund of a large bid to support a 3 year community ranger post and a packed programme of activities and events. The project will also deliver biodiversity improvement

projects, restoration of key features in Ninesprings valleys gardens and new interpretation for the building and wider country park with themes linked to heritage.

- The Dog Show, Halloween Trail and Easter Trail were all successful. Well dressing was the only victim of some bad summer storms, but 200 visitors braved the wet evening to see the decorated springs.
- The management plan for the Country Park has been updated, to take us into 2017.
- 3-2-1 running trails have been set up in the country park in conjunction with our Active Lifestyles Team and Run England. There are two trails, one at Riverside Walk and the other at Ninesprings which waymark a 3km circular running or walking route.
- Park Watch continues to monitor anti-social behavior on site with a good working relationship with the local Beat Manager, PC's and PCSO's.
- Volunteering has been expanded to Mondays and Thursdays each week; both sessions are popular, focusing on different areas of the country park.

### **Sampson's Wood**

- The woodland is in its final winter of significant tree stock management to stabilize the perimeter trees.

### **Chard Reservoir Local Nature Reserve**

- The volunteer team goes from strength to strength with 6 - 8 regular volunteers turning up weekly and on ad hoc days to help the ranger. Volunteering has been extended to 2 days per week allowing Lufton College and other local educational providers to send groups of students along to participate in appropriate tasks.
- The directed management of the water levels continues to attract rare bird species during migration seasons including a Grey Phalarope in October. This attracts many 'twitchers' to the site.
- The water levels continue to be well managed during the extreme rainfall events.
- Essential dam repair work, tree maintenance and fencing have been completed after support was given by District Executive via the unavoidable budget pressures submission.
- Chard Countryside Day was another successful day with approximately 300 people in attendance.

### **Headlines for the next 6 months**

- The project officer for the V3 Heritage Lottery Fund bid will start to finalise the round 2 bid to be submitted to HLF by Mid February 2015. This will have an outcome date in mid June 2015.
- We await finalisation of new countryside web pages and booking pages for the service and its events.
- Countryside continues to represent SSDC on the Somerset Local Nature Partnership. The Somerset Biodiversity Partnership has recently disbanded and representation for both groups will be through a landowners and managers forum of the Nature Partnership.
- Countryside pays the annual contribution and receives the papers for the Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs AONB.

### **Financial Implications**

In 2014/15 the Countryside Service manages 650 acres of public access land comprising land designated mainly as Country Parks and Local Nature Reserves and two Country Park Centre's. A team of 5.8 Full Time Equivalent officers manage the sites to a net expenditure budget of £243,570. The budget includes target annual income generation of £106,670.

## **Corporate Priority Implications**

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

### **CORPORATE PLAN – Focus 2: Environment**

- Maintain our Country Parks, optimising the use of external funding
- Continue to deliver schemes with local communities that enhance the appearance of their local areas.

### **CORPORATE PLAN – Focus 4: Health and Communities**

- Maintain and enhance the South Somerset network of leisure and cultural facilities, optimising opportunities for external funding to promote healthy living.
- Ensure, with partners, that we respond effectively to community safety concerns raised by local people and that the strategic priorities for Policing and crime reduction in South Somerset reflects local needs.

## **Carbon Emissions & Adapting to Climate Change Implications (NI188)**

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 an average of 500 trees and these are always native, ensuring they are best suited to our current climate and provide the habitats with the best chance of adapting to future climate change.

By having site based rangers travel is kept to a minimum and carbon emissions kept low. Instead of heavy use of power tools 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. Easy access trails are promoted at the largest sites. The website contains relevant information and assistance for planning visits and the South Somerset Disability Forum continues to advise the rangers on proposed works and projects, they also have a place on the South Somerset Countryside Steering Group.