

## **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**

That members note the report.

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

- It has been a busy and successful year across the sites. Community groups have been strengthened, volunteering programmes extended and a significant amount of grant money secured by both the SSDC Ranger team and our affiliated Friends Groups. We are in a strong position going forward and look forward to further enhanced delivery from 2015 onwards.
- Ham Hill, Yeovil Country Park and Chard Reservoir all again secured their Green Flag Awards in the top 2 highest scoring brackets. We have enjoyed a mix of visiting judges over the years and continue to take away valuable suggestions from their visits.
- For 2014/15 the events programme totalled 45 public events. This was on a range of scales (large fairs and trail events, to small play schemes and storytelling) and subjects (Halloween, Dog shows, Bonfires, Wildlife and Easter) to appeal to many residents and visitors. We estimate that 5071 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 rangers at Ham Hill and Yeovil delivered 24 booked educational sessions to schools, having direct led contact with 971 pupils. Further schools and groups access the sites to lead their own sessions, making use of our online educational packs and group materials like orienteering.
- Volunteering continues to be the back bone of the countryside operation. In the last year volunteer numbers have increased from 1601 to 2387 donated days per annum. This is due to offering an extra practical volunteering day at Yeovil each week, and further ad hoc project days at Chard. 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. 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.
- This winter 1507 native trees were planted across the sites. All native species, expanding the woodland size for South Somerset. In 2014 free tree packs were secured from the Woodland Trust and the Friends group at Ham Hill secured a grant of £1,000 from the International Tree Fund towards plantings in Pit Wood.
- Practical land management is delivered by the rangers, apprentices and volunteers across the sites, all inline with their 5 year land management plans. 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 where possible including hedge laying, dry stone walling and coppicing.
- Two new apprentices started with the team in September 2014. This year for the first time we have taken on level 3 apprentices. Both Andrew and Kristy are doing incredibly well, bringing new ideas to the teams and developing and delivering their own projects on Skylarks (through Breeding Bird Surveys) and Penn Hill Park respectively.
- The team are awaiting the launch of new web pages at [www.southsomersetcountryside.com](http://www.southsomersetcountryside.com) where places on the events can be booked online and the variety of site literature is available to download and print.
- 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.
- In addition to the regular annual funding income from Agri Environment schemes, Yeovil Town Council, wood sales, events and other tenants of the sites; the countryside ranger team and Friends groups also managed to submit and secure £227,865 of external funds for current and future delivery at the South Somerset sites, the individual breakdown is shown under each site.

### **Challenges over the year**

- As is inevitable at any popular open access site, at times, particularly in the summer months, there has been the aftermath of anti-social behavior to deal with; including small fires, littering, detritus of parties & graffiti. The rangers aim to attend to the removal of all issues within one working day.
- It has been a particularly busy year at Yeovil Country Park with a number of significant grant bids submitted and the construction of the new Ninesprings Centre. The ranger team has been heavily involved and inevitably, at times, this has affected their ability to deliver and complete the practical projects on the ground.
- Dog fouling and sheep worrying are continuing issues at Ham Hill Country Park and we are now working with the Enforcement and Legal teams to investigate the possibility of a new Public Space Protection Order to help in management of the few site users that currently abuse the site.

## Ham Hill Country Park

- The ranger team are working with the Friends group to submit a £20,000 Heritage Lottery grant to progress a project to re-surface a piped stream in Witcombe Valley bottom. The project would see the valley returned to its natural state and have positive outcomes for wildlife and landscape, whilst also providing new heritage interpretation for the site.
- Project income for the year through the Friends Group included:

International Tree Fund	£1,000	Pit Wood tree planting
Waitrose Community Fund	£750	Witcombe Project funding
Local Ham Hill Parish Council's Norton and Odcombe, plus Sports and Rec Trust in Stoke	£700	Event delivery

- Events in the past year included a heritage trail, community bonfire and Easter egg hunt. Current apprentice Andrew and some volunteers are delivering wildlife themed events and walks throughout the summer.
- The rangers have been pleased to work with a range of new groups, from 50 serving Yeovilton personnel on a team building exercise for Commonwealth Day, to 25 children on series of home education group visits to understand all about the various facets of Ham Hill.
- 2015 looks set to be interesting with a new dog show organised by volunteers in July and a wood fair in September.

## Chard Reservoir Local Nature Reserve

- Habitat management projects for the reed beds and native woodlands continue to progress well in the winter months. Currently work on site focuses on the replacement of old wooden boardwalks with new stone built causeways to retain an access route around the site for the future.
- Volunteers are heavily involved in the management of the site for around 3 days per week. They assist a range of tasks and accompany the ranger to avoid lone working. Lufton College are regular attendees and have helped across a range of practical projects.
- Chard countryside day continues to be well received when it is delivered in July each year.

## 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.

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

- Great crested newt numbers continue to grow on site, with the greatest success being their range expansion into the new pond that was dug in 2013. Good relations have been built with adjoining residents and advice given to them on managing their land and gardens for wildlife.
- A small team of local residents 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.

## Sampson's Wood

- The Yeovil rangers continue to monitor the tree stock and manage any issues as they arise. Recently an illegal bike track was established and had to be taken down by the ranger team and notices erected.

## Yeovil Country Park

- It has been an exceptionally busy year at Yeovil Country Park. At the end of October 2014 the ranger team took occupation of the newly constructed Ninesprings Centre. The building was completed on time and budget, at a final construction cost of £280,876. External funding included grants from the organisations listed below. Subject to final contract closure in October 2015, £172, 597 was raised externally, 61% of costs and 39% was funding provided by SSDC (£108,279).
- £50,000 was pledged early in the projects development by the Yeovil Vision. This first tranche of secured funding enabled the countryside team to go out and secure the external grant monies.

Veolia Environmental Trust	£90,000	Yeovil Centre Construction
EDF Green Energy Fund	8,245	Yeovil Centre Construction
Wellbeing of Yeovil	8,000	Yeovil Centre Construction
Old Mill Accountancy	250	Yeovil Centre Construction
BuildBase & Screwfix	Cost & free materials and products for build	Yeovil Centre Construction
AgustaWestland	£5,000	Yeovil Centre Construction
Yeovil Town Council	£5,000	Yeovil Centre Construction
Unilateral agreement	£39,229	Yeovil Centre Construction
Friends of YCP	£4,000	Yeovil Centre Construction
J H Meech and Son	£25	Yeovil Centre Construction
Abbey Manor Charitable trust	£500	Yeovil Centre Construction
Countryside staff fundraising	£236	Yeovil Centre Construction
Waitrose Community Fund	£102	Yeovil Centre Construction
Individual Public donations	£510	Yeovil Centre Construction
Clarks Trust	£10,000	Yeovil Centre Construction
Wessex Watermark	£1,500	Yeovil Centre Construction

- The Ninesprings Café has been established as part of the Centre and continues to perform well against its business plan. In the current financial year we are budgeted to offer £10,000 of savings against the Café income and we hope to be able to offer more in the coming years. A full review will be completed in November 2015 after a year of trading.
- Despite an incredibly swift set up, and business opening, the café team are performing well under the management of Samantha Lane. The customer service is excellent and provides a welcoming and positive visitor experience at Yeovil Country Park.
- The Café and Centre as a whole have been received incredibly well on site. Already there is a noticeable difference in the visitors coming to site. The provision of public toilets and an indoor space has made a significant difference to the range of individuals and groups that can make use of the wider country park. Local schools, play groups, pre-schools and groups are asking for led sessions and there is an increased demand for more and better literature in the park.
- In the last year the rangers and Friends continued to deliver their very successful trail events focused around Halloween (and in 2014 this was the opening week of the centre),

Easter and a fairy tale trail in May. Many hundreds of children completed these trails and the feedback, lots of it via Facebook, is fabulous. The trail events aim to encourage visitors out into the country park, helping them discover the green space for future visits.

- A range of grants have been secured by the countryside rangers and the Friends Group to enable the delivery of a variety of public and group sessions, events and projects. This coming summer, and for the next two to three years, the event and activity programme will be diverse and offer a range of events free of charge to attract new users to site. Key calendar events this year included Sat 27<sup>th</sup> June, Armed Forces Day, where large flags were erected along the cycleway in Ninesprings celebrating the work of the Armed Forces and their associated communities in our local area. The flags have been designed in community workshops locally. On Friday 21<sup>st</sup> August the Flight and Float day will be a family focused day of hands of activities all linked to the air and water; model helicopters, creating rafts and local demonstrations should help capture young imaginations.

Ernest Cook Fund	£5,580	Educational activities and training sessions for pupils and teachers.
Awards for All	£9,900	Mini play events, orienteering mapping and courses, forest school training and sessions.
Grants for the Arts	£13,450 + £9,590	Art workshops for groups on three annual themes, photography courses and wood carvings for across the site.
Armed Forces Community Fund	£14,298	A range of events and activity sessions with a military theme, engaging forces families and the park community locally.

- At the beginning of June we had confirmation from the Heritage Lottery Fund that our bid had been successful and from later this summer we will embark upon a £421,000, 3 year project, which will improve the natural heritage and visitor offer at Yeovil Country Park. The key delivery elements of the project include:
  - Employment of a 3 year Community Ranger, to deliver and coordinate new activities and work programmes.
  - Enhanced volunteering opportunities for a greater diversity of individuals and groups.
  - New and better interpretation, and educational, materials, in the Centre and across the site.
  - Built repairs to Ninesprings, where the ageing infrastructure of the waterfalls and grottos needs specialist attention.
  - Habitat improvement works across the park for meadows, wetlands and woodlands.
  - A huge variety of events based in the country park but of interest to a great array of people including art sessions, adventurous activities and performances.
- During the development phase of the lottery grant the ranger team enjoyed delivering trial events and consultation with a range of groups including the WI, U3A, local schools, Phoenix language school, Milford Youth Group, Scouts and Guides, Deaf Club, Shopmobility and NHS STEP team. With the Lottery funding now confirmed we look forward to offering further sessions and projects so these groups can build an ongoing relationship with the site.

## Headlines for the next 6 months

- The Heritage Lottery Project in Yeovil will progress with the recruitment of a Community Ranger to start the activity programmes.
- Event delivery peaks during the school summer holidays with a range of innovative themed events taking place this summer.
- A further heritage grant will be submitted for Ham Hill for the Witcombe Project.
- The Apprentices will swap sites as they reach the half-way point of their 18 months with us, enabling them to see management at two very different country parks.
- The Ninesprings Café will have its first annual review.

## Financial Implications

In 2015/16 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 new Ninesprings Cafe. A team of 5.8 Full Time Equivalent countryside staff and 1 Full Time Equivalent Café manager plus a casual café workforce manage the service to a net expenditure budget of £253,720. The overall budget includes target annual income generation of £213,970.

## 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 a minimum of 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. 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.*