

Area North Committee – 24<sup>th</sup> October 2007

## 8. Annual Report Outlining the Past Year's work of the Countryside Service

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*Head of Service:* David Julian, Head of Countryside, Heritage & Tourism  
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### Purpose of the Report

To update Area North Members on the past and forthcoming year's work of the countryside service with a particular focus on Public Rights of Way.

### Recommendation

That Members comment on and note the report.

### Background

This report provides an update on work undertaken by the countryside service in the last twelve months.

### Aims of the countryside service.

The countryside service is a dynamic frontline service provided by South Somerset District Council, and is a major contributor to the quality of life of its residents, offering many opportunities for individuals and groups to get involved. The service aims are:

1. Improving countryside access including rights of way, trails and circular walks, contributing to the local economy and tourism.
2. Enhancing council managed countryside sites for people and wildlife
3. Developing opportunities for people to participate in safeguarding wildlife and habitats
4. Advancing people's understanding of the local landscape and wildlife resource
5. Ensuring the service meets the needs of its users, providing value for money, whilst maintaining high professional standards in both countryside and business management

The service has the following characteristics:

- **Committed to a community focus** - demonstrated by the high level of volunteers, which brings extra capacity to the Council, as well as the number of community groups that are involved.
- **Delivery focused** – demonstrated by high performance, high rate of outputs and high profile.
- **Dedication and commitment of staff** – this continues to underpin the success and creativity of the service.

## Across the District Last Year

- Countryside sites team secured £160K of Heritage Lottery funding over three years to improve education and access at Ham Hill Country Park. Project commenced January 2007 with a new officer in place to start delivery.
- A full network survey of all Somerset public rights of way is being carried out by Somerset County Council, and the results of this will provide better information for work programming over the coming year. This survey is due to be completed within the next few months.
- Both Yeovil and Ham Hill Country Park secured Green Flag status in 2007 / 2008 and will be entered for 2008/2009 judging.
- The apprentice ranger from Yeovil Country Park wins South West Apprentice of the year 2007.
- Public Rights of Way database went live to public, provided by Somerset County Council and allows public to access interactive maps and report faults on line.
- Successful year of events including walking festival and second Ham Hill heritage fayre.
- In March Clare Freeman, our previous Head of Service departed for pastures new (to Poole Borough Council) and is replaced by David Julian (seconded from his position as Economic Development Team Leader) as acting Head of Service.

## The Rights of Way Network

- Rights of Way are valuable assets for the public enabling them to enjoy free access to the countryside, 365 days a year. They contribute to our corporate aim of improving the health and well being of our citizens. With only one ranger per area across the district, there is a huge maintenance commitment to keep routes accessible. By the County Council, the District Council, Parish Councils and individuals working in collaboration, the rights of way network can be maintained to a higher standard for the benefit of all. Many Parish Plans demonstrated interest in Rights of Way matters and the South Somerset Parish Paths Stewardship scheme aims to improve the network across the District and offers more support to groups and individuals to maintain, develop and promote paths
- This has been the second year of the Parish Paths Stewardship Scheme with volunteer training sessions held and newsletters distributed to members of the scheme and parish councils. We now have Rights of Way Parish Liaison Officers in 74% of Parishes and Towns across the District. The only Parishes WITHOUT Liaison Officers in Area North are Aller, Hambridge & Westport, Langport, Puckington and Stocklinch. The success of the scheme and the interest from many Parishes wishing to undertake practical tasks on rights of way has meant that we have reshuffled the Access Team so that we have a full-time Rights of Way Volunteer Co-ordinator, Peter Keenlyside who works across the District liaising with Parishes supporting volunteer activities.
- 2006/07 saw another increase in our Best Value Performance Indicator for rights of way being 'open, available and signed'. It has increased from 63% in 2005/06, the most recent surveys carried out during May and August this year give a figure for the South Somerset of 70.7% and for Somerset County as a whole of 65.4%
- The Rights of Way Improvement Plan has been drawn up by Somerset County Council to take into account how the existing rights of way network will meet future

user needs, this has now been endorsed by SSDC and as part of the agency agreement will underpin the future work of the access team.

- SSDC and SCC will be looking at drawing up a new Agency Agreement in the coming 12 months.
- The Access Team have continued to work closely with Somerset County Council to bring in additional funding and to work collaboratively on trails, bridgework and community projects. Total funding secured from SCC exceeded £100,000 with additional funding in the region of £50,000 secured. Also £20,000 was secured through SCC from the Local Transport Plan for rights of way improvements in the South Somerset District, this was allocated to Parishes which bid for grants through our Parish Paths Improvement Fund. Successful Parishes in Area North included: Martock, Barrington, Seavington St Mary & St Michael, Stoke Sub Hamdon, Fivehead, Shepton Beauchamp, Stocklinch, Lopen, Isle Brewers, Ash, Beercrocombe, Kingsbury Episcopi. The improvement these Parishes achieved included replacing stiles with gates and surface improvements
- The recent consultation with Parishes asking for information regarding vegetation clearance and path prioritisation requested by SCC has provided a good response. Parishes have listed paths which they feel should be on our vegetation clearance schedule, these paths will be checked by SSDC Officers who will decide whether to add them to the schedule or not during the winter months ready for the 2008 growing season. Parishes were also asked to prioritise paths according to usage with a ranking of 1-3 with 1 being the most used paths. We will be working with SCC to go through the responses in due course. Invitations have gone out to Councillors inviting them to workshops on 27<sup>th</sup> October at which SCC Rights of Way team will be present to provide more information about this piece of work, all members should have received invitations to these workshops and will be most welcome to attend.

#### **At the Sites:**

- Ongoing Countryside Stewardship work to maintain and promote traditional land management
- The apprentice ranger scheme continues in conjunction with Kingston Maurward College. The scheme currently part funds three apprentice ranger posts
- Invasive species control continues on all SSDC countryside sites
- The Education and Access Officer started at Ham Hill Country Park in January (Grace Hall) has resulted in increase in all visiting groups and other improvements like website.
- Ham Hill Fayre successfully run with more visitors this year, estimated at 6000.
- Friends of Ham Hill Community Group raised money and funded a weekend summer ranger for Ham Hill - decreased litter on site and provided new opportunities for visitor engagement.
- 3 year HLF funded project underway, totalling £160K (officer, fayre, volunteer support, web site, education pack, apprentice).
- Last years apprentice successfully gained employment with Dorset Countryside at Durlston Country Park and two new apprentices started in September.
- Green Flag awarded to Ham Hill was in the highest scoring bracket.

## Financial Implications

The work highlighted in this report is met from within the existing service revenue budget. Additional income and grants were received from:

- Countryside Stewardship grants from DEFRA
- Agency agreement funding from SCC
- Income from events and festivals such as walking festivals, Country Park Fayres and guided walks
- Income from educational activities such as slide shows, outreach work and staff led sessions.
- External grants e.g. Big Lottery Fund, Breathing Spaces, Aggregates Levy Fund.
- Partnership working with SCC and RPT.
- Developing external funding bids
- Area-specific assistance e.g. Yeovil Town Council funding for Yeovil Country Park.

## Implications for Corporate Priorities

The work of the countryside Service supports the Districts Council's corporate priorities:

- Provide cost effective and well managed services
- Improve the health and well being of our citizens
- Increase economic vitality and prosperity

**Background Papers:** Countryside Service Plan 2006/07  
Countryside Service Plan 2007/08

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