

## 10. **SSDC Countryside Service – Annual Service Report**

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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 detail the achievements of the Countryside Team at South Somerset over the past year, with particular reference to the rangers based at the countryside sites. It will explain what has been completed in terms of land management and also event delivery for the public.

### **Recommendation**

That members note the report.

### **Introduction**

The countryside team manages sites at Ham Hill Country Park, Yeovil Country Park, Chard Reservoir Local Nature Reserve, Sampson's Wood, Langport Visitor Centre and cycleway, Moldrams Ground Local Nature Reserve and Eastfield Local Nature Reserve.

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

- The largest sites have again secured 3 Green Flag Awards.
- Yeovil and Ham Hill Country Parks became two of the first in the country to become accredited under Natural England's new accreditation scheme.
- In the financial year 2009/2010, we ran 112 events, seeing 7219 children, 7663 adults. 70 schools visited our sites, which included 1702 pupils having contact with the rangers.
- For 2010 a diverse events program was developed which included over 40 public events. From children's bug and mini beast sessions to fayre events, heritage sessions and bush craft camps it has been well received.
- 1338 volunteer days were donated across the district and we secured £63k of funding for projects and land management.
- 600 trees were planted and in a town centre survey we received a 91% satisfaction rating with the service and its sites.

- Apprentices were successfully trained and assisted in finding work in the land-based sector.
- Practical land management continued including dry stone walling, hedge laying, scrub and tree stock management and grassland works.
- Sites were kept clean and safe and bins were regularly emptied.
- Wildlife enhancement and monitoring schemes; bat, bird, mammals and butterfly surveys plus construction of hibernacula and other “homes”.
- The Rights of Way function has been returned to Somerset Country Council and the remaining sites team has picked up management of Langport Visitor Centre.
- Continued to run the children’s Look Out Club and other associated playschemes.
- Worked closely with two Ground Work South West Teams providing placements for the teams at both Country Parks with other days at smaller sites.
- Run junior ranger sessions at Ham Hill, Yeovil and Chard with great success for 12-16 year olds.
- Signed up as a BBC partner in delivery of Breathing Places and secured funding from them for a key event.
- Better working relationships built with Natural England, Somerset Wildlife Trust, Dorset Countryside and the National Trust.

### **Ham Hill Country Park**

- The 3 year Heritage Lottery Funded project ended, it was evaluated as a great success and many materials and schemes are still operating.
- A bid was submitted to Access 2 Nature for a new community engagement project based at Ham Hill, unfortunately we have recently heard that due to high competition the bid was un-successful.
- Delivered a partnership enforcement day to educate and inform site users.
- Country Park applied for and secured Higher Level Stewardship for the next 10 years. A significant amount of woodland & scrub clearance work has been carried out and a meeting for the parish councils was held on the Hill to explain the future works.
- Sheep grazing and scrub clearance are integral to the future management on site, sadly a recent dog attack caused the death of 3 ewes and injury of 15 more and we continue to work with the farmer to maintain his access.
- Delivered a very successful fayre in 2009 (HLF funded) and a smaller event this September just past.
- In December 2009 the site was a venue for the BBC’s Tree O Clock record-breaking attempt and planted 512 trees in 1 hour.
- The Ham Hill Centre remains the focus for the Park; regular groups and users include Forest Education Initiative, D of E, PRU referral groups and Groundwork SW. Educational and other groups also make regular use of the facilities and there are frequent ranger led sessions. A mobility vehicle is available for free hire from the centre.
- The BBQ area has been improved with more bins and seating and an outdoor classroom will be put in place in the next month.

### **Yeovil Country Park**

- Secured planning permission to construct a ranger base and community café / room on site in July 2010. Work now starts to secure funding for the project.
- A Park Watch scheme has been designed and launched in partnership with the Community Safety Team and the Police.
- Very successful bank holiday Monday May Fayre continue to be a key fixture in calendar.

- Rangers have worked with the local Headway support group to clear out and re plant borders on Penn Hill Park. A new community wildlife garden is part of this scheme and has been created with the help of park volunteers.
- Work in Ninesprings Valley Gardens continues, with laurel cleared and a replacement native flora planted.

#### **Sampson's Wood, Yeovil**

- From autumn 2010 year 2 of a significant tree management project continues to stabilise the peripheral tree stock in the woodland, and veteran trees in the woodlands core.

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

- The ranger arranged Chard Countryside Day in both July 2009 and 2010, this year's event was better attended than in 2009 but it is hoped that with a few amendments we can deliver a popular event in 2011.
- A dive project was managed to clear the underwater sluice outlet.
- Reed bed restoration continues in the winter months with the volunteers.

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

- In spring 2010 an amphibian survey revealed the presence of Great Crested Newts in the top pond. The presence of Dormice has been confirmed and works on site this autumn include improvements for both these protected species.

#### **Eastfield Local Nature Reserve, High Ham (opposite Windmill)**

- Scrub clearance work will continue in the winter months carried out by the rangers, volunteers and Ground Work SW team.
- Discussions with Butterfly Conservation have revealed that it is a prospective release site for the large blue butterfly; we are supporting a landscape wide grant application by Butterfly Conservation to help in the costs of managing the Local Nature Reserve
- To a habitat standard suitable for large blue releases.

#### **Langport Visitor Centre**

- Old walking and cycling leaflets have been redesigned and launched with all routes starting and finishing at the centre.
- The centre has new picnic benches, the car park has been enlarged and a new suite of signs is in the pipeline as part of the funding from the Area North Capital Programme.
- The first stretch of the cycle way has been widened and a low boundary fence erected. A new accessibility bike & wheelchair is now available for hire from the centre as well as a trike.

#### **Monitoring service performance**

The Ranger Team monitor their performance by:

- Recording all volunteer days, educational visits, trees planted and events delivered on a monthly basis.
- Recording all compliments and any complaints on a monthly basis.
- Working in line with the service plan targets and ensuring all sites have current management plans with prescriptions for evaluation at team meetings.
- Issuing customer feedback forms at every event and session for evaluation and guiding future planning.
- Carrying out a satisfaction survey every 2 years, last in 2009 in Yeovil town centre.
- Managing a South Somerset Countryside Steering Group to oversee and comment on delivery quarterly.

## Financial Implications

The net revenue budget in 2009/10 for the Countryside Service was £234,690 (which takes into account £75,000 of income secured).

## Corporate Priority Implications

The work of the countryside service delivers for the following Corporate Plan targets:

THEME 2: Enhance the environment, address and adapt to climate change:

- 2.1 Explore options for biodiversity enhancement on SST partner land by 2012 and deliver projects each year to 2026
- 2.3 With SST partners, develop a joint Open Spaces strategy for South Somerset by 2012
- 2.4 Agree land management plans for own estate by 2012
- 2.9 Increase resident satisfaction with street cleaning, car parks, public toilets and open spaces/ Country Parks.
- 2.19 Decrease CO2 emissions in Somerset from 7.9 Tonnes/head/year (2006)
- 2.21 Support an SST campaign by 2010 to raise community awareness and involvement in environmental approaches

THEME 3: Improve the housing, health and well-being of our citizens:

- 3.19 Support SST to develop a long term (over 20 years) multi-agency commitment and action plan to reduce the number of children and adults that are overweight and obese and deliver one initiative by 2012 (SCS Action 9)
- 3.20 Increase children and young people's satisfaction with parks and play areas and adult participation in sport and active leisure.
- 3.29 Increase access to services and facilities by public transport, walking and cycling

THEME 4: Ensure safe, sustainable and cohesive communities:

- 4.1 Deliver positive activities for children, young people (especially those at risk of exclusion or offending) and families, designed to reduce anti-social behaviour by October 2010 (SCS Action 1)
- 4.6 Decrease perceptions that drug use/dealing is a problem from 30.5% (2008) to 23.4% by 2011/12 (Action 3)
- 4.9 Develop a range of approaches and initiatives that build confidence and reduce fear of crime by maintaining a level of 92% of population that feels safe in their community by 2012.

## 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 available 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.

***Background papers:*** None

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