

Area North Committee – 25 January 2012

11. 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 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. The countryside team manage 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.

Recommendation

That members note the report.

Across the South Somerset Countryside Sites

In 2011/12 the Countryside Service manages 650 acres of public access land comprising land designated mainly as Country Parks and Local Nature Reserves. A team of 5.8 Full Time Equivalent officers manage the sites to a net expenditure budget of £257, 820. The budget is managed cross 4 budget codes allocated to the 3 largest countryside sites (Yeovil Country Park, Chard Reservoir and Ham Hill) and Langport Visitor Centre.

- The largest sites have again secured 3 Green Flag Awards.
- For 2011 a diverse events program was developed which included over 41 public events. From children's bug and mini beast sessions to fayre events, heritage sessions and bush craft camps it has been well received.
- Throughout 2011 the rangers led educational session for schools seeing 410 pupils on the countryside sites, and 6500 people attended the 41 organised events.
- 1431 volunteer days were donated across the district (an increase on last year) and we secured a total of £50k of funding for projects and land management.
- The rangers have actively sought out new income streams e.g. through the sale of logs after woodland management.
- Volunteers have played an increasingly important role for the team: helping them secure income by processing wood, fund raising and organising events through

functions like the Friends of Ham Hill, protecting sites through a Park watch function and directing management of the sites via the Countryside Steering Group.

- The Woodland Trust sponsored 2 tree planting schemes; a total of 1500 trees will be planted during winter 2011.
- 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 schemes; bat, bird, mammal and butterfly surveys plus construction of various animal “homes”.
- Two new apprentices started at the Country Parks in September, there were over 40 applicants for the year long posts.
- Rangers worked closely with two Groundwork South West Teams, providing placements for the teams at both Country Parks, assisting them in establishing an apprenticeship scheme and were pleased to see many participants going on to find employment.
- The most frequent compliments received by the team relate to the free or cost recovery events suitable for all the family. Ham Hill and Ninesprings receive compliments about woodland and landscape management.
- New countryside web pages have been launched at www.southsomersetcountryside.com

Challenges over the year

- Some events, including Yeovil May Fayre, suffered at the hands of the British weather, decreasing participation numbers.
- The hard winter created increased issues with tree stock and rangers have needed to carry out a greater amount of management and use climbing arborists where necessary.
- The ongoing management programme in Sampsons wood continues to be a success, but many adjoining residents are still unhappy having such large trees next to their properties.
- In the high summer months the main countryside sites continue to suffer from excessive littering. Increased casual ranger cover, increased enforcement, and a revision of bin layouts has gone some way to improving things, but on some occasions the inconsiderate few have left the sites in a dreadful state.
- Ham Hill lost 10 sheep in various dog attacks over the year. Posters on site, parish news articles and media presence have raised the profile of this issue, but some dog owners do not take responsibility for their pets and these times have been challenging for the rangers and the farmer.
- There are continuing issues with angling at Chard Reservoir, we are working with the angling club to overcome littering of the site and the EA have assisted with advice. A significant pollution incident of red diesel into the reservoir last winter was traced to Oscar Mayers who later provided support and financial aid to help in the clear up operations.

Yeovil Country Park (Area South)

- Penn Hill wildlife garden has flourished, bringing new colour and interest to a previously disused area on Penn Hill. The conservation volunteers completed this project with help from Headway support group, who also successfully re-designed the old rose garden on the site.
- The rangers have provided support and led walks for a local MIND programme of environmental walks; grant funded sensory walks are delivered by the ranger to help people explore the fantastic environs of Yeovil Country Park through the seasons.

- Yeovil College secured a Woodland Trust tree pack of 500 trees for planting in January. The students have been assisting the rangers in preparing the site for the planting works and helped forge a great working relationship between the team and the College.
- A visitor survey in Yeovil Country Park returned an encouraging satisfaction rating of 86%, with many positive comments about the woodlands and events managed by the rangers.
- The Yeovil May fayre had a good range of stalls and free activities, the day was blighted by poor weather but the turn out was excellent considering the weather.
- Funding work continues towards the community ranger base. Applications have been submitted to various local funders and we intend to re-approach the Heritage Lottery Fund with a revised bid. Both Yeovil Town Council and Westlands have pledged £5K of support
- A new Friends of Yeovil Country Park had its inaugural meeting in January and Yeovil Rotary Club provided Christmas draw tickets to be sold by this group in aid of the ranger base project, raising £250
- Work in Ninesprings Valley Gardens continues, with laurel cleared and a replacement native flora planted.
- A fantastic new storytelling zone has been finished in Southwoods. Fairy doors, balancing beams, woodland mushrooms, a creepy tree and willow shelters all add to the natural seating already provided.

Sampson's Wood, Yeovil (Area South)

- From autumn 2011 we enter year 3 of a significant tree management project; to stabilise the peripheral tree stock in the woodland, and veteran trees in the woodlands core.

Chard Reservoir Local Nature Reserve (Area West)

- The July 2011 countryside event was a great success. As well as increased visitor numbers (c.400) donations of £350 were taken. Visitors could make a bird box, a willow sword or wigwam, meet the Eduzoo animals or try clay modeling. Local targeted publicity helped secure the events success.
- The reed bed restoration project continues: the hard work of the volunteers was evident this summer with dense lush growth. For the first time in many years a pair of swans bred on site and 1 cygnet successfully fledged.
- The volunteer team continued to expand over the year; upwards of 40 bird boxes have been built and erected by the volunteers.

Moldram's Ground Local Nature Reserve, Pen Selwood, Wincanton (Area East)

- A new management plan for site has been completed and is currently being formatted and is out for approval by Natural England. This includes specific prescriptions on management for dormice and great crested newts.
- A considerable amount of work has been completed on site increasing the number and suitability of the ponds, plus erection of dormice boxes. Volunteer and public events have been arranged on site to help deliver works.

Area North

Ham Hill Country Park

- Higher Level Stewardship works continue and the benefits in the site landscape are already evident with encouraging biodiversity in the meadow fields with a bumper

orchid crop in the summer. A survey in October produced evidence of dormice in some woodlands.

- Natural England paid for an Archaeological Management Plan for the site, providing a gazetteer and works prescriptions to ensure the Scheduled Ancient Monument is protected.
- The Friends of Ham Hill secured £9,000 of funding to deliver community arts workshops culminating in a performance in July interpreting the history of Ham Hill.
- The rangers September heritage fair was a great success, with families enjoying a day of free events on site, with an estimated 3000 attendance.
- A Woodland Trust sponsored community tree planting took place in Pit Wood, with 500 new trees planted.
- Cambridge Archaeological Unit and Cardiff University were on site July – September excavating in advance of a quarry extension. A 2 acre area was dug and they uncovered a complex network of Bronze, Iron and Roman remains. This included human remains and extensive artefacts. The excavation team will be returning in the summers of 2012 and 2013. www.hamhillfort.info
- The Centre continues to be used by a range of groups including Groundwork, local archaeologist and teacher Eddie Wills for his Iron Age sessions, Forest School and the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme. A wider range of external groups now hire the facility for activities like sponsored walks including Macmillan Cancer Research and Crewkerne Running Club.

Eastfield Local Nature Reserve, High Ham opposite Windmill

- Butterfly Conservation are leading on the management of this site with significant scrub management already completed, this has been funded by SITA through a landscape wide Butterfly Conservation project.
- Ant surveys have taken place and propagated wild thyme plants planted by volunteers. The site is progressing well and a decision as to when large blues will be released will be taken in summer 2012. www.butterfly-conservation.org

Langport Visitor Centre

- The re-designed leaflets of 2011 have been very successful and a repeat print will be required for spring 2012.
- A new suite of signs has been erected funded by Area North and the cycle way leases re-negotiated.
- The ranger team are working to improve the safety of the cycle way by completing tree safety surveys and delivering all required works.

Headlines for the next 6 months

- A pre application form will be submitted to the Heritage Lottery Fund to advance a project to deliver a smart phone application for Ham Hill. The “app” will use all the evidence from the archaeological dig and create a new innovative suite of interpretation for the site. Partners include the 2 universities and Somerset County Council.
- We will continue to seek funding for the Yeovil Country Park ranger base build, with various additional avenues being explored by the Friends of the Country Park.
- The rangers will plant standard oak trees at Yeovil Country Park, Ham Hill Country Park and Chard Reservoir for the June Jubilee celebrations. A beacon has been registered for Ham Hill to take place on June 4 as part of the chain across the country.
- The Green Flag Awards for 2012 will include an application for Ham Hill for Green Heritage status.

- Both Country Parks are due for a review of their management prescriptions in 2012, which will take into account the protected species work and new projects for each site.

Financial Implications

The net revenue budget in 2011/12 for the countryside service was £257,820 (which takes into account £85,000 of income secured).

Corporate Priority Implications

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

CORPORATE PLAN – THEME 2: ENHANCE THE ENVIRONMENT, ADDRESS & 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

CORPORATE PLAN – 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

CORPORATE PLAN – 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 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*
