

## 10. Countryside Services Update Report

*Strategic Director:* Vega Sturgess, Operations and Customer Focus  
*Assistant Director:* Steve Joel, Health and Well Being  
*Service Manager:* Katy Menday, Countryside Manager  
*Lead Officer:* Katy Menday, Countryside Manager  
*Contact Details:* [katy.menday@southsomerset.gov.uk](mailto:katy.menday@southsomerset.gov.uk) or (01935) 462522

### 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 Service 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 at Ham Hill Country Park, Yeovil Country Park, Chard Reservoir Local Nature Reserve, Sampson's Wood (Yeovil), Langport cycleway, Moldrams Ground Local Nature Reserve (Pen Selwood) and Eastfield Local Nature Reserve (High Ham).

### Recommendation

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.
- For 2012 a diverse events program was developed which included over 37 public events. From traditional guided walks to themed Halloween events; bookings via the Octagon continued to rise as our marketing continues to improve.
- An estimated 7000 visitors (children and adults) attended across the 37 events, which includes 3 large fayre events.
- Additionally an estimated 3000 people attended the special Jubilee Fayre organised for Her Majesty The Queen's visit in May to Yeovil.
- 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 bring the annual average of frequently engaged volunteers to 50 individuals. In 2012, 1446 practical volunteer days were donated across the district (a further, if small, increase on last year). Extra days were donated by members of our community groups including Park watch.
- The Countryside team have continued to work towards delivery of all targets in their annual delivery plan which is monitored by the steering group.
- 1542 trees have been planted during the winter seasons and these include 4 Jubilee oaks at Ham Hill, Yeovil, Chard and Moldram's Ground.

- 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 new apprentices started at the Country Parks in September, there were over 55 applicants for the year-long posts. A new countryside Intern started in October as part of the district wide scheme for 9 months.
- 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 and improved accessibility.
- Work continues towards improving our web based information at [www.southsomersetcountryside.com](http://www.southsomersetcountryside.com) and the rangers now have a Twitter account @SSDCCountryside

### **Challenges over the year**

- Persistently wet weather, making fayre events difficult to set up and manage; although on actual event days we have been very lucky. Some smaller play schemes have needed to be cancelled due to torrential rain. Paths and bridleways across all sites have suffered in the persistently wet weather, even repair works have been hampered due to inaccessibility for site vehicles.
- Ash Tree dieback is a worrying threat to the woodlands and ash trees across the district. The rangers are fully appraised of the situation and continue to inspect the trees on our sites. Sites display posters asking the public to comply with suggested containment measures.
- In June a break in and theft from Ham Hill Country Park including grounds maintenance machinery set back the summer vegetation cutting programme.
- We experienced the usual irresponsible use of sites and vandalism at the busiest sites over the summer months.

### **Yeovil Country Park**

- Yeovil College continue to work with the ranger team to clear the valley gardens of Ninesprings of laurel and re plant with a native woodland mix.
- The Yeovil May Fayre had a good range of stalls and free activities, due to the altered bank holidays in May we ran on a Saturday but we still had a good turn out.
- Yeovil Country Park was the focus for a visit by The Queen on May 2, with the site requiring various preparations works by the ranger team and long hours in the week running up to the event due to heavy rainfall and high winds. The team organised a special event that aimed to showcase the unique heritage, landscape and industry of Somerset, and was an event aimed at primary school children with plenty of free activities to enjoy.
- Funding work continues towards the community ranger base and wider project. The V3 project; inVolve, Visit, Volunteer has two strands, the construction of the V3 Hub and the employment of a 3 year Community Ranger post and activity programme. Applications have been submitted to the Heritage Lottery Fund, Veolia and Reaching Communities in addition to smaller local funds.
- The Friends of Yeovil Country Park are very active, fundraising and representing the park at local events and meetings. They also run a community facebook page called "Yeovil Country Park" which has proved to be a great marketing tool for events and gaining public feedback.
- The 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. This free and great exploratory facility is popular with nursery schools and is a good base for running events like last years popular Halloween trail.

- The countryside rangers were given an award by Lufton Mencap College for their practical conservation work with the College and its students.

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

- From autumn 2012 we entered year 4 of a significant tree management project; to stabilize the peripheral tree stock in the woodland, and veteran trees in the woodlands core.

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

- The July 2012 countryside event was a success. Families came and spent all day with us making clay animals, exploring the site and listening to the story teller.
- The reed bed restoration project continues: the hard work of the volunteers was evident this summer with dense lush growth.

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

- A new management plan for site has been completed. With protected dormice and great crested newts present on site the plan specifies land management works to support these populations. Copies can be provided upon request.
- The group of volunteers led on the purchase and planting of the Jubilee oak tree on site and SSDC arranged for the creation of the plaque.

### **Ham Hill Country Park**

- Higher Level Stewardship works were delivered and a further year of capital income negotiated with Natural England funding projects like a survey of the limekiln and restoration proposals.
- Ham Hill secured a Green Heritage Accreditation Award for the first time.
- Cambridge Archaeological Unit and Cardiff University were on site July – September excavating in advance of a quarry extension. This second year of excavations broadened its search to include 3 extra trenches in the wider hill fort. The findings were very exciting and included stone built roundhouses and fortified Iron Age ramparts. [www.hamhillfort.info](http://www.hamhillfort.info). The importance of the finds is likely to lead to a joint Heritage Lottery bid to fund further excavations and new interpretation for the site post summer 2013 excavations.
- The Woodland Trust funded the planting of 250 trees in Pit Wood and the work was undertaken by the volunteer team.
- The Country Parks profile continues to rise as the rangers host press days for Camping and Caravanning magazine and the Daily Mail; on woodland crafts and bush craft skills. Use of the twitter feed provided powerful free advertising for events and a rapid feedback mechanism for the public using the site.
- Dormice have been confirmed on site in the eastern woodlands, supporting the current management approach to the native woodlands.
- The Ham Hill Centre continues to be used frequently by the Forest School cluster group, the Duke of Edinburgh Awards Scheme and Somerset Wildlife Trust. The venue is becoming well known as a training venue for courses like outdoor first aid and working with external organisations has strengthened the teams contacts and joint working.

- The Wednesday volunteer team averages 10 -12 participants on a weekly basis and volunteer numbers are swelled by the Friends of Ham Hill support group and South Somerset Steering group. We have experienced a greater number of school and college work experience placements throughout 2012.
- Successful events in 2012 included a heritage fayre, bush craft playscheme and Christmas crafts. The surprise success was the June Jubilee beacon which attracted c.250 people and this year the rangers will arrange a bonfire in November as local residents really seemed to enjoy a peaceful gathering around a fire on the hilltop.
- District Executive approved the proposal to designate Ham Hill Country Park as a Local Nature Reserve and SSDC's Legal team now have to finalise the designation.
- A response was submitted to the recent local minerals consultation to County, specifically in relation to Hamstone and the wider implications of quarrying on the recreational and heritage landscape.

### **Langport Visitor Centre and Cycleway**

- The Langport Visitor Centre has closed upon the retirement of our business tenant. New tenants (basket makers) have been found for the space and much of the River Parrett and Somerset Levels exhibits will remain in situ for the visiting public to view.
- The Countryside Rangers continue to manage the cycleway from Langport to Muchelney, cutting, inspecting trees and dealing with any issues.

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

- Butterfly Conservation are funding scrub management works on site and the planting of propagated wild thyme plants. The grassland restoration work is going well and Butterfly Conservation are confident of a large blue release in the future.
- Natural England have confirmed a 10 year Higher Level Stewardship Agreement for the site to assist in the funding of land management on site from Spring 2013.

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

- We await the outcomes of 3 round 1 funding bids for the Yeovil Country Park project. The outcomes of these will dictate our next steps in terms of developing to round 2 or seeking alternative funders.
- Both Country Park's management plans will be revised, which will take into account the protected species and archaeological implications for each site.
- We will work with the Environment Agency to run an educational campaign directed at school children to highlight the link between pollution in Chard Reservoir and litter and debris that is dropped in Chard High Street.
- We will explore funding options to see if money can be raised to re-design and print a new map panel for Moldrams Ground.
- Countryside will feed into the newly emerging Green Infrastructure Strategy, to ensure that all appropriate land holdings are captured in the mapping phase and biodiversity considerations inform the plan's targets.
- Countryside will represent SSDC on the new Somerset Local Nature Partnership.

### **Financial Implications**

In 2012/13 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 £238,170. The budget includes annual income generation of £113,000.

## **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.

**Background papers:**    *None*

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