

Area West Committee – 15<sup>th</sup> August 2007

## 6. Annual Report Outlining the Past Year's Work of the Countryside Service

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### Purpose of the Report

To update Area West members on the past and forthcoming year's work of the countryside service with a particular focus on Public Rights of Way and Chard Reservoir.

### Recommendation

That the report be noted.

### Background

This report provides an update on work undertaken by the Countryside Service between April 2006 and March 2007.

### 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 2006 / 2007 and are entered for 2007/2008 judging.
- The 2006/2007 apprentice ranger from Yeovil Country Park wins south west apprentice of the year 2007 and is put forward to the finals for the summer of 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 first 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 wellbeing 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 72% of parishes and towns across the district, The only parishes WITHOUT Liaison Officers in Area West are: Ashill, Chiselborough, Merriott, Whitelackington and Whitestaunton. 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, with the most recent surveys carried out in May this year giving a figure of 69.1%.
- 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.
- SSDC's three largest countryside sites are currently undergoing a management planning exercise. By the summer of 2007 a new five-year plan will exist for each site. This will include conservation practices, community involvement and funding priorities for each site. These plans will direct the works programme for each site based team.

- 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 West included Tatworth and Forton, Crewkerne, North Perrott, Ilminster, Broadway, Misterton. Improvements achieved by these parishes included replacing stiles with gates and surface improvements.
- The recent consultation with Parishes asking for information regarding vegetation clearance and path prioritisation has provided a good response. We will be working with SCC to go through the responses and to prioritise the work generated. SCC will be organising workshops in the District in late October to provide more information about this piece of work.

### **At the Sites**

- Ongoing Countryside Stewardship work to maintain and promote traditional land management.
- Apprentice ranger scheme continues in conjunction with Kingston Maurward College. The scheme currently part funds three apprentice ranger posts.
- Green Flag awards pending for two sites.
- Invasive species control on all SSDC countryside sites.

### **Chard Reservoir**

- Countryside Ranger David Lester retired after 12 years with SSDC. Everyone associated with the Chard Reservoir site will miss his work, his smiling face and the wealth of wildlife knowledge that he brought to the Countryside Team. Tim Brown (ranger from Ham Hill) takes up the position in September.
- A programme of improvements is scheduled for 2007/08 including renovation of the Bird Watching Hide.
- Chard Countryside Day 2007 is planned for Saturday 15<sup>th</sup> September. This event will be held in partnership with Chard Town Council and Action for Chard Town (with thanks to Cllr Jean Smith for her assistance).
- 'Birding mornings' will take place at the site every Tuesday morning throughout October. Ranger Rachael Lappage will run the events and full details will be advertised on the SSDC website.
- This winter, a new volunteer team will be established to assist in the running of the site.

### **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.
- Grazing licences, licences for ice cream vans, and the angling club licence at Chard Reservoir.
- Income from events and festivals such as walking festivals, Country Park Fayres and guided walks.

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- 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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