

Area West Committee – 18th January 2012

## 9. 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 FTE officers manage the sites to a net expenditure budget of £257,820. The budget is managed across 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 programme 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 sessions for schools seeing 410 pupils on the countryside sites, and 6,500 people attended the 41 organised events.
- 1,431 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 1,500 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, mammals and butterfly surveys plus construction of hibernacula and other “homes”. Dormice were confirmed at Ham Hill, Chard and Moldrams Ground.
- The team continues to manage Langport Visitor Centre & cycleway.
- 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 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](http://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 incidences of littering on 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.

### Ham Hill Country Park

- 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 £9K 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.
- 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](http://www.hamhillfort.info).

### **Yeovil Country Park**

- 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 County Park returned a satisfaction rating of 86%.
- 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.
- A fantastic new free exploratory 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.
- At Sampson's Wood in Yeovil from autumn 2011 we enter year 3 of a significant tree management project; to stabilize the peripheral tree stock in the woodland, and veteran trees in the woodlands core.

### **Moldrams Ground Local Nature Reserve, Pen Selwood, Wincanton**

- A new management plan for the 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.

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

- Butterfly Conservation are funding scrub management works on site. Ant surveys have taken place and propagated wild thyme plants planted. The site is progressing well and a decision as to when large blues will be released will be taken in summer 2012.

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

- 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 modelling. Local targeted publicity helped secure the event's success.
- On site butterfly and birding events have been organised and walks and slide talks delivered to external groups.

- Green Flag Judges commented upon the comprehensive management plan, and the successful delivery on limited resources at a site with a variety of wildlife and recreational clashes.
- 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. It was whilst checking and cleaning these boxes that we believe a dormouse was discovered. On average 6 volunteers attend every Friday to help with works and often throughout the week to assist the ranger.
- SSDC's role as reservoir owner and undertaker requires compliance with the Reservoir Act, works to clear vegetation from the dam wall are progressing well as recommended in the last annual Reservoir inspection. An emergency plan has been written for the site and staff from across the District Council trained in emergency procedures and water level management.
- The Environment Agency praised the cleanliness of the site on a recent inspection visit and found 100% compliance with rod licences.
- Chard and Chaffcombe continue to have excellent and active representation on the South Somerset Countryside Steering Group. Attendees include Cllr. Nigel Mermagen, Cllr. Graham Forsyth from Chard Town Council and Cllr. Josie Miles from Chaffcombe Parish Council. Minutes and agendas are also now circulated to Cllr. Sue Osborne for information.
- New interpretation boards are being designed for site with colour maps and updateable information boards for summer 2012.

### 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 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

None.

## 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.*