

Area West Committee – 17th July 2013

8. 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 provide the highlights of the Countryside Team 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, Langport cycleway, Moldrams Ground Local Nature Reserve and Eastfield Local Nature Reserve.

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.

- The Langport Visitor Centre 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 Rangers continue to manage the cycle way which remains open.
- Two new apprentices started at the Country Parks in September, there were over 55 applicants for the year long posts. A Countryside Intern was in post from October – May as part of the district wide scheme.
- 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 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 apprised of the situation and continue to inspect the trees on our sites.
- We experienced the usual irresponsible use of site and vandalism at the busiest sites over the summer months.

Ham Hill Country Park

- Higher Level Stewardship works delivered and a further year of capital income negotiated with Natural England despite an unknown climate for the future of the scheme.
- 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. 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 2013.

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 from Spring 2013.

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.
- Rangers continue to attend site to deliver practical works but there is now a core of volunteers from the local Parish that both inspect and assist with these practical works.

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, attendance this year was an all time high and feedback from visitors on the day was great.
- Yeovil Country Park was the focus for a visit by The Queen on 2 May 2012, with the site requiring various preparation works by the ranger team and long hours in the week running up to the event due to heavy rainfall and high winds. The special event 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. Applications have been submitted to various local funders, we have received a round 1 Heritage Lottery Fund pass and are awaiting the outcome of a capital bid for the Hub building in July.
- 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 group sailed to victory in this year Western Gazette Wish campaign, scooping the £5K prize money to be spent in the park. The money they won last year was used to deliver an Easter Eggstravaganza event that attracted over 500 children.
- 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 this 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

- 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 and 2013's date is Sat 27 July. Families came and spent all day with us making clay animals, exploring the site and listening to the story teller. In addition butterfly themed playschemes and bird box days were organised on the site in the school holidays.
- The 2012 Green Flag report was excellent and in 2013 the site will only be "mystery shopped" as it scored so highly last year.

- We are working with Environment Agency Officer Oliver Hill to deliver an educational campaign called “Yellow Fish, only rain down the drain” to primary school aged children in Chard. In July we will visit schools to deliver talks on water borne pollution and its impact on Chard Reservoir, students will be given the opportunity to “paint” yellow fish on drain covers where water feeds straight into the Reservoir. A subsequent public education campaign should reinforce the message. This project comes out of Oliver’s work to improve water quality at the reservoir by first dealing with industrial polluters and outlet issues.
- We are grateful to Oscar Mayer Ltd for their kind sponsorship of a new map panel for the reservoir. The on site interpretation was tired and out of date and through their sponsorship new artwork and printing could be created and erected in the spring.
- The reed bed restoration project continues: the hard work of the volunteers was evident this summer with dense lush growth, extending the quality and area of reed beds on site. Volunteering projects have been increased to 2 days per week due to their popularity, and last year 258 working days were donated by volunteers.
- The inspecting engineers report on the reservoir was very favourable after the vegetation clearance particularly along the dam wall over the past 2 winters. Our thanks to the tireless volunteer team who have helped carry out this sensitive work.
- Somerset Wildlife Trust have been involved on site erecting a barn owl box as part of the project to erect a box in every parish of Somerset, this will be monitored and guided walks arranged when we have inhabitants!
- Tim Brown the site ranger has worked hard to manage the water levels during very challenging times particularly over the Christmas period in 2012. Guided walks and attendance at Parish council meetings in Donyatt have improved communication between residents and the site and allayed most fears about water levels in times of high water.

Headlines for the next 6 months

- We finalise funding streams for the Yeovil Country Park V3 project. Outcomes later in July will dictate our steps in terms of developing to round 2 or seeking alternative funders.
- Both Country Park’s management plans are now in draft and will be finalised which will take into account the protected species and archaeological implications for each site.
- Countryside will feed into the newly emerging Green Infrastructure Strategy, to ensure that all appropriate land holdings are captured in the mapping phase and that biodiversity considerations inform the plans targets.
- An “unavoidable budget pressure” will be submitted for Chard Reservoir for the next two years to cover the costs of essential sluice and dam repair works as recommended by the inspecting engineer.
- 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
