

Area West Committee – 21st May 2014

7. Update Report from the Countryside Service

Strategic Director: Vega Sturgess, Operations and Community Focus
Assistant Director: Steve Joel, Health and Well Being
Service Manager: Rachael Whaites, Countryside Manager (maternity cover)
Lead Officer: Rachael Whaites, Countryside Manager (maternity cover)
Contact Details: rachael.whaites@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 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. Ham Hill also secured the Green Heritage Award for the second year running.
- 2013 saw a successful and extensive public events programme delivered. It was the best year we've had for numbers of participants and during the school holidays in August the team delivered a minimum of 2 events each week across the sites. We had over 11,000 people attend our events in total.
- The team has expanded their coverage on social media thanks to assistance and enthusiasm from key volunteers. The countryside team are now represented on Twitter with the 3 main sites-Yeovil, Ham Hill and Chard-with their own Facebook pages. The Facebook pages have been set up by volunteers and are regularly accessed by the ranger teams, who answer any questions that the volunteers are unable to. Yeovil Country Park now has over 1000 followers on Facebook. Social media has proved to be a great form of free advertisement for events.
- The countryside team still deliver 3 weekly key volunteer days across Chard, Ham Hill and Yeovil Country Park with a total of 1,601 volunteer days delivered in 2013. The volunteers are instrumental in delivering habitat management works across site and helping the rangers to keep on top of site maintenance works.
- The Friends groups of Ham Hill and Yeovil Country Park offer tremendous support to the countryside team-especially in getting external funding for projects and events. The Friends of Yeovil Country Park won the Western Gazettes WISH campaign in 2013 securing £5000 from Yeovil Round Table towards tree planting and the Green Hub project.

- The team continue to increase the tree stock on their sites at appropriate locations. At Ham Hill over 850 native trees were planted at Pitt Wood in winter 2013 and at Yeovil Country Park replacement trees are planned following large losses as a result of the storms in 2013/14.
- The SSDC Countryside website is due to be updated in 2014 with additional information about the smaller sites we manage and an online booking system for our events.
- Lufton Mencap College play a bigger role across the three main sites with 4 students attending the weekly volunteer teams with a supervisor. Ham Hill was given an award in 2013 by being a 'nice place with nice people' and Yeovil Country Park received an award for 'providing volunteering opportunities' for the students.
- Practical habitat management and site maintenance continues across all the sites including management of tree stock following annual tree safety surveys at all sites.
- Successful training of last year's apprentices-both achieved their ND level 2 in Environmental Conservation thanks to training & assessing from the rangers. Two more apprentices were recruited and started their training in September 2013.
- The Countryside team have continued to work towards delivery of all targets in their annual delivery plan, which is monitored by the countryside steering group.
- Shop Mobility in Yeovil, in conjunction with the countryside team, is developing two leaflets to show all ability trails at both Yeovil and Ham Hill country parks. It is hoped these will be available to the public in early spring.

Challenges over the year

- Ham Hill ranger centre was broken into in October 2013 with a number of powered tools including hedgecutters and chainsaws stolen, amounting to approximately £3000. The workshop was directly accessed through the roof by removal of roof tiles.
- Fairy doors were stolen from the Woodland Play Zone at Yeovil Country Park. Although they have no monetary value they are a popular feature with children and take a considerable amount of time to make. After a successful press campaign from the Western Gazette, they were anonymously returned.
- Two site vehicles (Kawasaki mules) at Ham Hill and Chard have been increasingly unreliable and financially draining. They have now been replaced with Polaris rangers following funding secured from District Exec.
- Stormy weather in October 2013 & December through to February 2014 have caused a large number of trees to come down across all of the sites. Trees have also been damaged with split branches and trunks causing them to be dangerous. This has resulted in a high level of work for the SSDC Arboricultural team who have had to undertake the climbing works. This has caused significant financial pressure to the budget. Damaged fence lines from falling trees have also been a cost.

Ham Hill Country Park

- The management plan for the country park has been updated, to take us into 2017.
- The grazing went out to tender in 2013 and as a result a new grazier will be taking over the tenancy at Ham Hill from April. Mr Wakely from South Petherton has had extensive experience grazing a public access site at the National Trusts Montacute estate. He will bring a mixture of sheep and some cattle onto the hill

although the cattle will be restricted to Witcombe Valley and Pitt Wood. Posters will go up on site prior to this to keep the public informed.

- Higher Level Stewardship work continues on site including putting new fence lines in and adding barbed wire to existing fences in areas where the cattle will graze.
- Communication with the local parishes has improved with regular articles included in the Hambook, which is delivered to every household in the parishes surrounding Ham Hill.
- A successful Heritage Fayre was delivered in 2013, with the public and volunteers helping to create a roundhouse frame, which was a focal point for the Fayre. The roundhouse was left in situ in the plateau fields but the roof was pulled down in January 2014. Public support on Facebook for the structure to remain means that the rangers will rebuild it, again with the help of volunteers and the public.
- The Universities of Cardiff and Cambridge completed their third and final year of digs at the back of Harveys quarry. They mostly found human remains-18 individuals have been identified, mostly adult women, dating back to first and second centuries BC. We are awaiting their final archaeological report which will interpret their findings.

Eastfield Local Nature Reserve, High Ham

- The Large Blue Butterfly project continues in conjunction with Butterfly Conservation. Over 1000 wild thyme plugs have been planted this winter and scrub clearance has continued. Grassland management with scything and grazing was carried out in the summer, with the aim to restore the site to suitable butterfly habitat.
- Natural England have confirmed a 10 year Higher Level Stewardship Agreement for the site to assist in the funding of land management.

Chard Reservoir Local Nature Reserve

- The volunteer team goes from strength to strength with six regular volunteers turning up weekly and on ad hoc days to help the ranger.
- The appropriate management of the water levels continues to attract rare bird species during migration seasons including a Grey Phalarope in October. This attracts many 'twitchers' to the site.
- The water levels continue to be well managed during the extreme rainfalls we have experienced this winter so far.
- We are seeking funding from District Exec to carry out essential works to the dam and replace the associated fence line along Chaffcombe road. If successful this work will commence in spring/summer 2014.
- The countryside team and Environment Agency delivered a 'Yellow Fish' campaign to local schools to educate them about the issues with litter going down the drains and how it can end up in the reservoir.
- Chard Countryside Day was another successful day with approximately 300 people in attendance.

Moldram's Ground Local Nature Reserve, Pen Selwood

- Great Crested Newt (GCN) and Dormouse surveys continue on site to monitor the populations of these European protected species. The local villages have also been involved, with Bourton School attending a newt survey last April.

- Vegetation has been removed from the three ponds to improve breeding conditions for GCN's.
- Advice has been given to a local landowner on management of his pond for GCN's and this work will continue with the help of local residents to identify key landowners to aid the conservation of the rarest animals.
- The local community continues to be involved with the management of Moldrams. Six volunteers are now registered for the site and they help with practical management works and surveys. A key volunteer keeps the community updated about works at Moldrams through the Pen Selwood village website.

Yeovil Country Park

- Funding has now been secured for the construction of the country park's Volunteer & Visitor Centre, which will act as a base for the rangers and volunteers, café, public toilets and an education and interpretation centre. Contracts are still being negotiated with the main contractor and it is anticipated that work will begin on construction in May, with official opening in October half term. A full press release will be issued in due course.
- Running in conjunction with the Green Hub is a Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) project (entitled V3; InVolve, Visit and Volunteer) to employ a community ranger who will deliver events and activities from the Green Hub over a three year period. The project will also deliver biodiversity improvement projects, restoration of key features in Ninesprings valleys gardens and new interpretation for the building and wider country park with themes linked to heritage. We are hopeful of a successful second round application which will mean that the funding from HLF will be in place early 2015 and this will help to bring the new centre to life.
- The team have decided not to run the country park fayre this year (normally held in May) and instead to concentrate on trail events which have proved more popular, cheaper to run and easier to deliver. However 'Well Dressing' is back on the events list for July 2014.
- The management plan for the Country Park has been updated, to take us into 2017.
- 3-2-1 running trails have been set up in the country park in conjunction with our active lifestyles team and Run England. There are two trails, one at Riverside Walk and the other at Ninesprings which waymark a 3km circular running or walking route.
- Park Watch continues to monitor anti-social behaviour on site with a good working relationship with the local beat manager, PC's and PCSO's.

Sampson's Wood

- From autumn 2013 we entered the fifth and final year to manage the peripheral tree stock in the woods. Since the management of the tree works began, the countryside team has received fewer and fewer enquiries of concern regarding trees. The countryside team will continue to monitor the trees through annual tree safety surveys and by responding to enquiries from residents and members of the public.
- As time allows, the Yeovil Country Park volunteer team undertake woodland management activities to reduce the density of the tree stock by removing sycamore saplings and coppicing hazel.

Headlines for the next 6 months

- We are now in the development phase of a second round application to HLF which involves the recruitment of a project officer & consultants to develop the activity & education programme and design the interpretation for the V3 project. This development phase is part funded by HLF.
- Fundraising by the countryside team and Friends of Yeovil Country Park continues to support the visitor centre and V3 projects.
- The countryside service website is to be updated so that it includes information on our smaller sites such as Moldrams and will also enable online booking for our countryside events.
- The countryside events programme for 2014 has been designed and starts in February half term. The service is running 28 events throughout the year with most events concentrated in school holidays.
- New grazier on site at Ham Hill Country Park from April.
- Chard Reservoir and Yeovil Country Park are due to be assessed for the Green Flag Award with a judging visit in May, whereas Ham Hill will have a 'mystery shopper' visit this year.

Financial Implications

In 2013/14 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 £243,310. The budget includes annual income generation of £90,670.

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 & Climate Change Implications

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.

Although it is accepted that the development of a new building at Yeovil Country Park may increase carbon emissions, the building itself is designed to be low carbon through use of underfloor heating, good insulation, sun pipes and an air source heat pump. Bicycle racks will also be provided to encourage green travelling to the centre.

Equality and Diversity Implications

The countryside team work hard to ensure that the countryside sites are as accessible as possible. There are no stiles on site. 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
