

Update Report on the Heritage Lottery Funded V3; InVolve, Visit, Volunteer Project at Yeovil Country Park

Executive Portfolio Holder: Sylvia Seal, Leisure and Culture
Assistant Director: Steve Joel, Health and Well Being
Service Manager: Katy Menday, Countryside Manager
Lead Officer: Becky Russell, Community Ranger, Countryside Service
Contact Details: Becky.Russell@southsomerset.gov.uk or 07971 111970

Purpose of the Report

To update Members on the delivery of the 3 year V3 InVolve, Visit, Volunteer, Heritage Lottery Funded project at Yeovil Country Park. Officers will also attend the Council meeting to give a short presentation on the project.

Public Interest

In the summer of 2015 the Heritage Lottery Fund awarded a £251,200 grant towards the V3; Involve, Visit, Volunteer project at Yeovil Country Park. This grant finalised the funding package for a three year long £421,382 project at the Country Park. Delivery commenced in the autumn of 2015 with the appointment of a community ranger working to achieve the busy activity plan.

Recommendation

That Council note and comment upon the delivery of the V3 Project at Yeovil Country Park and the presentation to be made at Full Council.

Background

Yeovil Country Park was formed in 2002 by joining the SSDC landholdings at Riverside Walk, Wyndham Hill, Penn Hill, Summerhouse Hill and Ninesprings together into one large 127 acre accessible greenspace. The linear park is linked by the old railway line, now a busy cycleway. The mix of woodland, grassland and waterways provides a superb mix of habitats and despite its urban fringe position the country park is home to 2,572 species of plant and animal including conservation priority species like water vole and otter. Under the management of a small countryside ranger team, and with the help and support of weekly practical volunteers and an active Friends group the Country Park has thrived. Today the site is heavily used by residents and visitors. The Keep Britain Tidy Green Flag Award has been held since 2006 and in 2016 the Park won a Britain in Bloom Best Park award.

An engaging and appropriate events programme is delivered by the countryside ranger team annually, with 18 events organised in 2016 seeing 6,248 participants attending. Some limited school visits were led by the site rangers before 2016 when they were able.

A practical volunteer team meets every Thursday for a full day of habitat, conservation and heritage restoration works. On Monday afternoons a volunteer team delivers less strenuous and more supported volunteering opportunities for a variety of individuals plus a regular group of students from Cambian College. In 2016 94 practical volunteering parties were organised with 827 days donated by volunteers.

A Friends Group was established in January 2012 to help with fundraising for park projects and to diversify volunteering opportunities. In 2016 37 days were donated by this group towards event delivery, activities and planning meetings.

In 2012 the Countryside Service started working with the Friends group to improve the facilities on site at the country park as a response to inadequate toilet facilities for both staff and visitors, and taking into account suggestions and comments made in feedback and visitor surveys by the general public and groups. In January 2014 a funding package was confirmed for the construction of the new Ninesprings Centre and the building opened in October 2014. Included in the Centre is a ranger workshop, office, public toilets, a volunteer space and the Ninesprings Café.

A funding bid was submitted to the Heritage Lottery Fund during 2014 that sought to diversify volunteering, improve visitor experiences at the country park and engage a greater number of members of the community in park projects. The success of this application was confirmed in the summer of 2015.

A key element of the lottery bid was the employment of a full time, 3 year community ranger to deliver the activity plan across the project duration. Becky Russell was appointed to the role, and started work on the project in autumn 2015.

V3 InVolve, Visit, Volunteer

The 3 year long project runs from September 2015 to September 2018.

The V3 Project seeks to

- Help people fully appreciate and understand the value of the Country Park and its heritage
- Ensure that all Yeovil residents have the opportunity to enjoy and engage with the greenspace.
- Target specific groups and encourage greater interaction between these groups, including those from more deprived social backgrounds, disabled, new ethnic populations, young people and children.

Total project costs are £421,382 with the project primarily funded by a Heritage Lottery Fund grant covering 60% of the costs at £251,200. Significant match funding grants toward the project have been received from; the Armed Forces Community Covenant Fund, Grants for the Arts, Ernest Cook Trust, Awards for All, Yeovil Town Council, The Rotary Club of Yeovil, The Friends of Yeovil Country Park, and a large proportion of 'In-kind' contributions from volunteers.

The project covers these main objectives;

To conserve and enhance the built and natural heritage of the Park through specific projects.

Restoration of the Victorian Valley Gardens of Ninesprings is underway. A dedicated team of volunteers, supported by rangers, operates on a Wednesday specifically to restore the valley gardens. Invasive laurel and other non-natives have been removed to prevent damage to infrastructure, to restore vistas and improve the site for wildlife. Scrub and spoil has been removed from streams and waterfalls, revealing previously forgotten springs and stonework

and letting waterways flow again. Stonework is being restored and repaired, including dam wall repairs. The progress of this project has been recorded by one of the enthusiastic volunteers on The Yeovil Country Park Facebook page. The practical restoration has generated a significant amount of public interest in Ninesprings and a photo amnesty day has been arranged to talk to people about their memories of the site and copy any historic images they may have.

Habitat enhancement work is underway at various locations across the Country Park improving the site for a range of species. At Riverside Walk aged willow trees are being managed and the reed beds scraped to encourage continued reed growth and expansion. Boardwalks will be constructed to facilitate continued public access across these wet areas. An orchard is being planted at the foot of Summerhouse Hill this month, and a volunteer training course delivered on fruit tree management and pruning to enable the volunteer team to manage the area in the future.

A variety of bird, bat and insect boxes are being added to the existing complement in the Park to support populations.

Volunteer working parties are being increased in size and frequency to help the ranger team deal with invasive species like ragwort in the grassland and Himalayan balsam in the watercourses.

Employment of a Community Ranger to develop volunteering, learning and community opportunities.

Community Ranger, Becky Russell, started work on the project in September 2015. Becky's work programme is set out in a detailed 3 year activity plan. Extensive research was carried out during bid development to identify particular groups and organisations that would benefit from supported visits to the country park and Becky's work programme covers these and requests from other groups interested in the site. Since starting Becky has run 77 events, attended by over 1,900 people. Some events are marketed to the general public such as Beautiful Butterflies and Woodland Storytelling. Other events like the Yeovil Yaffle Missions were designed to bring children from Armed Forces Families and non-service children together for exciting and challenging outdoor challenge days. During development of the bid a range of harder to reach groups and communities were identified and where possible Becky has worked with and developed sessions to appeal to, and accommodate, specific community groups that have so far included photography sessions for MIND, Campfire Cooking for STEP (Somerset Team for Early Psychosis) and Woodcarving for the local Deaf Club. All sessions are free to the groups and attendees.

Links with the wider community have been forged through meetings with the local railway societies to help inform future interpretation about the original railway line through the park. Visits to Doctors surgeries have resulted in the waiting rooms holding power points about the country park and the opportunities to get involved. Regular correspondence and talks to groups including Rotary, Lions, U3A and local business groups have resulted in new fundraising links and support from a greater range of individuals and businesses, plus a raised profile for the country park.

To create heritage interpretation including leaflets, displays and events for the new Centre and wider Country Park.

Interpretation is being designed for the interior and exterior of the Yeovil Country Park Centre enabling people to discover more about Yeovil Country Park, its heritage and wildlife and how they can get involved. This will include fun interactive panels for children, informative panels for adults and an accessible tactile map enabling all visitors to orientate themselves. Across site new welcome signs and site interest panels will be written and installed. A series of new leaflets will be developed and printed based around suggested walking routes and picking up themes to engage children. A range of themed family explorer backpacks available for loan will be launched in the spring 2017. These will be available for local families and groups to borrow and will include activity sheets, games, identification sheets and items such as binoculars and bug jars. These will be built around topics such as woodlands, pond life and railway heritage.

New orienteering packs have been created for the entire country park and course sheets and activity packs will be launched in the summer of 2017 to help people explore the park.

Wildlife Cameras are due to be installed across the park with live and pre recorded feeds at the centre in the Cafe. This will include a building mounted time lapse camera recording the meadows and woodlands through the seasons, bird box cameras, a pan-tilt-zoom camera on a bird feeding area, and trail cameras positioned to obtain footage of wildlife such as otters, water voles and kingfishers. The footage will be shown through a TV screen in the café and used for visiting groups, and outreach visits to local groups through presentations.

A series of wooden sculptures have been created by a South Somerset artist inspired by woodcarving sessions run with community groups and the public. These sculptures include an otter, owl, bats, a rose bush, kingfisher, woodpecker, train and new storytelling seat for the woodland play zone. The story telling seat was carved in situ, with support from volunteers, enabling visitors to the park to see how the carving is created. When all the carvings are complete they will be installed at locations throughout Yeovil Country Park.

A new woodland play trail will be installed at Riverside during 2017 as the final part of the Armed Forces Fund to provide opportunities for the new families on the Wyndham Estate to explore and interact with the greenspaces at Riverside. Features like willow tunnels, dens, climbing logs and balancing beams will be included after local community consultation.

Events at Yeovil Country Park	2014	2015	2016
Events	15	36	82
Youth participants	1,862	3745	4,729
Adult participants	117	1540	3,329
Total participants	1,979	5,285	8,058

To provide educational visits, an updated education pack, teacher training and resources.

54 formal education sessions have been run for over 1,200 pupils since autumn 2015. Sessions have included curriculum linked outdoor education sessions looking at topics such as water courses, mini beasts and identification. Popular Forest School sessions have enabled young people to gain confidence and understanding in an outdoor environment. The Forest School approach to education has worked well with groups from our Yeovil Schools where often English is not the first language of some pupils. Several teacher training sessions have been delivered to local school staff and trainee teachers; enabling teachers to have the confidence to visit Yeovil Country Park and run their own outdoor sessions, using loaned resources.

Of 18 Yeovil schools 13 have attended site and enjoyed sessions with Becky. This includes all except 2 of the primaries. We are offering tailored sessions to the secondary schools and have so far worked successfully with Westfield in 2016 on literacy summer schools. A project is in development with Preston School this year, and a similar opportunity will be offered to Bucklers Mead in 2018. Becky has also worked with the Somerset Partnership School. The project has seen many schools from outside Yeovil visit, and teachers and educators from Magdalen Farm, Wincanton and Sherborne have all attended teacher training sessions.

In consultation with local teachers, via federation forums and during site visits, a new, broader, education pack reflecting the new National Curriculum is being developed. The pack will be distributed to local schools and will be available on line. Launch sessions will be hosted to enable teaching staff to attend site and visit the suggested locations for each element of the packs delivery.

Educational sessions at Yeovil Country Park	2014	2015	2016
School groups	4	22	37
Pupil Participants	130	608	817

To improve access by providing waymarkers, surfaced routes and a Trampler vehicle.

To ensure that the Country Park is accessible to as many people as possible the valley gardens of Ninesprings have been mapped, described and graded in the anticipation of the arrival of a Trampler (mobility vehicle better suited to rougher terrain) for loan and use within the country park. The vehicle will enable users to travel away from the surfaced cycleway and deeper into the greenspaces. A partnership with Shopmobility will ensure that this loan is properly managed and supported for users. The routes will be mapped and way marked to assist users and a new tactile map will be erected at the Centre to help people orientate and find their way.

A series of new walking leaflets will be developed to help visitors navigate the country park along a series of themes, taking in features of interest across all the landholdings.

To provide volunteer and training opportunities.

New volunteers have been recruited to the V3 project, due to the wider range of opportunities now available. Volunteers are helping with school visits, public events, production of a new

orienteering pack, leading guided walks, helping at heritage sessions and workshops, in addition to the practical restoration of the Valley Gardens. These valued volunteers have contributed 311 days to the project so far.

Volunteer training days have been delivered across subject areas like; team leading, tree identification and orchard pruning to develop skills.

Volunteering at Yeovil Country Park	2014	2015	2016
Volunteer events	65	93	116
Volunteer days	673	717	1138

Comments and outcomes from V3 Participants

This project had resulted in many more, and a greater range, of people visiting Yeovil Country Park. Benefitting from increased physical activity, improved mental health and greater overall well-being. The positive benefits of being active within Yeovil Country Park have been recounted many times by participants. Children who will not talk in class have spoken in the woods, those who will not participate, voluntarily join in, confidence is improved. MIND enjoyed their photography course so much that they set up their own photography workshops to continue visiting the park monthly. STEP (Somerset Team for Early Psychosis) have seen positive benefits to their participants as a result of regular sessions. Young carers were able to children; they could relax, have fun and play in the woods.

‘I’ve loved all of it’from a school girl who cried at the start of a Forest School session because she didn’t like being outside.

‘That was amazing’from a 9 year old who was scared to come on a bat walk around Ninesprings in the dark.

“The literacy project has not only enabled the students involved to develop an interest in nature and outdoor learning but they have also built on relevant literacy skills and many have grown in confidence (both in English and in themselves). All students thoroughly enjoyed their three day experience and produced high quality pieces of writing suitable for the project aims. The project was well organised, engaging, relevant and flexible to the needs of the project, students and school. I have viewed it as being a real success and am delighted with the collaborative work that has taken place between the school and park. Many thanks for the opportunity given to our students”.....from Westfield School after the literacy summer school.

Becky’s highlight so far has been seeing 80 children joining in with the Yeovil Yaffle Missions in August 2016. Without their parents or teachers children made new friends, worked as a team, learnt new skills such as tree climbing, braved zip wires, had a go at willow weaving, tried an obstacle course whilst blindfolded, mastered fire lighting & campfire cooking and enjoyed bat detecting. The sessions brought together leaders from the ranger team, Scouts,

Guides, Forest school leaders and artists all working together to support and enable the children to have an amazing day.

At project end

The V3 project funding ends in September 2018, by this time;

Local teaching staff will have experienced high quality field study sessions with their pupils on site at Yeovil Country Park and through use of the new education pack will feel confident to deliver their own sessions in the future.

Teaching staff will have attended teacher training sessions on site and feel confident in the various curriculum elements that can be delivered on site making use of loaned resources through the existing ranger team.

Volunteers recruited through the project continue to volunteer on the ranger's practical sessions and via the Friends of Yeovil Country Park. Some volunteers will have attended training to enable them to lead volunteer groups on low risk practical projects increasing management capacity across the park.

Local support groups continue to use the Country Park and its facilities for sessions for clients.

Local interest groups and uniformed groups will have learnt about the Country Park and the facilities it has to offer for their participants and continue to use it for regular sessions.

General site visitors learn more about the country park and its heritage through the ongoing provision of high quality interpretation and the ranger's event programme.

A tactile map and tramper are available to help all park visitors explore and understand the site, and a greater range of visitors are able to explore the wider greenspace.

The built infrastructure of the Victorian Valley Gardens will have been restored and new plantings will create a native mixed woodland with some ornamental species reflecting the historic past of the site.

Habitats across the park will be better managed to conserve the communities of plants and animals they support.

The Ninesprings Centre and Cafe will be the primary gateway for the country park, providing information and facilities for all visitors.

Financial Implications

The three year-long project is financed by a range of external funders (see report detail). Grant claims are submitted twice a year in August and February to the Heritage Lottery Fund.

Council Plan Implications

The work of the V3 project delivers for the following targets:

Council Plan –Environment

- Maintain Country Parks and open spaces to promote good mental and physical health.

Council Plan –Health and Communities

- Help people to live well by enabling quality cultural, leisure, play, sport & healthy lifestyle facilities & activities.

Carbon Emissions and 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.

The V3 project will see the volunteers and rangers planting upwards of 500 native trees, ensuring they are best suited to our current climate; providing habitats with the best chance of adaptation to future climate change.

The emphasis on volunteering and the use of hand tools for practical conservation management ensures that fuel consumption is kept low wherever possible.

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

Physical access to the country park is a key part of the V3 project. Signage, leaflets, a tactile map and a tramper vehicle are all part of the scheme to open up greenspace to everyone. Consultation has taken place across a range of groups, with the support of Jo Morgan, to ensure the products and projects are suitable for the target groups.

Signed craft activities have been organised for specialist support groups like the Deaf Club. Forest school activities for pupils, and training for teachers, has been delivered to many educational groups with exceptional results for individuals and classes where English is the second language.

Privacy Impact Assessment

None

Background Papers

None
