

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, buildings & a café 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 & comment on the report.

Report

Across the South Somerset Countryside Sites

- Ham Hill, Yeovil Country Park and Chard Reservoir all again secured their Green Flag Awards. Ham Hill also retained its Green Heritage accreditation.
- In the last year the team has delivered 126 events. This was on a range of scales (large fairs and trail events, to small play schemes and storytelling) and subjects (woodland fairs, photography workshops, wild food forays and the ever popular spring and Halloween events) to appeal to many residents and visitors. We estimate that 7,995 people (children and adults) attended these events, having direct ranger contact, and feedback is always positive. Event delivery continues to be enhanced due to the delivery of the Heritage Lottery Funded Community Ranger in Yeovil Country Park; Becky Russell.

	Sept 2014 – Aug 2015	Sept 2015 – Aug 2016	Sept 2016 – Aug 2017
Events	45	110	126
Events participants	5,071	11,162	7,995
Educational visits	24	51	54
Pupil participants	971	1,640	1,323
Volunteer days	2,387	2,706	2,949

- Bookable play schemes and activities this year have been sold out across the Country Parks. With new and innovative sessions on offer (e.g. Capture the Fort) coupled with the easy online booking system we have found sessions fully booked weeks in advance. The rangers are currently delivering events at capacity and so we are investigating alternative ways of delivering more sessions for the public. At Ham Hill this has included working with willow artists from Tinkers Bubble and re-enactment metal workers for metal craft sessions.
- The Team attended the Yeovil Show in July to show case the work of the Service with the aim of completing off site visitor surveys to help inform the team of public opinion. The stall created by the rangers secured a second place award in the trade stand category.
- The Rangers at Ham Hill and Yeovil Country Park have hosted 54 formal school visits seeing 1,323 pupils from mainly key stage 2. Sessions have focussed on plants, habitats and at Ham Hill Iron Age and Roman history. There is ongoing engagement in Yeovil with key stage 1 settings as Forest School remains high on the agenda. Further schools and groups access the sites to lead their own sessions, making use of our online educational & orienteering packs and Ranger Rik Nature Trail.
- Volunteering continues to be the back bone of the countryside operation. In the past three years volunteer days donated have steadily increased from 2,387 to 2,706 and in the last year 2,949. The diversification of volunteering opportunities is responsible for this gradual and steady increase with a popular Monday afternoon lighter duties session at Yeovil, multiple weekdays at Chard and full time project volunteering and specialist volunteering at Ham Hill. Volunteers across the sites help with all aspects of practical site management, they open and close public facilities 7 days a week, monitor wildlife, litter pick and assist at events. In the last year the rangers organised a thank you away day for all our volunteers to Weymouth with guided walks at RSPB Radipole Lake and later in the year a Christmas party.
- In addition to the practical volunteering the Friends Groups have donated many hundreds of hours of grant funding work, event support and research for the ranger teams. Meeting monthly the groups provide advice, support, ideas and a forum for the users of the parks. A total of 88 days of volunteering has been contributed by these groups; however this does not include all the work behind the scenes.
- The Countryside Team continue to manage the overseeing South Somerset Countryside Steering Group; a forum where stakeholders and experts can come together to ensure delivery against the site management plans. In this past year a number of members of the Local Area Group for Somerset Wildlife Trust have joined the forum as the local group has sadly closed; the rangers are delighted to welcome their wildlife expertise. In addition to this the specialist Park Watch group (Avon and Somerset Police, plus Rangers, enforcement team and local residents) meet for Yeovil when necessary.
- Last winter 418 native trees were planted across Ham Hill and Yeovil Country Parks. All native species, expanding the woodland size, quality and connectivity in South Somerset. The Friends Groups continue to ensure we receive the free tree packs from the Woodland Trust. The woodland restoration in Ninesprings is now well underway after two winters of extensive clearance of laurel. Sadly Ash Dieback has now been confirmed at all three main countryside sites. The infection has been reported to the Forestry Commission and although no action is required the site rangers monitor the spread of the disease through the seasonal changes. The hope continues to be that mature ash specimens have natural resistivity to the infection and their genetics can be used to propagate a resilient variant of our native ash tree.

- Practical land management is delivered by the rangers and volunteers across the sites, all inline with their 5 year land management plans and the archaeological management plan for Ham Hill. Conservation targets are monitored in a range of ways including via the annual species surveys conducted for us by local volunteers. The rangers continue to use a range of traditional countryside management techniques wherever possible including hedge laying, dry stone walling and coppicing.
- Our web and online presence continue to be well received. Bookings for events are via www.southsomesetcountryside.com and events were fully booked in the last year. All site literature is now available online and many visitors choose to access leaflets and guides before they visit.
- Our presence on social media continues to be well received with very successful Facebook feeds for Ham Hill, Yeovil Country Park, Ninesprings Cafe and Chard Reservoir LNR. The Friends groups and volunteers carry out most of the management of these pages, regularly posting pictures and site updates. The Twitter feed for the ranger team is @SSDCCountryside which we do need to try and use more frequently.
- In August staff and volunteers received training from a local ecologist in the monitoring of reptile populations. Site surveys have now commenced for Chard, Ham Hill and Yeovil. Records for existing populations will be developed and habitat management adjusted accordingly to ensure provision for reptiles across the sites. This on-going data will also enable the service to engage with developers seeking to find translocation sites for reptile populations from development sites.
- Regular annual funding income from Agri Environment schemes, Yeovil Town Council, wood sales, events, grazing tenants and other licensees continues to be secured. The Rangers and Friends groups continue to research and apply for a variety small grant funds for distinct and smaller enhancement projects at the sites, but as both country parks are in the midst of delivering larger lottery funded projects we do not currently have any larger bids submitted.

Ham Hill Country Park

- The construction works for the restoration of the Witcombe Valley stream are now complete. The old Medieval pond was excavated under the supervision of an archaeologist and a network of holding ponds and linking stream created flowing down into the wet woodland to the south. Local schools have been involved in the sowing and planting of the banksides to ensure a good native habitat develops next spring.
- The site has had an exceptionally busy summer with many visitors and a successful events program. The site continues to be a popular venue for outside organisations to run sponsored walks and events and a new application system has been set up to ensure all events are properly managed.
- The Friends of Ham Hill continue to work to support the site and in the last year key projects have included the development of a new woodland play trail and funding for a new CCTV camera to cover car parks that can unfortunately be the focus for car crime. Project income for the year through the Friends Group included:

People's Postcode Local Trust	£2,000	Woodland Play Trail
Avon and Somerset Police Crime Commissioners Fund	£1,500	CCTV camera

The group has recently applied for constitution as a charity through the Charity Commission.

- Events this last year included the third annual dog show organised by volunteers, a popular range of summer holiday play schemes with the rangers and a variety of sporting events that are becoming established including the Full Monty Race and the new Conquest of Avalon long distance run.
- The rangers and volunteers worked hard over the busy summer months to hand pull many tons of wild parsnip from the most popular areas of the Country Park. This native plants sap can cause irritation to the skin when combined with sunlight and therefore poses a particular risk to our younger visitors. Two years of summer pulling has decreased the number of plants on site. Warning posters are erected each year in the spring, along with information about ticks and Lyme's disease, to ensure site visitors are informed about the natural hazards in the countryside.
- The Public Space Protection Order came into force in the spring of 2017, enabling the enforcement of dog fouling and dogs on leads when in with livestock across the sites. The designation does give the ranger team more powers of enforcement alongside the SSDC Enforcement Officers.

Eastfield Local Nature Reserve, High Ham

- The rangers and volunteers organise practical working party days to manage the grassland habitats on site. Contact is maintained between the ranger team and Butterfly Conservation with reference habitat quality and monitoring of species like the Brown hairstreak butterfly. Local volunteers now help to monitor site and assist with management activities.

Moldram's Ground Local Nature Reserve, Pen Selwood

- Great crested newts and dormice are the priority species on site that management is directed for. The secondary pond created by the rangers is now populated with newts and the populations are stable. A small team of local residents continue to visit the site regularly to report any issues to the ranger team so we can ensure that the site is well managed despite working so remotely from it.

Sampson's Wood

- The Yeovil rangers continue to monitor the tree stock and manage any issues as they arise. A new access track has been agreed and transferred to the woodland holding from the developers of the old Balidon House site to improve public access.

Yeovil Country Park

- The Heritage Lottery Funded V3 InVolve, Visit, Volunteer project continues to be delivered across the Country Park with restoration work in the historic Valley gardens of Ninesprings a firm favourite with the public. A specialist volunteer team now meets to continue this work and maintain the springs and grottos that have been restored as part of the project. Also in Ninesprings a new railway mural has been created by Bristol artist Jody Thomas on the old railway siding to illustrate the changing importance of the route; the wildlife is proving to be a talking point and provides an educational slant to the piece.
- Many groups have benefitted from the sessions and activities offered by the community ranger and attended across a range of developmental activities including Somerset MIND, Somerset Team for Early Psychosis (STEP), Preston Autism Unit and Fiveways School. Becky has now worked with all the schools in Yeovil and many from further afield.

- Volunteer retile surveying training and tree identification sessions have been organised and further training development sessions are planned for the coming months as the practical work program shifts to winter works.
- The ranger team delivered a mix of well received events, including the popular trail events in February half term, Easter holidays and Halloween. The V3 project also delivered a range of events spanning from leather work courses (supported by Pittards) and photography workshops. More sessions and activities for preschool children and toddlers have been delivered as sessions were popular last year and greater capacity required. The rangers have worked together to create new versions of popular events like Nighttime Ninesprings; an event suitable for 8+ years where bat detecting is coupled with fire lighting and storytelling. Additional capacity has also been created on Christmas events to satisfy demand.
- A new sculpture trail is currently being installed throughout the country park with a variety of wooden sculptures created by artist Jozef Mesar based around the built and natural heritage of the country park. A self-guided trail will be created for people to follow to view all the pieces.
- Projects were developed with Somerset Art Works and a ceramic artist, to deliver workshops to schools and groups using clay, with finished pieces now on show at the Octagon Theatre. A Literacy project aimed at pupils at all the Yeovil secondary schools was rolled out in October half term and again in the Easter holidays.
- A range of infrastructure repairs have been delivered across the Country Park from new gabions to stabilise the banks of the River Yeo and tarmac repairs to the cycleway.
- The Ninesprings Café has continued to flourish and also benefited from the array of activities and events on offer in the country park.

Chard Reservoir Local Nature Reserve

- The Chard Volunteer Group continues to deliver a huge range of practical site improvements and conservation works. Twice a week the group meets and have this past year cleared vegetation to enable reed bed restoration, renovated benches and seats across the site, cleared out and surveyed bird boxes, made stable the old boat house, repaired eroding woodland paths, sown wild flower patches on the dam wall and repaired fishing platforms.
- A skilled regular volunteer has undertaken to lay all the reserves hedges as part of the conservation management of the site. The work is admired locally and provides training opportunities for other volunteers.
- The constituted Volunteer Group now meets formally to develop projects and fundraising ideas. Using funding from Waitrose they are currently installing new snapshot interpretation panels around the site to explain features of interest. The group have also constructed a woodland play zone on the way to the bird hide which is very popular with visitors.
- Other site works include the re-building of two bridges across the stream in the meadows.
- Successful events at Chard this year included the July Countryside Day and a further Crafty Chard Day in August that attracted many hundreds of children and families.

Headlines for the next 6 months

- The V3 Heritage Lottery project in Yeovil will continue with its winter programme of works whilst events and school visits are quieter. The new map and building interpretation will be finalised and installed.
- Events for 2018 will be developed taking on board feedback from this year.

- A range of small grants will be pursued with our Friends groups to help enable a variety of site improvement projects to go forward in 2018.
- Tree planting schemes will be completed across the sites where appropriate space exists for native woodland plantings.
- Chard Reservoir will be subject to its scheduled ten year dam inspection.

Financial Implications

In 2016/17 the Countryside Service manages 650 acres of public access land comprising land designated mainly as Country Parks and Local Nature Reserves, with two Country Park Centre's and the Ninesprings Cafe. A team of 5.8 Full Time Equivalent countryside staff and 1 Full Time Café manager plus a casual café workforce manage the service to a net expenditure budget of £247,580. The overall budget includes target annual income generation of £259,970.

Corporate Priority Implications

The work of the countryside service 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 & 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 around 500 trees and these are always native, ensuring they are best suited to our current climate; providing habitats with the best chance of adaptation to future climate change. By having site based rangers travel is kept to a minimum and carbon emissions kept low. Instead of heavy power tool use 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 and will shortly be available in Yeovil. Easy access trails are promoted at the largest sites. The website contains relevant information and assistance for planning visits.

Background papers: None
