



Countryside Services Update Report 2021

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Purpose of the Report

To update members on the work of the countryside service over the last two years.

Public Interest

The countryside service provides free and accessible green spaces for people to enjoy and nature to thrive. The country parks and nature reserves managed by the SSDC countryside service provide opportunities for leisure activities, wildlife watching, socialising, learning and a diverse wealth of environmental benefits.

Recommendation

That members:-

Note and comment on the work and delivery of the countryside service.

Background

Impact of the coronavirus pandemic

The coronavirus pandemic in 2020 greatly affected the delivery of the countryside service. Three of the rangers were redeployed to the crematorium and wellbeing hub leaving two rangers and a casual on site to cover the basic site maintenance from March 2020 to July 2020.

The government social-distancing restrictions during the pandemic greatly reduced volunteering capacity across all three sites, with volunteers unable to work in the greenspaces for several months until the restrictions changed. When the volunteers did return they were limited to groups of six only, and this stayed in place for all of 2020 and the start of 2021. This was approximately one third of the capacity of the usual volunteer teams.



All planned public and community group events were cancelled and the work of the Community Heritage Officer ceased entirely from March to September 2020. The rangers couldn't deliver any face to face events and so delivered online activities and events through social media, which helped to keep people connected to 'their' greenspaces, when they were unable to travel to visit them.

Despite the restrictions placed on travel and social activities during the pandemic, the numbers of visitors using our country parks and nature reserves increased dramatically. The greenspaces became important meeting places for family and friends and the rangers witnessed some very emotional moments. Ninesprings Café also recorded its busiest ever year, testament to how many people were visiting Yeovil Country Park. With many venues shut and outdoor activities becoming the focus for leisure time, the simple experience of being able to buy a hot drink or a cake became a focus for a day out.

For the most part, visitors to our greenspaces behaved responsibly but there was an increase in litter across the sites. This was exacerbated with more food outlets offering takeaway services, as they were unable to seat customers inside. Footpath erosion was another negative impact on the greenspaces. Visitors trying to observe social distancing guidelines and keeping 2m apart caused the edges of the paths to become worn and naturally widened the paths. Paths across the sites were used a lot more frequently, even in winter, which is normally a quieter time for visitors. This caused pathways to become heavily trampled and muddy, making some impassable and increasing the footpath erosion as visitors tried to find less muddy routes.

One positive legacy that has resulted from the coronavirus pandemic is the increased understanding of the importance of greenspace for physical and mental wellbeing. Since restrictions have been lifted, the country parks and nature reserves are still busy with visitors, many of whom are visiting for their first time. The public appreciation of the work that the rangers do is highlighted in the feedback on their social media posts and this provides a much needed morale boost to the team.

As part of the District Council's coronavirus recovery strategy, the countryside service delivered a series of events throughout the 2021 school summer holidays in as part of the SSDC 'Summer of Play'. Across all three strategic sites, the rangers delivered and organised 27 events in total with 1900 people taking part.

As part of the wider Leisure and Recreation Service, a new website has been created as the home for all visitor information for South Somerset. visitsouthsomerset.com is also the new host for all of the SSDC countryside sites. Through the new website, visitors can find out all of the essential information they need to know about Chard Reservoir, Ham Hill and Yeovil Country Park to plan their visit, as well as being able to book onto an event, download a trail leaflet and keep up to date with all of the news across the Leisure and Recreation service.

Report Detail

Ham Hill Country Park

Ham Hill's National Lottery Heritage Fund project 'Uncovering Ham Hill's Past for its Future' is progressing through the development stage of the application process. £98,000 of funding from the Heritage Fund for this stage has enabled discussions and planning with various consultants to progress to the final application for a £1.6 million four-year project, which seeks to:

- Create a small-scale sustainable visitor centre, with a café, visitor information centre, changing place toilet, public toilets and outdoor learning space.
- Improve the highway & parking to make the road safer for motorists and visitors.
- Develop a sustainable transport scheme for vulnerable and isolated communities to reach Ham Hill.
- Deliver a four-year activity plan for visitors, schools and community groups, particularly those that do not currently use Ham Hill currently, are vulnerable or isolated.
- Repair and protect important archaeological features such as the Iron Age ramparts and Lime Kiln, which have deteriorated, removing the Scheduled Monument from Historic England's 'At Risk' register.
- Habitat improvement works to increase biodiversity, improve habitat connectivity and protect existing populations of nationally important species e.g. dormice & shrill carder bees.
- Create a range of interpretation to tell the story of Ham Hill to visitors.

During the development phase, we have been working with consultants to:

- Investigate the options for a low scale sustainable visitor centre.
- Design a scheme and plan for changes to the highway to improve road safety.
- Develop ideas and themes to tell the story of Ham Hill in the interpretation plan.
- Deliver trial activities with community groups including Polinia & Friends.
- Investigate community transport options from Yeovil for vulnerable and isolated residents.

The final application is due for submission in spring 2022 (subject to Historic England approval) with the delivery phase of the project starting in summer 2022 for four years.

Ham Hill has also received over £68,000 of funding from the Culture Recovery Fund for Heritage, covering the period from November 2020 to June 2021. This has enabled the recruitment of two additional full time members of staff. As a result, the team have been able to offer extra volunteering sessions, which has included sessions with Fairmead school. The grant also provided funding for digital training & equipment, a #2minute litter pick station, wildlife trail cameras and a new website for the Friends of Ham Hill. The new Friends of Ham Hill website will enable the Friends to attract more funding through highlighting previous grant funded projects and recruit more members to help with planning and delivery of events and projects.



South Somerset District Council

The Friends of Ham Hill have received £800 of funding from the Somerset Community Foundation for an extension to the popular Wildwood Play Zone. This has enabled the rangers to create stepping-stones, a wooden xylophone and wigwam frames to aid den building, which has increased the play zone's popularity with visitors.

As well as the return of the weekly volunteer teams from May, the team at Ham Hill have also received voluntary support from Somerset-based business ADM Protexin, who spent a day litter picking at the hill and conservation volunteer group EuCAN, who provided volunteers to assist with repairing the dry stone walls.

The rangers carried out various wildlife surveys in the spring and early summer, with populations of birds, dormice, reptiles, butterflies and wildflowers recorded across the site. Wildlife surveys are an essential component of monitoring the effectiveness of the habitat management work, which is delivered in line with the site's five-year management plan.

During the lockdown in early 2021, the rangers delivered a 'Facebook Live' tree-planting event for Norton sub Hamdon and West Chinnock schools. The rangers planted one tree for every child in the reception classes. Due to the seasonality of tree planting in the autumn and winter period, the children themselves could not help to plant the trees, but the feedback from the schools and children was fantastic. Each tree was marked with a child's name so that they could visit the tree themselves with their families when government restrictions allowed.

Chard Reservoir Local Nature Reserve

Visitor numbers at Chard Reservoir have remained higher than normal since all of the restrictions were lifted, but unlike the other sites there has been very little in the way of littering, vandalism or anti-social behaviour.

Angling ceased at the reservoir from March to July 2020 and again from January to March 2021 during the most restrictive lockdown phases, which meant a loss of income for the Angling Club. The Angling Club licence with SSDC was also put on hold and so the reservoir also lost some income during this period. However, since reopening this year at the end of March it has been very busy. Combined with the increase in general visitors, the angler's car park off Chaffcombe road has been very busy and priority parking spaces have been designated for anglers, as this is the only car park that allows them access to the swims.

Since the volunteers return in May, they have been busy making the reserve more accessible for visitors. They created a better-surfaced path at the top of the bank from the angler's car park to the dam. This route gives pedestrians a safe path to walk on that is off the road and links to the popular Sustrans cycle path on the other side of the dam. The volunteers also installed resting benches in various locations across the reserve, and the benches in the northern section have been located to offer superb views across the water.



The five-year management plan for Chard Reservoir expired at the end of 2020 and has been updated to cover the period 2021-2025. The new management plan details the annual maintenance and habitat management works required on the site as well as the teams ambitions for events and educational engagement going forward.

There has been a change in staffing at Chard Reservoir. Former ranger Tim Brown retired in May after 26 years of service for SSDC. Tim worked at both Ham Hill and Chard Reservoir during this time with the latter 12 years as the ranger at Chard. Hannah Stanton has been appointed as the new ranger at Chard Reservoir and has settled well into the role.

The Chard Reservoir Volunteer Group were awarded £5000 from Area West towards a new children's trail activity leaflet at the reserve. The rangers and volunteers jointly planned the trail and the next step will be employing a designer to create the leaflet and markers. The trail focuses on nature at the reserve and offers small activities and a quiz for children to complete on their way round.

Yeovil Country Park

Due to its accessibility to a large population, visitor numbers at Yeovil Country Park have remained high, even throughout the lockdown periods. Issues regarding littering, vandalism and anti-social behaviour are always ongoing at Yeovil Country Park and there have been spates of such activity in the park over the last six months. The rangers have worked hard to deal with issues as they arise and a good relationship with the PCSO and beat team has enabled a better Police presence at the park, ensuring that issues are dealt with promptly and visitors feel safe. There has also been an increase in homelessness and campers in the country park since July 2020; the rangers have worked jointly with the SSDC housing team and the Police to deal with this.

The Friends of Yeovil Country Park secured £7000 of funding from the People's Postcode Lottery in 2020 to plant 570 new trees on the eastern edge of Wyndham Hill, expanding the small copse that is already established on this side of the hill. The community tree-planting day that had been planned as part of the project, had to be cancelled due to the coronavirus restrictions and the rangers planted all 570 trees without any assistance. The trees planted were a mixture of native species including hazel, alder, wild cherry, oak, lime, holly, sweet chestnut and beech. This increases the woodland edge habitat on Wyndham Hill, increasing biodiversity and carbon sequestration; contributing to the Council's Environment Strategy.

The volunteer teams returned to their full capacity in May 2021, enabling the rangers to catch up with the backlog of work. They have also been helping to progress the Riverside Play Trail and have installed some new play features, with more to be installed throughout the autumn. The Monday volunteer group returned to the country park in July. This weekly volunteer session offers lighter activities over a shorter period for those that have mental and physical disabilities. All volunteer sessions at the



country park are fully subscribed and unfortunately, the staff do not have the capacity to take on extra volunteers, even though the demand remains high.

The Yeovil Rivers Community Trust have been working with the rangers to progress the Dodham Brook project. The rangers hinged trees in the water to provide habitat for fish and invertebrates and to help create a sinuous flow in the brook. Berms and benches were also installed in the watercourse to provide additional habitat for flora and fauna. The aim of these works has been to improve water quality and increase biodiversity; contributing to the Council's Environment Strategy.

During the spring and summer months, the rangers undertook a range of wildlife surveys to monitor the effectiveness of their habitat management work. Many of the surveys have been completed in conjunction with the Yeovil and District Wildlife Recording group, who publish an annual updated species list for the country park. The rangers have carried out surveys for birds, otters, water voles, reptiles and wasp spiders. Reptile surveys at riverside in 2020 uncovered a population of glow worms that had not been recorded previously, increasing the total number of species found at the country park to over 2700 species recorded. The rangers attended a free reptile training day delivered by Froglife, to increase their knowledge on reptile biology and behaviour, which will help them to plan more effective surveys and habitat management in the future.

The work of the Community Heritage Officer picked up again from October 2020, with some family woodland wellbeing sessions offered in October half term at Ninesprings. These sessions were very popular and the aim of the sessions was to give families the confidence to visit the country park and take part in organised activities again. Since all restrictions were lifted in summer 2021, the work of the Community Heritage Officer increased furthermore with community groups and visitors feeling more confident to join in with organised group activities and events. However, in August this year, Becky Russell, who has been the Community Heritage Officer since the start of the post in 2018, left SSDC to start a new career. Edd Chilcott has been successfully recruited to this post and joins the team from his engagement ranger role at Ham Hill, which had been funded by the Culture Recovery Fund for Heritage. Edd will continue the important community and education work of this role with sessions already programmed in with Yeovil 4 Families for the autumn. Edd will also continue to progress the Woodland Wellbeing sessions at Ham Hill, which will be delivered to groups from The Huddle and MIND. The Woodland Wellbeing sessions are being funded by Co-op community Fund and organised in conjunction with the Friends of Ham Hill.

Moldrams Ground and Eastfields Local Nature Reserves

Due to the travel restrictions placed by the government throughout the pandemic, work at both of these local nature reserves has been focussed on essential maintenance, with the rangers teams only visiting when essential works have needed to be carried out.



South Somerset District Council

Species monitoring at Moldrams recommenced in April 2021 with great crested newt surveys taking place. The rangers have also been gaining experience in dormice surveys at Ham Hill, with the aim of obtaining a protected species licence for dormice so that effective monitoring can take place at Moldrams and Chard Reservoir, where dormice are also present.

The team are currently looking for a new tenant grazier at Eastfields LNR, to ensure the grassland is managed appropriately for wildflowers and butterflies. Without grazing, grasses will dominate and scrub will encroach on the floristically diverse grassland.

Financial Implications

Not applicable.

Council Plan Implications

Area South

- Support community led initiatives that contribute towards combatting climate change.
- Deliver a range of wellbeing sessions and practical volunteering at Yeovil Country Park to support Covid recovery, offering engagement with nature and offering sessions to key workers and their families. Supported by Yeovil Town Council.

Area East

- Deliver species monitoring training for Countryside staff and volunteers to enable them to carry out protected species monitoring and habitat enhancement work at Moldrams Ground LNR

Area North

- Support the development and diversification of volunteering at Ham Hill. Enable the Friends of Ham Hill to expand and create a new website to support the group's activities.
- Deliver a series of woodland wellbeing sessions to support Covid-19 recovery at Ham Hill, funded by the Co-op Community Fund.

Area West

- Support the volunteer group at Chard Reservoir to deliver a self-guided children's trail at the Local Nature Reserve

Carbon Emissions and Climate Change Implications

Not applicable.

Equality and Diversity Implications

Not applicable.

Background Papers

Not applicable.
