

Update on the Natural Environment and SSSDC's response to the Ecological Emergency

Katy Menday, Leisure & Recreation Manager

1. To update Members on SSDC's strategic and operational work in relation to the natural environment since the recognition of a Climate and Ecological Emergency in May 2019.



2. To celebrate our achievements in supporting the natural environment across South Somerset, as well as offering an opportunity to share the successes and delivery of our teams.



Background

- **Environment Strategy** - commits to creating and supporting biodiverse areas for wildlife to thrive.
- Sets strategic direction with underpinning operational **delivery plan** and Countryside Service & Horticultural Services delivering our objectives on the ground.
- Environment team work with in-house with the CoP and externally with individuals and groups in the community to progress delivery and to monitor progress against the plan.

South Somerset Environment Strategy



October 2019

Our Vision for South Somerset:

'we wish to be a leading Council in developing and adopting a Green Agenda to promote sustainable environment, economy and communities'

South Somerset Council Plan 2019/20



1. Delivery as part of our Environment Strategy

Tree Planting and Woodland Creation

- Enabled the planting of **15,000 trees** since 2019:
 - SSDC land (9,300 trees), including at Yeovil Rec, Ham Hill, Yeovil Country Park and Chard Reservoir.
 - In the Community (5,600 trees):
 - Great Parish Tree Giveaway (2019-21) – 4,700 trees to over 60 parishes & community groups.
 - 900 trees planted as part of the Urban Tree Challenge funding in Martock and Chard.
- Participating in delivering of new Somerset wide Tree Strategy
- Supporting Re-imagining the Levels tree planting programme



Shifting our land management practices to a focus on conservation

- Aim to use SSDC land to contribute to nature recovery, creating a more resilient and connected landscape across South Somerset. We have demonstrated good practice in wilding green spaces and engaging with communities to do the same.
- **‘No Mow’ Conservation Verge Trials** - successfully completed ‘No Mow’ trials in 5 parishes, across 15 sites in 2021.



“We were amazed by the variety of wildlife we saw, including dragonflies, butterflies, beetles, and so much more”



2. Leading by example; demonstrating best practice in how to manage natural greenspaces

- **Countryside sites** – on-going management for wildlife and conservation of over 700 acres of land across three strategic sites and a further 3 Local Nature Reserves
- Key projects - **Shrill carder bee project at Ham Hill**, linked to the Somerset Pollinator Action Plan, **water vole** management at Yeovil Country Park and **meadow restoration** at Chard Reservoir.
- **Yeovil Recreation Centre** – Tree planting, wildflower banks and no-mow areas at the Sports Ground



Management plans for SSDC sites

Ham Hill Country Park



Management Plan
2018 – 2022



A diverse and accessible countryside site where management ensure the long term enjoyment of its significant and inspiring archaeological and ecological assets.'



Yeovil Country Park



Management Plan
2018-2022



'A high quality countryside resource on the urban fringe maximising its value for wildlife, heritage and people.'



Land Management Plans at all Countryside Sites

- 5-year management plans at all SSDC owned or managed sites
- Cover all aspects of countryside work, including biodiversity & habitat management fundraising and community engagement.

Grassland Management Plans – in development for all principle Open Spaces

Wildlife Surveys

Wildlife surveys are undertaken throughout SSDC's countryside sites:

- **Bird & bat surveys at Country Parks** - carried out annually to monitor the impacts of our woodland management.
- **Butterfly surveys at Ham Hill** - carried out by volunteers and a good indicator of ecological health of a habitat.
- **Reptile surveys at Chard Reservoir** - monitoring populations of these protected species from our habitat management.
- **Dormice surveys** - carried out across a number of sites. As a protected species they offer an indicator to the success of our management.



Green Flag & RHS Best Park Awards



Green Flag Award for 17th consecutive year: Chard Reservoir LNR, Ham Hill, Yeovil Country Park

- Award is a benchmark for parks & greenspaces.
- Assessed on environmental management, biodiversity, landscape, heritage, and community involvement.



RHS Best Park Award

- Yeovil Country Park - awarded last three years;
- Ham Hill & Chard Reservoir awarded in 2021.
- Recognises the sites for their environmental management and community involvement.

3. Spaces deliver co-benefits for Health, Wellbeing and Covid Recovery



Volunteering & placements

- Weekly volunteering at our Country Parks.
- Specialist sessions for physical & mental needs.
- Tasks include wildlife recording, habitat management and assistance with public events.
- Countryside team supported by over **2,000 volunteering days per year** (with over **8,000 since 2019**); equivalent to an additional 8 full time rangers!
- Corporate volunteering offered; e.g. dry stone walling at Ham Hill & invasive species control at Yeovil Country Park.
- Supporting school & college work experience placements.



Community Support & Access to Greenspaces

- **Covid response** - our greenspaces were kept open for local daily exercise during Covid restrictions.
- **Recovery** - In 2021 the rangers delivered a 'Summer of Play', to help people feel confident about socialising again in a safe outdoor environment. They delivered **22 events for over 500 attendees.**
- Visitor numbers have increased since the pandemic as new visitors have continued to visit free to access high quality spaces.
- **Health and wellbeing:** woodland wellbeing sessions for target groups, such as the:
 - Huddle and MIND at Ham Hill;
 - Yeovil4Families at Yeovil Country Park.



Working with & for our Park Communities

Country Park and Local Nature Reserve events

- Our rangers deliver a busy & diverse public events programme.
- Most educational events based around wildlife, heritage and the natural environment and encouraging people to explore the countryside.
- Events include bat walks, nature trails, bushcraft events and more!

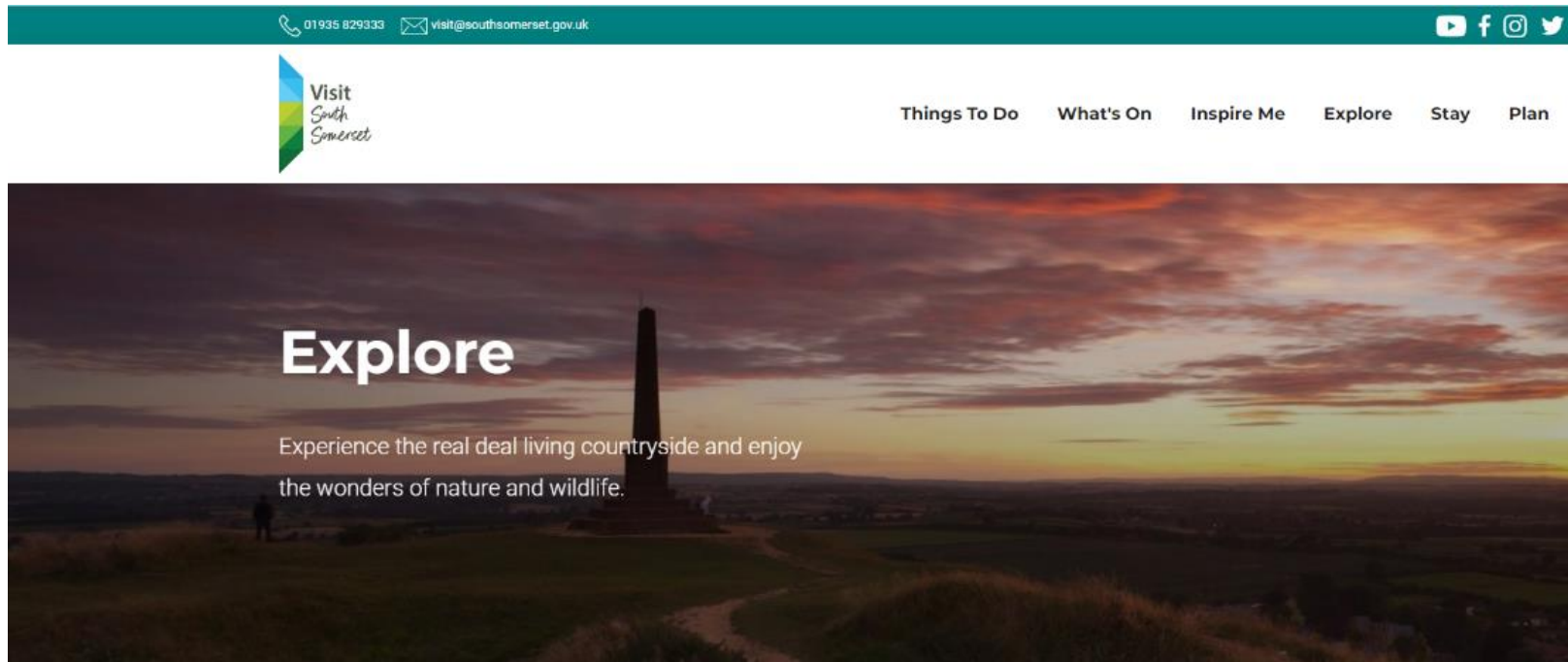


Since 2019 the rangers have organised 162 events with over 10,000 participants.



Visitor Information & Education

Countryside have built a new website to better showcase the fabulous natural greenspaces:
www.visitsouthsomerset.com/explore





An aerial photograph of Yeovil Country Park. The image shows a large, winding lake in the center, surrounded by a dense forest of trees. Some trees are in the process of changing color, showing shades of orange and red, while others remain green. In the lower-left quadrant, there is a paved area with some structures, possibly a playground or picnic area. The overall scene is lush and scenic, with a mix of green and autumnal colors.

Welcome to
Yeovil Country Park

4. Working with others to achieve more

- Supported the re-launch of the **Somerset Local Nature Partnership (LNP)**:
 - Production of Nature Recovery Network mapping of Somerset to be shared with communities as part of new Local Nature Recovery Strategy.
- **Creating a Somerset-wide Tree Strategy** with County and District partners:
 - looking at future resilient tree species for Somerset; and
 - the role forestry/ agriculture play and the economic value of developing sustainable tree planting.



River & Natural Flood Management Projects

- We have aimed to support river restoration groups, such as
 - Yeovil Rivers Community Trust in relation to the Dodham Brook, Yeovil.
 - CATCH on the River Cale, Wincanton; and
 - Brue Crew in Bruton.
- Completed a joint Green Recovery Challenge Fund project on Dodham Brook at Yeovil Country Park with YRCT, which sees the project improving flow and biodiversity along the culverted concrete channel between Ninesprings and Wyndham Hill.
- SSDC has applied for SRA Funding for future projects for Yeovil and the River Yeo.



5. Enabling our wider communities

Parish Environment Champions

- Network of **70+ champions covering 50 parishes** to date!
- Events, training and knowledge share opportunities e.g. Hedgerow training at Ham Hill; Seminars on river restoration, wild flowers and land management.



SSDC Wildflower Seed Giveaway

- Launched free wildflower seed giveaway (2022) to support communities.
- Supporting 33 sites in 26 parishes, **creating over 5,000 sqm (1.5 acres)** of new wildflower spaces.
- Short training guide on ground preparation shared.
- Encouraging local residents to survey through floral survey training and provision of ID/survey sheets.

Enabling our wider communities

South West in Bloom (Annual)

- Support 10+ *'It's your Neighbourhood'* community groups.
- For *'Yeovil in Bloom'*, we design & maintain the displays, regularly winning gold/silver as funded by YTC.



Community Resource Packs launched:

- ***Spring Nature Pack;***
- Followed by our ***Community Biodiversity Toolkit*** - signposting, supporting and engaging communities with practical ideas for enviro projects.



Friends groups

- Essential part of our team at Country Parks, contributing **£16k** since 2019
- Enabled delivery of woodland play area extensions, tree planting, woodland wellbeing sessions, and new children's nature trail leaflets.
- Provide a voice for communities and a way for people to get involved.

Digital Engagement with Communities

“Get SuSSed” – Monthly Environment newsletter

- Over 900 subscribers (internal staff and external networks), with positive feedback.
- News from our Environment Strategy including SSDC projects such as the Parish Tree Giveaway, as well as case studies & events.

Environment website - launched 2021

- 3,000+ unique visits since launch.
- Information on delivery of the Environment Strategy, as well as news and information.

Social Media – SSDC’s most viewed post on “No-Mow” – reached over 40,000 people, 200 shares, 3,000 reactions

South Somerset District Council
7 July at 15:14 · 🌐

💚💚 A local resident's recent enquiry and offer of support has led to a colony of rare bee orchids flourishing near Stoke-sub-Hamdon! 💚💚

Two colonies of rare bee orchids that were highlighted as being at risk due to proposed verge cutting on the A356 near Stoke-sub-Hamdon have now been protected following a request from a local resident. 🐝

SSDC are required to maintain these verges for the County Council's Highways team with up to 11 cuttings a year, however we have recently a... See more

With mowing Without mowing

1.3K 123 comments

South Somerset District Council
Committed to be Carbon Neutral by 2030

GET SuSSed
Sustainable South Somerset Education
Issue no 22 June 2022

Hello from Councillor Sarah Dyke

Welcome to our latest edition filled with exciting green news, which is hugely reflective of our recently published Environment Action Plan for 2022/23, link found below.

Look out for our new 'For the community' section in this month's edition, as well as a list of where we need more Parish Environment Champions to help deliver our Environment Strategy within our communities- [please get in touch](#) if you would like to volunteer.

Aside from that, read on for your monthly dose of green news, events, grants and tips!

Best eco wishes from Sarah x

SSDC Green News

6. Grant Income & Funding



Countryside projects

- Since 2019 the countryside team have secured over £225,000 of additional funding to deliver habitat management works, provide additional temporary rangers, deliver community group sessions and provide free public events.
- A further £233K enabled the purchase of 74 acres of woodland at Ham Hill to preserve the hillfort.
- Some of this funding has enabled development of a £2.2 million application to the National Lottery's Heritage Fund for heritage, wildlife & visitor improvements at Ham Hill. To be determined December 2022.

Other schemes:

- Urban Tree Challenge secured £1,500 for 900 trees.
- A grant of £7,000 from the People's Postcode Lottery for planting at Yeovil Country Park was secured in partnership with the Friends of the Country Park.



SSDC Community Grants for Green Initiatives

As an action from the Environment Strategy, added climate change as a focus for existing community grants scheme, thus enabling the following nature-based projects to apply & progress:

- Curry Rivel - Community Woodland (tree planting);
- Somerton TC – purchase of land for community park;
- Marston Magna PC - rights of way improvements – new gates/stiles.
- Martock Parish Council - memorial woodland project, including planting trees and shrubs on the recreation ground.
- Ash PC – Millennium wood and meadow maintenance
- Ferne Animal Sanctuary - reintroducing water voles.

Community Grant for local environment projects



 South Somerset
District Council



Committed to be carbon
neutral by 2030

Some of our team.....

Rachael Whaites – Countryside Manager

“Wildlife and the environment has always been my passion. The work we do in the countryside team is vitally important for the future of our communities, our greenspaces and our planet. Clean air, clean water, an abundance of wildlife and a connection to it is vitally important for good physical and mental wellbeing and this is what we facilitate in our nature reserves and country parks.”

Josh Bennett – Specialist Natural Environment

“Developing a resilient and connected landscape for Somerset’s biodiversity is the key goal we are always striving for. This is a reflection of a growing desire from our community for landscapes that support both their activities but the species they share them with. And so bringing our communities with us through sharing knowledge and supporting them to restore their surroundings is at the centre of all our work.”

Jack Newton – Kickstarter Chard Reservoir LNR

Working in Environmental conservation gives me the greatest source of excitement, passion, rewards and happiness. I'm proud to be part of building a better future.”



