

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 and buildings 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

- It has been a busy and successful year across the sites. Community groups have been strengthened, volunteering programmes extended and a significant amount of grant money secured by both the SSDC Ranger team and our affiliated Friends Groups. We are in a strong position and look forward to further enhanced delivery in 2016.
- Ham Hill, Yeovil Country Park and Chard Reservoir all again secured their Green Flag Awards in the top 2 highest scoring brackets. We have enjoyed a mix of visiting judges over the years and continue to take away valuable suggestions from their visits.
- The 2015 events programme totalled 74 public events (an increase from 45 in 2014, the increase in part due to the grant funds and closer partnership working with Somerset Wildlife Trust). This was on a range of scales (large fairs and trail events, to small play schemes and storytelling) and subjects (Halloween, Dog shows, Bonfires, Wildlife and Easter) to appeal to many residents and visitors. We estimate that 9465 people (nearly double last years figure) attended these events, having direct ranger contact, and feedback is always positive. We organise events that are free, or low cost to attend, to ensure as many people and families as possible experience and enjoy the countryside and all it has to offer.
- The rangers at Ham Hill and Yeovil delivered 36 booked educational sessions to schools, having direct led contact with 1467 pupils. Further schools and groups access the sites to lead their own sessions, making use of our online educational packs and free group materials like orienteering.
- Volunteering continues to be the back bone of the countryside operation. In the last year volunteer numbers have remained stable at 2398 (2387 in 2014/2015) with the rangers

working at capacity to facilitate volunteering sessions. 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 addition to the practical volunteering the Friends Groups at Ham Hill and Yeovil have donated many hundreds of hours of grant funding work, event support expert advice and research for the ranger teams.
- The Countryside Team continue to manage the overseeing South Somerset Countryside Steering Group; a forum where stakeholders and experts can come together to ensure success against the team's overarching delivery plan. 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 1507 native trees were planted across the sites. All native species, expanding the woodland size for South Somerset. For 2015/16 free tree packs have been secured from the Woodland Trust and the Friends group at Ham Hill secured a grant of £1,000 from the International Tree Fund towards plantings in Pit Wood.
- Practical land management is delivered by the rangers, apprentices and volunteers across the sites, all inline with their 5 year land management plans. Conservation targets are monitored in a range of ways including via the annual species surveys conducted for us by the Yeovil Branch of Somerset Wildlife Trust. The rangers continue to use traditional countryside management techniques where possible including hedge laying, dry stone walling and coppicing.
- Two new apprentices started with the team in September 2014. This year for the first time we have taken on level 3 apprentices. Both Andrew and Kristy are doing incredibly well, bringing new ideas to the teams and developing and delivering their own projects on Skylarks (through Breeding Bird Surveys) and Penn Hill Park respectively.
- New web pages have been launched at www.southsomersetcountryside.com. The key feature of these new pages is the online event bookings. In contrast to previous years all of our 2015 events have been fully booked and paid for in advance. This online facility has made an astonishing difference to how we operate; we will evaluate the improved attendance and income generation from the booking system. The web pages also enable a greater variety of site literature to be downloaded and printed.
- 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. We have found that event advertisement on these feeds is sufficient to fully book most play scheme events.
- In addition to the regular annual funding income from Agri Environment schemes, Yeovil Town Council, wood sales, events and other tenants of the sites; the countryside ranger team and Friends groups also managed to submit and secure £326,468 of external funds for current and future delivery (the next 2 – 3 years) at the South Somerset sites, the individual breakdown is shown under each site.

Challenges over the year

- As is inevitable at any popular open access site, at times, particularly in the summer months, there has been the aftermath of anti-social behavior to deal with; including small fires, littering, detritus of parties & graffiti. The rangers aim to attend to the removal of all issues within one working day.
- It has been a particularly busy year at Yeovil Country Park with a number of significant grant bids submitted to compliment the year old Ninesprings Centre. The ranger team has been heavily involved and inevitably, at times, this has affected their ability to deliver and complete the practical projects on the ground.

- Dog fouling and sheep worrying are continuing issues at Ham Hill Country Park and we are now working with the Enforcement and Legal teams to investigate the possibility of a new Public Space Protection Order to help in management of the few site users that currently abuse the site.

Moldram's Ground Local Nature Reserve, Pen Selwood

- Great crested newt numbers continue to grow on site, with the greatest success being their range expansion into the new pond that was dug in 2013. Good relations have been built with adjoining residents and advice given to them on managing their land and gardens for wildlife.
- A small team of local residents 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. A local resident kindly coordinates this voluntary involvement and helps arrange task days with the visiting ranger team. Task days this year have included bracken bashing, pond clearance and tree stock management.
- Limbs from an aged oak came down, paths have been cleared and brash chipped with larger limbs left as habitat piles.
- Grass and flag iris have been removed from the ponds to create more open water and some iris have been transplanted to the lake in Yeovil Country Park.
- This winter some of the vast number of self seeded oak saplings will be dug up and transplanted to both Yeovil and Ham Hill Country Parks.

Ham Hill Country Park

- The ranger team, working with the Friends group, have secured £20,000 of Heritage Lottery grant to progress a project to re-surface a piped stream in Witcombe Valley bottom. The project will see the valley returned to its natural state and have positive outcomes for wildlife and landscape, whilst also providing new heritage interpretation for the site.
- Project income for the year through the Friends Group included: International Tree Fund (£1,000), Waitrose Community Fund (£750), Local Ham Hill Parish Council's and the Stoke Sports and Recreational Trust (£700).
- Events in the past year included a Wood Fair, community bonfire and Easter egg hunt. Current apprentice Andrew and some volunteers are delivering wildlife themed events and walks throughout the summer and the August bush craft play schemes continue to be well received.
- The rangers have been pleased to work with a range of new groups, from 50 serving Yeovilton personnel on a team building exercise for Commonwealth Day, to 25 children on series of home education group visits to understand all about the various facets of Ham Hill.
- The 2015 events calendar was re vamped and well received with a new dog show organised by volunteers in July and a Wood Fayre in September.

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 as a prospective large blue butterfly release site.

Sampson's Wood

- The Yeovil rangers continue to monitor the tree stock and manage any issues as they arise. Recently an illegal bike track was established and had to be taken down by the ranger team and notices erected.

Yeovil Country Park

- It has been an exceptionally busy year at Yeovil Country Park. At the end of October 2014 the ranger team took occupation of the newly constructed Ninesprings Centre. The building was completed on time and budget, at a final construction cost of £280,876. External funding included grants from the Veolia Environmental Trust, Yeovil Town Council, Westlands, Wessex Water, Yeovil Vision and Wellbeing of Yeovil.
- The Ninesprings Café has been established as part of the Centre and continues to perform well against its business plan. Despite an incredibly swift set up, and business opening, the café team are performing well under the management of Samantha Lane. The customer service is excellent and provides a welcoming and positive visitor experience at Yeovil Country Park.
- The Café and Centre as a whole have been received incredibly well on site. Already there is a noticeable difference in the mix of visitors coming to site. The provision of public toilets and an indoor space has made a significant difference to the range of individuals and groups that can make use of the wider country park. Local schools, play groups, pre-schools and groups are asking for led sessions and there is an increased demand for more and better literature in the park.
- A range of grants have been secured by the countryside rangers and the Friends Group to enable the delivery of a variety of public and group sessions, events and projects. Funds and their outputs include Ernest Cook Fund (5,580) for educational activities and training sessions for pupils and teachers. Awards for All (9,900) for mini play events, orienteering mapping and courses, forest school training and sessions. Grants for the Arts (£13,450 + £9,590) for art workshops for groups on three annual themes, photography courses and wood carvings for across the site. Armed Forces Community Fund (£14,298) for a range of events and activity sessions with a military theme, engaging forces families and the park community locally including Flying the Flag on Armed Forces day in June and the recent Flight and Float Day on August 21st.
- At the beginning of June we had confirmation from the Heritage Lottery Fund that our bid had been successful and with their investment of £251,200 a 3 year project, which will improve the natural heritage and visitor offer at Yeovil Country Park commenced. The key delivery elements of the project include:
 - Employment of a 3 year Community Ranger, to deliver and coordinate new activities and work programmes.
 - Enhanced volunteering opportunities for a greater diversity of individuals and groups.
 - New and better interpretation, and educational, materials, in the Centre and across the site.
 - Built repairs to Ninesprings, where the ageing infrastructure of the waterfalls and grottos needs specialist attention.
 - Habitat improvement works across the park for meadows, wetlands and woodlands.
 - A huge variety of events based in the country park but of interest to a great array of people including art sessions, adventurous activities and performances.

Chard Reservoir Local Nature Reserve

- Habitat management projects for the reed beds and native woodlands continue to progress well in the winter months. The reed beds have responded very well to previous winter works and their area has expanded.
- The volunteers under the direction of the site ranger Tim Brown, have worked tirelessly to replace the old wooden boardwalks with new stone built causeways. The stone built structures will now provide a long term solution to access across the wet areas of the site.
- We are currently updating the site leaflet and seeking funding to enable us to print the leaflet so it can be available in hard copy at the LIC and on site.
- Final repairs were made to the reservoir dam structure and the dam wall fenced along the Chaffcombe Road. The reservoir water levels are monitored and recorded monthly, these are reviewed at the annual reservoir inspection completed by an external inspecting engineer in August.
- Volunteers are heavily involved in the management of the site for around 4 days per week. They assist in a range of tasks including litter picking, bird hide opening, practical land management, nest box surveying and maintenance and larger projects like fencing and causeway works. Volunteers are vital to reduce lone working by the reservoir ranger. Lufton College continue to be regular attendees and have helped across a range of practical projects.
- The sites 5 year land management plan requires revision and will be completed over the winter months in conjunction with the Countryside Steering Group.

Headlines for the next 6 months

- The Heritage Lottery Project in Yeovil will progress now that the Community Ranger has been appointed.
- The silt trap at Chard will be excavated and restored so it functions well for the winter rains.
- The Rangers will carry out site repairs, maintenance, and habitat management works over the winter months after the busy summer events season.
- Permissions and public consultation will commence for the Ham Hill Witcombe Lottery project and PSPO proposal.
- The Apprentices will finalise their project work and complete their assessments as their 18 months with us come to an end.
- The Ninesprings Café will have its first annual review.
- The Countryside Service maintains contact with the Somerset Local Nature Partnership and Cranborne Chase AONB on relevant items.

Financial Implications

In 2015/16 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 Centres and the new Ninesprings Cafe. A team of 5.8 Full Time Equivalent countryside staff and 1 Full Time Equivalent Café manager plus a casual café workforce manage the service to a net expenditure budget of £253,720. The overall budget includes target annual income generation of £213,970.

Council Plan Implications

The work of the countryside service delivers for the following targets.

COUNCIL 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.

COUNCIL 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 a minimum of 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. Easy access trails are promoted at the largest sites. The website contains relevant information and assistance for planning visits and Access for All are used to advise the rangers on proposed works and projects.