

Update Report from the Countryside Service

Assistant Director: Steve Joel, Health and Well Being
Service Manager: Katy Menday, Countryside Manager
Lead Officer: Katy Menday, Countryside Manager
Contact Details: Katy.menday@southsomerset.gov.uk or (01935) 462522

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.

Across the South Somerset Countryside Sites

- It has been a challenging year for the Countryside service, as a reduction in staffing cover across the sites (in the absence of the apprenticeship scheme) and other staffing absences has seen the service working at full stretch since spring 2016. Despite this the delivery had been astonishing and there has been increased and enhanced delivery particularly across the areas of volunteering and events.
- Ham Hill, Yeovil Country Park and Chard Reservoir all again secured their Green Flag Awards in the top 2 highest scoring brackets. Ham Hill also retained its Green Heritage accreditation.
- In 2016 the team delivered 111 events. This was on a range of scales (large fairs and trail events, to small play schemes and storytelling) and subjects (Halloween, medieval fairs, bat walks, sapling pre-school sessions, military style missions and popular spring and Easter events) to appeal to many residents and visitors. We calculate that 11,281 people (children and adults) 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 event delivery this last year is massively enhanced due to the appointment and delivery of the Community Ranger in Yeovil Country Park; Becky Russell.

	2015	2016
Events	45	111
Events participants	5,071	11,281
Educational visits	24	72
Pupil participants	971	1,310
Volunteer days	2,387	2,711

- The Rangers at Ham Hill and Yeovil Country Park have hosted 72 formal school visits seeing 1310 pupils from mainly key stage 2, but with new interest from key stage 1 seeing pre-schoolers having their first forest school experiences. 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. The first Schools Day was hosted at Chard Reservoir to generate an interest in field study sessions on site.
- Volunteering continues to be the back bone of the countryside operation. In the past three years volunteer days donated have steadily increased from 1601 to 2387 and in the last year 2711. 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 linked to event development and centre improvements. 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 and research for the ranger teams. The groups provide advice, support, ideas and a forum for the users of the parks. One year ago the Chard Volunteers constituted their group to enable them to drive forward projects and fundraising at the Nature Reserve. The ambition of three groups is fabulous, and ensures that we make best use of all opportunities presented.
- In the winter months 954 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.
- 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 the Yeovil Branch of Somerset Wildlife Trust. 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. All events are booked via www.southsomersetcountryside.com and most 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 and we are aiming to improve our tweeting this coming year!

- Regular annual funding income is secured from Agri Environment schemes, Yeovil Town Council, wood sales, events, grazing tenants and other licenses. The Rangers and Friends group 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 delivery of larger lottery funded projects we do not currently have any larger bids submitted.

Moldram's Ground Local Nature Reserve, Pen Selwood (Area East)

- 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 further member of the ranger team is currently undertaking their dormice handling certificate so we are able to monitor the dormouse population on site. Somerset Wildlife Trust have identified some of the priority species listed in the September State of Nature report: on SSDC countryside sites this means a continued focus on habitat management for dormice, great crested newts, bitterns and an array of butterflies across all sites.
- 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.
- The 5 year management plan has been updated in 2016 and the work program will be delivered by the ranger team and volunteers for the site. The management aims for the site remain around maintaining the public facility with wildlife protection and enhancement.

Sampson's Wood (Area South)

- The Yeovil rangers continue to monitor the tree stock, maintain public access and manage any issues as they arise.

Yeovil Country Park (Area South)

- We have enjoyed an exceptional year at Yeovil Country Park as the Heritage Lottery delivery of the V3 InVolve, Visit, Volunteer project is fully underway. Community Ranger Becky Russell has made significant inroads to the busy delivery plan. In summer 2016 alone Becky has led school visits from 17 groups, meeting 556 pupils. The response from primary and preschool providers in Yeovil has be fantastic and as the figures show many hundreds of children are benefiting from exploring the greenspace on their doorstep, learning about the wildlife and history and getting to grips with forest school activities. Becky has made positive links with the secondary schools and runs specialist pupil development weeks across a variety of curriculum areas. Additionally teacher training sessions have been delivered in science and forest school sessions, giving teachers, and teaching assistants the confidence to use the country park resources.
- Many groups have benefited 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) and many uniformed groups.
- The built heritage restoration work in Ninesprings has struck a chord with many people over the winter months when a great deal of clearance work and repairs were carried out by a ranger and a team of volunteers. We had an astonishing response, particularly on social media, to the work illustrating what an important place Ninesprings is in many people's lives, and how much they are enjoying seeing it being restored. This new volunteer project is diversifying and increasing volunteering opportunities on site, it is providing skills training for the participants in woodland management, and also building techniques, as they point brickwork and replace missing masonry.
- The ranger team delivered a mix of well received events, increasing their popular trail events in the last year including a fairytale trail at May half term. Links with performing arts students at Yeovil College saw real life mermaids and costumed characters delighting the hundreds of children that

came through the park that week. Additionally the V3 project has developed 36 new events that were delivered this summer, with 1,122 people benefitting from targeted and specialist activities including wood carving, printing workshops, photography, toddlers sessions and a whole range of other activities.

- A series of Yeovil Yaffle Mission events were delivered in August for 8-12 year olds funded by the Armed Forces Community Covenant Fund. The day long events offered a variety of activities for the age group including tree climbing, fire lighting, army drill, den building and nighttime bat walks and storytelling.
- The Ninesprings Café has continued to flourish and also benefited from the array of activities and events on offer in the country park.
- Land at Riverside Park will be added to the Country Park as an off-site contribution by developer Barratt Homes at Wyndham Park and managed for people and wildlife by the existing ranger team.

Chard Reservoir Local Nature Reserve (Area West)

- Practical site works have included further ongoing repairs to the reservoir structures, winter woodland and reed bed management and summer shoreline works and angling pitch improvements.
- The practical volunteer team has formed a small constituted group to enable them to branch out into other projects for the site. They are fundraising to install a woodland play trail / learning zone near to the bird hide for school groups and visiting families. They also plan to create and erect a series of small interpretation panels throughout the site that explain the various heritage features of interest. The group has featured in the Waitrose green token Community Matters funding program, and looks forward to using this money to start work on the site improvement schemes.
- The practical volunteers have exposed and restored the old boat house on site and have visited Chard museum to gather information for a new interpretation panel.
- Partnering with Magdalen Farm a schools day was delivered in July, when local primary aged children from the 5 closest schools were invited to site to experience a range of habitat linked field studies with educational staff from Magdalen Farm. 80 pupils attended from 2 schools and feedback from the teachers and pupils alike was very positive. It is hoped that the developing woodland learning and play zone should help encourage and support future visits from local schools.
- Volunteers are heavily involved in the management of the site for around 3 days per week. Lufton Cambian College are weekly attendees and have helped across a range of practical projects.
- Chard countryside day was well received in July, and was our busiest site event yet, with an estimated 600 people through the free activity based event. The site ranger planned 4 play schemes for the various school holidays, but sadly we could not generate the interest to fill places on them, and so they didn't run. In 2017 we are delivering a second drop in activity day in August, as this seems to be the type of event favoured by families in the area.

Ham Hill Country Park (Area North)

- The ranger is working with the Friends group to continue delivery towards the reinstatement of a historic stream in the bottom of Witcombe Valley. All the permissions are in place but work has been delayed until June 2017 to allow for drier ground conditions in the valley for the main excavation works. The project is funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund and a Medieval Fair was held on Saturday 3 September to celebrate its launch with information on the medieval village that used to exist in the valley. The fair was well received with over 1000 visitors in the morning, but high winds and heavy rain from 1pm sadly ended the event early.

- Over the winter the ranger and volunteers worked with the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group on their “Slow the Flow” project to address local flooding issues in the hamstone villages by implementation of brushwood dams and silt traps in Witcombe Valley and the adjoining woodlands. The work is featured in a film currently being shown in Bridgwater Library.
- Events this last year included the second 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 at the Hill including the Full Monty Race and the Ham and Lyme distance run. We took the decision to cancel the wood fair for capacity reasons in 2016 after the serious accident of our colleague Jon. Looking forward we hope to start beginners running classes on site and BuggyFit classes. Appropriate commercial use of the Centre is encouraged for workshops like willow weaving and crafting.
- The rangers and Friends have worked together to create a new self-guided Ham Hill Geology Trail in memory of local geologist and past Ham Hill Friends Chairman Hugh Prudden. Hugh’s input to Ham Hill, and Somerset geology generally, was huge and the trail seeks to take people around some of the key elements on site. Funding was secured from 2 external funders and the trail was launched in October’s Earth Sciences week.
- Ash Dieback has been confirmed on site, manifesting in our younger trees. There is no specific directed management requested by the Forestry Commission. We are monitoring the spread and most importantly, to enable the proactive management of the disease, keeping an eye on our mature ash tree stock to assess if any specimens display natural immunity and would therefore be of genetic use to plant ecologists.
- The Duke of Cornwall visited his land (the Northern Spur area of the Country Park) in February and we were asked to discuss land management of the hillfort and the challenges it can present. The Team was able to present The Duke with a jar of Ham Hill honey at the end of his visit.
- Working with the Friends Group we have submitted a bid for funding to cover the costs of installing a CCTV system to cover the private loop road and car parks in an effort to stop car break ins on site.
- Later in 2017 the intention is to install a woodland play area and learning zone in an area of hazel coppice; to cover the costs of this a grant bid has been submitted with the Friends Group to the Postcode Local Trust.
- This past winter the rangers and volunteers have completed the restoration woodland planting in Pit Wood; restoring the woodland to its historic shape and size. Now works will focus on coppicing and enhancement of areas for priority species like Nightingales. Other winter works have seen paths widened and car park surfaces improved to help our visitors navigate site in the muddier winter months.
- The Friends of Ham Hill now create a quarterly newsletter about the site; written by the volunteers it provides a summary of the practical works and events delivered across the seasons.
- The popularity of the country park does bring with it issues relating to littering and anti-social behavior mainly in the summer months, and dangerous parking throughout the year. The ranger team is aware of these issues and tries to manage for them where at all possible. The introduction of the district wide Public Space Protection Order (PSPO) in South Somerset gives the ranger team new powers of enforcement for dog owners that fail to pick up after their dog and who refuse to put their dog on a lead in with livestock. A public awareness program will precede the start of enforcement of the new PSPO at Ham Hill.

Eastfield Local Nature Reserve, High Ham (Area North)

- 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. A newly funded Heritage Lottery Project called “Blues and Browns” will focus conservation management on particular at risk butterfly species.

Headlines for the next 6 months

- The V3 Heritage Lottery project in Yeovil will continue with its spring / summer program of works including new center and site interpretation.
- Event delivery for 2017 will commence taking on board feedback from last 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 2017.
- The Ham Hill Witcombe stream project details will be finalised and works commence in the late spring of 2017.
- The play zone and interpretation panels will be progressed at Chard Reservoir.
- Infrastructure repairs at Ham Hill and Yeovil Country Parks will be costed and prioritised including; the tarmac cycle way in Yeovil, the lake edge in Ninesprings and fencing and rampart pathways at Ham Hill.

Financial Implications

In 2017/2018 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 annual income generation of £259,970.

Corporate Priority Implications

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

- Environment - Maintain Country Parks and open spaces to promote good mental and physical health.
- Health and Communities - Help people to live well by enabling quality cultural, leisure, play, sport & healthy lifestyle facilities & activities.

Carbon Emissions & Adapting to 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.
