

BULLETIN TO INFRASTRUCTURE SERVICES COMMITTEE – 20 JUNE 2019

2018/19 ANNUAL REPORT OF ABERDEENSHIRE COUNCIL RANGER SERVICE

1 Recommendation

The Committee is recommended to:

- 1.1 Acknowledge the continuing work of the Ranger Service and its role in the promotion and protection of Aberdeenshire's Natural and Cultural Heritage, as shown in the Ranger Service Annual Report in Appendix 1.**

2 Background / Discussion

Background – Ranger Service

- 2.1 Aberdeenshire Council Ranger Service raises awareness and understanding of Aberdeenshire's natural and cultural heritage and promotes responsible access to the countryside. This is in alignment with other Ranger Services and follows National Ranger Service Aims identified by Scottish Natural Heritage. Aberdeenshire Council Ranger Service Strategy 2017-2020 identifies aims and objectives to deliver Scottish Government and Aberdeenshire Council policies, plans and strategies.
- 2.2 The Ranger Service provides first hand provision of information, interpretation, advice and guidance on Aberdeenshire's natural and cultural heritage for residents and visitors. The Service contributes to the monitoring, management and enhancement of environmental assets to promote and encourage engagement with Aberdeenshire's outdoors in a responsible and sustainable way. The Service also contributes to a range of Council, partner and community initiatives which support wider corporate and national objectives.
- 2.3 The Service is part of the Specialist Services Team, within Planning & Building Standards. The Ranger Service has six full time equivalent (FTE) Rangers, one based in each administrative area of Aberdeenshire and is line managed by a part time (0.6 FTE) Co-ordinator. The Bennachie Visitor Centre is staffed by a part time (0.5 FTE) Warden, part time (0.7 FTE) Seasonal/Relief Assistants and one (0.27 FTE) Cleaner.

Summary of Annual Report for 2018/2019

- 2.4 The Annual Report covers the period of 1 April 2018 to 31 March 2019.
- 2.5 The Ranger Service works within the framework of its 2017 – 2020 Strategy. The aims and objectives of the Strategy were planned to reflect Scottish Government and Aberdeenshire Council strategies, plans and policies which form the Golden Thread from the Scottish Government to delivery on the ground.

- 2.6 A detailed breakdown of achievements is contained in **Appendix 1**, however, a summary is shown in the table below:

	2018-2019		2017-2018	
Ranger Activity	Sessions	Attendees	Sessions	Attendees
Public Events	85	2,524	89	2,566
Community Groups	162	2,893	127	2,080
Schools	187	4,405	220	4,849
TOTAL	434	9,822	436	9,495

- 2.7 The Ranger Service delivered 73 sessions for 377 disadvantaged or otherwise vulnerable adults and children. This is an increase from 2017/2018 when 57 sessions were undertaken with 267 attendees and reflects a move by the Ranger Service to increase accessibility for disadvantaged and vulnerable groups or individuals.
- 2.8 The Ranger Service delivered 76 volunteer sessions offering volunteering opportunities for 1,089 adults and children providing 1,510 volunteering hours. This is an increase in the number of sessions and volunteers from 2017/18 at 72 and 1,049 respectively and reflects a focus to increase volunteering opportunities within the Ranger Service.
- 2.9 Working with partners, staff at the Bennachie Visitor Centre helped get it crowned the Tourist Hotspot of the Year at the Pride of Inverurie Awards, while it was also shortlisted as a finalist in the Best Visitor Attraction category at the Aberdeen City and Shire Tourism Awards. Following an assessment by Visit Scotland, the Centre also maintained its 4 star status.
- 2.10 The Head of Finance and Monitoring Officer within Business Services have been consulted in the preparation of this Bulletin, had no comments to make and are satisfied that the Bulletin complies with the Scheme of Governance and relevant legislation.

3 Scheme of Governance

- 3.1 The Committee is able to consider this item in terms of Section F.7.1 of the List of Committee Powers in Part 2A of the Scheme of Governance as it relates to the scrutiny of the activity of the Aberdeenshire Council Ranger Service.

4 Implications and Risk

- 4.1 An Equality Impact Assessment is not required because the Bulletin is to inform the Committee on performance and there will be no differential impact, as a result of the Bulletin, on people with protected characteristics.
- 4.2 There are no staffing and financial implications arising from this Bulletin but trends are used to inform future budget planning.
- 4.3 No risks have been identified as relevant to this matter on a Corporate Level (Corporate Risk Register).

4.4 The following Risks have been identified as relevant to this matter on a Strategic Level (Directorate Risk Registers):

- *Climate Change*: Conserve the natural and historic environment by protecting and enhancing landscape, biodiversity and historic assets. It is recognised that there is a heightened risk of the natural environment being damaged or lost as a result of climate change. The Ranger Service will continue to provide support, advice, and promote best practice to residents, visitors, groups and communities within Aberdeenshire, including children and young people, to ensure that they are aware of the natural environment so that it is preserved and biodiversity is enhanced.

Stephen Archer

Director of Infrastructure Services

Report prepared by Fiona Banks, Ranger Service Co-ordinator

Date: 13 May 2019

ABERDEENSHIRE COUNCIL RANGER SERVICE ANNUAL REPORT 2018/19

1.0 2017-2020 Ranger Strategy Aim 1 – Deliver a Programme of Public Events

The Ranger Service delivered a programme of 85 events attended by 2,524 residents and visitors to Aberdeenshire to raise awareness and understanding of Aberdeenshire’s natural and cultural heritage. Events included support to local and regional festivals. Fourteen sessions were held which provided opportunities for volunteers to protect and enhance biodiversity.

Outcome: Participants gained a greater knowledge and understanding of Aberdeenshire’s natural and cultural heritage, resulting in them being more likely to be engaged with their local environment helping to make it a better place to live, work and visit.

Aberdeenshire Performance Indicator	2018/19	2017/18
Number of public events	85	89
Number of attendees	2,524	2,566
Number of public volunteer events (included in total above)	14	21
Number of volunteers	96	256
Number of volunteer hours	628.75	484

Case Study 1 – Beachwatch 2018

The Ranger Service delivered public events in Banff and Buchan and Buchan to support the national Beachwatch programme in September 2018. This national beach cleaning and litter survey programme is an annual event, now in its 25th year. The Ranger Service worked with public volunteers at the events to clean local beaches and record the litter found. The results were passed on to the Marine Conservation Society and contributed to the national recording of beach litter.

Outcome: increased awareness and understanding of beach litter and the threat it poses to marine wildlife. Providing volunteering opportunities as part of a national programme, and helping improve the local environment contributing towards making it a better place to live, work and visit.

2.0 Ranger Strategy 2017-20 Aim 2 – Enhance Community Learning and Participation

The Ranger Service worked with local communities and organised groups to raise the awareness and understanding of our natural and cultural heritage at 162 sessions attended by 2,893 adults and children. The Ranger Service provided opportunities to protect and enhance biodiversity within communities at 37 sessions for volunteers.

The service has been particularly focused on increasing accessibility for those who are disadvantaged or vulnerable and delivered 73 sessions for 377 people who are classed as disadvantaged.

The work of Aberdeenshire Council Ranger Service was promoted at a European level when it hosted a site visit for delegates from the 2018 Europarc Conference. The delegates were from a number of European countries and had a focus of reconnecting people with nature, with a particular emphasis on youth engagement.

Outcome: Communities and groups gained a better understanding and awareness of their local environment, contributed to its management, biodiversity and biological records and became more likely to be engaged with their local environment. This contributed towards making the area of a higher quality and a more attractive place to live, work and visit.

Aberdeenshire Performance Indicator	2018/19	2017/18
Number of community/group sessions	162	127
Number of attendees	2,893	2,080
Number of community/group volunteer sessions(included in total above)	37	22
Number of volunteers	327	244
Number of volunteer hours	628.75	554
Number of sessions for disadvantaged or vulnerable (included in total above)	51	27
Number of disadvantaged or vulnerable attendees	314	191

Case Study 2 – Al Amal group (Syrian Refugees), Haddo Country Park.

The Ranger Service worked in partnership with Backbone CIC, Community Learning and Development resettlement team and community volunteers to deliver an outdoor learning session with the Al Amal group of Syrian Refugees at Haddo Country Park. The purpose of the session was to introduce the New Scots to our countryside and provide the knowledge and confidence to enable opportunities to enjoy independent visits to the countryside. The group was made aware of the Scottish Outdoor Access Code (SOAC) and the Ranger Service programme of public events.

Outcome: Through a supported visit to the countryside the group feels better informed and has gained the confidence to undertake their own visits and join the Ranger Service for public events, helping them to make connections in the wider community and environment. This has helped make Aberdeenshire a better place to live and work for the group.

3.0 Ranger Strategy 2017-20 Aim 3 – Support Schools and Other Environmental Education Providers

The Ranger Service provided advice, support and expertise to early years groups, primary and secondary schools and other education providers in the delivery of environmental education and outdoor learning.

The Ranger Service has been focused on delivering Continuing Professional Development (CPD) to teachers and early years practitioners to provide the skills, knowledge and confidence to enable independent visits to local sites for environmental education.

Outcome: Participants gained knowledge and understanding of their local environment, and are more likely to be engaged with it and help conserve and enhance it in the future.

Aberdeenshire Performance Indicator	2018/19	2017/18
Number of school sessions	187	220
Number of attendees (children)	4,405	4,849
Number of volunteer school sessions	25	29
Number of volunteers (included in total above)	666	549
Number of volunteer hours	637.25	588
Number of school sessions for disadvantaged or vulnerable (included in total above)	10	27
Number of disadvantaged or vulnerable attendees	58	69

The increased focus on working with groups who are disadvantaged and providing community volunteering opportunities has resulted in a lower number of school sessions being provided. The year 2018/19 also saw a joint working project with Early Years Development and North East Scotland Outdoor Learning Group (NESOLG) to deliver a programme of CPD “Early Years in Nature” to 15 Early Years Practitioners across Aberdeenshire which reduced availability for school sessions but has enabled more independent visits to the outdoors by pre-school establishments.

Case Study 3 – Early Years in Nature, delivering CPD to Early Years Practitioners

Working in partnership with NESOLG and Early Years team, the Ranger Service supported the delivery of CPD to 15 participants from Aberdeenshire on the Early Years in Nature programme. The course gives the participants knowledge and understanding on the key elements of using the outdoors with pre-school children with the purpose of giving the confidence to increase outdoor learning by Early Years Practitioners. The Ranger Service worked alongside the participants at local sites to support the on the ground delivery of skills and knowledge shared on the course.

Outcome: Sustainable use of the outdoors for learning through increased understanding of basic wildlife, habitats and strategies and activities for outdoor learning amongst early years staff. The course has been very successful in increasing the use of outdoor sites and many staff are now operating effective outdoor learning in their own settings throughout Aberdeenshire. This will help ensure children are aware of the natural environment from a young age and help to protect and promote it in a sustainable way so that future generations can continue to benefit from it.

4.0 Ranger Strategy 2017-20 Aim 4 – Protect and Enhance Natural Heritage

The Ranger Service worked with colleagues and partners on projects and initiatives to protect and enhance Aberdeenshire’s natural heritage. The Service delivered information on the Scottish Outdoor Access Code (SOAC) at 152 sessions helping to inform residents and visitors on rights and responsibilities when accessing the countryside.

Outcome: Aberdeenshire’s natural heritage is better protected and biodiversity has been enhanced. Residents and visitors gained a greater knowledge and understanding of Aberdeenshire’s biodiversity and contributed to its management, enhancement and biological records through volunteering opportunities.

The Ranger Service also worked with colleagues and partners on the following projects and initiatives to protect and enhance Aberdeenshire’s biodiversity: Aberdeenshire Biodiversity Champions, British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) Beached Bird Survey, Buglife’s B-Lines, Local Nature Conservation Sites (monitoring), North East Scotland Biodiversity Action Plan’s Camera Trapping, Open Air Laboratories (OPAL) Surveys, Pollinator Strategy, Saving Scotland’s Red Squirrels, Scottish Wildcat Action, The Wild North East - Scotland’s Natural Gem short film, UK Biodiversity Action Plan/Cairngorms Nature Action Plan – priority Lepidoptera species.

Case Study 4 – Volunteer recording of priority Lepidoptera species in the Cairngorms National Park.

Lepidoptera are good indicators of how the natural environment is responding to climate and habitat change. As such it is important to have robust baseline data from which to monitor changes and the impact of conservation work to improve habitats. The Ranger Service has been working in partnership with private estate Rangers to give volunteers the skills and knowledge to set, monitor and make records from moth traps.

Outcome: Increased opportunities for volunteering and increasing skills and knowledge with volunteers. Increased submission of biological records through the North East Scotland Biological Records Centre (NESBReC) to national databases. This contributes to monitoring habitat improvements, thereby improving the quality of our environment as a place to live, work and visit.

4.0 Ranger Strategy 2017-20 Aim 5 – Support, Sustain and Enhance Facilities at The Bennachie Visitor Centre

The Ranger Service worked in partnership with the Bennachie Centre Trust, Forestry Commission Scotland (now Forestry and Land Scotland) and the Bailies of Bennachie to deliver a quality experience for visitors to the Bennachie Visitor Centre (BVC).

Outcome: Visitors had an enjoyable and informative experience, gaining knowledge and understanding of Bennachie and its natural and cultural heritage.

Aberdeenshire Performance Indicator	2018/19	2017/18
Number of visitors (people counter, not calibrated) <i>(including Ranger Service attendees)</i>	35,379 (37,065)	40,040 (n/a)
BVC Facebook likes	1,978	1,630
Number of public events at BVC <i>(including Ranger Service events)</i>	5 (11)	17 (n/a)
Number of sessions at BVC for schools and groups <i>(including Ranger Service schools and groups)</i>	6 (60)	68 (n/a)
Number of training/workshops/meetings at BVC	55	65

2018/19 figures in brackets are reported here for information but have already been counted under Strategy aims 1-4.

It has been a very successful year for the Bennachie Visitor Centre. It was crowned the Tourist Hotspot of the Year at the Pride of Inverurie Awards in August 2018 beating off competition from Inverurie Golf Club and Castle Fraser. The Centre was also shortlisted as a finalist in the Best Visitor Attraction category at the Aberdeen City and Shire Tourism Awards, with it only being pipped to the post by Peterhead Prison Museum. A quality assurance assessment of the Centre was undertaken in 2018 by Visit Scotland under their revised Visitor Quality Assurance Scheme. The Centre maintained its 4 star rating and actions have been identified to make improvements to maintain and further enhance the visitor experience. The Ranger Service will continue to do this in 2019/20 in partnership with the Bennachie Centre Trust, Forestry and Land Scotland, and the Bailies of Bennachie.

5.0 Ranger Strategy 2017-20 Aim 6 – Continuous Improvement

The Ranger Service continued to ensure that delivery was high quality, continually improving, efficient and responsive to local peoples' needs.

The Ranger Service has been working to deliver the Ranger Service Strategy 2017-2020 for the second year. The Aims and Objectives of the Strategy were drawn together to reflect Scottish Government and Aberdeenshire Council strategies, plans and policies which form the Golden Thread from the Scottish Government to delivery on the ground for our communities.

The Ranger Service is continuing to seek ways to reduce our carbon footprint and this year conducted interviews for the seasonal and relief Bennachie Visitor Centre positions by Skype rather than in person, saving four journeys by car. We are also seeking to reduce our use of paper and increase efficiency by moving bookings for 2019 events to Eventbrite and use of social media for promotion of events. The Service is now also actively seeking donations towards meeting the costs for providing the public events programme.

Members of the Ranger Service attended a number of training courses and seminars to increase knowledge and skills, keep up to date with legislation, guidelines and research. They also benefited from examples of best practice to ensure a quality delivery of service. Aberdeenshire Council Rangers are key members of the Scottish Countryside Ranger Association (north-east) and deliver a programme of CPD for Rangers across Aberdeenshire.

Partnership working and contributions to a wide variety of local and national initiatives and events continued to offer benefits of marketing, promotion and reach; networking and collaboration; and ensuring the most effective use of resources:

Local and national festivals and initiatives included:

Ballater Walking Festival, Beachwatch, Big Butterfly Count, Big Garden Birdwatch, Cairngorms Nature Big Weekend, Moth Night, National Nestbox Day, National Meadows Day, North East Scotland Bioblitz, Scotland's Nature Festival, Scottish Archaeology Month, Wellbeing Festival and Wild About Aden.

External partners included:

Aberdeen City Council, Aberdeen Foyer, Aberdeenshire Astronomical Society, Aberdeenshire Council Social Work Teams, Backbone CIC, Bailies of Bennachie, Balmoral Ranger Service, Bat Conservation Trust, Belhelvie Community Trust, Bennachie Centre Trust, Butterfly Conservation, Cairngorms National Park Authority, Centrica, Chapelton Community, Donside Camera Club, East Grampian Coastal Partnership, Forestry and Land Scotland, Formartine Partnership, Friends of Denlethen Woods, Glen Tanar Ranger Service, Greener Kemnay, Haddo Visitor Services, Huntly and District Development Trust, Invercauld Estate, Marine Conservation Society, National Trust for Scotland, North East Scotland Biodiversity Partnership, North East Scotland College, NHS, Outdoor Woodland Learning Scotland (OWLS), Port Erroll Heritage Society, Portlethen Moss Conservation Group, RSPB, Scottish Countryside Rangers Association, Scottish Natural Heritage, Scottish Wildlife Trust, Sustrans, Taqa, University of Aberdeen.