

BULLETIN TO INFRASTRUCTURE SERVICES COMMITTEE – 18 JUNE 2020

2019/20 ANNUAL REPORT ON ABERDEENSHIRE COUNCIL'S RANGER SERVICE

1 Purpose of the Bulletin

- 1.1 To inform the Committee of the activity of the Ranger Service for the period 1 April 2019 to 31 March 2020 through the presentation of the Aberdeenshire Council Ranger Service Annual Report, as shown in **Appendix 1**.

2 Background

- 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 the 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 the Planning & Environment Service. 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.
- 2.4 The Annual Report has been brought to this Committee in order to inform members of the activity the Ranger Service has undertaken in relation to the above policies, plans and strategies. This is the first Committee which the Bulletin has been presented to. It is intended that the Bulletin will also be presented to the Sustainability Committee due to the work which the Ranger Service undertakes in respect of sustainable development and climate change.

3 Discussion

Summary of Annual Report for 2019/2020

- 3.1 The Ranger Service works within the framework of its 2017–2020 Strategy. The aims and objectives of the Strategy were planned to reflect the Scottish Government and Aberdeenshire Council strategies, plans and policies which form the Golden Thread from the Scottish Government to delivery on the ground.
- 3.2 A detailed breakdown of achievements is contained in **Appendix 1**. However, a summary is shown in the table below:

Ranger Activity	2019-2020		2018-2019	
	Sessions	Attendees	Sessions	Attendees
Public Events	109	3,067	85	2,524
Community Groups	124	1,893	162	2,893
Schools	158	4,620	187	4,405
TOTAL	391	9,580	434	9,822

- 3.3 As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic the Ranger Service cancelled 22 public events, community group and school sessions planned for March 2020.
- 3.4 The Ranger Service maintained accessibility by delivering 51 sessions for 312 disadvantaged or otherwise vulnerable adults and children.
- 3.5 The Ranger Service delivered 61 volunteer sessions offering volunteering opportunities for 734 adults and children providing 1,271 volunteering hours. During this period the Ranger Service developed two Ranger Service Volunteer job profiles and successfully recruited five volunteers.
- 3.6 The Ranger Service delivered 42 sessions with a focus on health and wellbeing benefits, including sessions to support the National Health Service Wellbeing Festival. This reflects a focus on raising awareness of the health benefits of engaging with the outdoors and increasing confidence amongst people to access the outdoors.

4 Council Priorities, Implications and Risk

- 4.1 The Bulletin helps deliver Council Priority 5 – Encourage active lifestyles and promote well-being with a focus on obesity and mental health.

The Bulletin helps deliver Council Priority 11 – Protect our special environment, including tackling climate change by reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

- 4.2 The table below shows whether risks and implications apply in relation to this Bulletin:

Subject	Yes	No	N/A
Financial		x	
Staffing		x	
Equalities		x	

Fairer Scotland Duty		x	
Town Centre First		x	
Sustainability		x	
Children and Young People's Rights and Wellbeing		x	

- 4.3 An Equality Impact Assessment is not required because this Bulletin is only to inform the Committee on the performance of the Ranger Service and does not have a differential impact on any of the protected characteristics.
- 4.4 There are no specific staffing or financial implications arising from this Bulletin, but trends are used to inform future budget planning.
- 4.5 No risks have been identified as relevant to this matter on a Corporate Level (Corporate Risk Register).
- 4.6 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.

5 Scheme of Governance

- 5.1 The Head of Finance and Monitoring Officer within Business Services have been consulted in the preparation of this Bulletin and had no comments to make and are satisfied that the Bulletin complies with the [Scheme of Governance](#) and relevant legislation.
- 5.2 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 the Bulletin allows scrutiny and review of the activity of the Aberdeenshire Council Ranger Service.

Stephen Archer
Director of Infrastructure Services

Bulletin prepared by Fiona Banks, Ranger Service Co-ordinator
Date: 24 April 2020

List of Appendices

Appendix 1 – Aberdeenshire Council Ranger Service Annual Report 2019/20

ABERDEENSHIRE COUNCIL RANGER SERVICE ANNUAL REPORT 2019/20

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

The Ranger Service delivered a programme of 109 events attended by 3,067 residents and visitors to Aberdeenshire to raise awareness and understanding of Aberdeenshire’s natural and cultural heritage. Events included a wild café, bike rides, beach cleans, bird watches, wellbeing and mental health walks, pond dipping, rock pooling, bat and moth evenings, and pollinator awareness.

Events included support to local and regional festivals, including Climate Week North East, National Bog Day, Aberdeenshire Wellbeing Festival and National Nest Box Week. Unfortunately, the Service had to cancel eight planned public event sessions due to the Covid-19 outbreak. These sessions were community volunteer events with Greenspace Officers to plant trees and wildflowers at community sites.

During this reporting period a regular Ranger Service Volunteer was on sick leave and unable to contribute hours to the service as she had done in previous years.

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	2019/20	2018/19
Number of public events	109	85
Number of attendees	3,067	2,524
Number of public volunteer events (included in total above)	22	14
Number of volunteers	115	96
Number of volunteer hours	275	244

Case Study 1 – Bird Box Building in Aberdeenshire Council Libraries

The Ranger Service worked in partnership with Aberdeenshire Council Library Service to offer nest box building sessions in Libraries across Aberdeenshire during National Nestbox Week. This provided the Ranger Service with an accessible community setting from which to run the sessions from and engage with new audiences. Most of the sessions were booked to capacity and the response from attendees and Library staff was very positive. The Ranger Service will continue to develop this partnership and deliver future sessions on this and other topics at Aberdeenshire Libraries.

Outcome: New audiences engaged with Ranger Service activities and development of a positive working relationship with the Library Service. Increased nesting locations for local birds to mitigate the impact of local habitat loss, improving local biodiversity, and contributing towards making Aberdeenshire a better place to live, work and visit.

2 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 124 sessions attended by 1,893 adults and children. Six community group sessions were cancelled due to the Covid-19 outbreak.

A reduction in the number of group sessions is a reflection of a move by the Service to offer support and guidance to holiday, out of school clubs and similar organisations to enable self-led sessions. This allows the Ranger Team to focus their face to face time on sessions requiring specialist skills and knowledge across all our user groups.

Community group sessions included, 50+ walking groups, Shared Lives, Home Start, Youth Services, Community Learning and Development, Community Centres, Home School Group, and Social Work.

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	2019/20	2018/19
Number of community/group sessions	124	162
Number of attendees	1,893	2,893
Number of community/group volunteer sessions(included in total above)	26	37
Number of volunteers	236	327
Number of volunteer hours	518.5	628.75
Number of sessions for disadvantaged or vulnerable (included in total above)	34	51
Number of disadvantaged or vulnerable attendees	243	314

Case Study 2 – Our Natural Heritage Project with Backbone CIC and New Scots

The James Hutton Institute's 2018 use of the outdoors report shows overall that population groups least likely to visit the outdoors are non-white minority ethnic groups. For families newly arrived from a war-zone in a very different part of the world, with little or no English, the difficulties in enjoying the outdoors are magnified. Building on previous sessions with the Ranger Service, Backbone CIC has been working with the Al-Amal group of refugees from Syria to identify potential leaders for outdoor visits. The Ranger Service has continued to work with the group leaders to share skills, knowledge and techniques of leading outdoor sessions to enable sustainable independent enjoyment of our outdoors.

Outcome: The group leaders will have the skills, knowledge and confidence to undertake their own outings to various outdoor sites across Aberdeenshire. This will help the group to access the health and wellbeing benefits of visiting the outdoors, develop understanding of the natural environment and countryside, and how to access it safely and responsibly. This has helped make Aberdeenshire a better place to live and work for the group.

3 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. Topics covered in school sessions included, citizen science projects, night sky, plants, invertebrates, rock pools, litter survey, sea and seashore, freshwater invertebrates, land use through time, and wildlife garden development. Eight school sessions were cancelled due to the Covid-19 outbreak.

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

Aberdeenshire Performance Indicator	2019/20	2018/19
Number of school sessions	158	187
Number of attendees (children)	4,620	4,405
Number of volunteer school sessions	13	25
Number of volunteers (included in total above)	383	666
Number of volunteer hours	477.5	637.25
Number of school sessions for disadvantaged or vulnerable (included in total above)	15	10
Number of disadvantaged or vulnerable attendees	45	58

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 Ranger Service continued to work with Early Years Development and North East Scotland Outdoor Learning Group (NESOLG) to deliver a programme of CPD "Early Years in Nature" to Early Years Practitioners across Aberdeenshire which continues to enable more independent visits to the outdoors by pre-school establishments. Contact with previous participants of the course shows a good use of skills and knowledge in their own early years' setting and increased use of the outdoors with their classes.

Case Study 3 – Learning for Sustainability, Education Service In-Service Continuous Professional Development Seminar

The Ranger Service was invited by the Education Service to present at a Learning for Sustainability Continuous Professional Development Seminar. The seminar was attended by both primary and secondary teachers with the purpose of encouraging more learning for sustainability activities in schools across Aberdeenshire. The Ranger Service presented on the range of support we can offer to schools and offered some simple activities teachers could use to connect their pupils to their local environment or school setting. This was followed up by a practical session making wildflower seed bombs with teachers to take back to their schools.

Outcome: Teachers understand the importance of connecting and engaging pupils with the natural environment. Teachers have knowledge and experience of simple, sustainable activities to help them achieve this. Local biodiversity improvements in school grounds where wildflower seed bombs are used. This helps ensure more 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 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 144 sessions helping to inform residents and visitors on rights and responsibilities when accessing the countryside.

In 2019/20 Ranger Service volunteers assisted the Ranger Service and wider Planning Environment Team through supporting and delivering biological recording. This included visiting sites to assess the impact of amphibian drain ladders on local amphibian populations and plotting the invasive species Piri-Piri Burr. This information will be used in planning future measures to manage Piri-Piri Burr.

The Ranger Service delivered a "Toolbox Talk" to certain depots within Landscape Services on the benefits of reduced mowing regimes for biodiversity. This will increase knowledge and awareness of biodiversity in this Service and equip them to answer questions from the public on mowing regimes. The Ranger Service has also worked in partnership with Landscape Services Greenspace Officers to identify a variety of suitable demonstration sites for introducing a change in mowing regimes and increased planting of trees and wildflowers. This included a number of school and community planting events. It is expected that the Ranger Service will continue to work with Landscape Services and build on the positive results of the Greenspace Project in communities beyond the demonstration sites.

Outcome: Aberdeenshire's natural heritage is better protected and biodiversity has been enhanced. Increased planting and protection of existing habitats can help mitigate the effects of Climate Change. Recording and monitoring of sites and species can assist in planning responses to Climate Change. 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: British Trust for Ornithology (BTO), Beached Bird Survey, Buglife B-Lines Project, Buglife Lacewing Survey, 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, UK Biodiversity Action Plan/Cairngorms Nature Action Plan – priority Lepidoptera species.

Case Study 4 – Volunteer conservation sessions to install piling dams at Portlethen Moss

Peatlands are important sites for carbon capture. The remnant raised bog at Portlethen moss has seen much habitat loss over the years but does retain areas of active peat growth. To prevent water loss and associated habitat decline the Ranger Service worked with community group, Portlethen Moss Conservation Volunteers, to dam ditches on the moss. Supported by Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) the dams were successfully installed which has slowed water loss down and increased water percolating into the surrounding bog.

Outcome: Increased opportunities for volunteering and increasing skills and knowledge with volunteers. Reduction in water loss in the raised bog area which will support the peatland as an important habitat for carbon capture and prevent habitat and species loss. Thereby improving the environment of this local community asset, making it a better place for people to visit.

5 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 and Land Scotland and the Bailies of Bennachie to deliver a quality experience for visitors to the Bennachie Visitor Centre (BVC). This included organising 18 public information and interpretive displays over seven months, including visiting display boards from Royal Society for Protection of Birds (RSPB), North East Biological Records Centre (NESBReC).

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

Aberdeenshire Performance Indicator	2019/20	2018/19
Number of visitors (people counter, not calibrated) <i>(including Ranger Service attendees)</i>	35,509 <i>(37,180)</i>	35,379 <i>(37,065)</i>
Number of public events at BVC <i>(including Ranger Service events)</i>	4 <i>(17)</i>	5 <i>(11)</i>
Number of sessions at BVC for schools and groups <i>(including Ranger Service schools and groups)</i>	5 <i>(58)</i>	6 <i>(60)</i>
Number of training/workshops/meetings at BVC	45	55

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

6 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. To ensure our work delivers this we seek feedback from all event attendees, group and school bookings.

The Ranger Service has been working to deliver the Ranger Service Strategy 2017-2020 for the third year. The Aims and Objectives of the Strategy were drawn together to reflect the 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.

In April 2019, Ranger Service event booking and publicity were moved online to the booking platform Eventbrite. This has been well received by the public, with many events running to full capacity with waiting lists. The nature of the booking platform has also greatly reduced staff time required to administer and process bookings. The success of online bookings will allow the Service to reduce the number of printed leaflets produced in future years, subsequently reducing costs. Following the success of online bookings, the Service is now progressing moving school and group bookings online as well.

Following the Service actively seeking donations towards meeting the costs of delivering the public events programme for the first time in 2019/20, it collected £2,513.62. Donations will continue to be sought in 2020/21 when the Service is delivering a full service (Covid-19 dependent). An online platform developed to help make it easier for donations to be made by service users is due to go live in 2020.

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 and allied Countryside Professionals across North-East Scotland.

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:

Across the Grain Festival, Ballater Walking Festival, Beachwatch, Big Butterfly Count, Cairngorms Nature Big Weekend, Houghton Park Family Day, Huntly Eco Weekend, Moth Night, National Bog Day, National Nestbox Day, National Meadows Day, Scotland's Nature Festival, Scottish Archaeology Month, Wellbeing Festival and Wild About Aden.

Partners included:

Aberdeen City Council, Aberdeen Foyer, Aberdeenshire Council Social Work Teams, Aberdeenshire Council Library Service, Aden Allotments Committee, Alcohol Action, Backbone CIC, Bailies of Bennachie, Balmedie Sand Bothy, Balmoral Ranger Service, Bat Conservation Trust, Bennachie Centre Trust, Butterfly Conservation, Cairngorms National Park Authority, Chapelton Community, Donside Camera Club, East Grampian Coastal Partnership, Forestry and Land Scotland, Formartine Partnership, Fraserburgh Development Trust, Glen Tanar Ranger Service, 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, National Health Service Community Mental Health, Outdoor Woodland Learning Scotland (OWLS), Portlethen Moss Conservation Group, Reach Foyer, RSPB, Scottish Countryside Rangers Association, Scottish Natural Heritage, Scottish Wildlife Trust, Scotland's Rural College, Surfers Against Sewage, Taqa, University of Aberdeen, University of Aberdeen Museums.