

## **BULLETIN TO INFRASTRUCTURE SERVICES COMMITTEE – 17 JUNE 2021**

### **2020/21 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 2020 to 31 March 2021 through the presentation of the Aberdeenshire Council Ranger Service Annual Report, as shown in **Appendix 1**.

#### **2. Background**

- 2.1 Aberdeenshire Council Ranger Service seeks to connect people to place through improved engagement with our natural and cultural heritage which will enable responsible use, protection and enhancement of these resources.
- 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.
- 2.3 Aberdeenshire Council Ranger Service works within the framework of the 2020-2023 Ranger Service Strategy. The Strategy aligns with NatureScot Connecting people and place, a policy statement on rangering in Scotland document and clearly identifies aims and objectives to deliver Scottish Government and Aberdeenshire Council priorities, plans and strategies.
- 2.4 The Service is part of the Specialist Services Team, within the Planning and Environment Service. The Ranger Service has 6 full time equivalent (FTE) Rangers, 1 based in each administrative area of Aberdeenshire and is line managed by a part-time (0.6 FTE) Co-ordinator.
- 2.5 The Annual Report has been brought to this Committee as it is the policy reporting Committee for the Service in order to inform Members of the activity the Ranger Service has undertaken in relation to the above Strategy. 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 2020/21

- 3.1 This is the first year of the Strategy period 2020-2023 and associated annual performance indicators, which have changed from the 2017-20 Strategy period. The 2020-2023 Strategy annual performance indicators seek to better capture information on the breadth and value of service delivery, however, as it is the first

year of reporting there is not comparable data for all new annual performance indicators.

- 3.2 The Ranger Service was severely impacted by Covid 19 restrictions and the subsequent national lockdown that was implemented in March 2020. This was due to large parts of the work which the Service delivers involving face to face contact, and it not being a critical service in terms of tackling the impacts of Covid-19. Therefore, staff were mobilised where required to assist in the delivery of critical Council and community services between April and August 2020, providing 22 staff days for food and medicine deliveries to residents shielding during the pandemic.
- 3.3 The Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 provides powers for local authorities to employ Rangers with the purpose of providing advice, assistance and related functions in respect to outdoor access rights. The lifting of lockdown restrictions in the summer 2020 resulted in unprecedented pressures on Aberdeenshire's countryside. The Service was called upon to assist with the re-opening of the countryside and quickly undertook a comprehensive exercise to identify hotspot sites and prioritise patrols of such sites. The team undertook weekend patrols of the identified hotspot sites between the 29 May and 12 July, providing a visible and reassuring presence while offering advice and assistance to visitors, communities and land managers. The patrols provided information and support to other Council services, including Roads and Waste, partner organisations including NatureScot, Forestry and Land Scotland, Cairngorms National Park Authority and other ranger services.
- 3.4 The Ranger Service worked closely with the Council's Communications Team and Economic Development Service throughout the summer to promote responsible countryside access and the Scottish Outdoor Access Code through media releases, media interviews and social media. The Service worked in partnership with the Access Team to provide support and guidance to visitors, communities and land-managers on access rights and responsibilities and the Ranger Service developed a series of posters and a leaflet on fires and barbecues to promote responsible countryside access. During the winter period the team worked in partnership with the Economic Development Service to review visitor impacts and patterns in 2020 and feed this information into the development of the 2021 Aberdeenshire Visitor Management Plan to help manage the impacts of expected increased visitor numbers in 2021.
- 3.5 Due to the restrictions in place as a result of Covid-19, the Ranger Service had to rapidly change how the aims and objectives of the Strategy were delivered, including a swift change to online delivery during lockdown periods and covid safety measures introduced to on the ground sessions resulting in lower capacity at most events when restrictions allowed between July and December 2020. This was following endorsement being received from the Council's Adaptive Services Board to return to undertaking public face to face work.
- 3.6 The Ranger Service acknowledged the important role connection with nature and access to our greenspaces had on mental health and wellbeing during lockdown,

and as such provided online resources to promote good health and wellbeing through connection with nature, including connection to nature activities such as natural art and walking meditation.

- 3.7 The provision of Ranger Service materials online, including guides to; bird song, animal tracks and signs, non-native invasive species, pollinators, citizen science activities, and online walks show casing Aberdeenshire’s natural and cultural heritage. The Ranger Service also delivered interactive sessions and ran online sessions on geology, back garden beasts and beachcombing
- 3.8 The provision of online material has proven to be very popular reaching new audiences both locally and further afield. Following of the Aberdeenshire Council Ranger Service Facebook page during lockdown increased by 935 and received very positive public feedback and interaction. As such it is planned to continue to offer a blended approach of online and face to face sessions.
- 3.9 The pandemic restrictions meant that some areas of planned work, including volunteer recruitment and the Junior Ranger Award, were not able to be progressed, but as restrictions ease again it is fully expected that these will be able to proceed and built upon in 2021-2022.

#### 4 Council Priorities, Implications and Risk

- 4.1 This Bulletin helps deliver the Strategic Priority “Economy and Enterprise” within the Pillar “Our Economy”, by having the right people, in the right place, at the right time.

The Bulletin helps deliver the Strategic Priority “Health & Wellbeing” within the Pillar “Our People”, by encouraging active lifestyles and promoting well-being.

The Bulletin helps deliver the Strategic Priority “Resilient Communities” within the Pillar “Our Environment”, by addressing issues raised by climate and sustainability.

- 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 The following Risks have been identified as relevant to the on-going delivery of the Ranger Service Strategy on a Corporate Level (Corporate Risk Register):
- *ACORP006 Reputation management (including social media)*. The Ranger Service promotes the work which it undertakes and engages with communities through social media. This is all undertaken in accordance with the Council's Social Media Procedure.
- 4.5 The following Risks have been identified as relevant to the on-going delivery of the Ranger Service Strategy on a Strategic Level (Directorate Risk Registers):
- *ISSR004 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.

**Alan Wood**

**Director of Infrastructure Services**

Bulletin prepared by Fiona Banks, Ranger Service Co-ordinator

28 May 2021

## **List of Appendices -**

Appendix 1 – Aberdeenshire Council Ranger Service Annual Report 2020/21

**ABERDEENSHIRE COUNCIL RANGER SERVICE ANNUAL REPORT 2020/21****1. Introduction**

- 1.1. Aberdeenshire Council Ranger Service seeks to connect people to place through improved engagement with our natural and cultural heritage which will enable responsible use, protection and enhancement of these resources. This connection can also improve health and well-being, provide volunteering and learning opportunities, increase skill levels, and support regeneration and tourism.
- 1.2. The team works within the framework of the Ranger Service Strategy 2020-2023, providing a structured approach to service delivery. The Strategy is primarily an Aberdeenshire Council working document to help manage and deliver the key priorities, aims and objectives of the Ranger Service. The Strategy aligns to the “Connecting people and places – a policy statement on rangering in Scotland” published in 2020 by NatureScot. In future years this will enable benchmarking of the Ranger Service against similar local authority ranger services and measure the impact of ranger services at a national level (National monitoring and benchmarking has not taken place this year due to the Covid-19 pandemic).
- 1.3. The Service swiftly adapted service delivery to meet the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic. Sessions and information provision was converted to online delivery during lockdown periods and, when restrictions allowed, on the ground sessions were risk assessed and adapted to ensure they could be undertaken in accordance with national Covid-19 safety measures and guidance.
- 1.4. The team rapidly responded to the unprecedented numbers of visitors to our countryside and worked in partnership with other Council services, communities, land managers and partner organisations to manage the impacts of increased visitor numbers. The Service also focused on promoting responsible countryside access and the Scottish Outdoor Access Code providing advice and support to visitors, communities and land managers.

**2. 2020-23 Ranger Service Strategy Aim 1: Promotion of our Natural and Cultural Heritage**

- 2.1. The Ranger Service seeks to provide a warm welcome to Aberdeenshire's countryside and coast for residents and visitors and provide support to vulnerable and minority groups to access our natural and cultural heritage. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic the Ranger Service was required to adapt service delivery to account for travel and physical distancing restrictions through the year.
- 2.2. During the reporting period there were 14 on the ground sessions attended by 116 residents and visitors. There were 10 on the ground sessions attended by 93 people to promote health and wellbeing benefits of connection to nature. The Service ran 2 weeks of online activities as part of the Live Life Aberdeenshire Winter Wellness Initiative to promote health and wellbeing through nature connection during lockdown.
- 2.3. There were 10 interactive online sessions, including The Stone that Followed Me Home, Back Garden Beastie Hunt and Beachcomb from Home and a series of

quizzes to raise awareness of Aberdeenshire's natural and cultural heritage. These were very well received and engaged local audiences and those from further afield including England, Canada, Australia, Norway and Nepal.

- 2.4. There were 183 online social media postings through a combination of both Facebook and Twitter to promote Aberdeenshire's natural and cultural heritage, on topics including local walks, raised bogs, pre-history, cultural heritage, flora and fauna, species identification, tracking and recording.
- 2.5. The Ranger Service created 37 videos including online guided walks, site tours, beachcombing guide and guides to run a minibeast hunt in your garden.
- 2.6. The Ranger Service provided online information and activities to support local and national festivals including: Big Butterfly Count, British Science Week, Citizen Science, Climate Week North East, Digital Doors Open Days, Geoweeek, International Bat Night, International Dawn Chorus Day, Live Life Aberdeenshire Winter Wellness Initiative, National Insect Week, National Moth Night, World Oceans Day, and Scottish Archaeology Month and Scottish Badger Week.
- 2.7. The lifting of Covid-19 local travel restrictions coincided with an exceptionally warm and dry summer. This resulted in unprecedented numbers of visitors to Aberdeenshire's countryside and coast. During the summer the Ranger Service worked with other Ranger and Council Services, land managers and communities to help manage the negative impacts of increased visitor numbers.
- 2.8. The Ranger Service also worked closely with the Council's Communications Team and Economic Development Service to issue media releases to local and national press throughout the summer on the Scottish Outdoor Access Code to promote responsible access and behaviour in the countryside.
- 2.9. In addition, the Ranger Service undertook patrolling and monitoring of hotspot sites across Aberdeenshire each weekend between 29 May and 12 July 2020 (weather permitting) to engage with visitors, promote responsible access and share information with other Council Services including Roads and Waste to take a co-ordinated and informed approach to address some of the issues faced on the ground.
- 2.10. The Ranger Service were called upon to use the team's expertise and experience to assist with the development of the re-opening of the countryside plan for 2020 and the Aberdeenshire Visitor Management Plan for 2021 to support areas suffering negative impacts of increased visitor numbers.
- 2.11. The Service provided information on access rights and responsibilities to land managers and community groups on topics including proper dog control, wild camping, outdoor toileting and wildflower theft. The Ranger Service created a series of responsible access posters to promote responsible access and raise awareness of the Scottish Outdoor Access Code.

<b>Aim 1 - Promotion of our Natural and Cultural Heritage: Annual Performance Indicators</b>		<b>2020/21</b>	<b>2019/20</b>
<b>Strategy Objective 1: Increase awareness, understanding and care of our natural and cultural heritage through personal connection</b>			
I.	Number of public sessions offered and number of participants	14 sessions 116 attendees	109 sessions 3,067 attendees
<b>Strategy Objective 2: Support recreation and enjoyment helping to improve people's physical and mental health and wellbeing</b>			
II.	Number of group sessions for health and well-being supported and number of participants	10 sessions 93 attendees	42 sessions 816 attendees
<b>Strategy Objective 3: Provide a welcoming and reassuring presence for less confident users including tourists and people and groups who benefit from increased support.</b>			
III.	Number of online resources made available.	7	New measure
IV.	Number of sessions with vulnerable or disadvantaged groups.	1 session 14 attendees	51 sessions 312 attendees
V.	Number of sessions with BAME or other minority groups.	2 sessions 24 attendees	New measure
<b>Strategy Objective 4: Provide Ranger Service Volunteer Opportunities in public engagement role</b>			
VI.	Number of Ranger Service volunteers recruited to role VR080 (public facing).	0	5
VII.	Number of "drop-in" volunteers at public and group sessions and number of volunteer hours.	0	61 sessions 734 volunteers 1,271 hours
<b>Strategy Objective 5: Develop community engagement with our natural and cultural heritage</b>			
VIII.	Number of community group sessions to promote connection to natural and cultural heritage	6	124 sessions 1893 attendees
IX.	Number of presentations delivered to local communities and groups and number of attendees.	0	New measure
X.	Number of community group requests for meetings and site visits to empower local decision making.	2	New measure

<b>Strategy Objective 6: Promote Responsible Countryside Access</b>			
XI.	Number of sessions where Scottish Outdoor Access Code and access rights and responsibilities are promoted.	14 sessions 265 attendees	New measure
XII.	Number of resources produced.	7	New measure

<b>Aim 1 - Promotion of our Natural and Cultural Heritage: Social Media Posts</b>			
<b>Strategy Objective</b>	<b>Number of Posts</b>	<b>Post Impressions</b>	<b>Post Engagements</b>
1	183	232,509	18,550
2	156	26,410	2,518
3	N/A	N/A	N/A
4	N/A	N/A	N/A
5	60	191,491	9,147
6	40	123,582	9,388

### **3. 2020-23 Ranger Service Strategy Aim 2: Support Nature Connection in School Pupils and Young People.**

- 3.1. The Ranger Service aims to provide support to schools and youth groups to undertake and benefit from outdoor learning opportunities and provide support to attain awards recognising increased understanding of our natural and cultural heritage.
- 3.2. During this Strategy period work with schools and young people was significantly disrupted by school closures and restrictions on youth group meetings. It is fully expected that demand will return to at least pre-covid levels in 2021-22.
- 3.3. When restrictions allowed, the Service was able to deliver sessions to schools and youth groups. Topics studied included Hedgerow Harvest and plant use in World War 2, The Wonder of Nature and Signs of Winter.
- 3.4. The Ranger Service adapted delivery to provide online sessions and information on topics including local study, careers day, forest schools, outdoor learning and school grounds for biodiversity.
- 3.5. The Ranger Service took the opportunity to use the time provided through fewer face to face session to develop an Education Biodiversity pack for Aberdeenshire schools. The pack offers simple and easily accessible ways for teachers to identify the main habitat types found across Aberdeenshire and how to interpret those to pupils. The pack also contains simple step by step guides for nature connection activities suitable for each habitat. The teacher activity guides are supplemented by pupil guides to download onto tablets and be taken out into local areas. Pupils will also have the opportunity to record their findings using an online Nature Notebook which has been developed alongside the pack. It is hoped to have the pack ready

for use by schools in June 2021.

- 3.6. Restrictions have meant the Junior Ranger Award has not been progressed this year by either Aberdeenshire Council Ranger Service or partner organisations. However, the Ranger Service was able to successfully deliver the John Muir Award at Haddo Country Park.
- 3.7. The Ranger Service has secured a Kickstart Placement to offer a young person aged between 16 and 24 on Universal Credit, the opportunity to become an Assistant Ranger for a fixed term period during 2021. This will give the young person valuable work experience and skills to pursue a career in rangering or similar.

<b>Aim 2 - Support Nature Connection in School Pupils and Young People: Annual Performance Indicators</b>		<b>2020/21</b>	<b>2019/20</b>
<b>Strategy Objective 7: Support outdoor learning and help young people to enjoy, share, understand and connect with the natural and cultural heritage of Aberdeenshire.</b>			
XIII. Number of school sessions delivered and number of participants.		8 sessions 195 attendees	158 sessions 4620 attendees
XIV. Number of education resources completed		0	New measure
XV. Requests for guidance, information or resources to support outdoor learning		10	New measure
<b>Strategy Objective 8: Deliver training in outdoor education to teachers and other education providers</b>			
XVI. Number of training sessions delivered and number of participants.		0	8 sessions 156 attendees
XVII. Requests for guidance, information and support in delivering training.		1	New measure
<b>Strategy Objective 9: Develop the next generation of Rangers through Junior Ranger schemes and the promotion of rangering as a career path for young people.</b>			
XVIII. Number of young people attending sessions and achieving Junior Ranger Award.		0	New measure
XIX. Number of Junior Ranger Award sessions supported.		0	New measure

<b>Aim 2 - Support Nature Connection in School Pupils and Young People: Social Media Posts</b>			
<b>Strategy Objective</b>	<b>Number of posts</b>	<b>Post impressions</b>	<b>Post Engagements</b>
7	11	36,200	1,519
8	N/A	N/A	N/A
9	N/A	N/A	N/A

**4. 2020-23 Ranger Service Strategy Aim 3: Protect, Sustain and Enhance Care of our Natural Heritage**

- 4.1. The Ranger Service seeks to support positive action by public and communities to combat biodiversity loss and climate change and support the enhancement of biodiversity.
- 4.2. During this reporting period the Ranger Service worked to provide information for interpretation boards and leaflets for communities and visitors including Gourdon, Collieston and Stonehaven Tolbooth Museum.
- 4.3. The Ranger Service ran a number of online initiatives to encourage local action to combat biodiversity loss and climate change, including Grassland Watch. This project was in partnership with NESBiP (North East Scotland Biodiversity Partnership), Greenspace Aberdeenshire, and NESBReC (North East Scotland Biological Records Centre with information on how to enjoy, identify and record common wildflowers. The Service made daily postings for British Science Week on citizen science activities; information on squirrel tracks and signs for Saving Scotland's Red Squirrel initiative; and the importance of Aberdeenshire's raised bogs in climate change issues as part of Climate Week North East.
- 4.4. The Ranger Service also promoted the benefits of gardening for wildlife and biodiversity to existing and new audiences enjoying gardening during the pandemic. This included social media posts on enjoying wildlife from your window, gardening for wildlife and an online expert Question and Answer event in partnership with NESBiP.
- 4.5. The Ranger Service took the opportunity to use the time afforded by fewer on the ground sessions to work in partnership with Landscape Service Greenspace Officers to develop an ALDO course on the benefits of a change in mowing regime and increased tree and wildflower planting on ground managed by Aberdeenshire Council. It is hoped the course will be available on ALDO for all staff from June 2021.

<b>Aim 3 - Protect, Sustain and Enhance Care of our Natural Heritage: Annual Performance Indicators</b>	<b>2020/21</b>	<b>2019/20</b>
<b>Strategy Objective 10: Provide volunteer opportunities for communities and organised groups in biological recording, practical conservation, biodiversity enhancement and climate change actions.</b>		
XX. Number of Ranger Service volunteers recruited to role VR70 (non-public facing).	0	1
XXI. Number of attendees at community/ad-hoc volunteer sessions, attendees.	3 sessions 10 volunteers	26 sessions 236 volunteers

<b>Strategy Objective 11: Enhance the condition of natural and historic features through site and countryside management.</b>		
XXII. Number of sites where Ranger Service delivery has enhanced natural or historic features and number of site management plan actions delivered.	3	New measure
XXIII. Requests for support, guidance or information on enhancing sites.	33	New measure
<b>Strategy Objective 12: Encourage and support positive action by the public to address the climate emergency and biodiversity loss.</b>		
XXIV. Number of sessions and attendees	5 sessions 27 attendees	New measure
XXV. Number of Aberdeenshire Council's Pollinator Action Plan actions delivered.	1	New measure
XXVI. Number of partner organisations supported, and number of partnership action plans objectives/ sessions delivered to combat biodiversity loss and climate change.	2	New measure
XXVII. Requests for support, guidance or information on climate change and biodiversity loss	13	New measure
<b>Strategy Objective 13: Support partner organisations to combat biodiversity loss and climate change and support the enhancement of biodiversity.</b>		
XXVIII. Number of public sessions offered and number of participants	5 sessions 27 attendees	New measure
XXIX. Requests for support, guidance or information from partner organisation	13	New measure

<b>Aim 3 - Protect, Sustain and Enhance Care of our Natural Heritage: Social Media Posts</b>			
<b>Strategy Objective</b>	<b>Number of posts</b>	<b>Post impressions</b>	<b>Post Engagements</b>
11	1	794	39
12	19	17,023	641
13	5	4,978	217

## **5. 2020-23 Ranger Service Strategy Aim 4: Continuous Improvement**

- 5.1. The Ranger Service seeks to maintain a skilled and committed ranger workforce, adaptive and responsive to the needs of our diverse communities, delivering a high quality, efficient, continually improving service to all users.
- 5.2. During this reporting period Helen Rowe, Marr Area Ranger was nominated for the National Biodiversity Network Award for Wildlife Recording in recognition of her work to promote lepidoptera recording in Aberdeenshire.

- 5.3. The Service has revised its webpages and moved booking requests for schools and groups to the webpages to make the service more accessible to users and offer a consistent service delivery across Aberdeenshire. The Service is also working with Live Life Aberdeenshire, Live Life Outdoors Team to provide information and contact details for their webpages.
- 5.4. During this period the Ranger Service saw a significant rise in the number of followers and engagements with its social media channels, from 2,154 on 1 April 2020 to 3,089 on 31 March 2021.
- 5.5. On the ground training sessions with the Scottish Countryside Ranger Association North East, were all cancelled or postponed during the pandemic except for 2 sessions. However, the Team continued to develop their skills to improve service delivery and attended online training sessions on inclusivity in the outdoors, species identification, biological recording and delivering covid safe public events.
- 5.6. Income generation, whilst not excluded was not promoted for the majority of 2020/21 due to undertaking limited public facing work as a result of the pandemic. This was reflected with the Service only receiving £35 worth of donations in 2020/21 compared to £2,513 in 2019/20. The Service's online donation platform through the Council's webpages went live this year, and it will be promoted when the Service is able to undertake public facing work. It is hoped this can help generate a similar amount or greater of donations to 2019/20 due to it being easier for people to donate electronically.
- 5.7. The Team continue to maintain individual Personal Performance Plans and produce a team action plan and annual report to measure service delivery.