



SOUTH EAST DEVON  
HABITAT REGULATIONS  
PARTNERSHIP

# South East Devon Habitat Regulations Executive Committee

## **South East Devon Wildlife Communications Report**

Anne Mountjoy, Communications Officer  
April 2023



**Exeter**  
City Council



Legal comment/advice:

There is no direct comment to be made in relation to this report, each and any individual issue will need to be considered as it arises.

Finance comment/advice:

The financial implications are set out in the report.

<b>Public Document:</b>	<b>Yes</b>
<b>Exemption:</b>	None
<b>Review date for release</b>	None

## Recommendations

It is proposed that the Executive Committee:

1. Notes the results of the communications report for the period March 2022 – February 2023.
2. Will receive the next communication report in March 2024.

## Equalities impact: Low

Risk: Low. This report provides the results of the communications report for March 2022 – February 2023.

## 1. Summary

1.1 South East Devon Wildlife (SEDW) is the public facing brand for the South East Devon Habitat Regulations Partnership.

1.2 Key performance indicators (KPIs) enable evaluation as measures of success. There are six agreed KPIs which reflect the aims of the business plan:

1. Website page views
2. Website time spent on site
3. Website average number of pages/session
4. Website referrals
5. Website top referral channel
6. Number of people signing up to newsletters

In addition, social media engagement is being monitored:

7. Social media engagement – Facebook, twitter, Instagram

1.3 This data is monitored and evaluated on a monthly basis to understand how project delivery, stakeholder engagement and communications are impacting on our overall goals.

1.4 Appendix 1 shows a summary of the KPIs for the period from March 2022 – February 2023.

1.5 The communications officer role provides limited support at 1 day per week, which means engagement and communications is being delivered by the Wildlife Wardens at the same time as performing a range of duties. This tension means direct delivery is adversely affected. During the busy summer and autumn months, wardens spend more time on site engaging directly with visitors, which means less time spent on communications including social media and writing articles for partners' newsletters.

1.6 Staff changes have had a significant impact on engagement and communications with a reduction in onsite activity and lack of continuity. It is challenging to start new initiatives when the team is changing regularly and time is spread between inductions and learning the role. At times when only one warden has been in post, it's very difficult for that person to progress and enact plans for the future, as they are often firefighting, operating reactively rather than proactively.

1.7 In addition, the absence of the branded gazebo meant the team had a less prominent presence on the protected sites between April - September.

## 2. Website

- 2.1 The table in 2.2 shows the last 12 months figures compared to the two prior 6/7 month periods.
- 2.2 Average website visitor numbers have remained the same compared to the last period. Despite staff issues (outlined in 1.6 above) combined with the launch of the new website in April 2022, these figures are promising.
- 2.3 It should be noted that all of the website statistics in Appendix 1 were affected by a google analytics reporting problem for the first few weeks after the new website launched in April.
- 2.4 On the new website, visitors are exploring more pages than previously, however overall visitor numbers are lower which could be attributed to the glitch with google analytics in April.
- 2.5 Search Engine Optimisation continues to be effective as the way most users reach the site is through organic search.
- 2.6 A planned communications campaign for wildlife refuge season (14 September – 31 December) was successful as evidenced by that page performing as top content at 847 page views. In addition, September received the most visitors at 357 for the month.
- 2.7 The adage 'content is king' remains true. Reviewing web statistics on a regular basis has helped us identify most visited pages and as a result we have developed web content through our increasing offer of interactive 'Relive' walks. These include along the Exe Estuary at Powderham Castle, Dawlish, Mamhead, Cranbrook Country Park, Ashclyst Forest, Haldon, Mutters Moor and Ladram Bay. We are working on providing more wildlife spotter sheets for young people.
- 2.8 The monitoring dashboard on the website has been updated with all the monitoring reports to date and will be updated as further work is undertaken. This provides visitors with insight into the condition of the species and habitats that are found across our protected sites.
- 2.9 Analysis of the behaviour flow of visitors to the website has indicated the following trends about navigation:
  - \* After the home page, the most popular landing page was wildlife refuges, and from there visitors clicked to key species.
  - \* Reports show that of 3000 sessions, 2200 drop off after the first page; at the first interaction there are 786 sessions and 350 drop off; at the second interaction there are 436 sessions and 172 drop off.

\* For the entire year, 10.8% of visitors return and the rest are new visitors. Both of these latter two points show that more work should be done to encourage repeat visitors and to provide content to prevent visitors leaving the site after looking at one page (web bounce). Work is currently being progressed to include regularly updated tide times as a feature of the website, which will increase our return “offer” to visitors.

	<b>Feb 21 – July 21 (6 months)</b>	<b>Aug 21 – Feb 22 (7 months)</b>	<b>March 22 – Feb 23 (12 months)</b>
Average page views	294	516	514
Average number of page/sessions	1.76	1.73	2.04
Total users / referrals	89	255	201
Top referral channel	71 (organic search)	119 (organic search and email)	143 (organic search)
Top web content	74 (home page)	122 (home page and PBH car parks)	180 (wildlife refuge)

### 3. Social media and newsletter

3.1 Social media engagement is consistently 9% and above, which is considered high but is increasingly difficult to achieve as the number of followers grow. There was a marked increase during the wildlife refuge campaign, particularly video content featuring the wardens themselves. Two popular videos were compilations of ‘a day in the life of a warden’ and ‘bird watching with Simon Bates’.

3.2 Numbers of social media followers have experienced a small increase, with more new followers compared to those who unfollow across all channels and the gap between Facebook and Instagram is closing. We will be revisiting our work to deliver more targeted messaging by posting to geographical Facebook communities to increase relevancy and impact.

3.3 The use of hashtags remains important particularly for Instagram as significantly more ‘not following’ accounts are reached compared to followers.

3.4 Social media handles were reviewed for consistency in September and were renamed as @SEDwildlife across all channels. This increases visibility and search-ability and means that partners can more easily tag @SEDwildlife.

3.5 Staff engaged in a session on the benefit of using reels versus stories and posts on Instagram and Facebook. Reels are more likely to be viewed by a wide range of Instagram accounts (not followers) and the team will focus on developing content for reels in future.

3.6 Newsletter: A pleasing increase in newsletter subscribers indicates the content is pitched accurately at our readers, with subscribers increasing by 489 from 1196 in April 22 to 1685 in February 23. Links to wildlife spotter sheets prove popular in the quarterly e-newsletter, as well as news about our work.

## **4. Media**

### **4.1 Press releases**

4.1.1 The press releases below were issued during this period, featured on the website and shared on social media.

2 September 2022 Exe Estuary hosts its most impressive natural event of the year - sent to 64 media contacts

31 May 2022 Ridgetop Park opens to local people – a carefully managed release to people living in the area by TDC communication team and amplified locally by us. As only walking/cycling visitors could be facilitated, targeted communications took place. The news was shared on our website emphasising that it is open for local residents only.

### **4.2 TV and Radio**

4.2.1 TV and radio coverage has raised our profile over this period:

11 October 2022 ITV Westcountry interviewed Cllr Geoff Jung and recorded Wildlife Wardens in action on the patrol boat. Focus was on the tender and wardens interacting with people contravening advice by canoeing to Dawlish Warren from Exmouth. The video features on our YouTube channel and has had 98 views thus far<sup>1</sup>.

4 December East Devon radio interview with Imogen was broadcast, focusing on the bird breeding season, bring your dog to work day, and the Exe wildlife refuges.

4.2.2 Managing media enquiries has been an important task this year, especially in connection with managing the reputation of the partnership, its work and each Council. For example, a particular media outlet had been keen on misreporting the wildlife refuges and interviewing a member of the Committee but this was carefully managed by the communications officer and their counterparts.

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<sup>1</sup> [Exe Estuary wildlife refuges on ITV Westcountry News 11.10.22 - YouTube](#)

## 4.3 Editorial

4.3.1 A range of articles have been provided for partner e-newsletters during this period:

March 22 Exe Press – 1000 print; sent to 1395 email addresses  
July 22 Exe Press – 1000 print; sent to 1420 email addresses  
November 22 Exe Press – 1000 print; sent to 1500 email addresses

January 23 Devon Local Nature Partnership – sent to 2455 email addresses;  
September 22 EDDC residents newsletter sent to 7500 email addresses;  
September 22 Wild East Devon newsletter sent to 5504 email addresses;  
September 22 TDC residents and members newsletters plus website  
October 22 EDDC residents newsletter report on ITV coverage and link  
Winter 22 Countryside Management Association e-newsletter

## 5. Events/presentations

5.1 For Devon Loves Dogs and South East Devon Wildlife, events are an important way of engaging with people visiting or likely to visit the protected sites. Presence at external events and pop-ups included Devon County Show, EDDC Dog Roadshow, pop ups with National Trust, Heath Week, TDC event at Bakers Park, Newton Abbot, TDC event at Dawlish, a presentation to the Exeter Forum Society, speaking at Bickton College to ~25 students studying wildlife and conservation.

5.2 Devon Loves Dogs led 24 waggy walks which were regularly fully booked at 15 people and their dogs.

5.3 Engagement with watersports groups included updating them on year 3 survey results with offers to speak at their club meetings. Topsham Small Craft Club accepted this offer and Red Rock Exmouth Watersports have agreed to collaborate in future social media messaging.

5.4 'Habitat Regulations: the way forward' an RTPPI webinar in Feb 23 was attended by 400 delegates. Neil Harris presented to key stakeholders such as Defra, Natural England, Environment Agency, MHCLG, DLUHC, Network Rail, National Parks, Planning Inspectorate, AECOM, Persimmon, Linden, Barratt, city, as well as district and local councils from across England, Northern Ireland and Scotland – even included international planning consultants based in Hong Kong and Govt of Hong Kong.

## 6. Lessons learned and future plans

6.1 Staff changes have had a significant impact on our available time and loss of existing experience. Training has repeatedly been provided to new staff on language, tone, approach, process as well as systems training.

6.2 Developing new content is a priority and drives communications for all outlets. Regular news and social media updates will continue to be distributed to encourage visitors to the website, increase awareness and engagement.

6.3 Social media algorithms continue to prioritise video content as demonstrated by the popularity of staff experiences, in particular. Reels also help to reach new contacts. We aim to continue to build on this approach. To increase relevancy and impact, we will produce more targeted content for local communities, posting to geographical Facebook groups.

6.4 We will continue to optimise social media by using the rule of thirds (personal, point, promote) to provide a rich experience for viewers. We will ensure that social media posts and newsletter articles link to relevant content on our website as much as possible.

6.5 We are committed to forward planning communications campaigns. We are focussing on Bird Breeding Season; BBQ and fire risk; Wildlife refuge season. We use a social media scheduling tool which means we can monitor and evaluate each campaign to continue to build on success.

6.6 As indicated in last year's report, following the launch of the new website, we have reviewed visitor journeys. The trends identified show that we need to do more to increase the number of pages viewed per visit as outlined in 6.7 below.

6.7 In addition, the majority (90%) of visitors are new so we need to do more to give visitors reasons to make repeat visits. We need to focus on providing fresh content to encourage repeat visitors and create a community of interest. A push to regularly update the "Events" page with details of our wider partners outreach work and the tide time updates will help us to achieve this.

6.8 A communications and engagement review took place in Jan 2023. As a result the following changes are planned:

- Remove twitter for DLD and SEDW from the social media scheduling tool (saving £250 pa for each account); twitter posts will continue to be made natively through the platform.
- Campaign planning instigated to cover seasonal topics (see 6.5 above)
- To be distributed through the newsletters, a survey will request views on marketing and communications, including asking for feedback on: content that readers people would like to see more / less of; on the new website and interactive walks; on work completed in the last 12 months (including car parks and signage); on the strategy and dashboard; on partner events; on ideas for guided walks with wardens.
- Identify a budget for giveaways e.g. sticker/bookmark with a call to action to visit our website/follow us/ sign up to our newsletter.



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South East Devon Habitat Regulations Executive Committee  
April 2023

Natural England comment:

Natural England have reviewed the report and have no comment.