



SOUTH EAST DEVON
WILDLIFE

South East Devon Habitat Regulations Executive Committee

South East Devon Wildlife Communications Report

Anne Mountjoy, Communications Officer
October 2024

Legal comment/advice:

EDDC Legal Services have read this report and have no comment.

DEM.1-0007/October/RAH

Finance comment/advice:

There are no direct financial implications set out in the report.

Public Document: Yes
Exemption: None
Review date for release None

Recommendations

It is proposed that the Executive Committee:

1. Notes the results of the communications report for the period March 2023 – August 2024.
2. Receives an annual communications update within the annual progress report for future meetings, rather than as a separate report.

Equalities impact: Low

Risk: Low. This report provides the results of the communications report for March 2023 – August 2024.

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. Since the introduction of new web analytics platform Google Analytics 4, on 1 July 2023, the KPIs have been amended because it is no longer possible to report on the previous KPIs due to changes made by Google. The KPIs have been amended to:

1. Website visitors (previously website page views).
2. Website sessions (previously time spent on site).
3. Website average engagement time (previously average number of pages/session).
4. Website top referral channel (unchanged).
5. Top website content (previously website referrals).
6. Number of people signing up to newsletters

In addition, social media engagement is being monitored:

7. Social media followers and reach – facebook, twitter, Instagram

Appendix 1 shows data for the KPIs. It should be noted that March-June web statistics used the historical Google Universal Analytics platform so cannot be used as a direct comparison for data July 2023-August 2024.

1.3 KPI data is reviewed with the team on a bi-monthly basis to understand how project delivery, stakeholder engagement and communications are impacting on our overall goals and how we can improve.

1.4 As the communications officer role continues to be limited to 1 day per week, communications are delivered by the Wildlife Wardens at the same time as engaging with stakeholders and other duties. Generally, during the 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.

1.5 Communications and engagement across the work of the team has been enriched over the last year with a focus on providing engaging and informative social media content. We have adopted a campaigns approach, for more targeted messaging and QR codes for tracking and measurement. See Appendix 2 for campaign collateral examples.

1.6 In Autumn/Winter 2023 a branding review took place to ensure consistency and maximum impact of the South East Devon Wildlife brand.¹

1.7 Due to a change in a staff members' circumstances, SEDW has benefitted from an uplift in communications resource. Warden Ivo Salmon has been partially confined to desk based activities since July 2024. This has seen a raft of newsletter articles supplied to nature and other publications, work on the wildlife refuge public awareness campaign and increased scope and breadth of our social media approach. This re-emphasises the case for an increase in comms resource, as previously reported.

1.8 How the comms resource is used is a key challenge for the team. As stated above, a bi-monthly operational review of comms activity across the team takes place. This helps us learn from experience and make changes accordingly. More efficiency can be gained if the annual comms report became an update in the annual progress report, saving scarce staff resource for operational benefit.

2 Website

2.1 Table 1 below shows the figures from 1 March 2023 until 31 August 24. It is not possible to include prior years as they cannot be compared due to changes in Google Analytics explained above in (1.2). The statistics will enable useful comparisons going forward.

2.2 The average engagement time per session 0.37s. We are working on making content more "sticky" by giving visitors reasons to make repeat visits, eg through the tide times widget on the homepage and uploading more wildlife spotter sheets. There is work coming forward from the Wardens which could see a "virtual tour" of the Pebblebed Heaths being hosted via the website. There is potential for this to add to our website "offer" and significantly increase the number of repeat visits.

¹ See "South East Devon Wildlife branding update" April 2024. [HREC - Branding update Jan 2024 25012024 South and East Devon Habitat Regulations Executive Commi.pdf](#)

2.3 Total website users for the 18-month period are 12,268.

2.4 Search Engine Optimisation continues to be effective as the way most users reach the site is through organic search.

2.5 Top web content was the June 2023 newsletter on the website at 568 visits. Social media posts generated interest in 'meet the team' which highlighted the return of Sama Euridge and the appointment of Katie Jones as part of the team's 3 Wildlife Wardens.

2.6 The monitoring dashboard on the website will be updated with details of Petalwort monitoring, reported at the April 2024 meeting of the Executive. The dashboard provides visitors with insight into the condition of species and habitats that are found across our protected sites.

Table 1: Website analytics 1 March 2023 until 31 August 24

| | July 23 – Aug 24 (14 months) |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Average engagement time per session | 0.37s |
| Total users | 12,268 |
| Sessions / top referral channel | Organic search 7318 |
| Top web content | 568 (June newsletter page) |

3. Social media and newsletter

3.1 Through social media monitoring, we have learned that we can increase our reach by posting content separately to various geographical community groups. As a result, social media engagement increased considerably, particularly on Facebook. Facebook reach grew from 5381 in November to 18,860 in December as a direct result of this. Where appropriate, we change our approach based on monitoring and it is a strategy we plan to deploy on a regular basis.

3.2 Tailored content has been developed to target different user groups – eg paddle board groups. A video on watersports was created by working with partners, Exmouth Watersports. It was used to target watersports groups. The team have been focussing on developing engaging content for reels and stories.

3.3 Numbers of social media followers continue to grow but in particular Facebook's algorithm makes this challenging. The algorithm is constantly, secretly changing, so trial and error is continually needed to identify the best approach. For example, links to external content are now recommended to be placed in a comment, rather than in a post, as Facebook will not prioritise posts with external links. [See 3.5 social media exchange]

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

3.5 A ‘social media knowledge exchange’ took place between the SEDW team and a new staff member at EDDC, Louie Belfield. Louie previously managed social media for ‘Tuff-e-nuff’ dog toy company and Avon Wildlife Trust. The team felt the learning was valuable especially around the use of twitter/X, and Facebook algorithms. As a result, we investigated our X channel and due to paywalls and declining engagement, we will be reducing our focus on this channel.

3.6 Newsletter: A pleasing increase in newsletter subscribers indicates the content is interesting to our readers, with subscribers increasing from 1685 in February 23 to 2647 in June 24. Links to wildlife spotter sheets prove popular in the quarterly e-newsletter, as well as news about our work. Over the period 194 sessions occurred in the ‘resources’ section. The most visited content is Dawlish Warren Code of Conduct with 1542 views over the period.

4. Media

4.1 Press releases

4.1.1 The press coverage for this period is listed below. Stories also feature on the website and on social media.

April 23 Devon Loves Dogs – Midweek Herald

July 23 Ridgetop Park - Devon Live

Aug 23 Ridgetop Park - Teignmouth Post

Sept 23 Exe Estuary Protection Zones proving a success for birds - BBC News online

Sept 23 as above – Yahoo News online

April 24 Interview dog walking expert, Stephen Jenkinson – resulted in BBC Radio Devon interview

April 24 Devon’s nature-focussed organisations welcome expert dog advice

Sept 24 Call to avoid Wildlife Refuges as flocks of birds return to the Exe Estuary

4.2 TV

4.2.1 TV coverage has raised our profile over this period:

January 2024 ITV Westcountry interviewed Cllr Geoff Jung and filmed Wildlife Warden and Delivery Manager in action on the patrol boat. The story was broadcast on Friday 12 Jan. The video features on our youtube channel².

² <https://youtu.be/PUX2LKfAm8I>

4.2.2 August 2024 BBC TV Spotlight news interviewed Imo Salmon about the wildlife in the Exe Estuary and the impending wildlife refuge season at Exmouth (and wildlife refuge at Dawlish Warren) It was too windy to take the reporter on the patrol boat, but Stuartline Cruises obliged by allowing filming to take place on their boat. Stuartline Cruises also interviewed about the special nature of the area. This video also features on our youtube channel³.

4.3 Editorial

4.3.1 A range of articles have been provided for partner e-newsletters during this period, however, lack of staff resource has meant writing articles was not prioritised until July 2024 (see 1.3 above):

Aug 23 EDDC Residents newsletter
Nov 23 Exe Press newsletter
Jan 24 EDDC councillor's newsletter

July 24 Devon Local Nature Partnership
July 24 Ranger magazine
July 24 Sou'wester magazine
Aug 24 British Trust for Ornithology – Waterbird News
Sept 24 Natural England (internal newsletter)
Sept 24 Exeter Citizen
Oct 24 Exe Press newsletter

5. Events/presentations

5.1 For Devon Loves Dogs and South East Devon Wildlife, events and presentations are an important way of engaging with people visiting or likely to visit the protected sites. As Wardens outline their activities separately in the "Habitat mitigation team update" report, it is not duplicated here.

6. Lessons learned and future plans

6.1 In the 2023 communications report, the team agreed to prioritise developing new content in the form of: newsletters to drive web traffic; video reels and stories on social media to increase reach; media engagement (e.g. ITV) to raise awareness across the South West. We continue to deliver on this as a successful communications strategy.

6.2 We continue to expand our video content to engage with new users on social media. In line with our aim to increase impact, we have shared content with local communities of interest by posting to geographical Facebook groups. Results were exceptional over the Christmas period, when people were likely to be off work, with more leisure time. Content shared with geographical Facebook groups increased reach by more than three times.

³ <https://youtu.be/KvdFhvr9IbM>

6.3 We aim to provide a rich experience for viewers and linking social media posts and newsletter articles to relevant web content.

6.4 We are committed to forward planning communications campaigns. We are focussing on Wildlife Refuge Season; BBQ and fire risk; Bird Breeding season encouraging Paws on Paths campaigns. We meet with key partners to plan campaigns and agree key messages and plan to meet to develop a new campaign around dog fouling on the East Devon Pebblebed Heaths. We use a social media scheduling tool which means we can monitor and evaluate each campaign to continue to build on success.

6.5 The majority of visitors are new, so we need to do more to give visitors reasons to make repeat visits. We need to do more to provide fresh content to encourage repeat visitors and create a community of interest. Although we intended to focus on regularly updating the “Events” page with details of our wider partners outreach work, we have not achieved this as more staff time resource is required.

6.6 A communications and engagement review took place in Jan 2023. Some actions have faced delay due to a high workload but a stakeholder survey to request views on marketing and communications was sent to recipients of the newsletter in June 2024. We have asked for feedback on : content that readers would like to see more / less of; the website and interactive walks; work completed in the last 12 months; the strategy and dashboard; partner events; ideas for guided walks with wardens. The results of this survey and how this informs our communications plan is to be confirmed.

6.7 Whilst some important achievements have been realised over the reporting period, it is important to note that the level of communications output has reached capacity. Without an increase in dedicated staff resource, our ability to operate in this way will inevitably be constrained.

Anne Mountjoy
Communications Officer
South East Devon Habitat Regulations Executive Committee
October 2024

Natural England comment: Natural England have read the report and have no comment other than to thank the communications team for their work.