



# RTPI South West Awards for Planning Excellence 2018:


## Dawlish Countryside Park



Locally-acclaimed, large scale countryside park on the edge of a 1700 home extension to Dawlish that provides a positive response to protecting European designated habitats




The planning and delivery team led a wide ranging multidisciplinary team through negotiation, procurement masterplanning, design, planning consent, delivery, publicity and official opening




As a SANGS, the park plays a crucial role in unlocking 30,000 homes in the Greater Exeter area, including 4,000 in Teignbridge



Planners listened to strong public concerns and brought about an alternative, welcomed solution



Proactive engagement with Natural England led to a pioneering site assessment solution, avoiding potential delays at a later stage



A well coordinated approach meant a major planning application decision could be made by Planning Committee within ten weeks

## 1. Introduction

The £2.9 million Dawlish Countryside Park moved from inception to unveiling in just over 18 months. During that time, local public opinions of the project turned from rejection to overwhelming support. The 27 hectare park provides new, public, natural countryside right next door to an emerging urban extension of 1,700 homes. Already the park boasts more than 200 pedestrian visitors a day.

The Countryside Park is a Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace (SANGS) that was forward funded and delivered by Teignbridge. It acts to protect key conservation sites, counterbalancing increased visitor pressure associated with population growth. It is a key pillar of a joint Habitat Mitigation Strategy adopted alongside East Devon District and Exeter City Councils. Habitat Directive duties have been [delegated to a joint South East Devon Habitat Regulations Executive Committee](#), which approved the park's creation and monitors progress.

Delivery of the park means Teignbridge continues to grant planning permissions for around 4,000 homes in close proximity to the Exe Estuary and Dawlish Warren, which are sites of international importance for nature conservation. There had been a real risk of a development moratorium across much of Greater Exeter for as many as 30,000 homes before the park came forward.

The park has therefore been integral to ensuring that Teignbridge exceeds Local Plan housing targets. We are one of only around 10 per cent of authorities to do so each year since the Local Plan was adopted in 2014. We also maintain a healthy 8.4 year housing land supply.

## 2. Planning content and skills - a planning and delivery success

Teignbridge's Spatial Planning and Delivery team was project sponsor and project manager throughout. This involved a number of key actions including:

- Devising a framework for assessing the SANGS merits of various potential sites
- Stakeholder engagement and a project board approach to masterplanning the site
- Early pre-application engagement and design

work so that the resulting major planning application was determined promptly.

A SANGS site had been allocated elsewhere in the Dawlish area but it became clear that that the site would not proceed. This was accompanied by high-levels of public scrutiny and concern. Teignbridge planners listened and took a fresh stance. Working with Natural England, they developed a new detailed and pioneering methodology for assessing the potential of other prospective locations. Site assessments were conducted in partnership to avoid future statutory consultee surprises and three preferred sites were identified. The Spatial Planning and Delivery team engaged specialist land surveyors to negotiate and secure land purchase.

A wide ranging project team was led through a densely packed well-structured programme of dialogue, briefings, interpretation and action. This was planning at its multifaceted best. The team included in-house ecologists, Natural England, RSPB, development management planners, rangers, designers, surveyors and lawyers. Working with the Land Trust, a brief for consultants was developed to masterplan the reconfiguration of the site as SANGS.

Early preparation of the masterplan was essential to establishing cost estimates and confirming approved budgets. The masterplan addressed issues like:

- Vehicular access
- Drainage and engineering works
- Pedestrian and dog access
- Relationship with adjoining properties and developers
- Planting and seeding
- On site ecology and ecological potential
- Interpretation and art
- Signage
- Ongoing management
- Opportunities for expansion

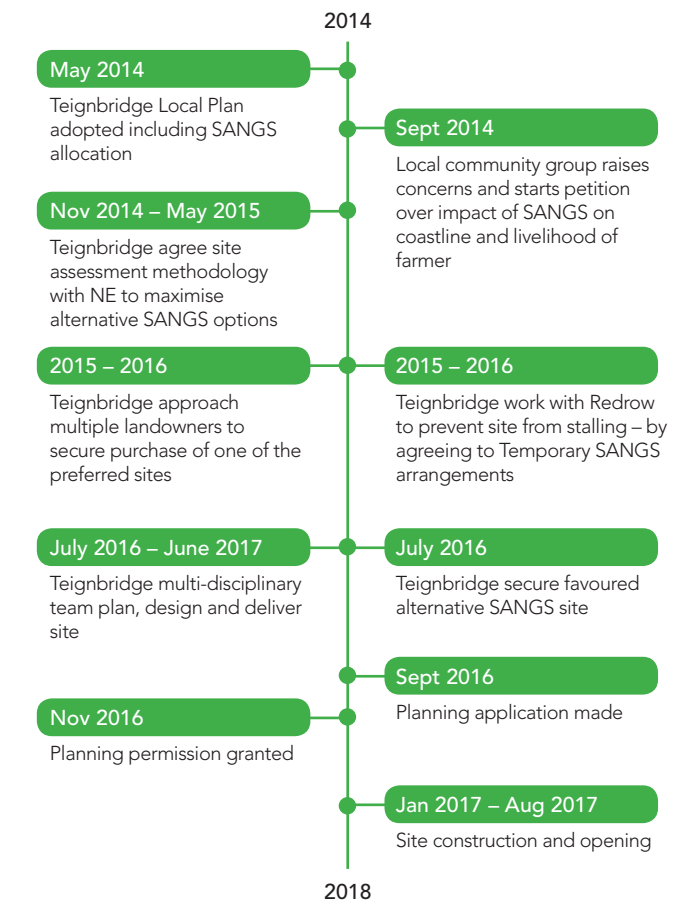
Advance masterplan preparation ensured planning permission was granted because there was a comprehensive package of information that went far beyond that required to validate and approve the scheme. Whilst heavily publicised, the major



planning application received minimal objections and many more letters of support. It was approved by Planning Committee within ten weeks, and a month ahead of programme.

Early masterplanning also made it possible for Teignbridge planners to oversee and manage an iterative approach to identifying value engineering opportunities, like those associated with 'naturalistic' path surfacing specifications, whilst continuing to meet all parties' objectives and requirements. The outturn cost of the scheme was around 15 per cent lower than initial budget estimates. This was good news for funding other Local Plan policy objectives, including other crucial infrastructure investments.

Evidence of high quality design and place making is evidenced by exceptionally high visitor numbers. As well as pedestrian visitors, the park's generous car park is regularly full even on a wet Tuesday morning.



### 3. Sustainable Development

Dawlish Countryside Park has opened as a long term response to increasing pressures on crucial nature conservation sites. It has come forward relatively early in the programme for delivery of the allocated urban extension at Dawlish, and is bringing meaningful benefits to existing residents. It is enhancing the opportunities for people living in new homes from the outset. One of the SANGS requirements is that provision is made for 'management in perpetuity', which means the social and environmental benefits of the scheme will endure over the very long term!

Exeter is the second fastest growing city in the UK, and Greater Exeter accounts for 42 per cent of the Heart of the South West housing growth even though it is only currently home to 28 per cent of the Local Enterprise Partnership area's total population. The park is an essential ingredient in ensuring that the social and economic benefits are balanced with environmental outcomes. Without timely delivery of this SANGS almost 60 per cent of Greater Exeter's housing supply would have been put at risk due to an absence of appropriate habitat mitigation. The park does not compromise any of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals but directly contributes to several of them:

#### *Quality Education*

A dedicated on-site ranger educates visitors about the environmental purpose of the site, its history and key features. Unique and attractive interpretation boards support the education programme alongside dedicated web material and social media.

The ranger team organise a variety of events to engage people of all ages, sharing information on history of the land, culture, and wildlife. Metal detector events and finds at the site have added to the story.

Events have included tanning and straw crafting skills, and local volunteers help plant native orchards, which host special Devon varieties, providing an additional learning resource. Devon Love's Dogs also host regular events that are fun for dogs and their owners, encouraging responsible dog behaviour and consideration for others.



#### *Decent Work and Economic Growth*

The park is integral to Greater Exeter's sustainable economic growth and acts to counterbalance the pressures of population increase in line with Habitats Directive obligations.

#### *Sustainable Cities and Communities*

Delivery of the park significantly enhances the sustainability credentials of Dawlish's 1,700-home urban extension. The growing community has direct and unrestricted access to a vast swathe of countryside and all of the associated social, health and wellbeing benefits entailed.

#### *Life Below Water and Life on Land*

The key purpose of SANGS delivery is to mitigate impacts on European Protected species; and their marine and terrestrial habitats. Both Natural England and RSPB strongly endorse the council's actions in protecting some of the most valuable and threatened species and habitats in Europe.

### 4. Additional benefits

The project team approach meant that additional opportunities for the scheme could be explored. Discussion and negotiation across the project team led to a decision to design and manage the park to benefit Teignbridge's Cirl Bunting population (which is around a third of the national total). There had been initial Natural England scepticism about farming arable squares in the centre of a public park but Teignbridge officers brokered a conclusion that provides a sense of space and attraction as well as enhancing its wildlife credentials by providing habitat for what had

been an estimated three breeding pairs. Those estimates have been easily eclipsed and one year on, nine territorial male Cirl Buntings have been recorded on and around the Countryside Park. The park's multifunctional benefits go far beyond its main purpose of providing an alternative green space. It is an oasis for Cirl Buntings as well as an accessible green lung for the emerging neighbourhood next door. Biodiversity gain is integral to the design of the park, from native tree planting to wildflower meadows and a carefully considered grassland management regime.

Building on these successes, Teignbridge and RSPB have worked together to secure quality Cirl Bunting land at nearby Ashill for a new nature reserve and Cirl Bunting 'hub'. The 37 hectare Ashill reserve was secured up-front by RSPB, and is being funded by Teignbridge's innovative approach to securing new development Cirl Bunting contributions for loss of breeding territories.

RSPB estimate Ashill can support at least 14 additional Cirl breeding territories once fully established. Following successful Cirl Bunting uptake, RSPB can review options for incorporating public access to provide wider reaching benefits, both for wildlife and the local community, including a potential future SANGS function (if required). RSPB will manage the site in perpetuity, protecting this resource into the future.

## 5. Community engagement

In response to a clear message from much of the Dawlish community that the original allocated site was not welcome, Teignbridge's planners optimised a programme of community and stakeholder engagement while masterplanning the town's urban extension. We welcomed views on where and what the countryside park should be. This played a big part in confirming that a site close to the growing community would bring more benefits than a focus just on the SANGS criteria alone.

Longstanding Teignbridge Council membership of local trader and holiday park forums helped us harness business views on the park, including pedestrian access, opening events and ongoing marketing of the site as a destination for visitors with dogs.



A key success indicator of community engagement is evidenced by original community opposition to the SANGS location, which was turned around to gain popular support.

In line with [Teignbridge community engagement strategy](#), we reached out to the community in ways and places they spend their time, including events and on social media. Facebook and Twitter were key to understanding the feelings and views of the community.

All the while, local councillors were kept abreast of proceedings. Through SANGS forums they were able to provide local feedback and remain up to speed with the progress that was being made.

## 6. Inclusive Planning

The park welcomes all members of the community and dogs. Although the site topography presented challenges, the masterplanning work and input from the ranger team ensured that wheeled access routes across the site have been engineered. Gates have been designed to be opened by people in wheelchairs and the surface of the routes are suitable for mobility trampers (weather dependent), in line with Natural England's guidance to keep paths natural.

Countryside rangers continue to work with the disability forum to make further access improvements.

## 7. Outcomes

The park is proving to be very popular with the local community and has provided 27 hectares of natural greenspace on the doorstep of 1,700 new homes. It fulfils Habitat Directive obligations to protect key conservation sites nearby whilst allowing much needed homes to be built. The park reduces visitor pressure these conservation sites and is also a home for wildlife itself, including protected Cirl Buntings. Following a recent RSPB site visit to Dawlish Countryside Park, Teignbridge District Council received a strong letter of praise from RSPB, in recognition of their success in creating a Park that is excellent for both people and wildlife.

## 8. Good practice

The fruits of delivery at Dawlish are already being transferred to delivery of the next SANGS at South West Exeter. Teignbridge's intellectual capital has been enhanced dramatically when it comes to creating new country parks, particularly on delivery matters like costings, programming and publicising a site.

With the Greater Exeter authorities embarked on preparation of a joint Strategic Plan, future SANGS provision looks likely. Teignbridge's experiences associated with the merits of allocating specific SANGS sites; the advantages of a CIL approach to funding; in-house delivery; and evidence of costs and viability implications will be invaluable to that process.

Our habitat mitigation partnership has also developed relationships with other authorities facing similar issues. We are able to share the benefits and efficiencies of a local authority-led approach to SANGS delivery, promoting the advantages of our approach to areas where the market is sometimes delivering privately, banking SANGS capacity and selling at a considerable profit, at the potential expense of other infrastructure priorities.

## 9. Social benefit

Ensuring the location of the Park next to a large housing development means that pedestrian access is possible, and reduces the need for car ownership, as well as congestion.

Community benefits have arisen through the park by providing valuable work experience, job satisfaction and social skills for volunteers at neighbouring charity, Dawlish Gardens Trust. Volunteers with learning disabilities have enjoyed a variety of gardening tasks on-site including tree-planting, mulching around 3,000 trees and helping to build 50 tree guards for the orchard. Further community involvement activities are being explored, such as installation of public art.

Community benefits for families are realised through the Rangers' programme of [education and countryside events](#). Devon Loves Dogs provide guided walks with a ranger, promoting responsible dog behaviour at the same time educating visitors about the wildlife, complementing the interpretation boards around the site educating visitors about the history and wildlife on site and the surrounding area.

There is a strong sense of community ownership of the site and the regularly on-site ranger gathers feedback and participation through face to face conversation. Local people have set up a 'Friends of' Facebook group which shares their willingness to care for the site, encouraging people to be responsible dog owners and get involved with maintaining the park.

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### A local resident's view changed to support the Park:

*“It's an absolute boom. Thank you from me and my dog.... This park brings so much joy and a community of regular visitors is building.”*

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