

**Incoming Chairman's Comments:
(Councillor Elaine Still)**

Firstly, I would like to thank all my fellow members of Hampshire County Council for electing me as your first female Chairman for several years. Now I must warn you, this will be a much longer speech than in recent years!

Secondly, I would like to thank Graham Burgess, our retiring Chairman, for all his guidance and mentoring. Most importantly I would like to thank Graham and his wife Marilyn for their excellent work promoting Hampshire County Council.

My third thanks goes to all my friends, including the Right Honourable Maria Miller MP, and my family, most of whom are here today. They have supported and encouraged me over the years, resulting in this honour of becoming Chairman. My children deserve special mention. James will be my main consort but the others will be stepping in when necessary. I'm lucky to be able to call on multiple consorts!

I must congratulate Charles Choudhary, on being elected our new Vice Chairman.

My theme this year will be "All Things Healthy and Green; All Creatures Great and Small."

In thinking about my theme of 'all things healthy' I came across a word that I was previously unaware of 'biophilia'. For the benefit of those who, like me, have not come across this term before it means 'love of life' or 'living systems'.

It describes the human preference to seek out things in nature, plants, trees, animals and it is this love of life that helps to sustain it. By looking after nature we are actually benefitting ourselves. There is an increasing body of evidence that illustrates the influence that connecting with nature has on our physical and mental health. This is particularly poignant as this is Mental Health awareness week.

Recent research shows that it is not just any old greenspace that helps to relieve stress and have a positive impact on psychological wellbeing. Visits to rural and coastal locations, especially those that are protected or designated for their conservation quality and value, have been linked to greater feelings of relaxation and refreshment.

This is good news for us in Hampshire with two national parks and over 75% of the land classified as rural, with our own organisation responsible for looking after over 3,000 hectares of it!

The vast majority of the land owned and managed by HCC is either nationally or internationally important for wildlife - from one of the largest coastal National Nature Reserves at Lymington to the 16 miles of the very special, Basingstoke Canal in north east Hampshire.

We know that physical exercise is good for us, it reduces the risk of cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes and some cancers.

But did you know that exercising in the outdoors has added benefits; it burns calories faster, increases self-esteem, is good for motivation and, perhaps as important, is freely available.

In Hampshire we have 3,000 miles of Rights of Way, that anyone can use to enjoy the fantastic countryside no matter where you are in the county, and it's all online and easy to access

Our country parks attract nearly 3 million visits a year and provide a huge number of opportunities to get active.

That is why the County is investing in all our country parks including Queen Elizabeth Country Park, where we have recently opened an assault course, children's natural play area and dog activity trail with funding from the Army Covenant Fund.

In early May the fantastic new facilities at Lepe Country Park were opened to the public and received a great reception.

Do go and see them at one of the most splendid coastal locations in Hampshire. This investment will ensure that the country parks are able to become operationally self-financing and will be secured for future generations to enjoy.

It would not be possible to have all these wonderful places protected and available to everyone without the support of an army of willing and dedicated volunteers.

There was an amazing 20,000 volunteer days spent doing just that in the Countryside Service alone last year.

Volunteering itself provides a lifeline for many people, keeping them in contact with other people, active and living independent healthy lives for longer, as well as making a valuable contribution to their local environment.

We also recognize the importance of engaging young people in getting them out of the classroom, being active, enjoying and learning about the environment. Over 25,000 educational visits take place in our countryside sites and parks and the Outdoor Service hosts 140,000 activity sessions involving over 55,000 participants (mainly young people) across its 4 Outdoor Centres every year.

Listening to and playing music is also well established as having beneficial effects on our physical and mental wellbeing, and particularly on the development of our young people.

Hampshire Music Service is one of the best in the country.

I encourage you to continue your support of Hampshire County Council Music Service and attend as many concerts as possible.

This year I would like us to raise the profile of Hampshire's environment and how it provides so many benefits for us.

We all need to consider the impact we have on the environment and take strides to reduce it.

HCC have already made a significant change to the amount of paper we use and there is more we can do.

I would like to see a real step change in the amount of plastics that are used only once and thrown away.

I am sure you witnessed the devastating effect that plastics can have on the marine environment presented by David Attenborough.

You may be interested to know that, in introducing a former County Council publication, David Attenborough said the following " Hampshire County Council has made a hugely impressive contribution to the protection and conservation of Hampshire's wildlife and wild places. No single local authority has invested so heavily in safeguarding its countryside and heritage features and in making these special places accessible for everyone to enjoy"

Looking after the ecosystem that supports us starts with the smaller creatures. Bees, beetles, hoverflies, butterflies and moths are in decline, under threat from a wide variety of pressures.

This year we will raise awareness of the importance, including from an economic perspective, of these pollinator species and all the work we do as a County Council to manage the habitats in which they thrive.

We will be helping other organisations and individuals to recognise the importance of pollinators and join with us to improve their chances.

As Chairman of the Council I am proud of those comments from Sir David, as I am sure we all are, and so this is the year that I would like us to focus on looking after nature so nature can look after us.