

Durlston Country Park National Nature Reserve Management Plan 2016-2026

Executive Summary – update 2025

Established in 1975 by Dorset County Council, Durlston Country Park (1.5km south of Swanage in the south-east corner of Purbeck, Dorset), comprises over 320 acres of seacliffs, coastal grassland and Victorian heritage which are carefully managed for wildlife, conservation and public enjoyment.

Currently, the Park attracts over 300,000 visitors a year who come for many reasons including those visiting for the Victorian Castle, the art gallery, the café, the wildlife, the views, the landscape, the history, the events programme, community participation and volunteer opportunities.

A flourishing Friends of Durlston group provides substantial voluntary support and there is a close working partnership with neighbours, the National Trust, Swanage Town Council, Dorset Wildlife Trust and many local groups and organisations.

The international importance of Durlston's geology and wildlife is widely recognised but the site has also played a key role in demonstrating Dorset Council's pioneering work in managing large numbers of visitors on sites with a high conservation value.

Ethos, Vision, Position, Management Priorities : 2016 - 2026

Ethos

Conservation for Public Enjoyment

Vision

We will continue to develop and manage Durlston as an inspirational, world class visitor facility with the highest commitment to conservation, customer satisfaction, accessibility, learning, community and sustainability.

Management Policies

The active conservation of Durlston's key natural and man-made assets. The activities on site take place primarily to fulfil this policy and vision.

We aim to provide a safe and welcoming environment for visitors, where any issues and problems are dealt with quickly and through the regular maintenance and monitoring programme, the standards of the site are high.

The management and maintenance of the site is undertaken by staff, contractors, volunteers and community members. These include Friends of Durlston, those taking part in the projects and other volunteers to the park.

Durlston Castle, Country Park and National Nature Reserve

Durlston is a 320acre countryside paradise with sea-cliffs, wildflower meadows and woodland. With views, trails, the Great Globe, wildflowers, bird-life and butterflies, there's always something new to see.

Durlston offers a great free day out on the Jurassic Coast. Durlston Castle (a unique Victorian building) houses our Visitor Centre, displays, café, shop and exhibition gallery is open daily from 10am. A key function of the Visitor Centre is the opportunity for the Rangers and public to have direct contact and to answer any questions the visitors may have, the Rangers act as a one stop shop for almost any query. Alongside the Rangers whenever possible is a volunteer who takes the lead for most activities – questions, sales and initial welcome.

The Castle is also home of the Fine Foundation Gallery which provides a changing programme of exhibitions and displays. The exhibition programme is managed by the Rangers as an integral part of the activities of the site, linking closely with the events programme, use of the studio, accommodation and other uses of the space including wedding hire and music events.

Two Trampers, an off-road and indoor wheelchairs are available for visitors to use as are audio guides and large print guides.

Durlston was voted Best Heritage Project in the 2012 National Lottery Awards, and it was awarded Gold, for Accessible and Inclusive Tourism in 2021 Visit England.

Free entry, parking charges apply.

Durlston is a multi-faceted site, with something for everyone, where all parts are interrelated and intrinsically linked. When marketing Durlston to the public there are many varied activities to focus on, but it is always a combination of conservation and public enjoyment.

Designations

85% of the site is National Nature Reserve, 33% of the site is a Special Area of Conservation, 64% a Site of Special Scientific Interest, 30% Site Nature Conservation.

Durlston is also on the Park and Historic Landscape Register, is a Dark Skies Site (Milky Way), Queen Elizabeth II Fields in Trust. It comes within the Dorset Natural Landscape (formerly AONB) and Purbeck Heritage Coast. The coastline is part of the East Devon and Dorset Coast World Heritage Site. The offshore waters are designated as a Marine Research Area.

Since 2010 Durlston has been a Natural England Accredited Country Park, and it has both Green Flag and Green Heritage Flag Awards

Durlston Castle, the Great Globe and the Sea Chart are all grade 2 listed buildings.

13. Volunteer and Community Involvement:

The involvement of the community through their volunteering and input is vital to the success of Durlston. The support, ideas and time helps the operation of Durlston and its embedding in the community.

In 2023 the number of volunteer hours put into the Park was over 12000, encompassing a huge variety of tasks and people. We aim to provide the opportunity for all, regardless of ability, age, ethnicity or background, to actively become involved in Durlston.

The provision of accommodation on site (4 bed flat) has allowed an increase in the opportunities for volunteers, their ability to stay overnight, enabling us to attract specific talents, for example artists, scientists, dry-stone wall trainer, fundraiser, coeloptera specialist, or bruchcutter operator, as well as long-term volunteer wishing to get experience in a work environment or change careers .

Financial Sustainability

The Country Park is operated as an entire entity, all areas supporting each other. This enables it to be income positive (including all staff wages), and in some years provide a cost recovery of up to 10%. Thus Durlston has a solid financial basis.

Key current income streams for Durlston include car park income (33%), rental income from the café and Allsort'd (26%), retail sales (22%), events and gallery income (11%), wedding and function income (6%) and donations (2%). All of these income streams are robust and all except countryside stewardship have increased since 2011 when the Castle opened.

As part of Dorset Council it is essential that the site remains a positive asset.

Welcoming Place

The Park must be a pleasant place to visit, with good signage prior to arrival, on arrival, within the park and within the Castle.

The Rangers and volunteers are provided with customer service training and disability awareness training

The Website provides comprehensive per-visit information, including a Visual Story

Healthy, safe and secure

Durlston needs to be a safe and secure place.

The health and safety policies are in place and are regularly reviewed and any changes implemented. The policies follow Dorset Council policies, with Durlston specific policies, regulations and risk assessments

Rangers and volunteers are trained in first aid, with regular refresher training

Infrastructure and equipment is regularly monitored, checked and surveyed

Clean and Well maintained

The park should be clean and well maintained. There are 7 dog fouling bins around the main dog walking areas. There are only litter and recycling bins at Durlston Castle and the Learning Centre. The desire (and assumption) is that visitors take their rubbish away with them. Any litter seen is picked immediately so as not to attract more. Any vandalism is rectified and graffiti removed as soon as possible

The buildings are maintained through Dorset Council property department

Annual targeted campaigns are aimed at visitors and locals, to increase the pick up rate of dog faeces and to improve dog/ owner behaviour.

The amenity area (around the car parks and Castle) should look cared for, but also natural, with wildflowers left to flourish but cut when visibility requires, the grass picnic area to be cut to maintain a short sward (to allow games, picnic activities).

Environmental Sustainability

As a National Nature Reserve concerned with conservation and habitat management, sustainability is intrinsically linked with the operation of Durlston. The activities that occur follow the sustainability plan to reduce, re-use and recycle resources where at all possible, to limit the negative effects of operating a visitor attraction and of conservation and habitat management.

Climate Change

Although the effects of climate change on habitats and ecosystems are difficult to predict, due to the complexity of systems involved, a number of outcomes are very likely:

- The effects of climate change are likely to be felt through the heavier rainfall and longer drier spells predicted. The effects of the heavy rainfall are likely to be increased problems with water runoff affecting the footpaths, to mitigate this drainage improvements are planned. The underlying ground conditions will mean the ground is more susceptible to waterlogging and poaching, mitigation for this is to reduce the human footfall in the wetter months by careful direction of visitors and Rangers.
- The drier spells will affect the stability of furniture dug into the ground for example gate posts, as the ground has a high proportion of clay within it.
- The changes in the climate will also affect the frequency of amenity grass cutting required, with the cutting season also becoming longer.
- It is likely that some species will be lost, due to climatic effects, however due to the complexity of eco-systems here and the current level of knowledge, the most effective response at present is to maximise overall biodiversity, so that if species are lost, hopefully their niche can be filled.

It is important that as the climate changes, weather recording at Durlston, which has been carried out since 1988 be continued and ideally work should be undertaken to relate this to wildlife data, to help aid future management and decision-making.

Transport

Reduced use of transport on site. People are encouraged to walk around the site to gain access to the facilities, this also applies to Rangers and volunteers who limit the use of the vehicles (off road mule or car) on site to the need to carry goods or people.

Cycle racks are provided at several points round the site.

The car park has 100 spaces, including two with electric charging points. The use of the car to get to Durlston is important for access and funding. The public service bus has not been running since 2021 due to the costs and bus company difficulties, there are plans for a Swanage Town bus that would drop off and pick up at Durlston, but this requires a comprehensive long-term funding package.

Resources

Minimal water use – the aim is to use minimal water on site. The water troughs have ball valves, meter readings are taken to watch for underground leaks. There is very little use of a hose. Rainwater is collected at the Learning Centre, Shed and Castle.

The Learning Centre has a 10Kw solar panels array producing electricity to the grid. This was installed in 2012. Durlston Castle has a 20kw solar panel array and has a Air-source heat pump installed to provide the majority of the buildings heating, (however a back up gas boiler is also used and the café kitchen has gas hobs & oven).

Electricity is used, and thanks to the solar panels and the installation of LED lights has been reduced, but as new items of equipment are required the power use is an important factor in replacement.

Waste produced is reused where possible, if not it is then recycled through collection and sorting (metal bins, plastic, paper, cardboard, light bulbs etc). Trade collections are made for café food waste, tins, plastic, cardboard, paper and glass, while large metal items are stored for removal and resale. The amount of waste produced is minimised and purchasing takes packaging and lifetime into account. Scrap wood is retained for use in projects or sold for firewood alongside logs produced during woodland operations. Items which are no longer required and are surplus to requirements are sold or given away, where appropriate.

Provenance

Where possible local resources are used – eg walling stone and limestone chippings from the local quarries, retaining both local character but also reducing the transport effects on the environment. Whenever possible, existing stone or wood from the site is

used or re-used. Reducing air miles, and freight miles is considered when buying for the shop.

Compostable Waste:

The waste generated from land management operations is where possible composted or put in waste piles to rot. There is a compost heap for kitchen waste. The compost is used for the occasional planting and seeds potting. During the clearance of the fallen leaves from the paths, this is also composted.

The number of bonfires is limited to essential fires only. This limits the nuisance caused to the local neighbours and keeps pollution emitted during bonfires to a minimum. It is however important to remove the waste for habitat management purposes.

Woodland waste produced during the woodland management programme includes logs and posts.

Peat use

There is no peat used on the site, the environmental consequences of using peat are completely against the ethos of the Park and conservation as a whole. Where compost material is required, for example in plant pots, raised beds it will be produced on site from material cut and composted. Compost bins were built as part of the shed project and they will be maintained through it. Where home grown compost is not available environmentally friendly and sustainably produced alternatives will be used.

Herbicides and Pesticides

There is currently a presumption against using pesticides at Durlston, this policy will continue. Where pest control is required it will be targeted specifically and the use of natural barriers and control methods will be considered first, with pesticides being used in exceptional circumstances only.

Only specific targeted herbicides are used at Durlston to treat only specific issues, these include spraying of bracken in exceptional circumstances, Japanese knotweed when discovered and occasional spot treatment of weeds around the hard-standing of Durlston Castle (spraying helps reduce damage caused by roots of plants in the buildings and surrounds). Elsewhere weeds are cleared using hand or power tools.

The herd of cattle which graze the site are not to be routinely fed with wormers, veterinary treatments are to be used for specific issues only

Habitat Improvements

There is a constant aim to improve the habitats of the Site, which is nationally known for its coastal limestone grassland, most of this area is under the countryside stewardship agreement.

The Woodland Habitat is currently dominated by Holm Oak and Sycamore. The Holm Oak has little wildlife value and provides an almost complete shade and canopy cover with very little understory. Opening up the glades allows more light into the woodland and increases the diversity of the woodland flora and fauna.

A seasonal work programme exists to ensure the habitats are managed.

A programme of Tor Grass management is in place to reduce the quantity of invasive Tor Grass in the meadows.

There is a programme of monitoring of the woodland trees for ash die back and chestnut canker – Ash die-back has led to a number of Ash trees being felled during 2023 and 2024. There are numerous Elms which get affected by disease after number of years, these are then felled and suckers left to regrow.

Standing dead wood is left in situ (where safe to do), brash and dead wood habitat piles are produced and left or moved and turned into dead hedges. Cut wood is where possible used on site as path edging and fencing poles.

Durlston is divided into three zones, these differ significantly in their visitor pressure, conservation value and requirements – see Appendix 1: 2.6 Zoning Policies and Criteria. Although separate they are not isolated from each other, with actions in one zone affecting another zone due to the similar or opposite requirements and practices.

Conservation of Nature and Heritage

Durlston has many designations for its Natural and Heritage assets. The wildlife, historic park, important landscape and structural features should be preserved and it is very important that any activities that are considered take account of the effect on the Heritage features

The high standard of management of the NNR, SSSI must be maintained and it should be continued to be promoted with other conservation groups and landowners and public

The Pleasure Grounds (the subject of the recent project) are to continue to be maintained and the Victorian focus retained.

Community Involvement

The local community should be able to join in caring for the park. Recreational facilities should be provide that are appropriate for everyone in the community

Friends of Durlston are the support group for the park and play an active role in developing and consulting on the Management of Durlston, through the executive committee and regular contact with the members.

The Volunteering element of Durlston is of high significance to its operation, and volunteers can and do feature in all elements from practical roles, public engagement, monitoring, wildlife surveys, events, administration, report writing, but opportunities can still to be increased. **% of volunteers have a disability or long-term health problem, but with the opening of the Everyone Needs Shed Project in 2021, more opportunities for volunteers to develop skills and share skills with others has emerged and an even more diverse range of opportunities has been developed, especially for people who are less physically able or have mental health challenges. This has diversified the volunteer base to include a greater number of people with disabilities.

Investigate opportunities to continue scheduled bus service

Investigate 'Neighbour Car' lift-sharing scheme and Community Transport scheme for groups

Marketing

Durlston should be promoted as a community asset as well as a tourist attraction. The provision of over 120 events and 100's of other activities each year enable a wide range of people to be involved in the Park. The information on events and activities is to be provide in a range of forms to increase the visibility for a diverse range of people, including website, social media, press release, posters, printed leaflets.

One of the key functions of Durlston is to educate and provide a place for young people to come and learn in a wonderful environment. This can be with family, friends or on formal education visits with schools.

The provision of 'Ranger led' session to schools continues to provide this opportunity at a low cost.

Management Plan

Consulted during year by Rangers and volunteers, and the work programme reviewed annually. A new Management Plan is required from 2026 and will have different layout, the previous one 2016-2026 having followed the Natural England National Nature Reserve layout.

Ethos and principles of interpretation

The aim is to make the interpretation at Durlston specific to the site, topical, regularly updated, fun, accurate and imaginative, with a commitment to arts and across a range of media. The overarching theme is "Change" with daily alterations and updates to the interpretation available on site and on the website.

The main focus for physical interpretation is Durlston Castle. Here a range of displays includes 'Durlston Today' which provides topical information and interpretation on a daily basis, monthly wildlife displays, Jurassic Coast Displays, A Durlston Round the Year four-screen show and a 'Rock' room which interprets the local geology. Within the Castle the Durlston website and Jurassic coast interactive are available for visitors to find out more in-depth information.

The Castle is also home of the Fine Foundation Gallery which provides a changing programme of exhibitions and displays. The exhibition programme is managed by the Rangers as an integral part of the activities of the site, linking closely with the events programme, use of the studio and accommodation and other uses of the space.

There are currently 4 temporary exhibitions owned by Durlston (Victorian Durlston, Durlston Past, Migration and Durlston and the Sea) these can be installed relatively quickly and have many extra parts that can be added. Other exhibitions can be income raising with commission taken on sales, from individual artists to art groups, museums, partner organisations or one with an interesting story or activity. The aims for all exhibitions are to maintain a changing programme of high quality exhibits which can interest a wide range of visitors.

The Daily Diary is written daily by the Rangers (and has been for over 20 years accumulating a vast amount of information), it is a very popular feature and is put on the website daily and is emailed out to a number of other local attractions to display.

A key function of the Visitor Centre is the opportunity for the Rangers and public to have direct contact and to answer any questions the visitors may have, the Rangers act as a one stop shop for almost any query. Alongside the Rangers whenever possible is a volunteer who takes the lead for most activities – questions, sales and initial welcome.

Self-guided Trails: 4 trails are currently provided to help visitors explore the Park: Victorian Trail (linking to Swanage), Wildlife Trail, Clifftop Trail and the Woodland Trail. The trails were reviewed and in parts altered in 2011, and each has a leaflet associated with it. There may be scope for provision of other trails in the future.