

Simon Mallinson
Head of Legal and Democratic Services

3 January 2019

Dear Mr Mallinson,

I write in response to the letter addressed to yourself, calling in the decision that was made on the 21 November to introduce parking charges at Worcester Woods Country Park.

The decision was made following the publication of a Cabinet Member Decision Report. I was delegated the powers to make this decision by the Leader of the Council as part of the delegated powers process.

The first point made in the call-in challenges whether sufficient consultation or consideration of the impact of the decision upon members of the Worcester Park Run, 20th Worcester Scouts; British Military Fitness; The Orchard Café or the general public who use the Centre.

The Cabinet Member Report clearly sets out in paragraph 16 that there will be no formal consultation regarding the proposals to introduce charge. The Head of Legal and Democratic Services advised that advance formal public consultation was not legally required in relation to the proposals set out in the report given that there was no statutory or common law requirement to do so. Instead it is proposed that there would be a period of public and stakeholder engagement to explain the proposals and to seek feedback on the proposed charging structure.

The decision that was made was not to decide the final details of the scheme but approve the principle of introducing charging for the countryside centre car parking, which is likely to provide sustainable funding for the future continuation of the Countryside Greenspace team and service for the greater public benefit.

For transparency there were some proposals for the charging structure in the report, but this was not part of my CMR recommendations that were agreed. The final recommendation of the report authorises the Director of Children, Families and Communities in consultation with the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Communities to finalise the details of charging at Worcester Woods Country Park including the level of charges and to take all appropriate steps to implement the agreed proposal in Summer 2019. This would no doubt be informed by the views coming back from the engagement exercise flagged at paragraph 16 of the report.

On publication of this CMR Report 7 days before the decision was made, Countryside Officers contacted the major users of the Centre to explain the proposals and to seek initial feedback. The Café tenant had already been made aware of the intent to bring in charges, and the issue had been discussed with her. The report at paragraph 12 highlights that there would be further investigation of ways to incentivise patronage of the café before the details were finalised.

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If my decision is upheld, then these conversations, along with wider public engagement, will continue to help finalise the charging structure introduced. With the implementation not being planned until summer 2019, this leaves at least five months for these discussions to take place.

The second point made in the call-in, questions the income to be generated and that the income quoted is factual and the costs to install car parking pay machines and enforcement has been accurately calculated.

The capital cost of introducing parking charges has been estimated at £40,000 after discussion with parking infrastructure companies. Potential income from charges has been estimated using the following factors:

- Information gained from visitor comment card data regarding the average length of stay
- Feedback via Country Park Facebook page and Trip Advisor
- Verbal feedback from visitors, meeting room users, café tenant and staff.
- Consideration of the number of spaces in the car park and the number of weekend, bank holiday and school holiday days compared to the number of regular working week days
- Turnover rate of spaces within the car park
- Experience of generating income from parking from Waseley Hills Country Park since the late 1990s as well as comparisons to other similar sites nationally
- Seasonality
- Potential number of annual passes that may be purchased.

These factors, along with average charges, were used to develop a draft financial model of what income/savings could be achieved. This is obviously subject to change due to the charging structure still being in draft and actual use of the carpark.

The third point questions that the impact upon cycling; physical activity and recreation has not been taken into account along with the impact upon people with low income and those dependent on state benefits.

A full Public Health and Equality Impact Assessment has been carried out and this was published as an appendix to the report. The purpose of this document is to accompany any major decision or change of policy. It allowed me to consider potential negative impacts on protected groups and public health so I could make an informed decision. The impact assessment highlighted the following potential negative impact for: Disability, Pregnancy and Maternity. Therefore, to ensure compliance with our Public Sector Equality Duty, consideration has been given to:

- The location and positioning of pay machines in the car park so that people with disabilities are not adversely affected. These will be placed adjacent to the café, toilets and meeting rooms, which provide the main hub of the Country Park and where people tend to arrive at and leave the site from.
 - The charging structure so that those who may take longer to carry out activities during a visit to the Country Park (e.g. people with a disability or a young baby) are not disadvantaged by an unreasonable time restriction which forces them into a higher charging band.
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- The number and location of disabled spaces in the car park so that these are located as near as possible to pay machines, café, toilets and meeting rooms
- The use of the meeting rooms by disabled groups and those with babies.
- An exemption or concessionary rate for those using a blue badge displayed correctly, for disabled visitors.

A Public Health Impact Assessment was also carried out and considered that the proposal may affect those on a lower income, may make a visit to the Country Park less attractive and so reduce potential positive effect on physical and mental health.

Therefore:

- Consideration has been given to comparison with charging structures at similar local attractions
- The charging structure takes account of most popular duration of visit (so that the most common length of visit does not incur maximum charge)
- An annual pass system has been incorporated into the charging structure
- The ability for visitors to get a refund of a percentage of the car parking charge if they spend over a set amount in the Orchard café will be investigated
- The charge is for parking a vehicle at the Country Park, not for visiting the Country Park.

The fourth and final point questions the impact on local residential areas of displacement parking. It is not considered that there will be a significant displacement of Country Park visitors to nearby residential areas. The Country Park is approximately 10-15 minutes' walk from Warndon Villages and 10 minutes' walk from Spetchley Road. This distance is likely to be a disincentive to a large proportion of visitors such as family groups from parking in residential areas. Currently during the summer when the Country Park is oversubscribed by visitors, there are no reported issues of displacement parking in neighbouring residential areas, due to people's recreational parking behaviour being different from work related parking behaviour.

Worcester Woods Country Park is an award-winning facility that is extremely popular with visitors (over 600,000 visits annually). Most sites with a similar range of facilities around the county currently either charge for entry or charge for car parking. It would not be desirable to levy an entry charge to use the Country Park and this proposal would mean that the Country Park itself remains free to use to visitors - it is only parking a vehicle which would incur a charge.

I have chosen to respond in writing to the points that were raised in the call-in letter to allow these to be considered ahead of the Panel meeting on the 14 January 2019 in order to aide debate and discussion on the day.

Yours sincerely



Councillor Lucy Hodgson.
