

Environment and Infrastructure Select Committee

29th November 2017

Pay and Conserve, Car Park Charging on the Countryside Estate



Purpose of report: To share the results of the consultation on implementing car parking charges on the Countryside Estate and to consult the Environment and Infrastructure Select Committee on the proposals.

Introduction:

1. Surrey County Council owns 6,500 acres of countryside estate, all of which is open for the public to visit. It is our responsibility to ensure the countryside is cared for and managed so Surrey residents and visitors can access and enjoy it, and we know it is highly valued by our residents.
2. The County Council works with Surrey Wildlife Trust (SWT) who are contracted to look after the countryside estate on our behalf. This ranges from the heathland of Ockham and Wisley Commons to the downland and woodland of Norbury Park. SWT makes sure that paths can be safely used, dangerous trees and branches are made safe, sensitive habitats and species are protected and littering is removed. They also make sure residents can get to the countryside, which normally means providing somewhere for them to park. The current cost of managing the Countryside Estate is £2.1million of which the County Council contributes £575,000.
3. With ever increasing pressure on local government finances, particularly as a result of the demand for social care services, we are now looking at ways that our countryside estate can be self-funding so it is more resilient to changes in public sector finance. That way, we can ensure the care and management that the countryside needs can be guaranteed for the future.
4. One way to do this is charging visitors for parking at sites such as countryside car parks. This has been done by many other landowners including the National Trust, the Forestry Commission and other county councils.
5. There are over 30 car parks across the Estate, which range from formalised car parks with the capacity for 190 cars to informal car parks with just a few spaces.
6. On 25th October 2017 SCC launched a consultation to understand how the public use the countryside and their views on proposals to charge for parking at the five busiest sites. The consultation closed on 6th November 2017 and received 1,242 responses. This report sets out the results from the consultation and the emerging options that will be presented to the Cabinet on 14th December 2017.

Pay and Conserve Consultation

7. The Pay and Conserve consultation is one of the ways that we are engaging with Surrey residents to share their views on ways to protect the county's countryside by making it financially self-sufficient. Over 1,200 people completed the consultation and we are grateful to all the people who took the time to respond and to share their insights and views on the countryside.
8. A draft business case based on the car count at each car park and the likely investment and net income has been developed by the Surrey Wildlife Trust and identifies the following sites on the estate where car park charging could be introduced:
 - Chobham Common
 - Whitmoor Common
 - Norbury Park
 - Ockham Common
 - Rodborough Common
9. The consultation survey asked a number of questions to help us understand how the sites are used:
 - what car parks are visited and how often,
 - the types of activity associated with car park usage,
 - time spent at each car park, and
 - any issues concerning the sites.
10. To help develop proposals, questions were asked about where and how we could charge:
 - if charging is introduced, should it be at all of the car parks, only some of the car parks or in none of the car parks.
 - the method of payment
 - options to close the least used car parks to reduce overall management costs.

A question was also included to help us understand what displacement parking may occur if charges were introduced. We wanted to know if users were likely to park elsewhere in the vicinity or go to an alternative site.

Analysis of the consultation

11. The consultation closed at midnight on the 6th November and a full analysis has taken place. There were a number of key themes that emerged from the consultation which are set out in the table below, with commentary on how these will be addressed

Key themes	SCC response
Concern that the income from charging will be used for other SCC services	The income will be ring fenced for the countryside and information will be put in the car parks to explain where the money is being spent.
There is a concern that volunteers will be charged	It is proposed to make arrangements for volunteers to park for free when they are volunteering

SCC should lobby Central Government to improve the central public investment in the countryside.	The Cabinet Member for Environment and Transport will continue to engage with the Secretary of State and other relevant ministers. The Secretary of State has been briefed on the issue of car park charging and other issues that SCC faces.
The introduction of charging is seen as an form of additional taxation on the public that use the sites	The budgets for countryside management are being squeezed as the pressure on the overall County Council budget increases. This is unlikely to change in the next few years and therefore we need to find a way of making the budgets for countryside more resilient to these pressures. The best way of doing this is to generate an income from the countryside estate that can be ring fenced for the countryside budget. However it is not proposed to introduce car parking charges at all car parks on the countryside estate.
There is a negative impact of charging for those on a low income	We are aware this could be an issue, however this proposal would not introduce charging at all car parks. Charging could encourage positive changes such as car sharing.
That the introduction of car park charging will have a negative impact on the health and wellbeing of users of the sites	The County Council and Surrey Wildlife Trust are aware of this point and have sought advice from other organisations that already charge for parking. There is a potential issue for people who cannot or will not pay, however this does not appear to translate into a lower number of people using the car park.
SWT members should not have to pay for car parking	Further investigation will be made to see if there could be more benefit for Surrey Wildlife Trust members.

Full data from analysis in Surrey Says, the Councils consultation tool is included in Annex 1 to this report.

Options identified in the Business Case

Set out below are the benefits and dis-benefits of the options considered in developing the business case.

Option 1 No change

If no charges were made for car parking then:

- a) There will be no income generated to cover the cost of running the Countryside Estate. The cost to SCC's revenue budget is currently £575,000 (FY 2017/18) which is reducing to zero by 2020/21, as set out in the Medium-Term Financial Plan.
- b) If the savings are not achieved little or no funding will be available for the delivery of the contract. This could lead to the closure of the car parks, or the removal of other access facilities, at the most popular sites on the Countryside Estate, resulting in falling visitor

satisfaction and additional legal risks associated with the maintenance of car park surfaces and trails.

- c) Potentially this could lead to more insurance claims if the condition of the car parks deteriorates.
- d) There will be less funding available for other work on sites such as the maintenance of access facilities, which could lead to a reduction in the public's ability to access the countryside.

Option 2 Introduce a voluntary donation in the busiest car parks.

The consequence of this option are:

- a) Income will be collected via mobile phone payment, such as RingGo or similar, and an annual parking pass scheme only (i.e. no Pay & Display machine).
- b) Compliance, based on work by the National Trust will be approximately 25%. Potentially this will be lower as this is parking run on County Council land, rather than land owned by a popular charity. It should be noted that Dartmoor National Park calculated that they received on average 15p per car via their voluntary donations and are now introducing a mandatory charge.
- c) Income from car park charging will make a minimal contribution to the Estate becoming self-funding.
- d) Displacement parking is unlikely to be an issue because the voluntary car park donation scheme will not be mandatory.
- e) Soft enforcement will be undertaken through 'guilt' notices and heavy promotion of the annual parking pass scheme.
- f) A voluntary scheme can be used as a softer introduction to mandatory car park charges after 2 years leading to less controversy because many of the regular users will be accustomed to the concept even with high non-compliance.
- g) There will be less funding available for other work on sites such as the maintenance of access facilities, which could lead to a reduction in the public being able to access the countryside.

Option 3 Introduce car parking charges on the five busiest sites using cash and card collection

The consequences of this option are:

- a) Income will be collected via a mix of Pay and Display machines, mobile phone payment, e.g. RingGo, and an annual parking pass scheme.
- b) The busiest car parks will contain Pay & Display machines and offer mobile phone payment and an annual parking pass scheme.
- c) The less busy car parks will offer mobile phone payment and an annual parking pass scheme only (i.e. no Pay & Display machine).
- d) Displacement parking will need to be monitored and could be a problem in residential areas around the car parks.
- e) Car park charging is likely to make a reasonable contribution to the estate becoming self-funding, however there are risks associated with cash collection, notably theft, associated vandalism and loss of income which could have a negative impact on the net revenue of this option.

Option 4 Introduce car parking charges across the five busiest sites using cashless payment methods only.

The consequences of this option are:

- a) Income will be collected via mobile phone payment and an annual parking pass scheme only (i.e. no Pay & Display machine).

- b) Car park charging is likely to make a good contribution to the estate becoming self-funding.
- c) Capital investment costs will be minimised, with the focus being on clear signage.
- d) Annual costs will be minimised because this option has less capital investment (no parking meters required), thus less depreciation costs; it removes the need for cash collection at sites and a banking service. All transactions are based on mobile based payment and annual parking pass scheme using an online facility.
- e) No cash meters will reduce theft and vandalism, a common issue for isolated rural car parks.

Option 5 Introduce car park charging at the five busiest car parks using non-cash parking machine (card only) and other non-cash payment methods, e.g. mobile phone payment and annual pass.

The consequences of this option are:

- a) Income will be collected via a mix of Pay and Display (Card only) machines, mobile phone payment and an annual parking pass scheme.
- b) Car park charging is likely to make a good contribution to the estate becoming self-funding.
- c) Capital investment is similar to Option 3.
- d) Annual costs will be reduced compared to Option 3; it removes the need for cash collection at sites, processing cash and a banking service. All transactions are based on card transactions, mobile based payments and an annual parking pass scheme using an online facility.
- e) No cash-based meters will reduce the risk of theft and vandalism, a common issue for isolated rural car parks.

For any of the options involving charging, displacement parking will need to be monitored, particularly for any impacts on residential areas around the car parks.

A summary of options are set out in the table below:

Option	Description	Method of collection	Value for money* (ranking 1=most preferred – 5= least preferred)	Where	Pay and Display
1	Do nothing	N/A	5. – will not generate any revenue to invest in the estate	N/A	N/A
2	Voluntary Donation	Mobile payment and annual pass	4 – will generate a small amount of income but evidence from elsewhere suggest that this is likely to be very low	5 busiest	No
3	Introduce car park charging on the five busiest sites – Cash	Cash, Card, Mobile payment and annual pass	3 – will generate a reasonable income stream but high operational costs and additional high risk of theft and vandalism	5 busiest sites	Yes
4	Introduce car park charging on the five	Mobile payment and annual	1 – will generate good income stream and low operational costs	5 busiest sites	No

	busiest sites – Cashless	pass	enabling significant reinvestment in the Surrey Countryside		
5	Introduce car park charging on the five busiest sites – Card	Card, Mobile payment and annual pass	2 – will generate good income stream and medium operational costs enabling good reinvestment in the Surrey Countryside	5 busiest sites	Yes

*The value for money is based on a set of assumptions relating to the capital investment, operating costs and projected income levels.

Preferred options analysis

12. The criteria for assessing the above options are as follows:

- Financial return
- Public acceptability
- Technology future proofing

13. Options 3, 4 and 5 all provide a positive business case, with net revenue making a positive contribution to the maintenance of the carparks and the wider estate. Based on financial return option 4 (phone & permit only) is the most viable. A cashless system with no meters on site will require a lower investment and incur lower annual running costs. The second most viable is option 5, which also includes an option to pay by card, resulting in higher capital and running costs. The capital costs associated with option 3 are similar to those of option 5 but the running costs associated with option 3 are significantly higher due to the costs of cash collection and option 3 could also be subject to a high level of vandalism, theft and loss of income that results from having cash at the sites. As a result, the level of investment in maintaining the Surrey countryside is projected to be significantly lower with option 3 than either option 4 or 5.

14. Considering the second criteria, the results of the consultation show us that options 1 and 2 would clearly be the most preferable, as it would mean that people would not need to pay for parking. However, this would result in deterioration in the quality of the estate and in access to the estate, such as the closure of car parks. Of the payment options, option 3 the cash system, would be the most acceptable to the public. The results show that 59% preferred to pay by cash. The next most popular payment option was by card at 46%. As outlined above, meters could be subject to vandalism and theft, particularly if they have cash in them. The National Trust are currently reviewing their method of charging for parking as a result of vandalism of meters. The consultation results showed that option 4 was the least preferred payment option.

15. The third criteria, technology future proofing requires any option that is implemented to be tested. There are currently trials underway to ensure that there is sufficient

network capacity at each site to ensure that options 3, 4 and 5 are technologically viable.

16. Taking account of the assessments above, Option 5 offers the most viable system, in balancing in particular financial return and public acceptability. This would be to introduce card only meters (some 95% of adults in the UK now have bank cards). Season tickets and pay by phone would also be available. Use of the system would be monitored to enable a potential future move towards a system without meters at a point in the future.

Conclusions

17. In order to ensure a secure future for the Countryside Estate in the stewardship of the County Council and Surrey Wildlife Trust, we need to ensure a steady revenue stream. Surrey Wildlife Trust are working with SCC to develop a range of opportunities to produce that income and help to conserve and enhance the Estate. Car parks are an important gateway to those sites (which require maintenance) and charging for parking is now an accepted way of generating that income.
18. Based on the financial assessment and the outcome of the Pay and Conserve Consultation the preferred option would be to introduce charging in the 5 busiest sites with a card only, pay and display machine and the option to pay by mobile phone or to purchase an annual season ticket as set out in option 5.

Recommendations:

The Select Committee are asked to:

- consider the output from the consultation
- comment on the proposed options
- provide a view on the preferred option

To enable their views to be taken into account by Cabinet when they meet on 14th December 17.

Next steps:

A paper will be prepared for Surrey County Council's Cabinet for a decision at their meeting on the 14th December

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Annex 1 Report on the Pay and Conserve Consultation Analysis.

Sources/background papers:

Pay and Conserve Consultation

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