

CABINET – 29 January 2019

PROCEDURAL MATTERS

Public Questions

Question 1: Ms Sally Blake, local resident, Guildford

The Council's policy for introducing parking charges at 5 of the commons in the Countryside Estate was based on parking numbers provided to the Cabinet by Cllr Goodman and the SCC Countryside Group, where it was stated that there were 446,000 cars a year parking prior to charges. A Freedom of Information request has since been used to show that the number of cars parking at these commons was likely to have been closer to 900,000.

The base data provided in that FOI shows that, of the 15 car parks at these commons, 6 of them, including 2 of the largest car parks, were neither measured nor included in the 446,000 total. Furthermore, the parking numbers quoted for the other measured car parks were all substantially altered from their base value.

The underestimation of parking numbers is similar to what happened at Newlands Corner where parking numbers reported in the original proposal for parking charges presented to Cabinet was only 122,000 a year. A Freedom of Information request subsequently revealed the actual number of cars parking there was 255,000.

If this information had not come to light, the reduction in the number of people using these 16 car parks as a result of the charges would have looked far less of an issue to councillors, particularly to the health and well-being of Surrey residents. This has, potentially, serious long-term implications for both adult social care policy making and budget formulation, as well as the perceived integrity of the Countryside Estate by the public.

Please could the Council explain how this could happen and what action will be taken to investigate and publicise why the Cabinet and the public have been misled? All relevant information was sent to the Head of the SCC Countryside Group on 7 December 2018 and no response to the concerns raised then has been received since.

Reply:

The numbers used in the original business plan were the figures available at the time and based on numbers from visitor surveys and figures extrapolated from data from a limited number of counters. It is quite clear from the report that not all car parks have counters on them. We understood these may not have been accurate and installed counters in further car parks between 2015 and 2018 and therefore now have more accurate numbers. Adjustments were made for car parks such as Ockham, where a 20 minute free period was factored in. As the County Council was introducing car parking charges for the first time at these locations it seemed sensible to be cautious with the figures when putting together the business case.

However, we have released the actual figures under FOI so there has been no attempt to hide the figures or to change them. We have clearly stated that the actual costs and expenditure will be published in summary once we have a year's worth of figures. Not all the car parking meters are operational yet and several were deliberately vandalised and have

only been operating properly for the last month. Any new business needs to have time to settle in before a true picture can be seen.

We have answered the point about health and wellbeing in a previous answer. We are only charging at 16 car parks of over 30 on the Countryside Estate. Most people who visit the Estate now are paying for parking or using free car parks on other parts of the Estate.

Mr Mike Goodman
Cabinet Member for Environment & Waste
29 January 2019

Question 2: Mr John Oliver, Local Resident

Surrey Wildlife Trust (SWT) manages Norbury Park which is council-owned land. It has a large population of ash trees. SWT is cutting down virtually all ash trees which exist in a 30 metre swathe on each side of footpaths and tracks/roads accessible by harvesting machinery. It amounts to up to 45 hectares of land, equivalent to 60 football pitches. This includes mature trees which can take up to 30 years to die – if at all.

SWT claims the work is being done on the grounds of public safety because of the ash dieback problem which is killing a high percentage of the country's ash population. The Office for National Statistics states that the chances of being killed by a falling tree or branch in a public place is one in 20 million and one in 10 million anywhere.

As I understand it, SWT is selling the cut wood to furniture manufacturers and to Euro Forest for chipping and further shipping to a biomass power station in Kent.

Ash dieback is a national disaster. However, up to 5% of ash trees are known to be resistant to the fungal disease and recent research indicates that survival rates may be higher. Each one of these needs to be protected so that they can form the bedrock of a resurgence in the ash population – a tree that is nationally important. SWT has not identified these trees and is cutting them down.

Current activity at Norbury Park is also destroying lower level habitat where protected species, such as the hazel dormouse, are hibernating (pictures available). It is impossible for SWT give assurances, not least because of the autumn leaf fall, that it will monitor this or that the machinery will not have a significant detrimental effect on the flora and fauna of this site.

As part of its policy to reduce it's funding to SWT, is the council content that:

- Surrey Wildlife Trust is clearing such a huge area, and intends to do the same at Worplesdon Commons, Sheepleas and Shere Woods amongst others, when there is such a small chance of harm to the public;
- resistant and mature trees are being removed as well as dead ones;
- lower-level habitat is being destroyed with potential impact on protected species;
- trees are being sent for burning and thus adding to global warming;
- SWT is pursuing a commercial approach to harvesting these trees rather than an ongoing managed approach to the problem in accordance with Forest Commission guidelines; and

would the council explain its response to each of the parts of this question?

Reply:

SWT is managing the tree safety risk from Ash dieback disease to visitors to Surrey County Council-owned sites in accordance with the appropriate tree safety policy. This winter's works will cover less than 20ha of the 200 hectares of woodland. (Norbury Park is around 445 hectares in total). The work involves selective felling of Ash trees within a maximum of 30m from zones immediately adjoining main paths and carparks where the public would be at greatest risk.

The Forestry Commission have been involved with SWT throughout the decision process. They visited the site with SWT during 2018 and agreed that the Ash on Norbury was showing significant signs of dieback. The majority of Ash trees are being left in place across the site, where they are not considered to be a risk to the public. None of the cut trees are being stump treated and will be allowed to coppice. The situation will be monitored over the next few years to see if ash stumps succumb to ash dieback and if any other trees need to be removed.

The Forestry Commission (FC) released guidance in 2018 linking Ash dieback disease to honey fungus which can cause collapse of trees. They asked woodland managers to revisit their risk assessments and policies. SWT spoke to statutory bodies at length to discuss the appropriate response and a decision was taken with FC and Natural England's support to carry out the works in progress at the moment on the grounds of safety.

As stated above all the work has been approved by Natural England and an ecologist is checking on site to ensure the work causes the least impact on the ecology of the site.

Ash dieback works will need to be undertaken across the countryside estate where there is a risk to the public. The amount of work will vary site by site and area by area as the density of Ash trees adjacent to paths and car parks changes.

Work is currently being undertaken by Euroforest who are taking most of the timber to Kent to be used in generating power. Any income from this is being directly used to fund further ash dieback safety works where they are needed across the Countryside Estate

Ash dieback and the subsequent work to remove the ash will make a significant impact on the landscape and it is now important to accept that and look at ways to manage those changes. Significantly viewpoints are likely to be opened up at sites such as Norbury Park, along with clearings in the woodland that allow a different range of plants and animals to colonise.

Mr Mike Goodman
Cabinet Member for Environment & Waste
29 January 2019

Question 3: Ms Katie King, Speech & Language Therapist

Given the overwhelming support from Surrey residents for investing more in to children's services, and the incredible opposition to making cuts to these centres, along with the clear preference residents have to protect Children's Centres financing over other services, what more can the council do to protect these vital resources for all vulnerable children, rather than just a small subset?

Reply:

The proposal to remodel our Children's Centre offer has not been taken lightly. We are facing significant challenges to meet the needs of the most vulnerable children and families whilst managing very challenging financial decisions.

The backdrop to these changes is that Ofsted have twice rated services for children in need and protection in Surrey as inadequate. Too many children are accelerated into high level child protection and public care services. The aim of the new Family Centres and Family Service is to catch these families and children early and work alongside them to improve outcomes. The current model is not effective, it will not meet the requirements set out in the Ofsted inspections and needs to change.

Our new Family Centres will be part of a wider family service that focuses on children and families in the most need. Currently the Children's Centres offer a 'universal' service and there is strong evidence that the families who are in the greatest need do not use the centres, instead accelerating into child protection and public care.

The wider Family Service is also going through a large scale transformation and we are working very closely with the District and Borough Councils and other partner agencies to maximise the opportunities to support families across the levels of need at the right time and in the right way.

Mrs Mary Lewis
Cabinet Member for Children, Young People & Families
29 January 2019