

NOTES OF A MEETING OF THE COUNTRY PARKS CAR PARK CHARGING TASK AND FINISH GROUP ESTABLISHED BY THE PLACE SERVICES AND ECONOMIC GROWTH POLICY & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE. HELD IN COMMITTEE ROOM 3, COUNTY HALL ON WEDNESDAY, 13 DECEMBER 2017

County Councillors':

Mark Durham	*	Bob Massey
* Eddie Johnson (Chairman)	*	Ron Pratt
Julie Young		

*present

The following officers were present throughout the meeting:

Laura Boreham	Country Parks Development Manager
Dominic Collins	Director, Economic Growth and Localities
Jenny Stubbings	Project Management Officer
Robert Fox	Senior Democratic Services Officer

The meeting opened at 10.00 a.m.

In introduction Councillor Johnson welcomed all to the meeting and reminded the Group of the presentation at the last full committee meeting of the Country Park estates and assets. At that meeting the increase in car park charges, from April 2018, was first mooted and this Task and Finish Group was established.

In presentation, Dominic Collins informed the Group Country Parks have been set strong and meaningful targets for income generation with the MTRS setting a target of an in excess of £600,000 surplus by 2020/21; and one of the key income drivers is car parking fees. A great deal of marketing activity as well as investment in attractions has led to an increase in visitor numbers. Essex County Council has a Fees and Charges Policy which states that increases should be in-line with the RPI and charging for parking at county parks has not been increased since March 2015. Revenue costs would support the capital expenditure that has been, and will be made. There is to be further capital investment in country parks during 2017/18 of £1.7million.

A paper (attached) outlining the preferred and additional options for car park charging was circulated to the Group. The proposed charges were benchmarked against other Green Flag Country Parks and other Essex-based family attractions. The attached paper outlines the proposed new charges with the likely pros and cons highlighted. The additional option is based on the pay on exit, Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) arrangement in place at Great Notley Country Park. Similar arrangements will soon be available at both Belhus and Cudmore Grove Country Parks. This would support a growth in income over traditional pay and display. Cressing Temple does not charge for car parking with the income generated by the tea rooms and the events held there; additionally Marsh Farm does not charge for car parking as there is only public access to the riverside footways.

Councillor Massey stated there could be opportunities at Marsh Farm to exploit to get value for money at the park to enable car park charging to be introduced. He reported on feedback from local residents which indicates an appetite for the introduction of an adventure playground at the Country Park.

Questions:

Why is there a disparity in car park charging between different parks; and what is the rationale behind this?

Response: This is based partly on history and the additional attractions/activities based in the park. The parks have many regular customers and this is recognised as part of the business model. It is difficult to get a blanket charge across the county as benchmarking is done locally, regionally and nationally; and there is a need to drive customers to the parks that have had capital investment to increase revenue. However, benchmarking does not necessarily compare like-with-like, as some national parks are named Country Parks but would not be what Essex would consider a Country Park. Essex County Council attempts to encourage visitors to stay at the parks for a significant part of the day when visiting. Therefore, benchmarking with family day out venues are used as a better benchmark, in many cases.

Why is there a £2 increase in the car parking cost for three hours at Great Notley Country Park?

Great Notley Country Park has ANPR and there is a commercial element to this. Apart from that the attractions at the park mean visitors could stay all day which gives a different element to many of the parks. It would be preferable if visitors stayed longer than three hours, therefore, the maximum payment for three hours-plus is likely to encourage longer stays, rather than be a deterrent.

Are there plans for additional marketing so as not to deter visitors due to increased car parking charges?

Increased marketing campaigns are being conducted to ensure the customer-base is not solely Essex residents as there is a significant market in North London and Suffolk for Essex Country Parks.

The public might ask why when there is a £200,000 surplus is there a need to increase the cost of car parking?

There are difficult conversations to be had with the public regarding this; but there has been significant capital investment and revenue income is needed to pay for these.

Are parking season tickets available?

There are six-monthly and annual tickets and these will continue

Has pay-by-phone been considered?

It has been considered, however, some of the Country Parks are not available for this as they are outside of mobile signals.

What is the rationale for the parking concessions offered as there is no hard-and-fast rule as to who is most in need of a concessionary pass?

At present over-60's and the disabled receive a concession.

Do the car-parking enforcers have cameras attached for filming disputes?

This could be considered. There is a high turnover of staff in these positions.

If the proposals received are those the county goes out to consultation with would it be useful to outline why the county is making changes to car park charging by communicating what exactly is on offer at all the country parks?

This could be added to the consultation.

Is there charging for country park walk-in's?

No. There is consideration of people parking their cars close by at residential settings. However, there is regular communication about this with residents.

Recommendations and Actions

Following consideration by members of the Task and Finish Group the recommendations below were agreed:

1. With the exception of the anomaly of a £2 increase at Great Notley Country Park the other increases should be put to the public as part of the consultation.
2. The use of ANPR should be encouraged across all Country Parks. The Task and Finish Group recognised the initial outlay costs.
3. Country Park car park enforcers should be supplied with video cameras.
4. The concessions policy should be reviewed.
5. The consultation document should include detail of all the available attractions at each Country Park.