

		AGENDA ITEM 7
		PSEG/38/14
Committee:	Place Services and Economic Growth Scrutiny Committee	
Date:	18 December 2014	
COUNTRY PARKS CAR PARKING CHARGES		
Enquiries to:	Christine Sharland, Scrutiny Officer 01245 430450 Christine.sharland@essex.gov.uk	

Councillor Hirst, Cabinet Member for Customer Services, Libraries, Planning and the Environment has invited the Committee's views upon proposals for changes to country park car parking charges that he is consulting upon.

Given Members' interest in the topic, arrangements have been made for the Committee to consider the proposals at today's meeting. The scoping document at Appendix A was used to assist in making those arrangements.

A briefing paper prepared on behalf of the by the Cabinet Member for Customer Services, Libraries, Planning and the Environment is attached at Appendix B.

At the meeting Councillor Hirst will set out his proposals and answer Members' questions in order for the Committee to draw together any comments that it may wish to submit as part of the consultation.

#### **Action Required by the Committee:**

**To consider proposals for changes to country park car parking charges**

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## Appendix A

<b>Essex County Council Overview and Scrutiny Committee Review Scoping Document</b>
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*This form is a tool that should be compiled at the start of each inquiry to set out clearly the aims and objectives of the committee's involvement in a particular matter, and will be completed at the end of the inquiry to confirm what has been achieved. The form also provides an audit trail for a review.*

<b>Review Topic</b> (Name of review)	<b>Country Parks Car Parking Charges</b>
<b>Committee</b>	Place Services and Economic Growth Scrutiny Committee
<b>Terms of Reference</b>	To consider the content of the consultation on proposed Country Park car parking charges
<b>Lead Member, and membership of Task and Finish Group</b>	Full Committee
<b>Key Officers / Departments</b>	Tim Dixon, Head of Country Parks
<b>Lead Scrutiny Officer</b>	Christine Sharland
<b>Relevant Portfolio Holder(s)</b>	Councillor Roger Hirst, Cabinet Member for Libraries, Communities and Planning
<b>Relevant Corporate Links</b>	Cabinet Member decision on Country Parks car parking charges to be included in the Forward Plan for February 2015
<b>Type of Review</b>	Full Committee
<b>Timescales</b>	Formal meeting on 18 December 2014

<b>Rationale for the Review</b>	<p>In December the Cabinet Member will be initiating consultation on proposals to vary car parking charges at ECC Country Parks. Once all County Councillors have been advised of the consultation then partners and other relevant bodies will be contacted about the proposals together with a poster campaign in the country parks. The consultation will be about a new structure of charges more consistently applied and with greater flexibility to give visitors to manage their time in the parks. Following a full analysis of the consultation responses, it is anticipated that a decision will be made by the Cabinet Member in February 2015.</p> <p>The Cabinet Member is seeking the Committee's views upon the proposals as part of the consultation process and prior to a decision being made.</p>
<b>Scope of the Topic</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The focus of the Committee's attention will be upon the proposals now being consulted upon in order to feed its comments to the Cabinet Member before a decision is made.</li> </ul>
<b>Key Lines of Enquiry</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What are the proposed changes to existing car parking charges at ECC country parks?</li> <li>2. Why are changes necessary?</li> <li>3. How will they be implemented and enforced?</li> <li>4. What are the estimated costs and revenue?</li> <li>5. What has been the car parking revenue for each of the Country Parks over the last four years?</li> <li>6. How much money has been spent on running each of the Country Parks over the last four years?</li> <li>7. If the parking charges are increased what are the proposed investment plans for each Country Park?</li> </ol> <p>The Committee has requested to be provided with information on car parking charges at Hainault Country Park, Thames Chase, Hylands Park, and Lee Valley Country Park and how they compare to the County Council's charges.</p>
<b>Other Work Being Undertaken</b>	<p>There is an ongoing review of the Country Parks Service, and the Committee will be given a progress report on that review and the implications of changes to car parking charges.</p>
<b>What primary / new evidence is needed for the scrutiny?</b>	<p>Consultation paperwork</p>

<b>What secondary / existing information will be needed?</b>	
<b>What briefings and site visits will be relevant to the review?</b>	Briefing at full Committee meeting on 18 December as part of review.
<b>Who are the witnesses who should be invited to provide evidence for the review?</b>	Cabinet Member, Country Parks Service Officers
<b>Implications</b>	<p>In terms of topic, have the following matters been taken into consideration in the planning of this review:</p> <p>Legal implications ..... Yes/ no  Financial implications ..... Yes/ no  Equality and diversity issues..... Yes/ no  Other critical implications.....</p>
<b>What resources are required for this review?</b>	This topic was not planned within the Committee's current work programme, and therefore it is necessary to divert resources from other scrutiny work already underway.
<b>Indicators of Success</b>	As a consultee the Committee will submit its comments to the Cabinet Member for consideration before he makes a decision on the proposed car parking charges.
<b>Notes</b>	At meeting on 18 December the Committee will also be updated on the vision being developed for the future of ECC Country Parks
<b>Provisional Timetable</b>	Activity to be focussed on formal meeting on 18 December, with Committee comments being forwarded to Cabinet Member for his consideration and response.

## **Appendix B**

### **ESSEX COUNTRY PARKS: PROPOSED CAR PARKING CHARGES FOR ESSEX COUNTRY PARKS**

**Briefing paper for the Scrutiny Committee prepared on behalf of Councillor Hirst, Cabinet Member for Customer Services, Libraries, Planning and the Environment**

**Committee Meeting: 18 December 2014**

#### **1.0 Purpose of report**

- 1.1 This report is to engage Scrutiny Panel on the consultation exercise which proposes variable car parking charges at Essex Country Parks (excluding Great Notley and Hadleigh) to be implemented in February 2015.

#### **2.0 Background**

- 2.1 ECC's Country Parks service provides access to the County's prime sites for countryside recreation with visitor centres and on-site staffing to ensure safe enjoyment for all ages and abilities, in addition to hundreds of activities and events throughout the year. The introduction of free 'pop up' events and themed activity days, e.g. Wild Wednesdays for adults and children are adding further value to visits to the parks.
- 2.2 All of the income generated from car parking goes directly towards offsetting the costs of staff and operating the parks. (See annex 2)
- 2.3 The current charging levels for 2014/15 were agreed by Cabinet Member Action (CMA) in February FP reference KD04 FP/442/12/13. These changes arose from a review of car parking charges across our ECC Country Parks and were the first changes in three years effective from the 1<sup>st</sup> April 2014.

The current charges are as follows:

Country Park	Tariff	
	Summer – 1 <sup>st</sup> April to 31 <sup>st</sup> October	Winter – 1 <sup>st</sup> November to 31 <sup>st</sup> March
Belhus Woods	£2.50	£2.50
Hadleigh	£2.30	£2.30
Weald	£2.50	£2.50
Thorndon	£3.00	£2.50
Danbury	£2.50	£2.50
Great Notley	£3.50	£2.50
Cudmore Grove	£2.50	£2.50

### 3.0 Proposed car parking charges

- 3.1 The Country Parks Service aim is to improve the experience of our customers and drive towards becoming cost neutral. Charging for car parking is the Country Parks' main source of income. Car parking is being reviewed with the aim of offering better value charges that will bring convenience and flexibility for visitors. The variable charging model based on the length of stay, is proposed to be introduced in February 2015.
- 3.2 The proposal is to replace the current flat rate charge at the parks and remove the reduced flat rate winter charge that is currently in place at Great Notley and Thorndon, to reflect the shorter time visitors stay and respond to customer feedback.
- 3.3 The proposed charging bands are based on information gained from benchmarking against similar sites e.g. Maldon Promenade Park, where charges are from £1 per hour to £6 for over 4 hours, and Moors Valley Country Park in Dorset, where charges in the summer are from £3.00 per hour up to £8.50 for over 4 hours.
- 3.4 The proposed new charges are as follows:

Band	Length of Stay	Thorndon (North & South)	Great Notley	Other Parks
1	Up to 30 mins	£1.00	£1.00	£1.00
2	Up to 1 hour	£2.00	£2.00	£1.50
3	Up to 2 hours	£3.00	£3.00	£2.50
4	Up to 3 hours	£4.00	£4.00	£3.50
5	Over 3 hours	£5.00	£5.00	£4.00

- 3.5 The introduction of a banded charging system offers customers greater choice, more flexibility and convenience when parking. It accommodates those customers who only wish to stay for very short period, as they will be paying less

than half of the fee they are currently charged. Forty five percent of our visitors stay in the parks for up to 3 hours. If you have a family of four visiting the park for 3 hours (band 4), the proposed maximum charge would be £4 which equates to £1 per person. As a benchmark, the costs for a family of four going to, for example, the cinema at Braintree Freeport would cost at peak time £30.80, Colchester Zoo would cost nearly £72.00 and Marsh Farm Country Park would cost £42.00. Other benchmarking data is available in Annex 1.

- 3.6 Great Notley Country Park is not included as part of this consultation, as the proposals are to be taken to the Great Notley Country Park Joint Venture Partnership Board with Braintree District Council first. Once approved at the Board consultation will commence in the same way. Hadleigh Farm and Country Park Olympic Mountain Bike Venue has also not been included within this consideration as it is under construction until March 2015, when it will be fully operational. It is anticipated that Hadleigh will consider the results of this consultation in setting the pricing structure.
- 3.7 Country Parks are also undertaking to update the car parking machines and systems to allow visitors to pay by debit/credit card via contactless payment in addition to cash, thus reducing the amount of cash held by the machines.
- 3.8 It is not proposed to increase the charges for car parking season tickets. These will remain at £65 for 12 months and £40 for 6 months, reduced to £45 and £30 respectively for Blue badge Holders and over 60's. We have maintained these prices since 2012.
- 3.9 The proposed charges would deliver an additional annual income of circa.£119,178 net cost and excluding VAT.
- 3.10 Under Section 43 of the Countryside Act 1968 a local authority has the power to make reasonable charges for any facilities or services provided by them in a Country Park. This expressly includes a charge to use 'any part of a country park set aside for any particular form of recreation'.

#### **4.0 Consultation and engagement with stakeholders**

- 4.1 Consultation with the public commenced on 2 December 2014 and will run until 14 January 2015. The aim of the consultation is to inform visitors of the proposed new charging model and gain their views on the charging bands. The information gathered will be used to feed into the finalisation of the variable charging model prior to the CMA being taken.
- 4.2 Country Parks Stakeholders (Thurrock Borough Council, Brentwood District Council and Essex Wildlife Trust due to their connections with Belhus, Weald and Thorndon Country Parks) have been advised of the proposal in writing prior to public consultation.
- 4.3 Posters have been displayed in the parks for 6 weeks inviting visitors to e-mail or write their views on the proposals. An example can be found in Annex 3. An e-

mail (Countryside.assets@essex.gov.uk) and postal address is provided for visitors to send their views to.

- 4.4 The ECC website, Country Parks website <http://www.visitparks.co.uk/>, Twitter and Facebook page will also provide details on the proposed changes and where they can send any comments

## **5.0 Risks**

### **5.1 Opportunity Risks**

Delivering more affordable and flexible charging will have a positive impact on reputation as the new model provides better value for money.

### **5.2 Reputational risks**

The potential consequences of the new car parking model could be that some customers stay for a shorter period of time.

The new variable charging model may be viewed by the press in a negative way and could result in a temporary reduction in visitor numbers. Publicity will focus, on better affordability, increased choice that reflects the duration of stay and the cashless parking.

## **6.0 Recommendation of the Cabinet Member**

- 6.1 That the Scrutiny Panel considers the new charging rates and approach and provides feedback as a key consultee.



## Annex 1

### Benchmarking data

Day out opportunity	Entrance Fee	Car Park Charge	Total cost for family of 4
Colchester Zoo	Adult: £20.99 Child: £14.99	Free	<b>£71.96</b>
Braintree Swimming Centre	Family Swim £12.00	Free	<b>£12.00</b>
Braintree Freeport Cinema	<b>Family (2 adults, 2 children or 1 adult &amp; 3 children)</b> £27.60 before 5pm weekday £30.80 after 5pm weekday £30.80 – all day	Free	<b>£30.80</b>
Chelmsford Odeon	Mon, Wed Thurs before 5pm Family ticket £23.00 All other times Family ticket £27.00	Monday to Saturday ( 7:00am to 5:59pm) <b>2 to 3 hours: £2.90</b> <b>3 to 4 hours: £4.50</b> after 6pm and all day Sunday <b>£2.20</b>	£27.00 + £2.20 <b>Approx. £29.20</b>
Maldon Promenade Park	£2 per 20 mins per child for Water Play Park	1 hour £1 Up to 2 hours £2 Up to 4 hours £5 All day £6	Potential scenario: £8 for two children to use Water Play Park for 40mins + £2 car park charge <b>Approx £10</b>
Marsh Farm Country Park	Family ticket £42.00	Free	£42.00

Moors Valley Country Park	N/A	<p>Summer (May – Sept) All day  Up to 1 hr: £3.00  Up to 2hrs: £5.70  Up to 4hrs: £7.80  Over 4hrs: £8.50</p> <p>Charges vary over Winter, but generally  Weekdays:  Up to 1 hr: £0.80  Up to 2hrs: £1.50  Up to 4hrs: £2.70  Over 4hrs: £3.70</p> <p>Weekends:  Up to 1 hr: £1.80  Up to 2hrs: £3.50  Up to 4hrs: £5.80  Over 4hrs: £6.70</p>	Up to £5.70 for up to 2 hours.
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**Annex 1 (a) Here is some information for the request around charges at Thames Chase and Hylands Park**

**Hylands** is free to park, but is it understood that their revenue costs are covered from the revenue generated from the V festival each summer which means it is not necessary to charge.

Car parking across Thames Chase Community Forest is free except at Broadfields where it is £1 all day (see link below).

<http://www.forestry.gov.uk/forestry/EnglandEssexNoForestThamesChaseCommunityForestTheThamesChaseForestCentre>

**Thames Chase** does not operate sites that are similar in scale to the Essex Country Parks. The sites (with the exception of Broadfields) do not provide on site staff, events, education and direct site management. Broadfields does provide a visitor centre and on site staff. Thames Chase is funded through contributions from several local authorities.

**If the parking charges are increased what are the proposed investment plans for each Country Park?**

We are currently investigating significant investment at Weald Country Park. We will continue to upgrade the existing infrastructure across the Country Parks. This will include improvements in car park provision, improved and increased footpath provision, improved signage and a wider range of events and activities.

## Annex 2 Financial Data

	Category	Income/Expenditure 13/14	Income/Expenditure 12/13	Income/Expenditure 11/12	Income/Expenditure 10/11
Belhus Woods Ctry Park General	Expenditure	199,328	145,200	123,252	124,659
	Car Parking Income	- 37,384	- 35,329	- 46,029	- 39,445
Cudmore Grove Ctry Pk General	Expenditure	110,440	72,847	71,797	66,656
	Car Parking Income	- 41,391	- 37,524	- 48,472	- 40,297
Danbury Country Park General	Expenditure	98,512	99,930	83,068	78,988
	Car Parking Income	- 22,765	- 22,030	- 31,194	- 25,772
HADLEIGH CASTLE - GENERAL	Expenditure	671,493	170,216	327,646	180,866
	Car Parking Income	- 8,109	- 8,852	- 13,985	- 9,417
GREAT NOTLEY COUNTRY PARK	Expenditure	341,096	293,894	274,087	248,914
	Car Parking Income	- 113,573	- 97,559	- 117,595	- 102,795
C PARKS CENTRAL BUDGET	Expenditure	480,373	386,026	274,112	304,061
	Car Parking Income	- 6,301	-	- 957	- 2,273
Thorndon Country Park General	Expenditure	292,384	354,936	250,351	252,412
	Car Parking Income	- 169,871	- 124,630	- 135,406	- 116,431
WEALD COUNTRY PARK	Expenditure	348,920	273,277	303,834	448,223
	Car Parking Income	- 77,589	- 74,151	- 102,499	- 80,343

- Please note: There has been other expenditure within Country Parks that isn't included on the attached, as it doesn't fall under the specific headings quoted (eg other Parks/cost centres exist but not listed in your request below)
- Includes all revenue expenditure for the elements listed.
- The income quoted is purely the car parking income and doesn't include any other income streams.

## Country Parks Car Park Charges

Essex Country Parks provide valuable outdoor spaces for the people of Essex to enjoy. The revenue raised from car parking is used directly to improve and operate the Country Parks.

Car park charging is being reviewed to provide convenience and flexibility for visitors. Variable charging models, based on the length of your stay, have been investigated to benefit short stay visitors and create a fairer system for all.

The proposed changes to the charges at **Thorndon Country Park** are shown below, which if approved, will be implemented in early 2015.

Length of Stay	2015/16 All Year Round
Up to 30 mins	£1.00
Up to 1 hour	£2.00
Up to 2 hours	£3.00
Up to 3 hours	£4.00
Over 3 hours	£5.00

Visitors to Essex Country Parks will continue to have unlimited parking with annual season tickets at £65 and six-month tickets at £40, reduced to £45 and £30 respectively for Blue Badge Holders and over-60s; offering excellent value for money for frequent visitors and continuing to be available at the same cost since 2011/12.

For greater convenience to visitors, all machines throughout the country parks will be upgraded to allow customers to pay by card as well as cash. In addition to this there will also be contactless payment systems installed.

Should you have any comments you can contact us via e-mail at:  
[countryside.assets@essex.gov.uk](mailto:countryside.assets@essex.gov.uk)

or post them to:

Country Parks  
Essex County Council  
E3 County Hall  
Chelmsford  
Essex  
CM1 1QH

Please ensure  
your comments are  
submitted by no  
later than  
**Wednesday  
14 January 2015.**



[www.visitparks.co.uk](http://www.visitparks.co.uk)



