

Development of Newlands Corner

Surrey County Council (SCC) and Surrey Wildlife Trust (SWT) have re-stated their intention to introduce parking charges, artificial play structures and minor changes at Newlands Corner. There is also the very real prospect of a new visitors centre, restaurant, “retail space” and a coach park.

Newlands Corner is registered common land. SCC has just taken the first step towards introducing the proposals, by applying to the Planning Inspectorate (part of the Dept. for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) for ‘commons consent’ to install parking charge infrastructure on the common.

Over 11,000 people have signed a petition against SCC/SWT's proposals, and hundreds have opposed them at public meetings and in correspondence to SCC and local politicians.

We believe that the SCC proposals are misguided and that there are valid legal objections to such an application. Please, look at the wider issues involved. **We are asking for your support** to oppose SCC's applications as they emerge.

‘Save Newlands Corner’ (SaveNC) is a group of local people campaigning against the main proposed changes, for the following reasons:

1. Changing the nature of Newlands Corner

- People of all ages and backgrounds love and value Newlands Corner for its free, drop-in access and unspoilt natural beauty. It is popular precisely because it is so unspoiled and does not have the facilities at, and more appropriate to, developed sites such as Alice Holt and Stoke Park.
- The effects of parking charge machines and artificial play structures would radically change not only the appearance, but also the nature of Newlands Corner and what it represents. Even more so would a large new building. Just as PVC windows would not be allowed in a Grade 1 listed building, so commercial and artificial development should not be allowed in the equivalent, natural legacy of Newlands Corner.
- Newlands Corner is a designated Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). Changes should focus on conserving and enhancing this unspoiled natural resource, not detract from it with inappropriate structures.

2. Effects of parking charges

- When the glossy pictures and PR language of the proposals are removed, the main driver for SCC and SWT **is to make money from parking charges**. Charges, which will be in force 24 hours a day, are the first step towards transforming Newlands Corner into a major, profit-oriented, visitor attraction.
- Charging will discourage many people from visiting. Even the much-vaunted £40 season ticket, for access to one car park, is bad value against the National Trust's £63 for unlimited access to all its 500 national sites, including over 300 historic buildings, and car parks.
- The introduction of parking charges goes against the very spirit of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 and the ‘Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty’ designation. These are meant to provide greater freedom of access to, and conservation of, the countryside.
- Low-income groups and disabled people who are not blue badge holders will be hit, despite being the very people that SCC claims to want to help.
- There are no guarantees about the future scale of parking charges.
- SWT's feasibility study indicated steep rises to come. It suggested that, once initial arrangements

have been allowed to “settle”, the first rise should be 20%, followed by 10% in each of the following two years, with significant increases to follow.

- The same study said that, without play structures, the parking charge scheme was unlikely to be viable. So, that is why SCC is trying to introduce them.
- Many people already have serious concerns about road safety in the area of the Newlands Corner entrance. SCC proposes to increase the number of visits from 255,000 vehicles a year to 365,000 within 4 years, but has made only cosmetic proposals for safety on the North Downs Way crossing. It resolutely refuses to do anything about road layout changes for the additional vehicles, including slow moving coaches, entering and exiting the site.
- SCC/SWT have not taken account of displacement parking (apart from roadside posts at the Trodds Lane junction). There will be parking on verges. Walkers are likely to use free spaces in the villages of Shere and Albury, which would affect local access for residents and trade.
- The parking charge proposals have not been thought through, including how penalty charges will be implemented and by whom.
- It is still unclear who will actually bank the parking charges, and how the revenue will be allocated. But we know that, 20% would go on VAT and, as it stands, 25% of net profit would go to the Albury Estate. If the remainder goes direct to SWT, where will public accountability be?

3. Artificial play structures in the woodland

- Seven artificial play structures in the Newlands Corner woodland are inappropriate in a place where nature itself provides so many opportunities for creative play. Children have access to organised/structured play in other locations but must be free to exercise their imagination in the type of natural surroundings that Newlands Corner provides.
- There is no demand for these structures (not even in a SCC survey), which, in spite of budget cut backs, have already cost over £20,000 in design costs. They would also be construction costs (which are set to be up to £200,000) as well as ongoing repairs, inspections, monitoring and liability issues.
- SCC says it wants to do more for the elderly and disabled. The current all-ability trail is the only true place where they can experience “quiet enjoyment” of Newlands Corner, which is what the National Association for AONBs says they should be able to have. This is the very trail SCC intends to turn put play structures attracting groups of noisy, excited children.
- The play structures are included in the proposals to ensure the financial success of the introduction of parking charges, in the absence of any other real benefits. This is in line with SWT's stated position, **“It would not be advisable to introduce vehicle charging without investing in visitor facilities as it would not provide the required financial returns”**.

4. Wasteful and ineffective management

- Many of the proposed SCC ‘improvements’ for Newlands Corner are actually little more than well overdue maintenance – for which SWT has already been paid.
- The need to upgrade the toilets and hard trails reflects poorly on SCC’s ability to properly supervise the SWT contract for the site. However, if parking charges are introduced, SCC expects the public to pay again for the work.
- SCC is paying £157,000 to SWT for the annual cost of providing access to Newlands Corner, i.e. the car park, toilets and trails. None of these costs includes woodland management or conservation work, which are the responsibility of the Albury Estate, owners of the site.
- By contrast, the nearby Friends of the Hurtwood manage over 3,000 acres and 15 car parks for a fraction of this cost (£70,000).

- So, where has the money gone, given that so much catching-up work needs to be done?
- Furthermore, SCC has indicated that annual costs would spiral to £319,000 once the parking structures and play trail are imposed - £59,000 alone for managing the parking charge scheme. Requests to see the Business Plan have been refused.
- SCC is making much of making SWT cost-neutral. However, in real terms, spending on the Countryside Estate, is only one twentieth of one per cent of SCC's budget.

5. First step to monetisation of the countryside

- The countryside has an intrinsic value and represents an important natural heritage. It should not be regarded as a marketable commodity to be exploited for the most that can be squeezed out of it.
- We fully support local rural enterprise, but parking charges at Newlands Corner are the first step towards monetisation and commercialisation of the wider SCC Countryside Estate.
- This will limit access to the countryside only to those who are able to pay.
- The SWT chairman recently said that he is unaware of SCC having any other projects in hand for other sites. Yet, SWT's own feasibility study discussed development of Ockham Common and a possible scale of parking charges. There may be no projects so far, but the ideas are certainly there.
- The SCC policy of funding countryside management through parking charges is also a high-risk strategy for sustainable management. What happens, if the parking charge scheme makes a loss?
- There are alternative models to meeting the essential costs of maintaining Newlands Corner, which SCC has been reluctant to consider. These include the concept of a 'Friends of Newlands Corner', a charitable trust based on the Hurtwood charity model – immediately removing the need to pay much of SWT's overheads. However, SCC will not contemplate a Friends organization taking over the management of the site.

6. The hazel dormouse

Newlands Corner is the home of a colony of hazel dormice. 'The People's Trust for Endangered Species' has recently reported on the threatened extinction of Britain's native dormouse. Their numbers have declined by more than a third since the year 2000 according to the Trust. The dormice are extinct in 17 English counties. SCC's proposals threaten Newlands Corner's own population of these shy, endearing creatures through noise pollution (vehicles and children on the play structures) and vehicle emissions. SCC plans to increase the number of vehicles by nearly 50% in four years, which will mean the same increase, at least, in vehicle emissions.

Conclusion

Newlands Corner is a precious place. It is within an Area of Outstanding National Beauty. SCC's and SWT only goal should be to "conserve and enhance" the beauty of this iconic site. Instead they are determined to turn it into a lucrative income source, paying not only for the long-overdue, and previously-funded, maintenance of the site and other sites, but funding the commercial development of the area, turning it into an urban play park. If it is successful in using the play park theme to raise money at Newlands Corner, what chance for other areas?

We are fighting to keep Newlands Corner open, wild and natural. We need your help to achieve this.

Save Newlands Corner

Keep up to date – visit the website www.savenewlandscorner.com