

**SURREY COUNTY COUNCIL****CABINET****DATE: 26 NOVEMBER 2019****REPORT OF: MS DENISE TURNER-STEWART, CABINET MEMBER FOR COMMUNITY SAFETY, FIRE & RESILIENCE****LEAD OFFICER: GILLIAN STEWARD, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF HIGHWAYS, TRANSPORT AND ENVIRONMENT****SUBJECT: REVIEW OF CHARGES FOR PARKING IN COUNTRYSIDE ESTATE CAR PARKS****SUMMARY OF ISSUE:**

A decision was made at Cabinet in January 2018 to introduce car park charging at the five busiest country sites, equating to 15 of the 30 car parks across the countryside estate to generate new investment in Surrey's countryside. In July of 2018, Cabinet agreed that a review of the impact of car park charging would be undertaken after 12 months of operation of the policy if it was considered that the policy of charging had not delivered a significant financial contribution to the countryside.

This review has now occurred and despite making a small surplus the first year of operations has not delivered the significant contribution as expected.

The Surrey countryside is valued highly by many of our residents, who visit it regularly and care passionately about it. However, many of Surrey's residents are not benefiting from exposure to the countryside and experiences with nature. Our ambition is for all of Surrey's residents to have access to the natural landscapes within the county and to benefit from the related health and wellbeing advantages, to enable them to lead healthier, longer lives.

It is considered that charging to park in the council's countryside estate no longer aligns with the council's overarching Community Vision 2030 and to our Health & Wellbeing Strategy and Greener Futures Programme.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

It is recommended that Cabinet:

1. Agree to the removal of all charges relating to parking at all Countryside Estate car parks currently managed under lease by Surrey Wildlife Trust, with effect from 1 April 2020.
2. Agree to delegate to the Executive Director of Highways, Transport and Environment, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Community Safety, Fire and Resilience, the development and implementation of a plan to deliver recommendation 1.
3. Develop proposals for the introduction of a voluntary payment scheme.

## REASON FOR RECOMMENDATIONS:

The Countryside Estate service operates 15 car parks across the county, where charges are made for parking to residents and visitors wishing to access the countryside.

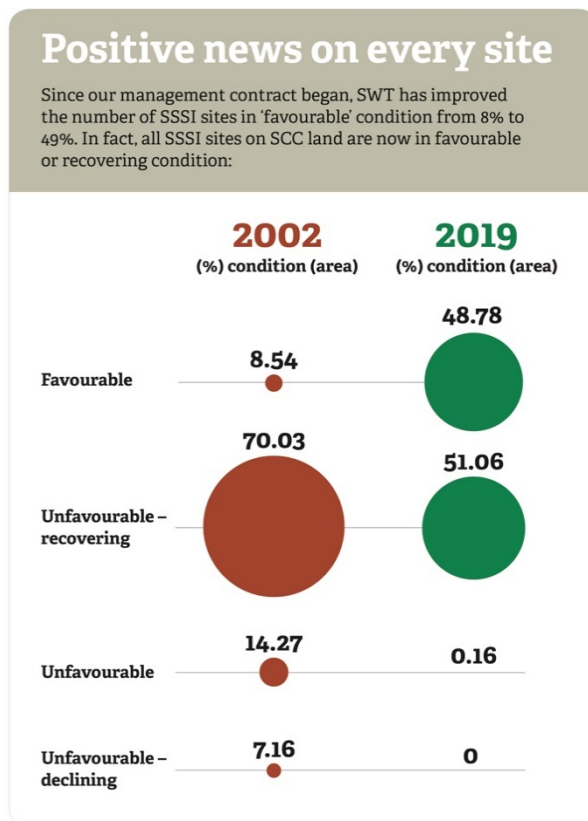
Following the implementation of the charges in July 2018 it was agreed that a review of the impact of car park charging would be undertaken after 12 months of operation.

This review has concluded that the original policy of charging visitors to park when visiting the countryside estate has not delivered the significant financial contribution and is no longer aligned with the council's overarching Vision 2030.

## DETAILS:

### Background

1. The Surrey countryside is beautiful and diverse. It is the most wooded county in England, with 23% coverage compared to a national average of 10%. In addition to woodland, Surrey also boasts rare and important areas of heathland and chalk downland, which are heavily designated for conservation purposes and which are home to rare species, such as the Dartford Warbler.
2. In the last 17 years, the Surrey Wildlife Trust have done an impressive job of improving nature conservation at the 10,000 acres owned and influenced by Surrey County Council (SCC), as demonstrated on the chart below. All sites are now in a favourable or recovering condition.



Source: Surrey Wildlife Trust 2019

3. Due to the improvements in the nature conservation of our sites, focus is beginning to shift to improving the visitor experience at these sites and to ensuring that residents who do not access the countryside are given the opportunities and means to do so.
4. The Council took a decision in January 2018 to introduce parking charges for all users of the following locations (Total: 15 car parks):
  - Newlands Corner
  - Chobham Common
  - Norbury Park
  - Ockham Common
  - Rodborough Common, and
  - Whitmoor Common (at the time of undertaking this review operational issues meant charging at this site has not gone live)
5. It was agreed that a review of the effectiveness and impact of charging would be conducted after the initial year of operation. As a result of the phasing-in of charges between July 2018 and August 2018 it was also agreed that the review should cover the period 1 September 2018 to 31<sup>st</sup> August 2019.

### **Role of the Countryside Estate in Delivering our Vision 2030**

6. Since the implementation of car park charging the Council has adopted Vision 2030. This new strategy follows a very robust consultation period and sets out the ambition to deliver significant improvements to the quality of life of all of Surrey's residents. The Countryside Estate has a key role to play in delivering Vision 2030. In particular, ensuring that;
  - *Everyone lives healthy, active and fulfilling lives, and makes good choices about their wellbeing.*
  - *Residents live in clean, safe and green communities, where people and organisations embrace their environmental responsibilities.*
7. The effects of the countryside and connection with nature in benefitting mental and physical health are well established. In practical terms, fresh air, headspace, contact with nature and community spirit present positive effects on our sense of belonging, reducing stress and anxiety and generally making us feel happier and healthier. The countryside also offers opportunities for free and inclusive forms exercise including walking, running and cycling, which have further health and wellbeing benefits.
8. The ambitions within the 2030 Vision aligns with the recent publication of the Landscapes Review: National Parks and AONBs by Julian Glover, an independent report commissioned by Defra. The Surrey Hills are one of the UK's 46 Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and so this report is of great relevance when considering decisions about Surrey's countryside.
9. The Landscapes Review states unequivocally that national landscapes should be a positive force for the nation's wellbeing and should be experienced and enjoyed by all.
10. The Landscapes Review identifies how access to the countryside is not equal. Glover states that landscapes are open and free to all but can seem exclusive. The statistics published in the report demonstrate that certain groups are especially disconnected. Most countryside visits are made by the same (better off, less diverse) people repeatedly, and those who miss out are the older, the young – especially adolescents –

and those from lower socio-economic groups and black, Asian and minority ethnic communities.

11. The findings from the Landscapes Review are reflected in the visitor statistics which we hold for the SCC countryside estate (from visitor surveys and car counters at car parks). These statistics reveal a stagnant pattern of use with a high percentage of dog walkers (87% across the estate) and an extremely low percentage of families and visitors with children (13%) compared with those visiting country parks (55%).

#### *Health and Wellbeing*

12. A new Health and Wellbeing Strategy (2019) has been developed for Surrey. It is the product of unprecedented collaboration between the NHS, Surrey County Council and wider partners, including the voluntary and community sector and the police.
13. The Strategy signals an important shift to a more preventative approach to health, addressing root causes of poor health and wellbeing – including issues such as environment – and not just treating the symptoms.
14. One of the key ambitions of the Strategy is to improve environmental factors that impact people's health and wellbeing. Access to the countryside for the purpose of exercise, spending time with family and friends, relaxation etc. are all key proponents of this ambition.

#### *Greener Futures*

15. In July 2019 Surrey County Council declared a Climate Change Emergency and set an ambitious target to be a zero carbon county by 2050. SCC is now working with residents, communities and partners, including the boroughs and districts, to develop a Greener Futures climate change strategy which will launch in April 2020.
16. The Greener Futures Scrutiny Task Group are currently gathering information and evidence from expert witness sessions to start developing recommendations for the strategy. Land-use, food and countryside is one of the six key themes which is being explored and part of this research is looking at the ways residents can interact with the countryside in order to mitigate against, and adapt to, a changing climate.
17. Working alongside the Greener Futures Programme, more work will be required to support and encourage residents to access areas of countryside within their localities, without making use of their cars.
18. The Health and Wellbeing Strategy and the Greener Futures Programme both play a crucial role in delivering the Community Vision for Surrey in 2030. Surrey's countryside estate will play a key role in delivering these future priorities. The introduction of car parking charges - and therefore a charge to access the countryside – is therefore seen as a potential barrier.

#### **Views of Countryside users and potential users**

19. Between October and November 2018 SCC carried out the Caring for the Countryside Survey to understand the views of our countryside estate visitors. During this time 1367 visitors were asked to complete a questionnaire. The following responses were obtained:

- 40% of respondees wanted to see free car parking in their vision for the countryside in 25 years (465/1147 responses)
- 33% of respondees stated that the parking charges were a barrier to access (9/27 responses)

20. The background interviews carried out with strategic partners such as the NHS Commissioning teams, Schools, Surrey Outdoor Learning Centres, Local Access Forums, and market research users groups showed all partners were keen to use the sites in their day to day activities, thus opening up the sites to those with access, health, mental health issues and facilitating the potential educational benefits of the sites. However, the spirit of joint partnership working is diminished when the delivery bodies would be charged for using the services. Removing the charges for car parking will open up the possibilities of working with these bodies to achieve SCC's Vision for 2030.

### Financial Summary

21. The council is committed to reviewing the introduction of car parking charges after the first 12 months of operation against the original business case. For the initial 12 month review period the net revenue position is set out below. The council has also incurred capital set up costs of c.£0.3m to date for equipment etc.

	<b>Newlands Corner £000</b>	<b>Wider Countryside Estate £000</b>
Ticket Income	(93)	(108)
Annual Pass Income	(9)	(36)
<b>Total Income</b>	<b>(102)</b>	<b>(144)</b>
Operating Costs	60	83
<b>Net Income</b>	<b>(42)</b>	<b>(61)</b>

22. It is important to consider balancing the financial returns from car park charging against the impact retaining car park charges may have on the council's ability to develop and implement a range of policy outcomes related to health, well-being and climate change.

### Implementing a Change in Policy

23. Following a decision by Cabinet, car park charges will be removed, and the council will need to undertake a programme of work to put this change into effect. Cabinet are asked to delegate the decisions relating to this to the Executive Director in consultation with the Cabinet Member.
24. We will consider enabling voluntary payments for parking in the Countryside Estate based on retaining the infrastructure in place. This is a model which has been used by the National Trust at many sites. This will allow residents and visitors to make an individual decision about whether to voluntarily pay for parking and therefore, contribute to the costs of managing, maintaining and improving the countryside estate. A campaign to promote how the voluntary contributions are directly benefitting the countryside will be developed and rolled out at each car park location.

25. Newlands Corner Car Park falls within the scope of a local access agreement in respect of land currently owned by the Albury Estate. In the event of the council deciding to remove car park charges discussions with representatives of the Albury Estate will be required to agree how to support the cost of managing and maintaining land covered by the terms of the current access agreement. As landlord the Albury Estate will retain the right to continue to charge for visitors to Newlands Corner should it wish.

#### **FINANCIAL AND VALUE FOR MONEY IMPLICATIONS**

26. Income received by SWT from parking charges has been retained and used by them to support the management of the countryside estate. The recommended removal of car parking charges would lead to a loss of income, which was £0.1m during the first year of operation. This, and any other associated financial implications such as decommissioning existing parking infrastructure and the impact of withdrawing parking charges on land owned by the Albury Estate, will be taken into account as part of the 2020/21 budget setting process.

#### **SECTION 151 OFFICER COMMENTARY**

27. Although significant progress has been made over the last twelve months to improve the Council's financial position, the medium term financial outlook is uncertain as it is heavily dependent on decisions made by Central Government. With no clarity on these beyond 2020/21, our working assumption is that financial resources will continue to be constrained, as they have been for the majority of the past decade. This places an onus on the Council to continue to consider issues of financial sustainability as a priority in order to ensure stable provision of services in the medium term. The removal of parking charges on the countryside estate will lead to a financial pressure as set out above. The loss of income will either result in reduced resources for managing the countryside estate, or will need to be offset by an increased subsidy from local tax payers. The full impacts will be factored into the Medium-Term Financial Strategy

#### **LEGAL IMPLICATIONS – MONITORING OFFICER**

28. The Council has a variety of powers to provide and charge for parking. For the Countryside Estate car parks, the Council utilised the power to make or authorise charges in Section 43 of the Countryside Act 1968. That power authorises, but does not require, the Council to make reasonable charges for the provision of facilities or services under the Act. It is therefore at the Council's discretion whether to levy parking or other charges on the Countryside Estate.
29. The public sector equality duty applies to this decision. Cabinet Members must have due regard to the need to advance equality of opportunity to people with protected characteristics, foster good relationships between such groups and eliminate any unlawful discrimination, which includes considering any disproportionate impact on any particular protected group. An Equalities Impact Assessment has been completed for the project and is annexed to this report, which members should take into account in making their decision.
30. Cabinet will need to be cognisant of its fiduciary duties to Surrey residents to ensure the Council maintains a balanced budget in the delivery of its functions.

## EQUALITIES AND DIVERSITY

31. Car park charges are payable at all relevant locations for all vehicle users. Whilst the level of charges payable has been set at a level designed to recover costs and to provide a reasonable level of investment in new countryside services and facilities, charges are likely to discourage a range of potential users including low-income families who otherwise may benefit from being able to access the countryside for free.
32. The Equalities Impact Assessment is included at annex A.

## ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS:

The removal of charges for parking at Countryside Estate car parks is likely to encourage new and additional visitors to the countryside. We are encouraging residents to use sustainable means of transport to access the countryside.

## PUBLIC HEALTH IMPLICATIONS

33. Over 400,000 visitors access Surrey's countryside estate each year, participating in a range of physical and well-being activities. Any measure that retains and promotes access to the countryside is likely to generate positive public health outcomes.

## WHAT HAPPENS NEXT:

Following a decision by Cabinet, car park charges will be removed, and the council will start to undertake a programme of work to put this change into effect.

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### Contact Officer:

Alan Bowley, Interim Head of Environment, 075 9502 4720

### Consulted:

Councillor Denise Turner Stewart, Cabinet Member for Community Safety, Fire and Resilience

### Annexes:

A. Equalities Impact Assessment

### Sources/background papers:

None

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