

CABINET - 16TH JULY 2014

SUBJECT: INTRODUCTION OF CAR PARKING CHARGES AT COUNTRY PARKS

REPORT BY: ACTING DEPUTY CHIEF EXECUTIVE

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To seek approval to proceed with the introduction of car parking charges at five Country Parks following the advertising of the Caerphilly County Borough Council Traffic Regulation Order.

2. SUMMARY

- 2.1 Car parking charges at country parks were agreed indicative proposals as part of the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP). These have now been advertised as is required by regulations and this report outlines the responses received to the consultation. Given the level of public response, it is considered that the matter should be reported to Cabinet to decide whether or not the charges should be confirmed.
- 2.2 Cwmcarn Forest Drive already has a Traffic Regulation Order in place authorising prescribed parking charges and does not need to be considered further apart from the introduction of a season ticket option to bring it into line with the proposals in this report if approved.

3. LINKS TO STRATEGY

- 3.1 Charges were agreed indicative proposals as part of the MTFP.
- 3.2 Maintenance and upkeep of the Country Parks and ease of accessibility to these parks links to the greener and healthier themes of the Single Integrated Plan and also to the Council's Strategic Equality Objective 3 – Physical Access.

4. THE REPORT

- 4.1 An estimate of £85,000 of annual income from car parking charges was included within the MTFP which Council approved on 26th February 2014. This was based on the introduction of charges at the following 5 County Parks - Parc Coedtir Bargod, Parc Cwm Darran, Penallta, Pen y Fan and Sirhowy Valley Country Parks. This was calculated by measuring the number of visits to the parks by local residents and external visitors with an assumption that most regular local users would opt to buy a season ticket. It was always explained that a final income amount will only be clear once we actually begin to charge.
- 4.2 The car parks form an amenity for the Country Parks and were put in place for both the convenience of visitors and to reduce or prevent congestion in surrounding areas and protect residential amenity.

- 4.3 Whilst the locations and circumstances are different for each of the car parks, there is a likely adverse effect from each should they not be operational, primarily in terms of the resultant off-site parking which could be on busy main roads or on residential streets. Following discussions, on each site, with Engineering Services regarding the impact of the above it was agreed that the proposed charges shall be progressed under the Road Traffic Regulations Act 1984 and other enabling powers.
- 4.4 The proposals have now been advertised and the public consultation has been completed. On the advice of Legal Services the consultation period was extended by a week to allow for the Easter holidays and ensure the public had adequate time to respond. Consultation ran between 3rd April and the 2nd May 2014. The advertised charges for each of the Parks is £1.00 for up to 2 hours or £3.00 for the day. Blue badge holders are allowed up to 3 hours for £1.00, this being in accordance with the concession previously approved by the Council. Season tickets will be available at a cost of £50.00 for 1 year (or £25.00 for 6 months).
- 4.5 Unsurprisingly, the consultation has resulted in a significant number of objections. A complete list of all objections is included in tabular form in Appendix 1. A total of 7 petitions were submitted (several were the same petition submitted in stages but each with different signatures) signed by over 2,800 persons. In addition there were 124 letters of objection and numerous comments made on social media.
- 4.6 There were a number of common objections raised. In addition others were from individuals pleading a "special case" suggesting they should be exempt from charges.
- 4.7 Many objections are on health grounds and on grounds of affordability. Whilst the physical and mental health benefits to residents of using our Country Parks are promoted and valued, it is not considered that charges are excessive, especially since the income raised will go towards the upkeep of the Country Parks so they can be enjoyed by all and a season ticket option will be offered.
- 4.8 Other comments/objections cover the cost of the installation of machines and money collection, as well as enforcement and possible vandalism. Scrutiny members have previously discussed some of these issues as part of budget deliberations. Most machines planned for use are already in stock having been purchased previously for another scheme and not utilised. All costs for the equipment were absorbed in 2013/14 budgets. The collection / enforcement will be carried out by Countryside staff as part of their daily routine of monitoring park activity. Vandalism is a potential hazard but no more that is faced by any council equipment in a public place. All procedures to protect staff will be put in place by following the Council's Lone Worker policy.
- 4.9 There have also been comments regarding the advertising of the proposed charges and the legality.
- 4.10 Other comments state that residents already pay Council tax, implying that they are being charged twice. There were also a number of alternative suggestions regarding other ways in which the estimated £85,000 p.a. could be raised.
- 4.11 Whilst most objections are quite understandable and it is unsurprising that local people are reluctant to pay for facilities that are currently free (though they remain free to those walking to the parks), charging for car parking is still considered to be essential in raising income which can help secure the long term sustainability of the Country Parks by offsetting costs for the management and maintenance including the car parks, thus protecting services and jobs. Cwmcam Forest Drive has been charging since May 2012 and visitor numbers have not declined in that time, indeed they have gone up.
- 4.12 Members may wish to consider a reduction in the cost of the proposed season ticket. However, a decision to make a reduction would reduce income which would then have to be recouped from another source.

5. EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 Some of the objections noted a concern that the effects on disabled people for example had not been taken into account and that the impact on this group could be more significant than on others. As noted in 4.4 above, however, an additional free hour for Blue Badge holders has been agreed.
- 5.2 Any negative effects of the charging policy on protected characteristic groups can be monitored via customer feedback forms or complaints for example, as the true picture will only become clear as the policy is introduced. Members may wish to consider any such feedback in terms of the charging policy during a future review.

6. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 Should the car parking charges not be progressed or if they are amended then there will be a financial impact on the ability of the Council and service to achieve required budget savings. Should that be the case, Regeneration and Planning will incur a budget deficit equal to the estimated income of £85,000 which would need to be funded by other means.

7. PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 There are staff implications to the implementation of car parking charges particularly in terms of staff time and logistics however it is considered that they can be accommodated within the current structure.

8. CONSULTATIONS

- 8.1 The Report sets out the details of the public consultation undertaken, in addition, as part of the statutory consultation process:
- Local Ward Members and Statutory Consultees were contacted by either e-mail or letter on 18th February 2014 with a return date for comments by the 14th March 2014.
 - Town and Community Councils (Community Partnerships) were consulted between 18th February and 14th March 2014.
- 8.2 The responses received during the consultation exercise have been outlined within the Report and further details will be found in the Appendix.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 9.1 To proceed with the Road Traffic Order to introduce car parking charges at all Caerphilly Country Parks as advertised.

10. REASONS FOR THE RECOMMENDATIONS

- 10.1 To raise income to assist with the future upkeep of the Country Parks and .to achieve budget savings

11. STATUTORY POWER

- 11.1 Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984.

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Mike Eedy – Finance Manager
Terry Shaw – Head of Engineering Services
Clive Campbell – Transportation Engineering Manager
Dave Thomas – Senior Policy Officer (Equalities & Welsh Language)

Appendix:
List of Objections and officer responses

Background Paper:
MTFP Report to Council 26th February 2014