

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

At a Meeting of **Highways Committee** held in Committee Room 2, County Hall, Durham on **Friday 22 June 2012 at 10.00 am**

Present:

Councillor G Bleasdale in the Chair

Members of the Committee:

Councillors J Robinson (Vice-Chairman), B Arthur, S Hugill, D Marshall, A Naylor, J Shiell, P Stradling, L Thomson, R Todd, E Tomlinson, J Turnbull and A Wright

Apologies:

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors A Bainbridge, D Burn, D Hancock, T Taylor, C Woods and R Young

1 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 10 May 2012 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

2 Declarations of Interest

Councillor J Robinson declared an interest in relation to Item No. 3 on the agenda, as the Local Member for Sedgefield

3 Hardwick Park - Proposed Parking Charges - Off-Street Parking Places Order 2012

The Committee considered a report of the Corporate Director, Neighbourhood Services which sought to introduce parking charges at Hardwick Park, Sedgefield and outlined representations made during the consultation period (for copy see file of Minutes).

The Strategic Manager for Countryside provided the Committee with the background of Hardwick Country Park, an 18th Century, Grand II listed site which was the fourth biggest tourist attraction in the North East. Based on 2011 monitoring figures the park had attracted 447,000 annual visitors.

9,655 people had attended organised events, 3900 school children had attended for staff led sessions and there had been 531 days of volunteer support. A substantial amount of restoration had taken place at the park which included new paths, restoration of lakes and a new visitor centre. The park was used for fun days out for families, school visits, guided walks, park runs, cycling events and vintage car rallies (for presentation see file of Minutes).

The Committee were informed that regrettably, considerable budgetary pressures were significantly affecting the management of the park. The introduction of parking charges had been identified as a substantial income generator which would specifically provide funds for the park's management. Consultation with other local authorities had indicated that many local authorities had implemented parking charges on countryside sites as a result of recent budgetary cuts.

Unfortunately, failure to generate income would result in a reduced standard of maintenance, at least three redundancies, the loss of the park's historical and environmental education as well as a guided walks programme.

A summary of the proposed charges was outlined to the Committee. The charges would assist the Council in maintaining the park to high standards and provide a safe and accessible environment for all visitors. Over and above that there was a strong desire to invest in education through increasing educational provision with the offer of more diverse sessions to schools. There was also a potential to increase volunteering opportunities, provide new events and activities, such as birthday parties and larger events, increase the café space, improve outdoor seating and create a new play area focusing on natural play.

A summary of those representations made during the consultation process was provided.

Councillor Robinson, one of the local members for Sedgfield, commented that Hardwick Park was the 'jewel in the crown' of Sedgfield and he spoke on behalf of the many residents and groups that had contacted him with regard to the proposals and highlighted some of the concerns outlined by his constituents, which included:

- the affects of the charges on local people from Sedgfield, Bishop Middleham and Fishburn who used the park to exercise their dogs, twice a day was difficult to comprehend and felt that some consideration should have been given for a reduced charge for this type of activity;
- concerns expressed by the Town Council in relation to the consultation process;
- concerns expressed about the impact parking charges on the park-run;
- the one-off payment of £50.00 which equated to a cheaper parking charge needed to be advertised properly;
- the viability of the café;
- what would happen to Hardwick Park if the targets identified in the MTFP weren't met;
- potential parking overspill to the Hardwick Hotel;
- had the Council had considered the potential problem of cars parking on the A177 bypass.

In response to Councillor Robinson the Strategic Manager for Countryside was appreciative that the park was a facility that benefitted many local people, however, it also had to be considered that the park was indeed a facility enjoyed by many visitors from across the County of Durham. Local people did enjoy the benefit of the park being close by; however, there was no evidence to suggest that any concession should be offered to local people on that basis following consultation with other local authorities.

In relation to the other issues raised, the Committee were informed that the consultation process and legal positions had been clarified and explained to the Town Council and they were satisfied with the County Council's response.

In terms of the park-run, it was highlighted that of the other park-runs that take place across the country, some were free of charge and some accrued a charge, however, the Council had come to an arrangement with park run organisers that the marshalls wouldn't have to pay for parking and a meal deal had been arranged with the café solely for the benefit of the park run.

In response to concerns about the café and its viability, there was a potential for the café to lose business but measures would be taken to offer as many incentives as possible to reduce any potential impact.

The Council had been notified that the Hardwick Park Hotel were considering the introduction of parking charges themselves and it was confirmed that the Council and Police would have to monitor the situation with regard to any cars parking on the A177.

The Committee then heard representations from a Sedgefield resident who explained that he felt it incorrect to charge people for being healthy, going to the park for a walk for their physical health and mental wellbeing. He highlighted that the presentation made by the Strategic Manager for Countryside made reference to the park as 'growing well' and suggested that the implementation of parking charges at the current time, in the present climate, would halt the growth referred to and seriously jeopardise the future of the park.

The Vice-Chairman of Sedgefield Residents Forum felt that the consultation process appeared to be flawed which had angered many local people. The forum fully accepted the reasons why the Council wished to introduce the parking charges to in terms of the upkeep and maintenance of the park and genuinely understood the reasoning behind retaining jobs, however, they felt that the proposed charges were simply too high and affected those people who used the park on a regular basis, with charges for disabled groups, minibuses and charities being a real cause for concern. The forum suggested that a good business plan could have made the park generate income without the introduction of parking charges.

A representative on behalf of Sedgefield park-run commented that the group was extremely appreciative of the concessions provided for their marshalls and recognised the issues around finance in local government generally and the fact that parking charges would generate monies required to maintain the park. The run was a national initiative with Hardwick Park being part of the park-run network. The run attracted local people and groups whilst also attracted people from across the country bringing much needed income to the local economy together with free publicity for the park. Organisers of the park run asked if the council could explore some flexibility in delaying any charges to 10.30 a.m. on Saturdays to accommodate those taking part in the run and felt that the introduction of parking fees would simply detract people from participating.

In response to the representations made at the meeting, the Strategic Manager for Countryside explained the consultation process undertaken and highlighted that the budget reduction reflected in the Council's Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP), agreed the Council's Cabinet in February 2012 had to be delivered by the service. There had been queries as to why the Council could not introduce visitor charges, however, Hardwick Park was not a secure site in terms of access and it was not considered to be a feasible option and would cost a substantial amount to enforce. He recognised the issues around

fully supported the park run and the representations made at the meeting. Given some of the comments made would further explore ways to spread the cost of an annual pass and consider the delay of charge times to support Parkrun events. It was also hoped to that some arrangement could be made for schools, an NHS cycling group and other social care groups.

Councillor Stradling commented that he had a great deal of sympathy for local people and other users, including the park-run and understood local concerns, for example, to those people who used the park to walk their dogs. He queried whether every single, conceivable option had been investigated before the Committee ultimately made a decision on the proposal. The idea of a 'special offer', was good in principle, however, he queried whether consideration been given that those people who wished to take up this option may not be able to do afford to do so in terms of a one-off payment and asked for some discussion to take place to see if this could be paid in instalments by a standing order or direct debit.

Councillor D Marshall highlighted that Beamish Museum charged £16 per head per year and you could visit the museum as many times as you wanted, where parking was free. People who didn't wish to pay to park would simply park elsewhere. In effect, the Council was treating Hardwick Park differently to other attractions which would naturally be cause for complaint from users of such facilities. There would always be a desire to increase income for any business but added that a proposal with too many variables would cause problems. Councillor Marshall queried what consideration had been given to secondary spend at the site.

In response, the Strategic Manager for Countryside informed the Committee that the on-site café made a small amount of profit, but not enough to raise anywhere near the amount of savings identified in the MTFP. There was a potential to hold larger events in the future but regrettably these would not generate savings for this year.

In response to a question from Councillor Wright, the Committee were informed that charges were slightly below average compared to other parking charges across the County.

Councillor Hugill felt that the proposed charge was simply too high and a charge of £2 per day would have perhaps been more reasonable, adding that people would probably goto nearby Sedgefield for a coffee or refreshments rather than pay an additional charge for parking. Councillor Hugill also supported the representations made by the park-run organisers adding that obesity costed the National Health Service a fortune and groups that promoted health benefit should have some form of concession.

Councillor Naylor, whilst sympathetic to the debate commented that she would not wish to see a loss of jobs, whilst adding that paragraph 7 of the report outlined that the scheme would be reviewed, if implemented. Councillor Naylor commented that the Council was working to cuts across services and had no option but to implement the parking charges. It was vitally important that the Council review the scheme at a relevant opportunity, where it could make any changes if need be.

The Strategic Manager for Countryside informed the Committee that the Council were not looking to make a profit out of such charges and if the scheme made additional amounts of money, then the idea would be to look at reducing parking costs accordingly.

Resolved:

That the Committee authorise the making of the Traffic Regulation Order to introduce parking charges at Hardwick Park, detailed in the report, with charging to commence on 1 July 2012 and that the scheme be kept under review once in operation.