

Highways Committee

22 June 2012

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



Report of Terry Collins, Corporate Director Neighbourhood Services

Councillor Maria Plews, Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Leisure, Libraries and Lifelong Learning

Purpose of the Report

- 1 To advise Committee of representations received to the proposed introduction of parking charges at Hardwick Park, Sedgefield.
- 2 It is recommended that the Committee endorse the proposal having considered the representations to the proposal.

Background

- 3 Charging for the parking of vehicles at Hardwick Park was agreed in 2008 as part of the Park's historical restoration by the former County Council and supported by Heritage Lottery. However, following Local Government Reorganisation, the new Authority determined it was not appropriate to charge at that time and additional funding for the Park's management was made available enabling the implementation of a parking charge to be deferred.
- 4 With the considerable budgetary pressures significantly affecting the Park's management in particular, charging for parking at Hardwick Park has been identified as a substantial income generator to specifically provide funds for the Park's management. All opportunities for income generation to contribute to savings required by the MTFP have been revisited and charging for parking at Hardwick has been identified to meet Sport and Leisure's required savings that directly affect the Park.
- 5 Benchmarking with similar venues has ascertained Hardwick Park is, nationally, one of an increasingly small number of sites of similar type and size (over 447,000 visitors in 2011) that does not currently charge for parking. Over the past year, many Authorities have implemented parking charges on many of their countryside sites as a result of recent budgetary cuts.

Proposal

- 6 The proposed parking structure is as follows
- i. Cars, minibuses (up to seven passenger seats) up to two hours - £2.00
 - ii. Cars, minibuses (up to seven passenger seats) any period over two hours - £3.00
 - iii. For frequent visitors, an annual pass is proposed at £75 (equivalent to 21p / day or £1.44 / week). As an 'introductory offer', this will be discounted in the first three months of operation (1 July – 30 September 2012) to £52 which equates to (14p / day or £1.00 / week).
 - iv. There will be no reduction for Blue Badge holders and specific measures will be taken to allow disabled persons to make convenient payment.
 - v. Minibuses (eight or more passenger seats) and coaches – flat £9.00 charge for any period. However, regular Special Educational Needs groups will be able to purchase an annual pass. (£52 introductory offer and £75 thereafter)
 - vi. It is not proposed to charge for pre-booked school visit transport. A 'Free Pass' system will be developed for appropriate use.
- 7 Although the fee structure has been determined with regard to attaining the required MTFP saving and associated cost implications, it is the intention to review the first (and subsequent) season's operation to ensure the parking fee structure is appropriate to ensuring the Park continues as a successful venue.

Consultation

- 8 Informal consultation was carried out in February 2012 with Sedgefield Town Council, Friends of Hardwick, Hardwick Hall Hotel and community groups who are regular users of the Park. The result of this consultation was an indication that all appreciated why the County Council needed to generate income for the Park's management. The consultation suggested a fee structure and comments received suggested a number of alternative models with that suggested by the Friends of Hardwick being adopted as indicated above.
- 9 A statutory advertisement and notification of the proposal was undertaken from 27th April 2012 until the 18th May 2012. During this period, 98 emails and letters of representation were received. Of the 98 responses, 19 are confirmed objections and one is wholly in support of the proposal.
- 10 The local Members, County Councillors John Robinson and David Brown, are aware of the proposal and have not raised any objection.

Representation and responses

- 11 Representations received in response to the publication of the Order in the Press and Official Notices on site are summarised as follows:

Parks should be free

Response: The Authority would very much wish to provide all its parks, countryside facilities and related services free of charge. However, the substantial savings required over the next four years as a result of the reduction in government funding has meant the Authority is required to make significant reductions in many budgets. To maintain necessary levels of management to meet contractual obligations and health and safety at Hardwick Park requires significant additional funding.

I have already paid for the Park in my Council tax, why should I be asked to pay again?

Response: With the pressures caused by the reduction in Government funding, it is not possible for the Authority to continue to fund all services to the degree it would wish. If charging for parking does not go ahead at Hardwick, this may mean an increase in Council Tax.

Cuts should be made where there is no detriment to public health. The County Council should not be putting obstructions in place that will discourage visitors to the park or prevent people from taking the opportunity to reduce stress, enjoy the benefits of healthy exercise and help to reduce obesity

Response: The Authority continues to develop and support a very wide range of programmes and activities Countywide that positively contribute to the health agenda. Hardwick Park is just one of 70 sites managed by the Countryside Service, the remainder being freely available for informal countryside recreation including the 120km railway path network.

As resident of Sedgefield, this local amenity should be free and residents should have a free pass or a concession. The people of Sedgefield didn't ask for the park to be improved so why should we pay for the cost of running the improvements?

Response: Although undeniably in close proximity to Sedgefield and enjoyed by many residents, Hardwick Park is recognised as a County and regional resource with a landscape of national significance that has benefited significantly from English Heritage and Heritage Lottery funding as a consequence. This is evidenced by a quadrupling in visitor numbers following restoration. The Park has been funded and managed by the County Council as a venue important to the County as a whole for almost 40 years. To attempt to define 'local' is impractical and to offer local residents any financial discount would be inappropriate in terms of the populace of the County and region as a whole. All visitors may apply for the annual pass as described above.

Instead of pay and display, the County should ask for a donation in an honesty box

Response: The income required to meet the MTFP saving that has already been applied and fund the management of Hardwick Park is a very significant sum. Experience with honesty boxes suggest that sums collected by such means are in no way sufficient to fund the management of the Park

Having paid for a memorial seat in the Park, I am now being asked to pay to visit. Crematoria and churches are free, why should memorials at Hardwick Park be different?

Response: Unfortunately, at the time most memorial seats were installed, we were not aware of the need to charge for parking. The charge will be brought to the attention of anyone enquiring about a memorial seat in the future. Hardwick is not provided or promoted specifically as a 'memorial park' and the objectives of the site and reasons people visit are very different.

It would be preferable to charge more in the café and for participation in events and lower the proposed charges

Response: Charges for events and items in the café are already set at market rates and increasing either will have the affect of making each less attractive and result in an overall reduction in income. Every effort will be made to develop a wider event programme in the future. However, the MTFP saving has already been applied to the Park's budget and funding to support larger events is not currently available.

People won't want to pay to Park and then pay to attend an event

Response: Event charges will be managed to include the parking fee

Annual permit fee is greater than membership of National Trust or English Heritage

Response: These organisations have numerous other sources of support and funding. Hardwick Park will be relying almost completely on car park revenue for its annual management. It should be noted that the charge made for non-members in National Trust car parks is significantly greater than the fees proposed at Hardwick Park.

Blue Badge parking should be free

Response: It is not the Authority's practice to offer free parking to Blue Badge holders. Social Care minibuses will be eligible to apply for the reduced cost annual permit.

Concern that the income generated at charity events will be affected

Response: It is possible that charity events may receive less support. However, charities use the Park because of its safe and attractive environment – the very aspects the parking charge is required to fund.

Concern that people who volunteer to marshal the weekly Parkruns and similar groups will not help if they have to pay a parking charge

Response: It has been agreed with the Parkrun organisers they will be given free passes for marshals to ensure the activity continues and this feature will be offered to similar organisations.

I attend the NHS Cycling Group that operates from Hardwick Park. This is a scheme that encourages people to take up cycling for the many health benefits. I will not be able to attend if the parking charge is imposed.

Response: The NHS cycling trial has been very successful and it has been agreed that an annual licence fee be paid by the NHS for storage and security provided by the Park. This will enable parking for all participants to be offered at no cost.

Vehicles will park on the verge of the A177 and on streets in Sedgefield and people walking from Sedgefield will have to cross the A177

Response: There is a potential for a small number of visitors to park on the highway verge on the A177. The situation will be monitored and should this cause highway safety issues, with Police advice, consideration will be given to additional restrictions to ensure road safety. Any vehicle causing an obstruction in the highway will be dealt with accordingly by the Police. Should visitors choose to park within Sedgefield itself additional visitors to the village may benefit the local economy and all will enjoy the benefits of the walk across the beautiful East Park. A safe crossing of the A177 is available by a signed and convenient underpass that is accessed via a mown and fenced corridor around the periphery of East Park. It is also proposed to improve the surface of this corridor with Section 106 funding related to an adjacent development.

Many people will cease to visit Hardwick Park and café revenue will suffer

Response: It is possible that the café's income may be reduced although current demand often outstrips the café's capacity. Should this be the case, a business decision will be made on how to increase trade.

The Park does not offer any special attraction to warrant paying to visit

Response: The Park attracted 447,000 visitors in 2011 and the parking charge is required to ensure the features that currently attract visitors continue to be provided, safe and well maintained.

How will the parking charge be enforced and won't this be a cost?

Response: Parking will be enforced by the Council's parking contractor and their costs funded by the charge

Fees are too high and restrictive – various suggestions of 50p and £1.00 / day, £2.00 per half day and a lower or no charge to let people visit for short period without cost

Response: The current charging structure has been benchmarked against similar venues across the country and is considered to be slightly lower than the average. The income generated from the charge is anticipated to be sufficient to meet the required MTFP saving and cover the inherent costs of enforcement, NNDR and VAT. It is not anticipated that the income generated will make any element of additional income for the Park.

12 Representation 2 – On line petition

The petition requested the Council to abandon plans to introduce parking fees at Hardwick Park as the proposed charges will discourage visitors both adults and children alike. It is an amenity that provides a unique experience and should be free to all.

Response: The petition was signed by two individuals and mirrors other representations considered above.

Recommendations and reasons

13 It is **RECOMMENDED** that

- I. Having considered the objections, the Committee endorse the proposal of the Corporate Director of Neighbourhood Services to make the Traffic Regulation Order to introduce parking charges to support MTFP requirements and avoid severe cuts to services, as detailed in the report, with charging to commence on 1 July 2012.

Contact: [Stephen Howell] Tel: 0191 3729178

Finance – Requirement to cover MTFP saving of £160,000 and associated costs of VAT, NNDR and enforcement.

Staffing – None

Risk – Severe cut in services if not implemented

Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty – None

Accommodation – None

Crime and Disorder – None

Human Rights – None

Consultation – As described in the report

Procurement – Enforcement will be undertaken by Authority's contractor

Disability Issues – None

Legal Implications - None