

Committee(s) Epping Forest and Commons – For decision	Dated 8 March 2021
Subject: Epping Forest Car Parking – Additional tariff options and consultation feedback (SEF 12/21)	Public
Which outcomes in the City Corporation’s Corporate Plan does this proposal aim to impact directly?	4,11,12
Does this proposal require extra revenue and/or capital spending?	Y
If so, how much?	£110,000
What is the source of Funding?	Local Risk
Has this Funding Source been agreed with the Chamberlain’s Department?	Y
Report of: Director of Open Spaces	For Decision
Report author: Jacqueline Eggleston, Head of Visitor Services	

Summary

Your Committee has agreed to introduce charging for car parking within Epping Forest commencing with 14 of the 50 car parks, based on a standard tariff.

The general public have now been consulted on further options for charging along with the opportunity to feedback opinion, make suggestions and raise any additional concerns regarding the introduction of charging for car parking.

The consultation feedback from 2,600 responses made between 27 January to 15 February are presented in this report, together with further recommendations for the tariff and the implementation of charging to reflect the consultation feedback.

Recommendation(s)

Members are asked to:

- Note the feedback from the public consultation exercise
- Decide additional options for modelling car park charging at Epping Forest:
 - a. Hourly fees varying by location
 - b. Hourly fees varying by day.
 - c. A regular user ‘season ticket scheme and pricing.

Main Report

Background

1. The introduction of parking charges at Epping Forest was approved at your Committee on 16 November 2020. Further detail on the fees for the standard tariff and other terms or parking were agreed at your Committee on 11 January 2021.
2. It was agreed that public consultation would commence once the basic parameters of charging had been agreed and consultation therefore was launched following the January Committee decisions.
3. A 'Frequently Asked Questions' (FAQ) information page was added to the City of London website. The content of this is attached as Appendix A.
4. The online consultation ran from 27 January to 15 February. The content of this questionnaire is attached as Appendix B. There were a total of 2,600 responses to the questionnaire.

Proposals

Tariff Models

5. The consultation proposed additional charging options that would help to meet the overarching aims of implementing car park charging. The public were invited to say how far they agreed with each proposal.
6. The public were invited to read the FAQ on the website and additional explanations were added to each question to align the purpose of the proposal with the objective it aimed to achieve.
7. The first question was to gauge a general response to the decision to implement charging. Around one third were in support of the proposals and the rest disagreed with the decision.
8. Further questions consulted on proposals to add a premium charge to some car parks based on peak times and/or premium location and an option to purchase an annual supporter scheme which includes parking.
9. The final question was to seek any other comments by consultees.

Hourly fees varying by day

10. Across all Forest car parks there is a greater demand at weekends and bank holidays than weekdays. In order to manage capacity a premium tariff could be charged during these peaks of demand, at weekends and bank holidays.
11. This model would apply a 25% increase to the chosen base tariff at weekends and public holidays.

12. This charging model would be in effect the opposite of most other local schemes, which have reduced charges at weekends and on public holidays.
13. This may have the consequence that Forest users opt to use neighbouring facilities which have reduced weekend rates. This would alleviate pressure on Forest car parks nearer to town centres but would also reduce income to the charity (Aim 1).
14. There may also be displacement of cars on to neighbouring roads in the centre and south of the Forest where, in some cases, resident parking schemes do not apply at weekends. However, in most cases, the car parks offer better direct access to the Forest and opportunities for on road parking are limited.
15. It should be noted also that, in the south of the Forest it has been the introduction of Residents Parking Zones around underground and overground stations that has already displaced commuter parking to the Forest. There are further yellow line schemes and Resident Parking Zones already implemented or being planned in residential areas adjacent to the north of the Forest that will increase pressure on Forest car parks.
16. The car parks in High Beach, like car parks in the north of the Forest that may be added after this first phase of charging, would not be undercut by cheaper local parking or on road parking which is more limited. This model would therefore achieve the combined benefits of dissuading some visitors away from the more heavily congested honeypot sites, which in the centre and north are also near to some of the most ecologically sensitive areas (Aim 3).

17. The majority of respondents disagreed with this proposal (75 %)

Premium tariff car parks

18. A standard tariff will apply to all car parks regardless of day of week or location.
19. However, if charging were to be varied by location it would help to steer visitors away from one location to another in order to better manage capacity and reduce environmental impact (Aim 3).
20. The premium tariff would be calculated based on the base charging tariff plus 25%.
21. Higher charges could be implemented at:

High Beach:

- Pillow Mounds
- Generals Ride

Chingford Hub:

- Connaught Water
- Barn Hoppitt (and seasonal overflow)
- Connaught Tennis Club

22. This would create a premium charge for these honey pot sites that are most regularly over- capacity. Warren Pond Car Park (Connaught Tennis Club) would need to be added to this equation or it would quickly become congested with displaced vehicles. The lower charges at the Bury Road car parks would attract more vehicles to where there is greater capacity and where the Forest is better able to sustain greater visitor numbers.

Leyton Flats:

- Hollow Ponds
- Boathouse

23. These are also honeypot sites that are regularly over-capacity. Higher charges here would dissuade some car use and would tackle both commuter use and the displacement from hospital car parks by hospital visitors and NHS staff and contractors (where charges already apply) (Aim 2).

24. This option allows for those parts of the Forest most under pressure for vehicle parking to contribute most to its care and preservation. It may also act to spread this pressure across the Forest's facilities and infrastructure by dispersing a percentage of visitors away from these enhanced rate locations.

25. The additional maintenance for to areas of high traffic could be offset by this increased levy.

26. The majority of respondents disagreed with this proposal (74 %)

Regular User Scheme

27. Previous visitor surveys show that over half of Forest visitors attend more than once a week (58%). An alternative scheme for daily car park charging to present a saving and convenience to the regular visitor could be introduced.

28. This will help to maintain support for the Forest from its most regular visitors and prevent alienating a potentially core supporter community.

29. Most surrounding public car parks (not resident parking schemes) offer a 'season ticket' or some variation of this. These season tickets vary in cost from around £515- £1700 per annum.

30. A season ticket could be marketed in a similar way to other heritage organisations, offering free parking and for example, a quarterly magazine.

31. It is important that a season ticket is operational upon roll out of parking charges. Therefore additional resources would need to be spent on marketing materials and CRM software.

32. The scheme would need to be priced closer to local car park season ticket schemes to be viable, rather than to comparable heritage membership schemes. The Epping Forest scheme would not benefit from the economy of scale which for example, allows the National Trust to offer membership at £71 (individual membership) and £126 (family consisting of 2 adults).

33. A pricing structure could be based on average regular use; a visitor parking in the Forest twice a week over a year for up to 1 hour per visit would pay £156. A scheme that included an annual parking permit for £150 would be a more cost-effective solution for the majority of visitors.
34. To prevent this becoming a cheap option for commuters, a maximum stay of 6 hours would apply to all including those participating in a 'season or supporter' scheme, to prevent abuse of this provision.
35. A maximum dwell time will increase the availability of parking capacity for those wishing to enjoy the Forest and is a method commonly adopted to prevent commuter parking, for example in supermarkets.
36. The majority of respondents said they were unlikely to buy an annual permit, although 14% said they *would* be very likely (5%) or somewhat likely (9%) to use it. This would equate to an income of between £20,700 and £36,750, although it should be noted that there is a consequent reduction in the daily income at car parks where regular users pay annually.

Additional Feedback

37. The consultation then allowed for an open response to the information presented in the questionnaire and several themes emerged in the responses.
38. From the 2,600 responses, 1,782 (86.5%) completed the 'any other comments' section.
39. 2,714 comments were made in total with respondents making several points in their response. The figures which follow are presented as a percentage of the overall number of comments.

Supporter scheme

- 85% thought £150 was too expensive and many suggested fees from £50 to £75. 383 people said they *would* buy a ticket at £150. This would therefore raise £57,450 from the scheme. If by comparison, the season ticket was £75, £28,725 would be raised (half as much).
40. Both these income figures can be compared with an annual projected income of £149,370 from an equivalent number of visitors staying for the average number of visits (three times a week up to two hours). This would equate to 12 visits per week at £2.50 = £30 pounds a month or £360 pounds per year.
 41. However, a lower price season ticket may encourage more visitors to buy into the scheme (although this will reduce regular income).

Need for use for over 6 hours.

There was some concern from users who held events such as long-distance walks. This did not seem to be a concern for individuals. Any organised event or activity on the Forest should be licenced and therefore extended parking times could be arranged through the licencing scheme.

Organised events/ affected businesses

42. Section 8(2) of the City of London (Various Powers) Act 1977 is very clear that car parks are only for Forest use and therefore businesses and charities that have come to rely on them for their own purposes are not strictly a concern for the Epping Forest charity. However individual conversations are taking place with those directly affected.
43. There was a strong lobby for discounts or free use from several businesses and organisations regularly using the Forest or relying on car parks in the Forest for their activities. Some of these were organisations that should be, but don't currently, apply for a licence for their activity. If a licence was applied for, special arrangements can be made for parking (but there would still be a charge). Separate arrangements are being made with business tenants of Epping Forest charity.

Local resident discount

44. Many comments thought there should be a discount for local residents or free parking. The majority were from Epping Forest District Council (EFDC) but there were also comments from residents of the London Boroughs of Waltham Forest and Redbridge. A good proportion of these respondents believed that they were already paying council tax for the Forest or assumed that EFDC runs the Forest - despite all of this being clearly explained in the introduction to the questionnaire. Previous surveys have shown that 95% of Forest visitors live within 2km of the edge of the Forest, therefore a discount would negate the concept of charging which would then not be viable.

Too expensive / opposed

45. 23% of comments expressed opposition to charging citing either as too expensive or stated a strong belief that access should remain free of charge. Comments centred on the value to mental health, need for exercise and that it was the Conservators duty to provide this for free. Although not factually correct, several comments were made in the mistaken belief that Queen Victoria had declared that the Forest should be free forever. This commonly held view is a simple misrepresentation of the Queen's statement at the official opening of the Forest.

Unfair on poor/ families / those with mobility limitations

46. 10% of comments suggested charging would be unfair on low income or young families and those with mobility issues/ elderly but that did not have a blue badge. Most of these comments were made in the third person about 'others' although there was genuine concern from a number of older visitors who felt the charge was not affordable and would prevent them accessing the Forest. A means tested discount for parking is not a viable operation for this scheme and the discount option is being made available through the supporter scheme. In addition, blue badge holders can park for free, there are free bus passes for pensioners and residents of London boroughs receive free passes for all public transport. It is made clear in the FAQ just how much of the Forest can be accessed by public transport.

Cycle parking/ public transport

47. There was a plea for more cycle parking and this will need to be addressed as soon as sufficient revenue is raised from the scheme. There were also calls for a bus service to be provided to access the Forest, in particular High Beach, which was highlighted as an area that needs fewer visitors (Aim 3). Previous attempts to service High Beach by bus has evidenced that such a service was not financially viable without a public subsidy. Furthermore, the closure of car parks did not affect numbers of visitors during lockdown periods thus alternative methods of access can be assumed to be sufficient.

COVID-19

48. 5% of comments centred on the COVID-19 pandemic and that introducing car parking charges, when other facilities are closed and there is even greater need for accessing open spaces, is poor/cynical timing or an attempt to capitalise on the situation. Members will be aware how long charging for car parks has been in discussion and the previous reports dating back a number of years. The pandemic has exacerbated the City of London's need to make savings as well as necessitating additional spending to cope with the additional visitors displaced by the lack of other available recreational services. The 12% savings target that the Epping Forest charity will need to make in 2021/22 means that implementing the charging this financial year is essential if core services are to be maintained (Aim 1).

Displacement parking

49. 8% of comments expressed concerned that charging would result in displacement parking, especially in local residential areas. Regular meetings are held with neighbouring local authorities in advance of decision making and meetings have also been held local authority highway officers to make them aware of the proposed charging. It is then the responsibility of the relevant highway authority to make local arrangements.

Operational concerns

50. 3% of respondents were concerned about the operational viability of the scheme, particularly perceived lack of phone reception for making payment. This is being tested and alternative charging facilities will be made available where required. It was a concern that paying in advance would be problematic when, for example, a walk takes longer than planned. The payment scheme being progressed does allow for additional time to be added by phone.

51. Further suggestions around options for payment were made and many thought that up to 2 hours should be free. Without cameras this is an unenforceable arrangement and the advice has been that free periods are subject to abuse. However, lack of cameras does mean that there is a grace period when entering the car park to make arrangements for paying, dropping off and collecting etc. as enforcement will be through periodic visits.

Value for money

52. 1% of comments raised that charging must result in improvements to the Forest, particularly more bins, less litter and better paths. Income from car park charging will be invested in the management of the Forest. Members are reminded that charges have been introduced to provide a standstill budget on a service that has been benchmarked at the lower end of the national Open Spaces funding spectrum. No individual investment in services could be undertaken without the overperformance of charging against current projections.

Alternative income

53. There were several comments suggesting that alternative means of raising income should be tried. Some of the suggestions (selling logs for example) are already in place and make a minimal return. Members will be aware that there is a working party looking at the wide range of income generating possibilities officers are already working on and that those considered most appropriate being prioritised.

Blue badge parking

54. The questionnaire also ascertained that 3% were blue badge holders and that many of these sometimes had difficulty finding a disabled parking space especially in High Beach. It is proposed therefore that dedicated blue badge parking will be set aside at the visitor centre car park in High Beach and that disabled bays are kept under review in other car parks with usage informing when there should be an increase or decrease in bays.

Options

55. Five options for additions to the basic tariff are presented for your Committee's consideration:

a. Premium location tariffs - Agree to charge a premium in specific car parks that reflects the additional costs to the Forest for maintaining these sites and to redistribute parking to less sensitive areas. This would be in addition to the tariff scheme agreed above. The consultation shows that there is strong opposition to this suggestion. Implementation of this would be a further complication to the roll out of new charges and will confuse messaging. It may be better to consider this again at a later date.

This option is not recommended.

b. Increased peak period charging - This places a premium on weekend parking at all car parks. Car parks are busier at weekends but placing an additional charge only at these times may seem exploitative and is unlikely to affect the ratio of visitors from weekday to weekend. It may however alleviate overcrowding and parking chaos and would increase income to the charity. The consultation shows that there is strong opposition to this suggestion. Implementation of this would be a further complication to the roll out of new charges and may confuse messaging. It may be better to consider this again at a later date.

This option is not recommended.

c. Membership / regular user scheme - Over half of visitors to Epping visit more than once a week. An annual payment for a discounted set price will benefit regular users financially and will be more convenient. Whilst there may be a reduction in overall income for the Forest compared to daily charges there will be more certainty of income which will better enable planning and such a scheme could generate a valuable membership relationship with visitors. 14% of respondents to the consultation felt that they might use such a scheme.

This option is recommended.

d. The proposed cost of this season ticket is £150 which is benchmarked between town centre car park charges and heritage venues, recognising the urban location of many of the car parks and availability of public transport compared to many heritage sites.

This option is recommended.

e. The charge could be reduced to £75 to align more closely with other heritage organisation membership schemes and be a more affordable option for visitors but this would reduce overall income.

This option is not recommended.

Strategic Implications

56. Car park charging supports the Open Spaces Departmental Business Plan objective to provide safe, secure and accessible Open Spaces and services for the benefit of London. Improving car park facilities and accessibility promotes opportunities to value and enjoy the outdoors for recreation, learning and healthy living; and developing a long-term management strategy will help protect the integrity of the environment.

Financial Implications

57. A season ticket option has the potential to reduce overall income in comparison with daily ticket income from the same number of visits. However, without a season ticket option usage may also decrease. A season ticket also creates the benefit of the option of a supporter membership scheme.

Resource Implications

58. The estimated forecast budget for the scheme indicates that an in year pay back for the initial outlay is possible, depending on how the initial investment is managed.

Legal Implications

59. Section 8(2) of the City of London (Various Powers) Act 1977 gives the Conservators the power to provide parking spaces on Forest Land in order to improve opportunities for the enjoyment of the Forest by the public. There is also a power to make reasonable charges for the use of parking spaces under section 8(4) of the 1977 Act.

Equalities Implications

60. An initial screening exercise of the equality impact of this decision has been undertaken by the City Corporation. At this stage, it is considered that there are no negative impacts on the protected equality groups. Blue badge users will receive free parking for a capped number of hours. Epping Forest is well served by public transport and is accessible by foot from many urban centres, charging is not therefore considered as unduly detrimental to those on lower income

Charity Implications

61. Epping Forest is a registered charity (number 232990). Charity Law obliges Members to ensure that the decisions they take in relation to the Charity must be taken in the best interests of the Charity.

Climate Implications

62. The implementation of car park charging can play a role in promoting modal shift to other forms of transport reducing reliance on cars to access the Forest, which in turn should have a positive impact on carbon emissions and air quality.

Conclusion

63. Charging for car parks has been agreed as a necessity in Epping Forest to manage capacity, deter non Forest users that present a direct cost to the charity and to raise revenue to maintain the car parks which otherwise require resourcing from the charity's finances that could otherwise be spent on protecting of the Forest for public recreation and enjoyment, as well as its internationally significant natural heritage.

64. This report recommends that a supporter scheme be established that will help ensure affordability and convenience to regular users who would incur charges on multiple occasions. The report also presents the key findings from a public consultation on the charges along with changes that can be made as a result of this feedback along with clarification as to why some of the suggestions in the feedback are not able to be delivered.

65. Charging will encourage more sustainable visits to the Forest, dissuading car use as far as possible but ensuring that where users visit by car the costs to the charity of providing parking are offset by the users of parking facilities rather than through funds that would otherwise be expended on the conservation and protection of the Forest for public recreation and enjoyment.

Appendices

Appendix A - Car park charging FAQs

Appendix B - Car park charging consultation questions and results

Background Papers

- URS Car Park Study Feb 2014
- Epping Forest Car Parking – Introduction of Parking Charges (28/20b)
16/11/2020
- Epping Forest Car Park Tariffs 11/01/2021

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