

Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Thursday 3 March 2022

Minutes

Attendance

Committee Members

Councillor Jeff Clarke (Chair)
Councillor Jonathan Chilvers (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Richard Baxter-Payne
Councillor Jenny Fradgley
Councillor Dave Humphreys
Councillor Bhagwant Singh Pandher
Councillor Tim Sinclair
Councillor Andrew Wright
Councillor Adrian Warwick

Portfolio Holders

Councillor Peter Butlin, Portfolio Holder for Finance & Property
Councillor Andy Crump, Portfolio Holder for Fire & Rescue and Community Safety
Councillor Kam Kaur, Portfolio Holder for Economy & Place
Councillor Heather Timms, Portfolio Holder for Environment, Climate & Culture

Officers

David Ayton-Hill, Assistant Director for Communities
Rachel Baconett, Lead Commissioner Green Spaces and Events
Andrew Felton, Assistant Director for Finance
Ian Marriott, Delivery Lead Commercial & Regulatory
Isabelle Moorhouse, Democratic Services Officer
Andrew Pau, Strategy and Commissioning Manager (Waste & Environment)
Mark Ryder, Strategic Director for Communities

Others Present

Councillor Jerry Roodhouse
Councillor Kate Rolfe

1. General

(1) Apologies

Councillor Jackie D'Arcy
Councillor Daren Pemberton who was substituted by Councillor Adrian Warwick

(2) Disclosures of Pecuniary and Non-Pecuniary Interests

None.

2. Public Speaking

Councillor Kate Rolfe who initiated the call-in made the following statement:

I apologise for bringing you all in for a special meeting. Firstly, I just want to say that the report that you have in your papers does not include the very last page on the report that was published two weeks ago which actually says councillors 'local members - not applicable'. You need to understand that because this is exactly why I'm calling it in. There are many reasons for this call in but the main one is the lack of consultation with members; in fact, the bottom of the report clearly states, 'local members - not applicable'. I for one find that quite insulting and undemocratic. The Portfolio Holder did not give the opportunity for any members who have country parks within their division the opportunity to comment on the proposals. In fact, had my colleague Councillor Jenny Fradgley not highlighted me to this I would have not known this was indeed even thought about. No one was forewarned of this proposal; I believe a cross-party group should have been set up to discuss the costs and the method of increase amongst members who have country parts in their division. We could have come up with a less severe increase and perhaps suggested a more gentle stepped-up increase over a period of three years. This is an unfair steep increase and more so in Stratford than other districts. The increases at Stratford greenway equate to a 50% increase and there is an unfair increase from £2-£3 for up to four hours; whereas the other increases are only by 50p. These increases are way over the rate of inflation. The overall increases across the country parks amount to around 17% which is still way above the rate of inflation. We're all going to be hit by rising fuel costs and we have all suffered increases across the board for food, insurances, fuel, etc. I feel for some people walking and leisure is about the only thing left that is pleasurable. The council in February adopted the new Council Plan which puts health and well-being as a priority and yet by these somewhat savage increases, we are preventing or restricting people's usage of these amenities and therefore reducing the health and wellbeing offer. On page one of the report, it states some 'modest increases', seriously do think 50%+ a modest increase? So I ask that you were withdraw the decision to increase charges and introduce a task and finish group to look at more modest, kinder ways of increasing charges over a period of time. Please also note that a fellow Stratford Councillor, Tim Sinclair on an e-mail to me when I asked for his support on the call-in, also agreed that a consultation and Task and finish Group would have been beneficial so can I ask you to reconsider this proposal, thank you.

3. Country Parks Fees and Charges 2022/23

The Chair reminded the committee that this report was raised at February's meeting for a discussion opportunity.

Councillor Heather Timms (Portfolio Holder – Environment, Climate & Culture) stated that fees and charges increasing for country parks and waste were made on the same day but there were no comments on the waste decisions despite the 'local members' wording being the same. The wording was set as 'n/a' because parking charges in country parks affects everyone cross-county and visitors who use the facilities but live outside of Warwickshire. When a decision affected more than one area in the past, there was no local member consultation. Councillor Timms reiterated that she came to February's OSC meeting to raise this report's existence and ask for any comments on the report to be sent to her. She responded to comments made by Councillor Rolfe.

The process of portfolio holder decisions could be changed so all portfolio holder decisions could be circulated to all members before the decision is made. Parking at Stratford Park and Ride had not increased for over five years, so 17% over five years was no increase. The parking charges were spent on maintaining the infrastructure, providing the litter bins and waste collection staffing. All revenue goes back into the country parks, so people pay for what they use. A 50p increase for short stays and £1 increase for long stays, people visiting/in Stratford use the greenway to park and walk into town instead of paying more for town centre parking. The increases were comparable to the cost of parking in Stratford and the other country parks. Parity in the country parks to be fair and equitable was the aim. Stratford greenway had been out of step because it had not been increased and it was reduced during the pandemic. Work had been done to make the parks available to everybody who wants to use them for their health and wellbeing. She concluded that the increase could encourage more people to walk to the greenway and reduce cars on the road.

Councillor Adrian Warwick noted that the country park parking facilities should not undercut the town centre parking in Stratford because people would park in the country car parks and this would stop people being able to use the country park facilities who want to; this could also harm town centre businesses. Reducing car usage would happen more with increased car parking and this was a 50p increase for the greenway over a seven-year period for a short stay. He concluded that country parks were in the interest in all members and not just the local ones.

Councillor Jenny Fradgley raised that the fundamental issue was the lack of consultation. The cost of living had increased and every increase from the council should be scrutinised by members. She concurred that this issue was county-wide and not Stratford specific and noted that there had not been an increase of the parkway for five years. If price increases are not done on an incremental level, they seem excessively steep to residents that the local members represent. Councillor Fradgley supported the idea of members getting to look at reports before decisions are made and incremental increases in prices should be done in the future then step increases.

Councillor Jonathon Chilvers concurred that the local members should have been made aware of this report earlier and queried the possibility of phasing the steep increase to align it with the other parks.

Councillor Tim Sinclair stated that there were two fundamental issues, transparency of the decision and the specific rises on the Greenway. The greenway is not a traditional country park as it is a long straight track with pretty views; people don't dwell at the greenway they use it to walk or cycle on. Anyone who pays for a four hour/day ticket would more likely be using the car park for cheaper parking then found in Stratford's town centre and walk into town from the greenway. To get to the greenway, residential streets are driven down, and people should instead be using the Stratford Park and Ride that also had cheaper parking then the town centres. On the 25th February, Councillor Sinclair walked to the greenway and took photographs of the greenway car park which showed that all the spaces towards the town centre end were full compared to the greenway end. The Park and Ride also had lots of empty spaces and people could park for £1 for the day. He suggested that the Portfolio Holder could advertise the park and ride at the town centre side of the greenway car park to encourage these people to park at the cheaper park and ride instead of the greenway. He concluded that members of the public should still be encouraged to use country parks for their health and wellbeing.

Councillor Fradgley noted that there had been issues with accessibility to the northern Stratford Park and Ride.

Councillor Dave Humphreys noted that no one likes parking at that parking elsewhere than the country parks was expensive, but the increase in the country park car parks was not bad as this money was being reinvested into the country park themselves.

Councillor Fradgley reiterated that if the decision making itself was more transparent then it would not have been called in; therefore, the consultation process itself should be changed.

Councillor Sinclair requested that the price increase for the greenway parking be used to fix its potholes.

In response to the questions raised, Councillor Timms stated that normally prices are increased/reviewed every two years in reference to what facilities are at the country parks. The Stratford Greenway had been 'out of step' and has differential parking while others like Burton Dassett, Hartshill Hayes and Pooley all have flat rates. Money made from the greenway parking goes back into the greenway. £250,000 had been obtained from S106 money to resurface the greenway and improve its facilities to improve availability/accessibility for all. Costs for running things in the car park had been increasing over the last five years. The decision for the smaller increase for the shorter stay was made because most people went to the greenway for one to two hours but there was a larger increase for longer stays because they were getting more value for money instead of using the available alternatives. Advertisement for the Park & Ride in Stratford would be investigated at the greenway. She reiterated that this report was brought up at February's meeting and all members being made aware of reports earlier will be investigated for greater transparency.

Councillor Sinclair welcomed the news of the greenway being invested in as well as the other country parks in Warwickshire.

Councillor Peter Butlin (Portfolio Holder – Finance & Property) stated that 'displacement' parking at the greenway was an issue when he was the Portfolio Holder for Transport & Planning. Price increases in parking was done to create habits which was what city centre park & rides did. The greenway is walking distance to Stratford town centre, and this encouraged people to park there because it was cheaper than the town centres. The Stratford park and ride was not used properly before was because town centre parking was cheaper and there was no parity between what the county charged and what the districts and boroughs charged and the differing income. The park and ride would have more successful initially if the council's had a unified approach in terms of pricing. The steeper price increase was needed to alter people's parking habits which needed to be done quicker for parity of parking for those who park at the greenway to use it. The cheaper parking at the park and ride would incentivise people to use it. The council's budget had some money set aside for a commercial offer to the public in terms what the country parks can provide. He concurred that all members should be made aware of decisions being made by Portfolio Holders and that 50p was not a lot of money to car owners.

The committee were informed that it was an easy process to make all members aware of Portfolio Holder decisions and this will be done in the future. They were also informed that all future member decisions are publicly available on the council's forward plan which was updated twice a month.

Councillor Fradgley noted that every member had residents to report back too so it would be good for all members to be aware of all reports earlier.

Ian Marriott (Delivery Lead Commercial & Regulatory) suggested that the legal and democratic services teams could provide a note on how/when members should be brought in for consultation and this could come back to a future meeting.

In response to Councillor Rolfe, Councillor Timms agreed to consult with all members who have the greenway running through it to discuss how the funding will be spent on it. A briefing note on how this money would be spent could be shared with members after.

The Chair formally proposed that the committee accept the recommendation set out in the report with the following addition, 'All members should receive an email notification when a decision is due to be made by a Portfolio Holder for all future member decisions.' Councillor Sinclair seconded this proposal.

Resolved

That Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee consider the call-in request.

AND

All members should receive an email notification when a decision is due to be made by a Portfolio Holder for all future member decisions.

The meeting rose at 14:38

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Chair