

# Portfolio Holder Decision

## Country Parks Fees and Charges 2024/25

<b>Portfolio Holder</b>	<b>Portfolio Holder for Environment, Climate &amp; Culture</b>
<b>Date of decision</b>	<b>16 February 2024</b>
	<b>Signed</b>

### 1. Decision taken

That the Portfolio Holder for Environment Climate and Culture approves the changes to Country Parks fees and charges from 1 April 2024, as set out in the Appendix.

### 2. Reasons for decisions

The County Council's constitution requires approval of fees and charges by the relevant portfolio holder prior to their application.

### 3. Background information

Country Parks fees and charges relate to parking, which is the main source of income for the service, as well as a range of other services that can be charged for. Country Parks are valuable green space assets that support people's health and wellbeing, and it is important that they remain accessible and value for money. All the income made from Country Parks fees and charges is utilised in our country parks and greenways.

The Country Parks service has generally increased fees and charges on a staggered basis, with increases to some charges one year, then different charges the next and so on. Prior to the introduction of cashless parking machines in 2020, parking charges were also paid in cash, which made it difficult to increase charges in line with inflation as this would result in visitors having to pay odd amounts in change, which is unrealistic and cumbersome.

This has meant that more substantial increases have taken place less regularly, sometimes to account for a number of years' worth of inflationary increases. Following the

introduction of cashless parking, and to reduce the need to make significant increases, the service has started to make more regular increases to fees and charges, either annually or biennially. The service continues to benchmark against similar amenities locally in order to remain competitive yet accessible, and it is important that fees and charges are increased sufficiently to reflect rising costs generally and sustain income to help pay for service delivery.

Some fees and charges are still being brought up to be in line with local competition and so do require increases above inflation. It is also worth noting that it is still not desirable to increase charges on set percentages alone as these can create 'unfriendly' odd amounts (e.g. £3.27 vs £3.30). Therefore, in some instances figures have been rounded up or down accordingly.

As a result of the above factors, this report sets out an average increase of 13% across all the charges that are being increased, most of which were not increased in 2022/23. It is envisaged that next financial year we will start to see smaller increases, more in line with inflation.

Visitors coming to our sites do so out of choice in order to enjoy the amenities they provide. Some visitors are regular and some less so. If we increase fees and charges across the board too frequently this may serve to deter visitors who could choose to go to other amenities such as Coombe Park, Draycote Water, Daventry Country Park, and so on. Achieving a balance between regular inflationary increases and not increasing prices too often is carefully considered each time we review our charges, taking into account the perspective of our service users. Visitors need to feel that they are getting value for money from the service we provide. We need to be competitive within the marketplace that we are operating, yet reasonable to remain attractive to our customers.

Income derived from rents, tenancies, catering concessions, shop sales, caravan site profits share, special events and grants etc, account for approximately 25% of the country parks' total income in a normal year; these elements are adjusted through rent reviews and lease arrangements and are not included in this review.

The Appendix sets out the new fees and charges to take effect from 1 April 2024.

### **Detail on proposed changes**

#### **Fishing Permits at Kingsbury Water Park**

Annual fishing permit prices and day fishing tickets were all increased by 10% in 2023/24

and so will not be increased in 2024/25, with the exception of the concessionary rate which was not increased last year. This will be increased by 10%. It is important that we remain competitive and don't price ourselves out of the market. Whilst improvements are still being made to the fishery, raising prices this year is not considered appropriate.

### **Car Parking**

2023/24 saw a 10% increase to car parking fees at both Kingsbury and Ryton. It is proposed not to increase at these sites in 2024/25. Furthermore, it is anticipated that Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) will be introduced at Kingsbury in 2024, which is likely to require a new charging structure, that may see the end of the flat rate fee (currently £4.95). The introduction of ANPR will help to eliminate parking charge evasion and ticket swapping, as well as being more attractive to visitors who only plan to stay for a short time on site.

The service is also preparing to change the way in which car parking is managed, with the aim of reducing parking fee evasion through better enforcement of parking charge notices. The move to utilising the powers set out within the Road Traffic Regulation Act will enable more effective enforcement and also mean that the Council is not liable to pay the VAT on parking income.

It is proposed to increase charges at all other sites in 2024/25. Burton Dassett, Hartshill Hayes and Pooley Country Parks daily flat rate fees will be increased by 10% from £3 to £3.30. Annual permits will be increased from £36 to £40 (11%) and disabled permits from £29 to £32 (9%). Generally, disabled permits are kept at around 20% cheaper than standard permits.

Stratford Greenway fees were not increased in 2023/24 and have only been increased once since car parking charges were first introduced there in 2017. Therefore, it is proposed to increase parking up to one hour from £1 to £1.20 (20%), up to 2 hours from £1.50 to £1.80 (20%), up to 3 hours from £2 to £2.50 (20%), up to 4 hours from £3 to £3.60 (20%) and over 4 hours/ All Day from £4 to £5 (25%). Whilst the all-day charge is to be increased by 25%, visitors who park for this length of time are less likely to be Greenway users and include people that choose to park at the Greenway to visit or work in Stratford itself. Car parks within Stratford generally charge £8.80 for between 4 and 9 hours, which still makes Stratford Greenway comparatively cheap for longer stay parking. Regular users of the Greenway are recommended to buy an annual permit, which is extremely good value for money.

Annual parking permits for Stratford Greenway are proposed to be increased by 20% for

standard permits, from £48 to £58 (which works out at £1.11 a week) and by 10% for disabled permits, from £38 to £42. Stratford Greenway is the third most visited site in the Country Parks portfolio, and we believe that the proposed rates offer excellent value and will not have a negative impact on visitor numbers.

### **Annual Parking Permits – All Parks/ South Parks & North Parks**

These were not increased in 2023/24, so it is proposed to increase these as follows:

- All Parks Permit – from £120 to £132 (10%)
- All Parks Disabled Permit – from £96 to £105 (9%)
- North Parks Permit – from £90 to £99 (10%)
- North Parks Disabled Permit – from £72 to £80 (11%)
- South Parks Permit – from £60 to £72 (20%)
- South Parks Disabled Permit – from £48 to £53 (10%)

It is worth noting that the North Parks Permit includes access to Kingsbury, Pooley and Harthill Hayes, whilst the South Parks permit also now includes access to Stratford Greenway, as well as Ryton Pools and Burton Dassett. The larger percentage increase in price for the latter reflects this addition. However, all annual parking permits remain significant value for money.

### **Other price increases/changes**

#### **School Visits**

These fees were not increased in 2023/24, and it is proposed that the 2-hour session (usually morning only) will increase to £5 per child from £4.50, and the 4-hour session (all day) from £7.50 to £9. This is a 20% increase but is competitive compared with similar offers locally. Most school bookings are for all day sessions.

Income derived from rents, tenancies, catering concessions, shop sales, caravan site profits share, special events and grants etc, account for approximately 25% of the country parks' total income in a normal year; these elements are adjusted through rent reviews and lease arrangements and are not included in this review.

## **4. Financial Implications**

The fees and charges increases detailed above should provide for additional income of

approximately £31,350 based on current visitor numbers/sales. This is a total increase of approximately 13%, based on average income over the last financial year for car parking and permit income at Stratford Greenway, Burton Dassett Hills, Hartshill Hayes and Pooley Country Parks as well as on the school's education income achieved.

In reviewing our fees and charges for 2024-25 we have not applied the same percentage increase to all charges, but instead have considered each charge on its own merits. This is in line with the approach to fees and charges across WCC services where there is a range of planned price increases for 2024-25, as well as some price freezes, depending on the circumstances of each service.

Where there has been a larger percentage increase in our fees and charges the rationale is outlined above and includes where prices are yet to come in line with competitors, to better reflect the cost of providing the service or where market value needs to be achieved. In all cases the increased charges are pitched to continue to make our country parks accessible and good value for money, and we continually benchmark our prices against our competitors, to ensure we are not under or over charging.

See Appendix for detailed information on Fees & Charges for 2024/25.

## 5. Environmental Implications

Whilst the Country Parks service is heavily dependent on income from car parking charges, we are confident that our regular users will continue to pay to visit their local country park or greenway. Most of our visitors do not need to travel for long distances in their vehicles to be able to get to their nearest/ favourite country park. Therefore, we do not believe that these fee increases will have an impact on length of vehicle journey for most of our users, which in turn will not have a detrimental effect on air pollution. Access to country parks and greenways remains free of charge to those arriving on foot or by bicycle.

<b>Report Author</b>	Andrew Pau – Head of Waste Management and Country Parks Rachel Baconnet – Lead Commissioner Green Spaces and Events
<b>Director</b>	David Ayton-Hill - Director of Economy and Place
<b>Executive Director</b>	Mark Ryder - Executive Director For Communities
<b>Portfolio Holder</b>	Cllr Heather Timms - Portfolio Holder for Environment, Climate & Culture

<b>Urgent matter?</b>	No
<b>Confidential or exempt?</b>	No
<b>Is the decision contrary to the budget and policy framework?</b>	No

<b>List of background papers</b>
Appendix A

<b>Members and officers consulted and informed</b>
Portfolio Holder – Councillor Heather Timms
Corporate Board – 31 January 2024
Legal –
Finance –
Equality – Delroy Madden
Democratic Services – Nicole Conway
Councillors –
Local Member(s):