


Proposed Urgent Decision to be made by the Leader of the Council on 3 July 2020

Funding for Improvements to Country Parks' Car Parking Facilities

Portfolio Holder	Cllr Izzi Seccombe
Date of decision	Decision Date 3 July 2020
	Signed 

Decision taken

- 1) To approve the allocation of £130k from the Capital Investment Fund to a project to upgrade the Country Parks' car parking facilities
- 2) To add the new project to the Council's Capital Programme

1.0 Reasons for decision

- 1.1 The Country Parks service operates eight parks and greenways as visitor locations across Warwickshire. In a normal year, with reasonable weather, car park charges at six of these locations generate ~£550k in income for the Council (including £110k prepaid permit income). The infrastructure and mechanism used to collect the day ticket elements of these charges varies by site but the majority, including the two major sites at Kingsbury and Ryton, only operate by cash payment. This approach has been in need of updating to meet changing visitor needs, particularly the desire to pay by card, and this need has been made urgent by the Covid-19 crisis, where cash-based solutions present an increased transmission risk for visitors and staff. Further reasons to move away from cash include the continued incidence of thefts and damage, and the queues caused at some locations where cash-based barriers require exact change. A significant proportion of requests made to Country Park

receptionists in visitor centres and rangers around the sites continue to be in relation to change for parking machines.

- 1.2 At the date of this report we are avoiding the cash risks (and limiting visitor numbers) associated with Covid-19 by use of a booking system hosted on the Eventbrite platform. While this does give us a cashless approach, it is expensive to run as it requires substantial staff resource to check visitor tickets manually at our gates. It also loses us income as we have to pay a substantial charge per transaction (~20%) to the platform vendor. It is therefore not a viable long-term solution.
- 1.3 We therefore propose the installation of card-based payment machines at all our car parks, to replace the existing cash machines. At all sites this will initially be a pay-and-display mechanism. At Kingsbury and Ryton, where approximately 75% of our parking income is generated, we will then upgrade these systems to more intelligent systems which will allow features such as:
 - Free short visits to drop off/pick up
 - Purchase and use of annual permits
 - Automatic alerts generated to onsite staff to notify them of non-compliance
 - Optional use of barriers to manage numbers and flows accessing the parks at any time in the future
- 1.4 Machines initially installed at Kingsbury and Ryton which are not part of the upgraded systems will be moved to other Country Parks to supplement the provision there.
- 1.5 The total capital cost of this project is estimated at £130k, to acquire the assets for a system expected to last for 5 years. There is expected to be a no net revenue impact.

2.0 Background information

- 2.1 The key issues we need to solve are:
 - **Covid-19 transmission risk for visitors and staff in using cash-based machines.** In the normal system, visitors use a variety of cash-based machines, which obviously involves physical contact with the machines in quick succession after another visitor. Some machines issue change, meaning transmission of coins from one user to another. The cash is then collected from the machines by staff, counted, and banked, meaning staff spend significant time handling and moving the cash. The volume of coins taken each day and the threat of theft at the main sites means it is not safe to leave the money in the machines for a long enough duration to be confident that any virus transmission was eliminated.
 - **Thefts from and damage to machines holding small amounts of uncollected cash in relatively remote locations.** As well as the initial loss of money, the damage caused by each event typically requires the purchase and commissioning of a brand new machine, which costs up to £5k including dismantling and scrapping the old machine, and a three-to-four week period during which no charges are collected.

- **Dangerous queuing onto the road at Kingsbury Water Park.** The normal system requires visitors to locate correct change to put into the machine to activate the entry barrier; a small area ahead of the entrance allows visitors to pull in and go into the visitor reception to either make a card payment or get change, but on busy days or at peak times this does not manage the flows sufficiently to prevent potential road traffic risks and a very poor visitor experience.
- **The high breakdown rate in the normal machines operating at Kingsbury.** This exacerbates the queuing problem and require constant staff oversight.
- **The need for patrols across substantial parking areas at Ryton Pools where a simple pay-and-display cash-only system operates.** We have no dedicated staff for this activity and so the time is taken away from necessary ranger activity.
- **The increased interactions that result between receptionists and visitors as a result of the use of cash machines.** This takes time and is often a cause of visitor complaints as many are used to paying for parking elsewhere by card.

2.2 We have conducted significant soft market testing to understand the potential solutions available, their advantages and disadvantages, and the likely cost impacts. This review has helped us identify the following system design requirements as key criteria for WCC:

- We need to retain the ability to operate entry barriers at the two main parks, Ryton and Kingsbury. However, since visitors can leave the sites late in the evenings during the summer months (when the sites may be unstaffed), the system must not involve exit barriers.
- The system must primarily operate through card payments. Phone app payments may be supported alongside card payments, but the mobile phone signal at our sites is generally not reliable enough to rely on payment by text or phone call.
- The system must allow the operation of annual or similar permits for regular users of our main sites. At smaller sites, where permits are not used, the system should allow visitors to purchase tickets for different durations or for different prices for different categories of user. Systems which improve the efficiency of our current permit issuing process, which involves sending out hundreds of cards and paper permits each year, would be preferred.
- The system must operate with relatively low levels of staff input, particularly for our less popular sites which do not have a permanent staffing presence. The scale of Kingsbury and Ryton make pay-and-display approaches difficult and costly to operate because visitors can disperse throughout the sites.
- The system should allow us to collect meaningful anonymised data about visitor entry and payments.
- The systems must be easy for visitors to use and designed to encourage a high payment compliance rate.
- The fee mechanism from the system vendor/operator should be transparent and predictable.
- The system should give us, rather than the system vendor/operator, the discretion as to how/if to pursue enforcement of fines. The fee mechanism should therefore not be linked to the collection of fines.
- The system must be compliant with regulatory requirements in relation to GDPR as well as financially secure in relation to payment processing.

- 2.3 Our options as a local authority are more limited than a private car park operator; in particular, we are legally unable to use Automated Number Plate Recognition (often known as ANPR) to enforce follow-up fines for visitors not making payments. This does not however preclude the use of cameras to support monitoring and onsite enforcement actions.
- 2.4 While going to cardless machines does not completely eliminate transmission risks for users (they still have to physically interact with screens and buttons), it does avoid the passing of coins between individuals and it also is expected to eliminate the high number of conversations between our staff and visitors in relation to change for parking (often accompanied by note/coin exchanges).
- 2.5 We have recently been trialling simple cashless machines, managed via a secure online Data Management System, at Burton Dassett and Seven Meadows on the Stratford Greenway. After three weeks of operation, income collected was £6800 compared to £5800 for the same period last year which indicates good ease of use and general uptake, as expected given the prevalence of similar machines elsewhere. Visitor monitoring has been carried out and in over 40 observed transactions, only one customer wanted to pay with coins. We have received no other complaints in relation to the installation of these machines; nonetheless we would carry out suitable social media and other communications to make visitors aware of any new systems as they come online. This trial has given us confidence that the majority of users do not need support to start using them.
- 2.6 Our conversations with suppliers in recent weeks have also revealed that there is likely to be a short delay in procuring more complex systems needed for Kingsbury and Ryton; the global supply chain of manufacturers has been negatively affected by the pandemic and furthermore many UK-based vendors (typically not the same company as the manufacturers) are in partial or complete furlough at this point. We are therefore not going to be in a position to place an immediate order for the permanent systems for Kingsbury and Ryton. It is equally not feasible to leave these two major sites without cashless systems in the short term. We are therefore proposing an approach which offers us both an immediate solution for all sites, but which will allow for Kingsbury and Ryton to be upgraded as soon as possible to their longer-term systems.
- 2.7 We are recommending the following approach:
- To solve the most pressing problem of needing to eliminate cash from our parking transactions, ten standalone cardbased pay-and-display machines will be purchased immediately. These are of the same specification and supplier as the machines recently trialled with success at Burton Dassett and Seven Meadows. Initially, these will be installed at the sites where cashless payments are currently not possible: Pooley, Hartshill, Ryton and Kingsbury. We are informed that the supplier has these in stock, and so estimate that these machines can be operational within two to three weeks of approval of this expenditure. The purchase costs for ten machines are estimated at £40k, and the initial installation costs at £5k.

- Subsequently, the pay-and-display machines from Kingsbury and Ryton can be removed and reinstalled at other sites including Burton Dassett, Stratford Greenway, Pooley and Hartshill. Minimal re-installation costs will be incurred but these will be absorbed by the Country Parks revenue budget to ensure installation costs are only capitalised once.
- Whilst these machines are purchased and installed, we will also pursue active procurement of the longer-term solutions for Kingsbury and Ryton. This will include all the necessary assurance work around financial security and data handling, including the Privacy Impact Assessment. Our current preferred system employs cameras recording vehicle number plates entering and leaving the sites, with card-based payment machines in the car parking areas. The system registers payments and compares them to the camera records, and alerts staff if a payment is not made at the vehicle within a certain reasonable time period (after checking for known permit holders, staff etc). Staff can then carry out necessary enforcement actions. This would therefore not require regular patrols to maintain compliance, which is essential at the two large sites with their multiple and dispersed parking areas. Use of cameras in this way is legal as fines are only actionable while the vehicle is on site, and is expected to raise compliance rates such that regular patrols for displayed tickets are no longer necessary. Based on discussions to date we hope to be able to place an order for these systems within six weeks and estimate a further six week installation period after that for before the new systems can operating. We currently estimate the purchase cost of the full systems for both sites to be £60k, with additional installation costs of £12k, largely for ground works.

2.8 To prevent delays we are requesting approval of both pieces of expenditure in this one report. The total request is therefore £130k, including £13k contingency for the cost variability on the procurement of the Ryton and Kingsbury systems. This funding is requested from the Capital Investment Fund.

2.9 In recent weeks there has been unprecedented demand for our Country Parks along with all other open spaces across the country. In some locations the local residents have endured substantial disruption and dangerous situations have been created by some inconsiderate park users choosing to park on the surrounding roads. We know that some of these users park this way to avoid parking fees altogether and any new system may have minimal impact on their behaviour. Others however are choosing to override our attempts to keep the numbers in the Park at that which we consider to be safe against the Covid-19 transmission risk. When we can safely open up the parks to more visitors, we need to ensure our systems are easy to use, reliable and modern or we will not change this learnt behaviour. The implementation of these new systems are not the only part of the plan to influence change here, but they are a key element.

2.10 Whilst this is an area where technological change is a constant, we envisage these systems having a five year life span from initial installation.

3.0 Financial implications

- 3.1 The capital investment proposed is estimated to cost £0.130m for the full suite of systems, including £0.013m of contingency to reflect the need for further work to confirm the procurement of the right long-term system for the two major sites. The service does not have sufficient resource to fund the project from their own resources and are therefore looking to the Capital Investment Fund (CIF) for support.
- 3.2 The wish to progress quickly to the procurement and thereby introduce a cost effective solution in response to the changed requirements of Covid-19 means the proposal has not been through the usual CIF evaluation process. However, the longer term benefits of the proposed solution and the relatively low cost means Corporate Board are happy recommend the investment for approval.
- 3.3 The total CIF funding available for 2020/21 is £30.625m of which £14.198m is nominally set aside for priority schemes identified in the Council's capital strategy. Therefore, approval of this allocation would leave £30.495m available for allocation in 2020/21.
- 3.4 There are expected to be minimal net revenue impacts in the short term, and any costs will be met from within the Service's existing revenue budget.
- 3.5 The systems are expected to last for approximately five years.

4.0 Environmental implications

- 4.1 The proposed systems are intended to make it easy for park users to access the green spaces offered by the service. It must be acknowledged that in the medium term the locations of our parks mean that we still expect the vast majority of visitors to arrive at the parks by way of private vehicle. However, by modernising the systems, particularly at the two major sites, we would be able to consider options to influence behavioural change such as differential pricing for electric car users.
- 4.2 The machines at Pooley, Hartshill, Burton Dassett and Seven Meadows will run from solar powered batteries and not require mains installations. The current preferred option for the longer-term systems for Ryton and Kingsbury are ticketless, which will avoid paper wastage and associated environmental impacts.

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Lead Director	Mark Ryder
Lead Member	Cllr Heather Timms

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

List of background papers (If applicable)

Equalities Impact Assessment

Members and officers consulted and informed

Portfolio Holder – Councillor Heather Timms

Corporate Board – Monica Fogarty, Mark Ryder, Rob Powell and Nigel Minns

Legal – Nichola Vine

Finance – Virginia Rennie

Equality – Barnaby Briggs

Democratic Services – Paul Williams

Councillors – Councillors Seccombe, Timms, Adkins, Roodhouse, Chilvers.

Councillor Alan Cockburn (For consent to urgency)

Local Member(s): N/A