

## FINANCE AND AUDIT SCRUTINY PANEL 7 SEPTEMBER 2010

- Present :-* Councillor Dennis Willetts (Chairman)  
Councillors Christopher Arnold, Scott Greenhill,  
Jon Manning, Colin Mudie, Kim Naish and  
Gerard Oxford
- Substitute Members :-* Councillor Barrie Cook for Councillor Nick Cope  
Councillor Jackie Maclean for Councillor Sue Lissimore  
Councillor Bill Frame for Councillor Colin Sykes
- Also in Attendance :-* Councillor Tina Dopson  
Councillor Tim Young  
Councillor Kevin Bentley  
Councillor Martin Goss  
Councillor Pauline Hazell  
Councillor Beverley Oxford  
Councillor Mike Hardy

### 22. Referred items under the Call in Procedure

Councillor Sue Lissimore attended the meeting and presented the case for the call-in, explaining that she believed the decision was flawed, as no consultation had taken place with local residents or visitors to the park. There was no clarity or aims and desired outcomes due to the lack of information on the number of visitors and the reason and period of time for their visit. Councillor Lissimore said the action proposed must be proportional to the desired outcome which is uncertain due to the lack of consultation, and results may not match the report due to the uncertain nature of the figures.

Councillor Lissimore said the Council needed new and innovative funding streams to bring in new revenue, but this decision was against the Council's policy on healthy living, with proposals based on cloudy and unsubstantiated information, due to a lack of consultation.

Councillor Lissimore said a lot of the information described in the report was not backed-up by evidence that would allow for a more accurate considered opinion, with a lot of information based on pure guesswork.

In conclusion, Councillor Lissimore said the lack of information and facts within the report made the decision unacceptable, and given the possible small amount of profit generated from the proposed scheme in the first year, relied on too tight a financial margin to be credible. Councillor Lissimore asked the panel to consider referring the decision back to the Portfolio Holders, for them to agree to a full survey and impact assessment, and for the results to be pre-scrutinised by the Finance and Audit Scrutiny Panel prior to implementation.

Councillor Dopson, Portfolio Holder for Communities and joint signatory to the decision addressed the panel in the absence of Councillor Hunt to respond to the case presented by Councillor Lissimore. Councillor Dopson explained that in a different time

she may have called this decision in herself.

That said, Councillor Dopson said the quantitative information within the report had not been plucked out of the air, guesswork, but was information based on estimates calculated by experienced officers in full knowledge of the operations at the High Woods Country Park car park.

Councillor Dopson said in terms of Healthy Living, actually choosing to go to the country park by car was not a particular healthy option, but accepted some visitors do come from many miles away.

Councillor Dopson confirmed that no formal consultation has taken place, but the High Woods Country Park Plan will take place by 2011 where any parking order will have to be supported by consultation. Later, Councillor Dopson confirmed that informal discussions had taken place with the local Queen Boudicca School, to allow parents an opportunity for limited short stay parking. The implementation of this decision will be in the knowledge of any local consultation.

Councillor Dopson believed the proposed charges are fair and reasonable, and demand will eventually exceed capacity, and the expertise of the Parking Services Manager on parking arrangements in the Borough, that such is his knowledge, he was able to advise both Uttlesford District Council and Essex County Council.

Councillor Dopson concluded by saying Councils are being encouraged to find new ways of generating income, and this was one opportunity to do it, accepting it will deter some current visitors.

### **Have Your Say**

Councillor Bentley addressed the panel saying that whilst he understood the need to save money and increase income, he was concerned at the apparent rush of this decision that did not appear to have the consultation and fact finding information needed to support the decision taken.

Councillor Bentley said the High Woods Country Park was a gift to the residents of Colchester to recompense for the development of High Woods, where residents and visitors alike could go to get away from the general hubbub of urban life.

The new charge was, Councillor Bentley believed, systematic of the relentless pursuit of penalising the motorist. Many motorists visiting the country park would avoid charges and cause more congestion by parking in residential roads close to the park.

Councillor Bentley concluded by asking whether the future changes in the size of minted coinage and the effect of this on the parking machines had been considered, given any new machine(s) would, not long after implementation, need changing. Councillor Bentley did not think the decision was sensible, would not generate a lot of income and betrayed the legacy of the park to the people of Colchester.

Later, and in response to Councillor Mudie and Bentley, Councillor Dopson said any changes to coin machines as a result of any change to the size of minted coinage

would be subject to future decisions.

Councillor Goss addressed the panel saying that whilst he agreed with the credentials of the Parking Services Manager he still believed the implementation of this decision would result in increased congestion in the surrounding residential roads, though a previous parking survey for Essex County Council in 2009 had concluded the impact from vehicles for the Primary Care Trust was not large.

Councillor Goss believed the estimated parking income generated was unreliable, and was disappointed that the local Parish Council had not been notified of this decision. Councillor Goss concluded by urging the Portfolio Holder to reconsider the decision.

In response to Councillor Willetts, Councillor Goss said he had not handed the information he received from Essex County Council to the Portfolio Holder(s).

Councillor Hazell addressed the panel saying in terms of healthy living lifestyles, the park was an oasis, free of charge, a boom for residents during these hard times. Councillor Hazell echoed the remarks of Councillor Bentley, saying free entry to this green space for the people of Colchester should continue.

### **General discussions**

Councillor Dopson confirmed to Councillor Willetts that consultation with residents would be undertaken prior to the implementation on the car park charging proposals.

Councillor Dopson confirmed to Councillor Arnold that the method of implementation of this scheme was no different to that taken at Colchester Leisure World, be it that the charging in both cases was different from the outset, that is, no charges to users of the Leisure World facility (the cost of parking at Leisure World was reimbursed when paying to enter Leisure World). Councillor Dopson hoped, and anticipated that many local visitors to the country park would use alternative means of travel, though she believed the 50 pence charge for a visit for up to 2 hours was not prohibitive.

In response to Councillor Arnold's suggestion of limiting the hours of parking (part day parking) would not alleviate the outlying areas parking congestion concerns expressed by Councillors Lissimore and Goss.

In response to Councillors Manning and G. Oxford, Councillor Dopson said the lack of detail within the report would be addressed at the time of consultation, prior to any implementation of the scheme, and any pre-decision consultation had not been considered given the need to keep implementation costs to a minimum.

Councillor Lissimore confirmed to Councillor Naish that she did not consult with local ward councillors over this decision, but felt the need, and a duty, to represent and protect the residents of Colchester over the decision taken. Councillor Dopson confirmed to Councillor Naish that she became the Portfolio Holder for Communities in May 2010 just after the refurbishment of the Country Park car park, though discussions that ultimately led to this decision had been ongoing for a year or more. Councillor Dopson also confirmed that if this decision was not implemented any future budgetary considerations would need to reflect this.

Councillor Frame still remained unconvinced and concerned by the costings within the financial plan, believing the management costs to be unrealistic.

In response to Councillor Mudie, Councillor Dopson said that the initial charge of 50 pence was not prohibitive, and whilst there is no thought of increasing the charge, Cabinet members must always be prepared to re-evaluate fees and charges. The preferred pricing structure for the car park, as shown under option 2 of the report, are considered fair charges, without being in competition with the hospital parking scheme.

### **In summary**

Councillor Lissimore gave a brief summary on her position following the debate, and concluded by asking the panel to consider referring the decision back to the Portfolio Holders, for them to agree to a full survey and impact assessment, and for the results to be pre-scrutinised by the Finance and Audit Scrutiny Panel prior to implementation.

Councillor Dopson gave a brief summary on her position following the debate, saying any early consultation, that is, a consultation before the parking order consultation would, she was advised, be an inappropriate cost and disproportionate to the decision taken. Councillor Dopson stood by her decision, but said she would be happy to enter into further discussions with members on details of the consultation beyond the decision taken.

### **Conclusion**

The Chairman gave a brief summary of the issues raised by members. The information within the report was considered to be flawed, with a need for better, more informative data, much of which could have been provided by a resident and visitor survey. There remained concern that charging for parking at one of the country park's car parks would move these users to the other country park car park, and members of the panel expressed a need for more information that would provide confidence in the delivery of the aims.

Councillor Arnold proposed referring the decision back to the Portfolio Holders to reconsider, given the reservations expressed by members of the panel.

Councillor Naish proposed that the panel accepted the decision taken by the Portfolio Holders, and agree the charges as set out in option 2 of the report.

Councillor Frame supported the deferral of the decision back to the Portfolio Holders, due to the lack of consultation, and the uncertainty of the charging figures that were not credible. Councillor Maclean seconded the proposal of Councillor Arnold.

*RESOLVED* that the panel referred the decision "COM-006-10 / STS-001-10 High Woods Country Park – car park charging proposals" back to the Portfolio Holders for further consideration, taking account of the reservations and suggestions of the panel (NINE voted FOR, and ONE voted AGAINST).