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Paul Thomson
Superintendent, Epping Forest.

cc Jacqueline Egglestone, Head of Visitor Services, Epping Forest

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Dear Paul

Car Parking Charges around Epping Forest

We are pleased that the City of London Corporation is conducting a review into car park charging across Epping Forest which we understand will report back to the Epping Forest & Commons Committee meeting in May 2022.

Like you, we want to protect and preserve the Forest for the enjoyment of generations to come, and that means minimising the damage caused by cars to the Forest through pollution and damage to the Forest floor (ie. on verges etc) as some car parking is currently spreading into the Forest. We therefore support one of the Corporation's key priorities to encourage sustainable transport to, from and around the Forest.

In relation to the introduction of car parking charges we have consulted our members in order to inform our feedback and the suggestions set out below. We received over 20 detailed responses, a number of which were totally opposed to car parking charges on principle, but the majority of which contained thoughts and suggestions which we capture below.

In summary we would like the City of London Corporation, Epping Forest to consider:

1. A more flexible and sophisticated approach.

We believe the Corporation need to be more sophisticated in their approach to car parking charges, taking into account the location of each car park, how each car park is used, the impact of car parking in and around the Forest, and the opportunities each car park provides for people using the Forest.

We believe you should consider:

- a) Differential charges, depending on the location of the car park and/or the time of week/day. This could be used, for example, to charge higher prices where you want to discourage car usage and parking, and lower or free parking in less used areas of the Forest. Or it could be used to offer lower rates at off-peak times – mid week for example when retired people might be more likely to want to visit the Forest. It could offer lower rates for people on lower incomes.
- b) A lower annual permit fee. A £50 or £20 annual subscription was mentioned as being more appropriate by some of our members, or £72 being the rate charged by the National Trust for access to all of its car parks. Or £75 by the Lea Valley

Regional Park. The permit could perhaps cover all car parks apart from the commuter car parks or other car parks where there is significant non-Forest usage.

- c) Exemptions or reductions for people on lower incomes – see below for more detail.

Further ideas from our members for your consideration

- d) A free period, either at the start of a parking session, or a grace period at the end of a session to reduce people's concerns about getting fined.
- e) Lower overall charges, perhaps set at £2 for a full day's parking, or £1 for up to 2 hours.

2. **The 6 hour time limit.**

We therefore believe that you should remove the 6 hour maximum time limit in at least some car parks around the Forest.

The 6-hour maximum visitor time limit prevents people and groups who might want to enjoy the Forest for longer periods of time, for example people undertaking all-day walks, specific activities requiring a longer time or day trips to the Forest. We understand that such limits might be necessary in some areas of the south of the Forest, where car parks have been used as "commuter" car parks or for other non-Forest uses, but this is not the case in most areas of the north of the Forest.

3. **Provision for older people and people on lower incomes.**

We believe that the Forest, an asset previously enjoyed in common before being protected by the Act, should be accessible to everyone to enjoy responsibly.

The majority of the feedback we received related to concerns from people, mostly older people and people on lower incomes, who were now no longer visiting the Forest due to the charges.

It was also suggested by some of our members that the payment system prioritises younger people and people from further away from the Forest compared to more local, older and less wealthy people.

We are genuinely concerned that people who previously enjoyed and benefitted from their visits to the Forest no longer feel able to visit. The concerns and ideas expressed can be summarised as follows:

- a) people who love and cherish the Forest but who are unable to afford to pay car parking fees. This has impacted a number of our members, including one of our very regular volunteers who has been visiting the Forest since a child, over 70 years ago, but who now no longer visits the Forest to walk his dog.
- b) people who are unable to (or who are not confident using), the current parking machines as they do not have smart phones, or do not have the connectivity required to use the machines in the relevant car parks.

We understand that some car parks now have machines that are able to accept card payment, which is positive.

We believe it would be good if card payment machines could be extended throughout Forest car parks, and that this fact could be communicated more widely to the general public.

Some of our members also wished there to be the ability to pay by cash at the parking machines as particularly older people feel more confident paying by cash than by card.

- c) real fears in relation to fines being imposed on people who return to their cars after the end of the period they have paid for. Several members noted that one of their main enjoyments of the Forest was the ability to disconnect from day-to-day life, and lose themselves in the Forest, and that this enjoyment is now curtailed as they have to constantly remind themselves that they have to return to their car at a certain time – the “ticking clock” as they referred to it. A grace period at the end of a parking period might help alleviate this problem.
- d) for older people with limited mobility (but who are not blue badge holders), who are able to walk in the Forest but not to it, the parking fees can be a significant financial barrier, as well as a technical challenge and a worry.

We believe you should consider whether free or subsidised annual passes could be given to local pensioners, for example, in a similar way to the Freedom Pass being given to pensioners in London funded by their respective local authority.

We note that the paper to the Epping Forest & Commons Committee in February 2022 states that there are no negative equalities impacts from the introduction of car parking charges. However, from the feedback we have received we are concerned that the charges are having a differential and negative impact on older people, disabled people and people on lower incomes.

We would therefore like a full Equalities Impact Assessment of the scheme to be undertaken, particularly as it impacts on older people, disabled people and people on lower incomes, and for the findings of such an Equalities Impact Assessment to then be addressed.

- 4. **Electric vehicles.** While some members thought that exemptions and/or discounts should be granted for electric vehicles as they cause less damage to the Forest and its biodiversity others thought electric vehicle owners should still pay to park as they are more likely than others to have enough money to pay for the charges.
- 5. **Public transport options.** People also commented on the lack of public transport options to the Forest meaning that visiting by car was the only way available to them, and suggested more should be done to encourage more bus routes through the Forest, including to key sites such as High Beach.

We believe that every effort should be made to encourage more public transport to the Forest, especially local buses.

I hope these thoughts and suggestions are a useful contribution to your reflections and would be very happy to meet with you to discuss them.

Very best wishes

Peter Lewis