

Forestry and Land Scotland submission of 23 October 2023

PE2042/A: Abolish car parking charges for all Forestry and Land Scotland sites

Thank you for your correspondence on the above petition on the 31st August 2023, which was passed to Forestry and Land Scotland for response on the 12 October 2023. The petition states:

- **Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to abolish car parking charges at all Forestry and Land Scotland sites, helping to promote access to forests and greenspaces across Scotland.**
1. Access under Scottish Outdoor Access Code (SOAC) to Forestry and Land Scotland land, which covers 9% of Scotland, is free.
 2. FLS and its predecessor Forest Enterprise Scotland (FES) have been charging for car parking at the most popular sites on Scotland's national forests and land for over twenty years. We are planning to charge at a third of sites with two-thirds of cars parks being free.
 3. Forestry and Land Scotland have two objectives with charge parking:
 - a. Sustainable finance. Annually, to provide up to £2M income to help cover the £13M costs of providing over 300 destinations for communities and visitors. This helps us maintain trails and facilities to help give 11 million visitors a year a safe and enjoyable experience.
 - b. Climate Change. Encourage communities and visitors to take active travel, public transport or car share to visit our forests and land.
 4. In 2012, FES expanded the number of sites where car parking incurred a charge, from 23 to 44 sites. In 2022, Ministers approved a further expansion to include an additional 66 sites over a three-year period (18 in FY 22/23, 13 in FY 23/24, 25 in FY 24/25). Taking the total number of sites where FLS will charge for car parking to 110 by the end of Financial Year 25/26. The majority of these sites have

been selected because they offer more facilities and a higher quality visitor experience.

5. The Ministerial decision in 2022 to increase the number of sites where charges are incurred, followed work by the Scottish Government's National Visitor Services Steering Group (NVSSG) and a challenge by the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Economy and subsequently the Deputy First Minister, for Public Bodies to actively seek to increase income from visitors to offset the increasing costs of managing visitor pressures.
6. The introduction of car park charging (or its increased use) is mirrored across all Public Bodies / Local Authorities managing sites, particularly in Rural Scotland where public usage, especially since the pandemic has dramatically increased. Abolition of parking charges would not only impact the sustainable finance of FLS but could lead to similar calls for other parts of Scottish Government and local authorities who currently charge for parking or may wish to charge for parking in the future.
7. Car parking charging is mirrored across a number of Public Bodies / Local Authorities in any geographical area. As an example, within the Cairngorms National Park, FLS, Historic Scotland, Scottish Water, NatureScot, Crown Estate Scotland, Highland Council etc. have co-ordinated charging to try and manage visitor use across all of the park, increasing charges at 'Honeypot' sites in conjunction with providing sites where there is no charge to disincentivise visitors from using the busy sites and incentivise the use of those quieter less popular sites.
8. Tariffs at FLS car parks range from £1.00 - £3.00 for an hour / £3.00 - £6.00 for all-day dependent on the level of facilities and visitor offer at the sites or the need to use price point to control capacity issues at honeypot sites (in conjunction with neighbouring landowners/mangers). Free parking is provided at all sites for Blue Badge holders. Money Saving annual passes are available at regional (£40-90) and national level (£100).
9. An Equality Impact Assessment is undertaken before the introduction of charging for the first time or an increase in tariffs. Local communities are informed before implementing charging at any site.

10. FLS has procured and introduced a pay by phone contract across all sites at which parking charges currently apply. It is hoped this will improve customer satisfaction, as it introduces further choice in how to pay.

11. FLS have considered if there any other options to refocus charging on other facilities, thus allowing car parking to be free of charge, but instead visitors paying for the added/additional facilities (if they wish to use them). We do not have pay for entry facilities at FLS sites. Unlike Historic Environment Scotland or the National Trust Scotland where the building or formal garden is the attraction, FLS visitor sites with professionally designed walking and cycling trails are outdoor visitor attractions where our equivalent to an admission charge is the car parking charge. Optional extras such as purchasing food in cafes or shops/bike hire/Go Ape is already in place at a small number of our sites but does not raise the same level of income as car parking. Charging for parking has many other visitor management benefits as detailed above beyond income.