

Forestry and Land Scotland submission of 14 December 2023

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

Thank you for your letter, dated 24 November 2023, in relation to the above petition and outlining the Committee's wish to see further detail on the rationale for the introduction of these charges.

I have responded to their request in the order in raised your letter. Supporting documentation and links to requested documentation have also been included in this response.

Rationale for Charging

The Public Petitions Committee asked for more detail for the rationale for car park charging on specific sites, including sites that had “no facilities or rangers on site”.

The FLS Visitor Strategy (<https://forestryandland.gov.scot/visit>) sets out a key Principle (see page 7) of Long Term Financial Sustainability and seeks for us to be more financially self-sustainable. Financial Sustainability is also part of one of our four priorities (see page 10). Car Park charging is a key income source for FLS to be more financially sustainable.

All sites where FLS charge for parking have car parks and trails that require quarterly safety inspections and annual and periodic maintenance of the trails and car parks. Maintenance work for all promoted sites includes: vegetation management, drainage work, signage replacement, tree safety work, car park and trail surface upgrades and litter collection. The cost to manage an individual car park or trail varies annually depending on materials used for construction, storm damage and levels of use and abuse by visitors. A trail could be low cost to manage for several years, but a major washout due to flooding could cost between £50K to £100K to repair. Tree safety work can be low cost annually until a large windblow event such as Storm Arwen. Bridges have a life expectance of 20 year but have a significant cost in the year they need to be replaced. Most of this maintenance work goes unnoticed by visitors, until a major storm, which closes a site for a

period. However regular maintenance is critical for visitor safety and is a considerable cost to FLS in terms of staff and cash costs.

Forestry and Land Scotland have a duty of care to keep visitors and communities safe when they are using our car parks and trails. To ensure visitor safety there are five critical steps we need to take to ensure visitors are safe and have an enjoyable experience:

1. The trail or car park needs to be designed or built by a competent designer, have full planning approval and follow Construction Design Management (CDM) principles.
2. The trail has to be built to the agreed design and be signed off by an engineer.
3. We have to inspect the trail – usually four times per year as a formal inspection.
4. We have to conduct trail and car park maintenance and keep records of the work.
5. We need to provide good quality visitor information, following principals of the Visitor Safety Group.

All the sites that FLS charge for parking have significant investment in trail and car park maintenance. In some car parks we have additional services that are a further cost to FLS to manage, and these sites generally attract a higher cost for car parking. These additional services can include public toilets, interpretation, visitor centres and play areas.

Regions considering a new site for charge parking are provided with national guidance on site selection. This considers a number of factors including: visitor numbers, financial appraisal, connectivity (solar, electricity, phone signal), visitor experience planning, health & safety and displacement, stakeholders and impacts on staff. A copy of the guidance is attached.¹

Increase in Roadside Parking

When introducing a new charge parking site Regions are asked to complete a Visitor Experience Plan (copy of the template is attached²). One of the key questions that is asked as part of the plan is “Will there be any displacement of visitors as a result of charging?”. The impact of

¹ Note from the clerk – a copy of FLS guidance titled “*Charge Parking Site Selection – process and considerations*” has been provided to the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee.

² Note from the clerk – a copy of the template has been provided to the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee.

roadside parking is site specific. Forestry and Land Scotland work very closely with local authorities and Police Scotland locally and nationally and seek to find pragmatic solutions to local issues. FLS have found partnership work around visitor management issues has been very effective in recent years thanks to the introduction of the Visitor Management Strategy working groups.

Equality Impact Assessment

The FLS Visitor Strategy has an Equality Impact Assessment which includes consideration of impact of Financial Sustainability on protected characteristics. There is also an EIA for Charge Parking. Both EIAs are published on the internet at <https://forestryandland.gov.scot/diversity-and-inclusion/legal-obligations>

Revenue from Charge Parking

Financial Year	Car Parking Charges/Parking Pass Income	Stay the Night Income
2019/20	£869,373	N/A
2020/21	£415,639	N/A
2021/22	£935,415	N/A
2022/23	£1,065,239	N/A
2023/24	£447,992 (income to 31/07/2023 only)	£36,610 (income to 31/08/2023 only)

FLS Visitor Management Costs

The below costs are for the five Regions to deliver visitor services across Scotland. FLS are the largest provider of outdoor recreation in Scotland managing 9% of the land area.

2023 / 24 Business Plan	Description	Staff Costs	Cash Costs

Urban Woodlands	Trail management and car parks for woodland in urban areas	£353,000	£308,000
Access	Work to improve access for visitor to trail network	£220,000	£18,000
Existing Facilities	Maintenance of trail, public toilet and car park network	£2,186,000	£1,762,000
Motor Rallies	Cost to repair forest roads after motorsport – covered by permission income	£109,000	£200,000
Christmas Trees	Christmas tree sales also linked with income to cover costs.	£200,000	£17,000
Specialist Recreation	Support of activities other than walking and cycling	£57,000	0
Commercial Recreation	Management of commercial income opportunities including events and leases	£239,000	£35,000
Visitor Centres	Costs to run and maintain visitor centres.	£505,000	£3,391,000
Community Development	Staff time to support and work with communities and community partnership projects	£566,000	£115,000
Tourism & Other Economic Development	Partnership projects to support rural economy growth	£104,000	£53,000
Recreation Infrastructure	Management and improvement of trail and car park network	£499,000	£692,000

Forestry Skills	Volunteering support	£12,000	0
Wider Employment Skills	Training projects	£1,000	0
VISITOR SERVICES AND COMMUNITIES		£5,052,000	£6,592,000

The above staff costs and cash costs of £11.6M exclude costs of Vehicles, Admin and exclude costs of the National Visitor Services team (£754,000) which brings the total cost to around £13M.

Management of the trails and car parks are covered by the headings urban woodlands, existing facilities and recreation infrastructure which is a total cost of £5.8M which is considerably more than the £1M income we received from car parking in 2022/23.

Forestry and Land Scotland welcome over 10 million visits annually. The management of trails and car parks costs us £5.8M annually and the delivery of visitor services costs around £13M. Car Park income of £1M is important to help Forestry and Land Scotland be more financially sustainable and allow us to maintain trails and car parks and keep visitors safe and give them an enjoyable experience. The cost of a family visiting one of our charge car parks is between £3 and £9 per day, which is brilliant value for money, when the cost of one large coffee is around £5 in the UK. For regular visits we offer an annual pass which is even better value. We appreciate some visitors do not want to pay for parking, but the vast majority willingly pay recognising the value a visit to our woodland trails provide for their mental and physical health.

I trust that this response provides you with all the detail the Committee sought however FLS is happy to provide any additional information or clarification on this issue if required.