

HAMPSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL**Report**

Committee:	Culture and Communities Select Committee
Date:	20 November 2014
Title:	Lepe Car Parking Review
Reference:	6276
Report From:	Director of Culture, Communities and Business Services

Contact name: Jo Heath

Tel: 01962 847717

Email: jo.heath@hants.gov.uk

1. Summary

- 1.1. The purpose of this paper is to consider the options for reviewing the opening hours of the Lepe beach car park in response to a request from members of the public for the car park to be open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.
- 1.2. This paper provides the Culture and Communities Select Committee with the necessary information to determine which of the options under consideration will provide a sustainable solution to allow Lepe to be enjoyed safely by as many people as possible.

2. Background

- 2.1. The park is managed by the Countryside Service and comprises an area owned and managed by Hampshire County Council, an area leased from the Exbury Estate (including the beach car park), an area leased from the Cadland Estate (including the top car park) and an area under licence from the Lepe Estate (including western car park). (See plan attached).
- 2.2. Lepe Country Park lies within the New Forest National Park and has a number of European and National designations for conservation importance, mainly for breeding and wintering birds.
- 2.3. The park is well used with over 270,000 visitors per year. At many times of the year it operates at capacity. Lepe is one of the few places along that stretch of coast where the public can access the coast, it is very popular with families and the beach café attracts custom all year around.
- 2.4. Lepe Country Park has three car parks, the western car park (open from March to October), the top car park and the beach car park (open all year round). They are currently open 7.30am - 8.30pm or dusk if earlier and a

charge is made, payable via machine. The Lepe ‘off-street parking order’, lists the prescribed charging hours as 6am-10pm. This allows the park to issue penalty notices for vehicles that park within those hours without paying. A member of the park staff acts as duty officer and closes the park gates each evening along with cleaning the toilets, this involves him returning to the site if dusk falls beyond the end of the working day.

Contextual Information

- 2.5. A local campaign for the beach car park to be open 24 hours a day was launched during the summer of 2014 via the establishment of Facebook page. Eight letters have also been received by the head of CCBS with the same request. This occurred prior to any discussion with park staff and the campaign leader was subsequently invited for a meeting with the park manager so that their request could be clarified and then addressed.
- 2.6. The beach car park was open for 24 hours a day for a period during the 1990s. Staff who worked at the park at that time remember damage to the toilets overnight and the need sometimes for several hours of litter picking in the mornings. The park acquired a reputation as a venue for beach parties with people travelling some distance to use the car park, often lighting fires, using whatever fuel they could lay their hands on including wooden sea defences and picnic tables. This became a significant management problem and cost along with inconvenience and disruption to customers.
- 2.7. Car park barriers and opening hours were subsequently introduced and have remained consistent up until now with minor adjustments for periods of good weather in the summer and special events.
- 2.8. All country parks are targeted to be operationally cost neutral by 2018. Any additional costs required to extend opening and closing times beyond the current operations will have to be offset by additional income.

3. Options

- 3.1. In response to the local demand for the beach car park the following options have been identified and assessed.

3.2. Options Table

Option	Risks and costs	Benefits
Option 1 – Open the entire beach car park 24/7	This would necessitate the installation of a new height barrier at the entrance to the beach car park and a new barrier between the beach and top car park. It could lead to an increase in antisocial and criminal behaviour during the night and the need for additional staff time and costs to deal with the	The public would have 24/7 access to the beach car park. There could be an increase in car park income.

	resulting damage and litter.	
Option 2 – Open a small section of the beach car park 24/7.	This would necessitate the installation of a new height barrier at the entrance to the 24 hour section of the car park and a new barrier between the beach car park and top car park. It could lead to an increase in antisocial and criminal behaviour during the night and the need for additional staff time and costs to deal with the resulting damage and litter.	The public would have 24/7 access to a section of the beach car park 24/7. There could be a small increase in car park income.
Option 3 – Review beach car park opening times and extend the opening times in the mornings and evenings taking account of the sunrise, sunset times during the summer months (April to September).	This would necessitate employing contractors on a seasonal basis to open and close the beach car park gate. A small saving may be made on additional park staff hours although the cleaning requirement would need to be covered. More casual staff hours would be required to enforce car park tickets over the longer period.	The public would have access to the car park for a longer period in the peak season. There is potential to increase car park income in order to cover the additional costs through extended opening.

3.3. Any change to the existing arrangements will necessitate a review of the current lease arrangements. All the landowners have indicated that they would not support any option that would mean opening the car parks on their land beyond daylight hours. This is a significant factor when considering the most appropriate way forward.

4. Performance

4.1. Minimal impact on overall visitor numbers and income is anticipated as a result of the options under consideration.

5. Consultation

5.1. Informal consultation has taken place with landowners, HC3S (who run the Lepe Beach Café) local police and the HCC Crime & Disorder Risk Advisor. They all have concerns about 24 hour opening, particularly with reference to security and possible increase in the levels of antisocial and criminal behaviour. Discussions have also taken place with the local County Councillor.

5.2. A Summary of the Visitor Research carried out over the summer is attached at Appendix 1. This research will aid the process of seeking further appropriate improvements to the Park.

6. Conclusion

- 6.1. In the light of the assessment above, the recommended option is option 3 – review the beach car park opening times to extend opening hours during the months of the year with longer days, opening earlier in the morning and closing later at night, subject to full cost recovery.
- 6.2. This recommendation takes account of the views of HC3S and the police. The HCC Crime & Disorder Risk Advisor states that this is the least risky option; it would encourage use of the areas for people wanting to enjoy the beach until the late evening but would prevent people attending after pubs shut for an extended drinking location. It also aligns with the visitor research referred to in the report.
- 6.3. It also takes proper account of the views of the freehold owners of the land concerned and the leasehold responsibilities of the County Council.

7. Recommendation

- 7.1. That the Culture and Communities Select Committee recommend to the Executive Member for Culture, Recreation and Countryside that he approves the recommended option to extend the car park opening times from April to September (as set out in option 3 of this report), subject to full cost recovery and agreement from the landowners.

CORPORATE OR LEGAL INFORMATION:**Links to the Corporate Strategy**

Hampshire safer and more secure for all:	yes
Corporate Improvement plan link number (if appropriate):	
Maximising well-being:	yes
Corporate Improvement plan link number (if appropriate):	
Enhancing our quality of place:	yes
Corporate Improvement plan link number (if appropriate):	

Section 100 D - Local Government Act 1972 - background documents

The following documents discuss facts or matters on which this report, or an important part of it, is based and have been relied upon to a material extent in the preparation of this report. (NB: the list excludes published works and any documents which disclose exempt or confidential information as defined in the Act.)

DocumentLocation

None

IMPACT ASSESSMENTS:

1. Equality Duty

1.1. The County Council has a duty under Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 ('the Act') to have due regard in the exercise of its functions to the need to:

- Eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation and any other conduct prohibited under the Act;
- Advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic (age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, gender and sexual orientation) and those who do not share it;
- Foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.

Due regard in this context involves having due regard in particular to:

- a) The need to remove or minimise disadvantages suffered by persons sharing a relevant characteristic connected to that characteristic;
- b) Take steps to meet the needs of persons sharing a relevant protected characteristic different from the needs of persons who do not share it;
- c) Encourage persons sharing a relevant protected characteristic to participate in public life or in any other activity which participation by such persons is disproportionately low.

1.2. Equalities Impact Assessment:

This proposal involves extending the current service and opening Lepe Country Park for longer during the summer months. This will not have any impact on community groups or people. The pricing structure for the car parking will reflect the additional hours and will be tiered, based on the time spent at the Park. There is already a membership scheme which offers very good value for money for regular visitors to the Park.

Lepe Country Park is in a rural part some distance from the nearest village. It is not expected that the specific recommendation will generate significant additional traffic or increase undesirable or criminal activity.

2. Impact on Crime and Disorder:

2.1. The recommended option is considered to have the lowest impact on crime and disorder. It allows for legitimate use of the country park during daylight hours and prevents use during the hours of darkness and after pub closing times.

3. Climate Change:

- a) How does what is being proposed impact on our carbon footprint / energy consumption?

N/A

- b) How does what is being proposed consider the need to adapt to climate change, and be resilient to its longer term impacts?

The beach car park is already affected by coastal processes exacerbated by climate change and has to be closed at times to keep visitors safe. There is a long term plan for improving Lepe Country Park's resilience to climate change.

Summary Visitor Research

Over the summer of 2014 a module of onsite visitor research was carried out. This was based on face-to-face questionnaires and self-completion questionnaires and the results are summarised below¹.

What do people do at Lepe County Park?

Walking and using the beach are the most popular activities at Lepe Country Park, this is followed by people who visit Lepe to walk their dog. Just under 10% of visits are related to using the play area and relaxing (please see table below). A number of people provided more than one answer.

Usage	%
To walk	24.8
To walk the dog	14.3
To visit the beach	22.3
To meet friends	3.8
To relax	9.2
To exercise	5.0
To cycle	0.8
To use the play area	9.7
To attend events/activities	2.1
To visit the café	8.0

Respondents to the survey were also given the opportunity to provide information on other activities and responses included D-Day, photography, volunteering and classic cars (which could be related to an event).

Enhancing the facilities and propensity to visit

Without investment in the product and supporting marketing the level of visits may start to decline. There is a need to engage with new audiences to significantly increase visitor numbers.

	More Activities	More play features	Improved catering	Improved retail	More events	Improved signage and interpretation	Better trails	Better online resources	Nature conservation activities
Agree %	15.5	14.3	12.2	7.4	10.3	17.1	24.0	6.0	16.2
Neutral %	76.1	76.6	77.0	82.4	82.4	74.3	70.7	88.1	79.4
Disagree %	8.5	9.1	10.8	10.3	7.4	8.6	5.3	6.0	4.4
Overall differential %	7.0	5.2	1.4	2.9	2.9	8.6	18.7	-	11.8

¹ Please note this is based on a small sample size

Better trails (+18.7%) and conservation activities (+11.8%) show a strong positive differential and reflect the limited current offer relating to these elements. In terms of some of the other services, including catering, it is clear there is a lower differential. However catering will be one of the key areas to increase revenue and serve new audiences.

Other answers in terms of enhancing the experience included introducing more benches, open the car park until later (which potentially could be achieved on a barrier entry system), an indoor area for relaxation and more information on D-Day.

When probed further about what type of play visitors would like to see at Lepe, some people provided multiple answers but 43% indicated that they would like to see adventure play and 25% some type of high rope experience.

Natural/Wild Play %	Low Ropes %	Adventure Play (%)	High Ropes %
16.2	14.9	43.2	25.7

Liked and least liked elements of the visitor experience

The elements of the visitor experience which were most liked included the beach, the play area, the peace and quiet, the views and cleanliness of the site. One respondent commented it was the cleanest café they had ever visited! It will be important to maintain the core qualities of the Lepe visitor experience.

Car parking was not viewed favourably by some respondents (pricing) and access between the upper and lower levels could be improved. Navigation around the site could also be improved.

What do people not want to see introduced at Lepe

People commented that Lepe should not become over-commercialised by introducing new buildings or an amusement park/funfair type of development and they did not want to see burger vans being introduced. The visitor experience should not be over developed and should respect the natural setting of Lepe Country Park.