



ASHDOWN FOREST CAR PARKING CONSULTATION

Overview

The Conservators of Ashdown Forest, who care for the forest on a day-to-day basis, are asking for your views on:

1. Whether parking charges should be introduced from Spring/Summer of 2022.
2. How much parking charges might be.
3. The details of the design and operation of the proposed scheme.

This consultation will run from 26th October 2021 to the 6th of December 2021.

Why your views matter

We want to hear your views on the proposal to introduce charges and on how it could be designed and operated (including the level of charges) if it were to be introduced. Your feedback will help us decide whether to introduce charges and to decide on the design and operation of any charging scheme if charging is introduced.

Information collected through this consultation will be analysed and a report prepared of the response. The report will be made available to the public on the Conservators' website

Introduction

Ashdown Forest is a living time capsule of the culture and history of our county.

Our famous heathland and verdant woodlands represent generations of human activity. At the heart of these processes is historic grazing by wild and domestic animals which created the original Forest landscape alongside woodland clearance.

This process was intensified in the medieval era with the enclosure of the Forest as a royal hunting park behind a 23 mile long pale or embanked fence. Further areas were enclosed in

the 18th century with the remainder being recognised as having rights of common. The records show legal battles being waged to keep the land as common land. It is these fights that allow us all to enjoy the open access to Ashdown Forest today.

Enabling this public access to the Forest is a guiding principle for us. Use of the Forest by the public has grown steadily in recent years and monitoring suggests 1.4 million visits were made during 2016. The number of visits during the 2020 Coronavirus pandemic of 2020/21 was far higher with the Forest being open throughout challenging lockdowns. We know how important the Forest was for so many during that tough time.

We want to maintain and enhance the experience for our visitors to provide a welcoming, safe environment. Our car parks and infrastructure struggle to create that atmosphere due to the pressure they received from normal use and then the increased footfall during the pandemic.

Like many organisations, Ashdown Forest has seen its funding squeezed in recent years, and our primary source of funding for day-to-day operations has been removed, just at a time when the level of use and the costs of managing the Forest are increasing, placing ever greater pressure on the already stretched team responsible for managing the forest.

With public funding under pressure nationally, Ashdown Forest is forced to take on responsibility for raising the funds we need to cover the growing costs of managing the forest and improving the experience of our visitors.

Why we need new and additional sources of funding

In 2021 Ashdown Forest has three main sources of funding.

- We receive an annual grant, from Natural England. This is for the ecological management of the forest only and cannot be used to support any of the core costs of maintaining Ashdown Forest as a safe and welcoming public amenity
- We receive support from two independent charities, The Friends of Ashdown Forest and The Ashdown Forest Trust (TAFF) to help us purchase equipment and undertake specialist and general projects.
- We receive 'core' income from:
 - licenses, for example for horse riding
 - the Forest Rate paid by Commoners
 - payments for access across the Forest to private properties.

This core income, plus monies from trading, is used to cover the operational and recurrent costs of running Ashdown Forest.

Altogether, however, they are insufficient to cover the costs of running the Forest, and not enough to improve the area beyond its basic state.

The Conservators have a legal obligation to protect the status of Ashdown Forest as a Special Protection Area (SPA). If the bird species, Nightjar and Dartford Warbler, that give the area the SPA status are lost, the future protection of Ashdown Forest would become

much less certain. Our grant from Natural England helps us manage the forest for its biodiversity but is not enough and does not help us protect its other values. We simply do not have the funds to protect the Forest's cultural and landscape values. Managing overgrown gorse or heather, for example, costs over £2,000 per hectare. Unless we do it regularly, we lose our treasured views and some of our rare birds begin to struggle.

In the past East Sussex County Council, under the terms of The Ashdown Forest Act 1974, agreed our budget and made up shortfalls in our funding. Driven by the imposition of the cap placed by central government on local council budgets and the escalating cost of provision of care for vulnerable adults and children along with other essential services, the Council was obliged, along with other similar measures, to curtail funding for the Forest from the financial year 2020/21 onwards. This, alongside the pandemic, has impacted greatly on the ability to protect the Forest, conserve its ecological importance, and ensure public access. Due to the heavily protected nature of the land, there are few opportunities to earn money through trading or licensing.

We have tried a range of activities to increase income and reduce costs. We have licensed coffee vans in some of the car parks, asked for donations and reduced the number of staff we employ. We asked for voluntary contributions via signage in the car parks and on the Conservators' website. Visitors were encouraged to purchase annual car parking stickers or make one off contributions for using the car parks. Unfortunately, the income generated through these avenues has been less than £10,000.

This has not bridged the gap between income and expenditure. In August 2021 we had a hole in our finances of £120,000 and, even if we fill that hole, that will only allow us to stand still, not to improve the forest. The Conservators of Ashdown Forest are therefore considering the difficult decision of whether to introduce car parking charges from Spring/Summer 2022.

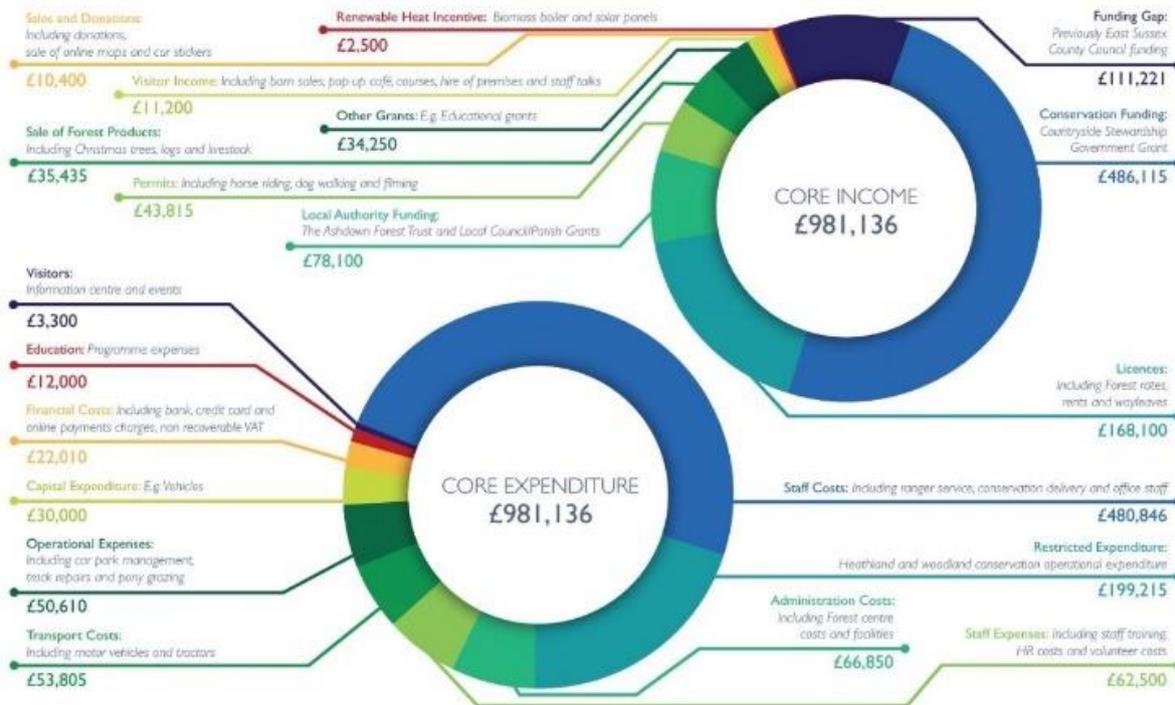
What do we spend our funding on?

To run a conservation and amenity site like Ashdown Forest takes a great deal of work behind the scenes. Much of this relates to efforts to deliver specific conservation work, like increasing the numbers of rare birds or insects. But great effort is required simply to keep Ashdown Forest an accessible and safe space for our visitors.

The work of delivering specific conservation outcomes is undertaken with funding from Natural England under a central government, Conservation Stewardship grant. The work of managing Ashdown Forest as a place for people to visit is paid for separately, from 'core costs'. Such work includes:

- Engaging with the many and varied visitors to Ashdown Forest on a day-to-day basis, answering questions, providing guidance and giving advice and assistance when needed
- Maintaining our 47 car parks so that they are safe for people to use. Fixing the potholes in just one car park will cost around £1,000

- Maintaining 75 miles of paths and rides and the bridges and culverts that cross the forest. A new footbridge costs £3,500; each one must be checked every year for safety, and they are usually replaced every 10 years
- Keeping fire breaks open to help manage wildfires which may increase due to climate change
- Ashdown Forest is open to all, but it is not accessible to all. Those with restricted mobility, impaired vision or other difficulties may struggle to experience the forest. We believe the Forest should be more accessible to these users. Such projects may be achieved by dedicated fundraising, but once in place, they need to be maintained
- Managing the impacts of growing numbers of visitors – and more are expected to come, especially during the anniversary years of Winnie the Pooh.
- Surveying and managing trees on the forest boundary and neighbouring our many miles of roads and tracks
- Litter collection, including fly tipping, and disposal of dumped material
- Maintaining and replacing our specialist fleet of vehicles, and all the tools and equipment needed to manage the forest estate
- Establishing and managing a volunteer work force of 130 people who support work on the forest throughout the year
- Monitoring the large deer population that moves through the Forest and responding to a range of deer related incidents
- Protecting the rights of the Commoners and helping them to exercise their rights including grazing livestock on the forest.
- Working with the public and the police to manage dog related incidents including livestock worrying, wildlife and horse riders
- Responding to visitor emergencies as and when people get into difficulty on the forest and need to be supported, located or receive first aid
- Providing information and interpretation of the priceless cultural asset that the Forest is. Providing education to children, working with local schools and other groups
- The salaries of our small team of staff – including the rangers and managers who ensure public access and deliver conservation
- Maintaining the buildings that make up the Forest Centre – the offices, workshops, shop, picnic site and tables, public toilets, and Education Barn including safety and security systems and IT
- Day to day administration, finance, human resource management, relationship management, and organisational governance
- Supporting the volunteers who make up the Board of Conservators, elected by Commoners or nominated by East Sussex Country Council and Wealden District Council
- Protecting the Forest as required by our bye laws and environmental legislation including preventing and dealing with encroachments, responding to illegal use, and managing permitted and licensed uses.



Source: Ashdown Forest Financial Information for a Generic Year based on 2021/22

Why are we looking at car park charges?

We must have new and additional sources of revenue to function as an organisation and manage the Forest effectively.

The forest’s governing legislation, The Ashdown Forest Act of 1974, requires the Conservators to regulate and manage the Forest as a place of amenity and resort. The withdrawal of the County Council funding, which has been in place since 1974, removed the guaranteed source of funding to achieve this. The Act does, however, allow the Conservators to make reasonable charges for cars parking on the Forest.

With the deficit in the 2021/22 budget and an uncertain charitable donation outlook, the Conservators have no option but to fully investigate charging for parking. Many if not most sites similar to Ashdown Forest already charge for car parking which makes us one of the last to consider this step.

1. What is your name?

Name:

2. What is your organisation?

Organisation:

You as a user of Ashdown Forest

Understanding a little about you as a visitor to Ashdown Forest will help us understand your thinking about our proposal to introduce Car Park charging. Please answer the following questions about how and why you visit Ashdown Forest.

3. What is the main activity you undertake on Ashdown Forest? Please tick the closest answer.

Dog-walking	<input type="checkbox"/>
Walking	<input type="checkbox"/>
Jogging / power walking	<input type="checkbox"/>
Outing with family / picnicking	<input type="checkbox"/>
Cycling	<input type="checkbox"/>
Wildlife / bird watching	<input type="checkbox"/>
Fishing	<input type="checkbox"/>
Photography	<input type="checkbox"/>
Meet up with friends	<input type="checkbox"/>
Visiting the information centre	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other	<input type="checkbox"/>

If you answered 'Other' please detail:

4. How long have you been visiting Ashdown Forest?

6 months or less	
Between 6 months and 1 year	
Between 1 year and 3 years	
Between 3 years and 5 years	
Between 5 and 10 years	
More than 10 years	
Don't know / not sure	

5. How long do you normally spend when you visit Ashdown Forest?

Less than 30 minutes	
Between 30 minutes and 1 hour	
Between 1 hour to 2 hours	
Between 2 hours to 3 hours	
More than 3 hours	
Don't know / not sure	

**6. In the past year, roughly how often have you visited Ashdown Forest?
(Choose the closest answer)**

Daily	
Most days (180+ visits)	
1 to 3 times a week (40-180 visits)	
2 to 3 times per month (15-40 visits)	
Once a month (6-15 visits)	
Less than once a month (2-5 visits)	
Don't know	
First visit	
Other	

If you answered 'Other' please detail:

7. Has the coronavirus pandemic changed how often you visit Ashdown Forest?

No, visiting the same as before	
Yes, visiting more	
Yes, visiting less	
Don't know	

8. Do you think your visits to Ashdown Forest will change in the future?

No, will visit the same as before	
Yes, will visit more often	
Yes, will visit less often	
Don't know	

9. "Ashdown Forest requires increased funding to be managed as a place of public amenity and nature conservation." How far do you agree or disagree with this statement?

Agree strongly	
Agree slightly	
Disagree slightly	
Disagree strongly	
Don't know/not sure	

Your thoughts on the planned scheme for car parking charging

To help see if we are on the right track, please answer the following questions about our proposal for introducing car park charging.

INFORMATION ABOUT THE PARKING SCHEME

Payment for parking would be able to be made through payment machines located on five of the largest and busiest car parks using credit cards and smart phones, by using a smart phone-based app, and through a website. Alongside many other rural locations, to reduce the risk of theft, cash payments are not proposed.

Car parks would be visited by parking wardens employed by a management company who will check vehicles have followed the parking charges.

Charges would apply every day (Monday to Sunday), including bank holidays, during opening hours (6am to midnight).

The charges under consideration by the Conservators have been based on a comparison with 11 other similar sites that charge for parking. To achieve the required level of income, charges are proposed to be in the region of:

£2.00 for up to 1 hour

£2.50 for up to 2 hours

£4.00 for up to 4 hours

£6.00 for an all-day pass (16 hours)

An annual parking pass would cost from £80 to £100.

There would be no charge for Blue Badge holders or motorbikes.

All parking tickets and passes would be valid for all car parks managed by Ashdown Forest for the duration of their validity.

These charges would be introduced in Ashdown Forest car parks from Spring/Summer 2021.

10. After reading why the Conservators of Ashdown Forest are considering introducing a car park charging scheme, do you:

Agree strongly?	
Agree slightly?	
Disagree slightly?	
Disagree strongly	
Don't know/not sure	

11. After reading about the need to increase the budget of Ashdown Forest to keep it open and safe for visitors and ensure its protection, do you feel the proposed rates for proposed car park charges are:

Too high?	
A bit high?	
About right?	
A bit low?	
Too low?	
Don't know/not sure	

12. Do you feel the proposed rate of between £80 and £100 for any annual car park pass is:

Too high?	
A bit high?	
About right?	
A bit low?	
Too low?	
Don't know/not sure	

We know that many people enjoy regular visits to Ashdown Forest, with over 60% of users visiting daily or weekly. Regular visitors may prefer to buy an annual parking pass. This would offer a discounted rate for parking and would be more convenient. The annual pass will cost £80 to £100. This represents a saving of between £14 and £24 a year for anyone visiting the Forest once a week for an hour, and more for anyone staying longer than an hour or visiting more than once a week.

13. How likely would you be to buy an annual parking pass?

We understand that visitors to Ashdown Forest would look at buying an annual parking pass in different ways and have a range of reasons for deciding to buy a pass or not to buy a pass.

Very likely?	
Quite likely?	
Not likely?	
Very unlikely?	
Don't know/not sure	

14. Do you agree with the proposed placement and design of payment machines?

Payment for parking would be able to be made through payment machines located on five of the largest and busiest car parks using credit cards and smart phones, by using a smart phone-based app, and through a website.

To reduce theft, cash payments are not proposed, in common with the practice in many other rural locations.

Agree strongly?	
Agree slightly?	
Disagree slightly?	
Disagree strongly?	
Don't know/not sure	

15. Do you agree with the days and times when it is proposed that charges would apply?

Charges would apply every day (Monday to Sunday), including bank holidays, during opening hours (6am to midnight).

Agree strongly?	
Agree slightly?	
Disagree slightly?	
Disagree strongly?	
Don't know/not sure	

A bit more about you

You're almost at the end of the survey. We just have a few more questions for you.

16. Are you any of the below? (Please tick all boxes which apply)

A Commoner of Ashdown Forest (pay an annual Commoner's Rate)	<input type="checkbox"/>
A Resident of Ashdown Forest (pay annually to access your property)	<input type="checkbox"/>
A member of the Friends of Ashdown Forest	<input type="checkbox"/>
A donor to the Ashdown Forest Foundation (TAFF)	<input type="checkbox"/>
A member of the Board of the Conservators of Ashdown Forest	<input type="checkbox"/>

17. Do you have any comments or concerns you feel we may have overlooked, or ideas to address the issues outlined in this consultation?

If you answered 'Other' please detail:

18. **Where do you live?** Providing your post code or the name of your nearest village or town will help us understand how far people travel to visit Ashdown Forest.

Where do you live?

19. **If you would like to receive a copy of the consultation report, please provide your email address before submitting your final response. Please tick the box if you would like to:**

Your email address:

Receive a copy of the Car Park Charging Consultation Report	<input type="checkbox"/>
Receive periodic information about Ashdown Forest	<input type="checkbox"/>
Be contacted by The Ashdown Forest Foundation (TAFF).	<input type="checkbox"/>

Thank you for taking part in this consultation or survey. Your views are important to us.

By submitting your responses, you give us permission to analyse and include your response in our results. After submitting, you will no longer be able to change any of your answers.

Please send or bring your responses to:

The Ashdown Forest Centre

Wych Cross, Forest Row

East Sussex, RH18 5JP