

St Helen's Picnic Site Consultation

Online Discussion Feedback Results

1. The Discussion

The discussion on the sustainability of facilities at St Helen's Picnic Site ran from the 22nd of October 2016 to the 15th of January 2017 and, while now closed, is still available to view [online](#) where ideas and comments can be viewed.

2. Overview

- There were a total of 798 hits on the main discussion page, approximately 159 of them unique. The latter figure is a good indicator of the number of people who followed the conversation while the dialogue was open.
- Of the people who visited the discussion homepage, three quarters (75%) went on to visit other pages within the dialogue, e.g. specific idea pages, indicating a higher level of interest.
- The average time spent on each of the dialogue pages (the homepage and individual idea pages) was 1 minute 33 seconds.

A trail camera was installed at St Helen's to count the number of car visits during the consultation period. Using the trail camera images there were over 1000 car visits over the consultation period of just under 3 months.

Drop in sessions

18 people attended 2 Drop In sessions to share ideas. The drop in sessions were held to raise awareness of the online discussion and provide an alternative way to offer feedback.

34 ideas were submitted and 107 comments

27 people left ideas or comments on the online consultation

We also received 2 emails. Copies of these are available (with personal information removed) on request.

3. Discussion promotion

The discussion was widely promoted via the following channels. This included recommendations from participants in the discussions.

1. Two banners were hung at strategic locations promoting the discussion. On the road running past St Helen's and at St Helen's picnic site.

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Sustaining St Helen's for the Future

Online Discussion: <https://dialogue.forestry.gov.uk>
running until the 15th of January

**Drop in sessions: Sunday 18th December 2016 &
Sunday 8th January 2017 10am – 2pm**

**The Classroom, Forestry Commission office car park,
Santon Downham, IP27 0TJ**

2. Posters were sited around St Helen's and posted out to the following:

Local Authority / Parish Councils

Mundford Parish Council
Weeting Parish council
Santon Downham Parish Council

Libraries

Brandon
Thetford

Local Schools

Glade Primary School
Forest Academy
IES Breckland
Lakenheath Community Primary School
Weeting Primary School
Thetford Academy
Thetford Grammar School
Drake Primary School
Admirals Academy
Diamond Academy
Norwich Road Academy

Queensway Infant and Nursery
The Bishops CEVA Primary
Raleigh Infant and Nursery
The Norman CofE Primary School
Mundford C of E Primary School
Barnham CEVC School
Elveden CEVA school
The Pinetree School (special needs)
Sheridan School (special needs)

Local people in Santon Downham

Santon Downham Club
Village Shop

3. We directly contacted the following groups, notifying them of the discussion when it commenced, providing a discussion link and background information.

Interest Groups

Breaking New Ground
Breckland Society
British Trust Ornithology
Butterfly Conservation
FC Retirement Association
Forestry Commission Staff
Friends of Thetford Forest
Norfolk Wildlife Trust
RSPB Eastern Region
Suffolk Wildlife Trust
Norfolk and Norwich Naturalist Society

Bike Clubs

Kings Lynn Mountain Bike Groups
Mildenhall Cycling Group
TIMBER

Local Stables

Little Lodge Farm
Forest Park Riding and Livery
Apollo Stables

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Suffolk Flora Trust
 The Suffolk Naturalists Society
 Norfolk rivers trust
 Volunteers with the FC and partner groups

Walking Groups

Suffolk Area Ramblers
 Ipswich and District Ramblers
 Norfolk Area Ramblers
 Disabled ramblers
 Suffolk- Gay Outdoor Club

Other sports and outdoor activities

Tri-Anglia
 Sudbury canoe club
 Ipswich Canoe Club
 Waveney Valley Canoe Club
 Dereham canoe club
 Grazing tenant
 Kings Forest Canicross
 The Outdoor Swimming Society
 Norfolk and Suffolk Outdoor Swimming
 Carriage Drivers

3. A press release was sent to a wide range of local and special interest media groups. A copy is available on request.

4. Two drop in sessions were held at the Classroom next to the village shop in Santon Downham

4. Information Provided

A breakdown of income and expenditure for St Helen's was shared on the discussion page and at the drop in sessions. (See below) We don't permit many events to take place at St Helen's to reduce impact on the scheduled monument area which extends beyond the moat into the car park and green space.

Income		Expenditure	
Item	Amount £	Item	Amount £
Ice-cream van permit	1,390	Toilet Cleaning (7 Months)	4,689
		Deep clean av. 3x pa	1,000
Go Beyond Running Event	1,000	Sewage tank pump out (not normally required but increasing numbers means system isn't coping)	600
Carriage Drive	81.61	Water	760
		Sanitary Waste Disposal	775
		Waste removal	2,500
		Grass Strim	175
		Repairs to facilities	1,900
		Sign installation and replacement of dragons teeth	635
		Car park maintenance	1,000
Total Income	2,472	Total Expenditure	14,034

5. Summary of Feedback

We have provided a simple breakdown of the ideas discussed. The online discussion, while now closed, is still available to view [online](#) where the full ideas and comments can be viewed.

The consultation asked for views regarding:

A. Reducing expenditure by removing facilities or generating income to keep facilities and sustain the site

B. We'd also like to know a little about you and why you visit St Helen's to help us understand how the site is used and its value to visitors.

A) Reducing expenditure by removing facilities or generating income to keep facilities and sustain the site

Facilities

Only 5 people expressed a definite preference regarding closure or non closure of the facilities. 3 said no and 2 said yes.

However, during the drop in sessions there was generally more concern expressed at the closure of the toilet block due to the mess this might create on site and the inconvenience for families with children. Two people suggested there should be more facilities on site such as play equipment but weren't keen on increasing income to support this.

Increase income

Discussion on increasing income generated a large amount of discussion around car park charging. Of those who expressed an opinion the preference was almost equal with 12 people feeding back that a car park fee would be acceptable and 11 saying it wouldn't be. In a number of cases these preferences had additional thoughts or caveats alongside them. The key points are listed below.

Car parking fee acceptable	Car parking fee not acceptable
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only at busy times / seasonally • Needs effective equipment • Needs high enough numbers of visitors to make financially worth while • Need to ensure the cost of vandalism and repairs can also be covered • To pay all year round only if toilets are open all year round 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hasn't worked in the past • Will put people off on low incomes • It's Public Forest Estate so forest should be accessible to the public • Should focus more on educating people about their environmental responsibility • Concerned it would mean other forest car parks would become pay and

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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As minimal charge as possible to maintain low key facilities / enhancements • Provide a discovery pass for regular users • Provision of facilities is expensive and users should pay. Cyclists and pedestrians still have option to access site for free • Should explore all other avenues for income and cost saving before charging 	<p>display</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Would see an increase in cars parking along the road verge • No car park fee but would like to see more facilities on site!
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Reducing Expenditure and Income generating ideas

A number contributors to the discussion made suggestions on alternative ways to generate additional income or reduce expenditure.

Reducing expenditure	Generating extra income
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use volunteers to care for the site • Build compost toilets or use portaloos • Have a salaried member of staff clean the toilets and deter litter • Close down toilet for 6 months a year • Look for cost savings elsewhere across all forest sites. E.g. Large scale services such as waste disposal and contracted mowing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Christmas Tree sales • Man the site and collect voluntary donations • Get a mobile caterer on site and make it their responsibility to deal with site rubbish • Icecream / food vendor to pay pitch fee • Charge for events • Charge for toilet

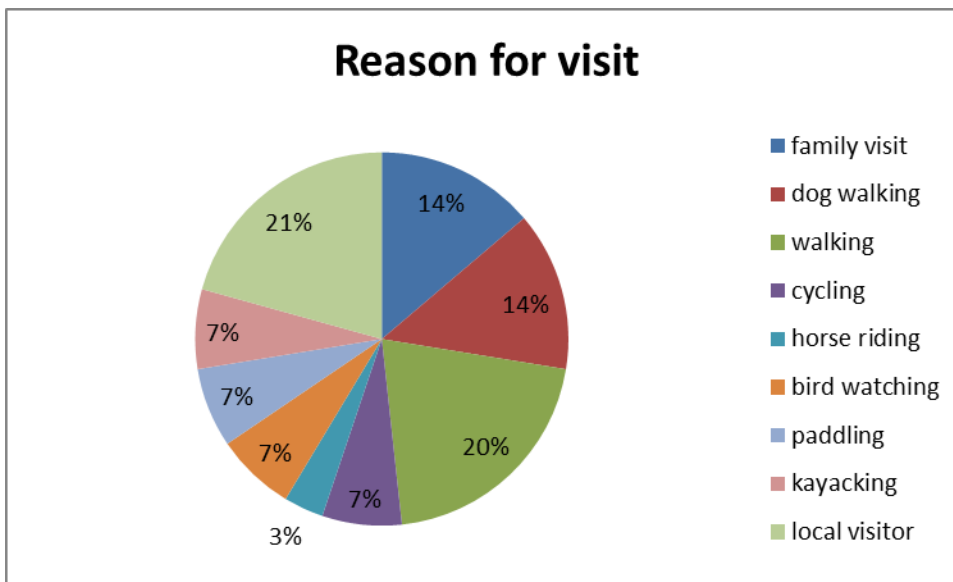
All of the above have already been carried out for a number of years apart from:

- **Christmas tree sales:** We don't have enough staff to supervise sales (Only 1 Recreation Ranger for Thetford Forest) and when external staff / company is used there is little or no profit. Security on site to prevent theft of the stock means.
- **Man the site and collect voluntary donations:** Lack of staff to do this all day and risk to volunteers holding money.

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- **Build compost toilets / use porta loos:** Compost toilets / portaloos still need to be cleaned and the building they are housed in maintained which costs money. Scheduled monument status restricts digging new holes on site.
- **Have salaried staff clean toilets:** This is more costly than using the contract cleaners currently being used.
- **Charge for toilet:** This was not a popular suggestion due the mess that may result from people being caught short. At other forest sites it has resulted in a high level of vandalism with smashed doors.

B) We'd also like to know a little about you and why you visit St Helen's to help us understand how the site is used and its value to visitors.



This pie chart is based on participants comments in the online discussion and drop in sessions. It is probably not proportionally representative as not everyone stated why they visited or liked St Helen's but it does give an insight into the diversity of use.

6. Other significant concerns or points raised

- The Forestry Commission have a duty to protect ancient monument
- Concern that this might be setting a precedence for other car parks
- Consultation should be held in the summer when visitor numbers and consultation response would be highest

7. Our conclusions and proposed next steps

Conclusion

The consultation didn't produce a consensus on views regarding "Reducing expenditure by removing facilities or generating income to keep facilities and sustain the site".

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Ideas put forward indicated that we are doing a good job on trying to keep costs down and generate income through other means as many of the suggestions made around this topic were already being carried out by the FC.

Next Steps

A consultation during the peak season

A number of participants felt that although the consultation was run for a long period of time it didn't capture the summer period when visitors from further afield came to the site in higher numbers. Using a simple trail camera it was estimated that car visits during the month of August 2016 were between 4500 and 5000. During the 3 month consultation period car visits were just over 1000.

The Forestry Commission will run the consultation again during the summer to see if a clearer consensus on the question of "reducing facilities to save costs or generating an income to sustain facilities" can be established.

Informing the decision making process

There were a number of thoughtful points made by participants (summarised in "Section 5 Summary of Feedback") that need further consideration if pay and display were to be an option.

Before the next consultation in the summer the following actions will be carried out:

- Explore other reasonable avenues for income and cost saving
- Identify vulnerable sites and other picnic sites and the positive or negative impact of displacement of visitors to consider whether they can be managed.
- Install an accurate traffic counter at St Helen's to establish whether the numbers of visitors are enough to make pay and display financially viable, including the costs to cover vandalism and repairs?
- Establish whether seasonal pay and display would cover the cost of keeping the toilets open 6 months a year or all year.
- Establish if suitable vandal resistant and user friendly pay and display machines are available for a site like St Helen's and could we afford them?
- What is the minimum charge required to maintain low key facilities and do visitors feel they could afford it?

Working alongside key stakeholders

During the consultation participants highlighted that it was the FC's responsibility to care for the Scheduled Ancient Monument and there were also concerns about the precedent that pay and display might set. To support delivery of the above actions we will:

- Work with key stakeholders to share information and deliver the actions above
- Establish what factors make a car park or picnic site a candidate for pay and display and whether this effects other forest car parks in Thetford
- Finalise a long term management plan with Historic England regarding St Helen's Scheduled Ancient Monument