

Review of the Parks Exercise Permit

In preparing this review, discussions, meetings or information has been attained from:
Programme Manager
Service Support
Contract Services
Green Spaces
Licencing Enforcement Team
Community Safety Manager
Insurance Officer
Sport & Leisure Team
Events team
Permit holders of the scheme- successfully and unsuccessfully

Background

In 2018 the Council implemented a Pilot scheme for the registration of exercise providers within WDC parks, to help monitor the use of parks and open spaces by physical activity providers. This was intended to be used to monitor the usage of parks and open spaces by organisations and individuals such as fitness groups and personal trainers. The Parks Permit and Policy scheme was formally introduced in October 2020 following the approval of a report to Executive Committee on 24 August 2020.

As part of the application process applicants would provide Risk Assessments, Public Liability Insurance, qualifications and agree to the terms and conditions associated with the scheme. Upon review the permit would be issued confirming the location, activity, and time. As stated in the Terms and conditions the location within the park would be flexible due to events and maintenance work carried out during the year.

Why Was the Scheme introduced?

- To ensure parks and open spaces are accessible to everyone.
- Businesses are choosing our parks and open spaces to host various activities, which need regulating and should in some cases be chargeable.
- Over the last few years there has been a change in the usage of some of our parks and open spaces through a wider range of group fitness activities (e.g. boot camps, buggy fitness, circuit training, personal training, running groups).
- To support groups/clubs/organisations to deliver activities.
- To promote a varied programme of activities.
- To ensure health and safety of activities.

The scheme entitles an organisation to non-exclusive use of parks and open spaces and does not include access to buildings. Sports clubs such as football and cricket hiring of pitches and pavilions did not form part of this scheme as they are required to book the facilities which guarantee the pitches, equipment and changing facilities.

Groups/organisations which are exempt from paying if they are:

- A registered charity.
- A fully constituted 'not for profit' organisation where any surplus is reinvested directly into the organisation.
- A school/education establishment

Charges (Prior to suspension of scheme)

1-3 Sessions Per Week	Monthly	Annual
Groups up to 5	£30.00	£310.00
Groups of 6 or more	£86.25	£874.00
4 or More Sessions Per Week	Monthly	Annual
Groups up to 5	£57.50	£586.50
Groups of 6 or more	£142.75	£1449.00

Permits issued depended on size of group and how many sessions delivered per week (regardless of how many parks used).

The following parks which were covered by the initial pilot scheme.**Leamington Spa:**

Harbury Lane
Newbold Comyn
Jephson Gardens
Pump Room Gardens
Victoria Park

Warwick:

St Marys Lands Warwick,
St Nicholas Park Warwick
Priory Park

Kenilworth

Castle Farm
Abbey Fields

All of the parks listed have been used by the scheme over the last 3 years, including requests for Mason Avenue Lillington and the grassed area by Edmondscote Athletics Track.

Report to Executive Committee

A report was presented to the Executive Committee on 24 August 2020 to approve a formal Parks Exercise Policy and Pricing. Various reasons for the recommendations were stated in the report, such as:

- Encourage more park users to enjoy a healthy, active lifestyle
- Awareness of the use within our parks and open spaces across the district
- Parks Exercise Policy is based on similar policies and charges set by other Councils around the UK.
- Allows us to fully monitor the usage of our parks and open spaces as well as making some income when issuing the permits.

The report also included various information such as pricing policy, criteria, risks. The report and documents can be found at (item 7):

[cmis > Meeting Dates \(warwickdc.gov.uk\)](#)

The recommendations in the report were approved by members (item 7):

[Document.ashx \(warwickdc.gov.uk\)](#)

Overview & Scrutiny Committee – Briefing Note on 1st Annual Review 21 January 2021.

This is the delayed briefing note, as the previous one was delayed due to staff workload in managing outdoor sport during various changes in government regulations in connection to COVID 19 pandemic. The briefing note included the following:

- Issuing of permits.
- 3-month free trial was given to organisations.
- Issues with enforcement capacity.
- Organisations were operating without permits, leading to frustration by permit holders as they were paying for a service that they can see others are obtaining for free.
- Identifying providers to inform about the scheme so they can apply.
- Complaints from councillors and general public, related to activities taking place in parks and open spaces other than those listed.
- Adding a new area to the policy.
- Review pricing policy.
- List of activities will not be expanded.
- Various issues: enforcement, parks and open spaces to be included in policy, activities included, maintenance of areas used by permit areas.
- The initial report can be found at [Document.ashx \(warwickdc.gov.uk\)](http://Document.ashx(warwickdc.gov.uk)).

Permits Issued/Income Generated

Financial Year	Permits Issued	Income
2018/2019	5	£6157
2019/2020	3	£3625
2020/2021 (figures from Oct 2020 – October 2021 as this was when the scheme officially started)	5 permits (of this 1 exempt from payment)	£3705
2021/2022	9 permits (of these 7 exempt from payment)	£1575
2022/2023	15 permits (of these 9 were exempt from payment)	£6984

Calculating the actual income figures for this scheme have been challenging due to: The scheme crossed over two financial years and was held over 2 systems, TOTAL and Ci Anywhere. In addition to this there was various mis coding's for income over the years of this scheme along with various refunds in 2020/21 due to COVID and these have been difficult to calculate due to unclear descriptions on the ledger.

The Figures from accountants, which were attained from the finances systems are not in line with the figures obtained by finance officers.

The main income was from the following groups:

April 2020 – Battle Bootcamp, Group Walx, Be Military Fit.

April 2021 – Physical Formula, Swan Tai Chi, Michelle Clements, Be Military Fit. April 2022 – Battle Bootcamp, Group Walx, Swan Tai Chi.

There was a period during COVID where charges were not taken, due to restrictions with activities taking place.

Current Position

The scheme has been temporarily suspended since August 2022 subject to a full review. The reason this decision was reached is as follows:

- Executive report 24 August 2020 stated that the expected income was £450 per month, which wasn't being met.
- Under resourced to manage and monitoring the scheme affectively.
- Loop holes within the scheme where organisations could apply for free permits and not pay pitch hire.
- Organisations didn't feel the scheme was fair for all.
- Organisation debts.

9 organisations are currently listed on the WDC website.

Existing permits have continued but have not be charged until the review is completed.

Similar Practices across the Sub Region

As part of the review neighbouring local authorities were contacted to obtain information associated with similar schemes.

- Rugby Borough Council – No official permit system in place, ad-hoc with operators encouraged to contact the parks team to discuss their activities, check risk assessments/insurances, advise of any site issues and discuss potential charges for use of the green spaces. Current charge for Professional Trainers (per hour) is £16.50.
- North Warwickshire Borough Council – No Permit Scheme in operation.
- Coventry City Council – Commercial activities across parks (e.g., fitness camps) will be charged a minimum of 2 hours fee (£18). No permit system in place, manage all bookings through existing 'book a park' process. Locations agreed with organisers and monitor usage and apply charges accordingly. Coombe Abbey Park, War Memorial Park, Allesley Park are all staffed. Staff approach groups and inform of bookings process. All parks usage is monitored through their social media pages and friends of groups, park users and other organisations using parks, notify Council of any new activity.
- Nuneaton & Bedworth Borough Council - Operate fees & charges for commercial personal training in parks. 6 months permit (Peak, April – Sept) £126, (Off peak, Oct – March), £205, 12-month permit (flat rate) £182. Currently reviewing charges, the scheme and who oversees within the Council. Informed events team have already produced events permit online booking form and would look to add to this.
- Solihull Council – Operate a permit scheme across all parks through the Events Team. 12-month permit per session, session can be up to 90 minutes max in 1 park per session. Permits required for each individual session. Up to 10 clients (£120). Up to 20 clients (£200). If over 20 clients, then this falls in the £200 payment category. New scheme which commenced in 2023, Parks team and events team monitor and book. Too early to say if this scheme is successful or has any operational issues, currently a 1-year pilot.
- Stratford-On-Avon District Council - No permit scheme in operation.

- Warwickshire County Council - Previously operated a full lease system for Bootcamp type activities and are looking at changing it to a Parks Exercise Permit scheme. This will stop the small groups having to pay the legal fees for a full lease.
- Annual fee of £200 for one session a week, but they had to cover the legal fees of the lease agreement. Rangers on site withing parks to monitor activity.
- APSE (Association of Public Service Excellence) - Some information had been attained from APSE in October 2022 about Permit Schemes. This information tells us that a number of local authorities across the county run similar schemes. Approx 15 responded to APSE.

The above demonstrates that a number of local authorities across the sub region operate a procedure and booking system for similar type schemes with variations to how they are operated by each local authority. All of the local authorities except Stratford-On-Avon District and North Warwickshire Borough Council have a system in place.

WDC's Scheme identified the following issues/challenges

- Scheme was complex and difficult to keep updated with changing information.
- Staff capacity to monitor scheme.
- Little involvement and interaction with Green Spaces Team.
- Scheme was not easy to understand for users and increased administration workloads.
- COVID Lockdown, increase in use of our parks and difficulty managing the existing scheme.
- Limited income generated, not as high as expected.
- Difficult to obtain information from all groups using the parks and open spaces.
- Free permits for charitable and non-profit making organisations were issued.
- Sports clubs using pitches which were not within the scheme.
- Not all users would apply and pay the set fees, making the scheme unfair.
- Groups were just using any green space, such as verges or parks that were not on the schemes list.
- WDC departments not aware of scheme and activities which created double bookings.
- Hirers complaints – There have been a small number of complaints about the scheme (e.g. an existing permit holder who wanted to leave the franchise he was working for and started up his own company, another regarding wanting to use a verge of some kind, regular complaint regarding grass being too long and delivery dangerous, group using light spill over from tennis courts at Victoria Park and were putting off tennis players with their loud music, request for a permit to be transferred across organisation/group without making a direct application).
- A true figure of physical activity providers is unknown due to the lack of monitoring in parks and open spaces.
- The scheme may have encouraged users to locate their activities in parks/open spaces in the district that are not covered in this scheme to avoid paying the permit fees or deliverers may have taken their activities out of Warwick District.

Feedback from previous permit holders from the scheme

Nine responses were received for a variety of organisations. The feedback about the scheme was of a mixed opinion.

Reasons given why they felt the scheme worked for them.

- Worked for their requirements and needs.
- Good locations available to use permit.
- Varied times available to use permit.
- Appreciated that commercial operators are charged while charities are exempt.

Reasons given why they felt the scheme didn't work.

- Not cost effective
- Not relevant as have an agreement with WDC for use of Newbold and pavilion.
- Very expensive
- Weighty for such a small group and low impact activity.
- since our activity leaves no trace of being used (compared to barbeques, car parking, other games), why are we being charged.
- Not everyone paid for permits, became unfair.

Suggested changes

- Would be better if could pay one off fee rather than a yearly one
- Combine the charge with our current ones we have with WDC to reduce admin for all.
- Charge per session, rather than up to an amount each week.
- Regular checks of the permit scheme.
- Improve communications.
- Different payment charges for smaller nonprofit groups.
- Regulate the scheme.
- Allow taster sessions.
- Allow advertising of their activity to increase participation.
- Allow use of promotional material whilst activity taking place

Evaluation of the Benefits

Benefits of running scheme	Benefits of not running the scheme
Will generate an income for the Council.	Staff resources are not required.
Monitoring the types of groups/organisations that are using our parks and open spaces for physical activity sessions.	Providers to operate activities across parks and open spaces without a cost or commitment to WDC.
Promotes the activity providers on our website.	No financial cost to provider.
Activity providers are allocated parks/open spaces for their activity so have a level of assurance that they are following the correct procedures and have permission to run their activity.	The scheme has been suspended since August 2022. During this time there has been no issues or complaints about operators.
Encourages and provides opportunities for residents to be physically active.	May encourage more groups/organisations to deliver in parks and open spaces.
Allows certain organisation funding support by not charging	

Cons of running scheme	Cons of not running scheme
Staff resources and capacity to operate and administer this scheme required	No income generated for the Council.
Staff only on fixed term contracts so need to be mindful if not extended.	No monitoring the type of groups/organisations that are using our parks and open spaces.
No guarantee that this scheme can be infallible, it relies on organisations applying for permits and the Council to promote and monitor.	Unable to promote the benefits of physical activity that groups/organisations provide as unaware these are taking place
	No allocation to parks/open spaces and no checks (applications process or insurance).

Recommendations of the Scheme-

Option 1- Continue the scheme

In order for us to continue the scheme either in full capacity or reduced the following processes and plans need to be put place ahead of reintroduction. We have looked at issues and causes that were created by the scheme previously and listed below what would need to change. In light of the changes below we would look to reintroduce the system and go live from April 2024.

- Application process would need to be reviewed to ensure the application meets the criteria of the permit scheme and isn't deemed an event or a sport playing surface booking.
- Terms and conditions would need to be reviewed and updated by officers, this will include reviewing the list of documents required during the application process e.g. insurance, risk assessment, qualifications, first aid provision.
- Improve working relationships within WDC teams to ensure the scheme is communicated and joint decisions are made on allocation of parks/open spaces for groups/organisations.
- Staff resource/capacity e.g. discussion with other teams across the Council to see if support can be provided to help monitor the scheme on the ground.
- Fees and charges will remain as previous until January 2025
- Media awareness of the scheme – improve the awareness of the scheme and how to apply for a permit.
- Recommend that the scheme is not expanded to include additional parks/open spaces, but Jephson Gardens to be removed from the list and Mill Gardens to be added as this area is more suited to this type of activity. Harbury Lane to be removed as there is limited parking and is near residential area.
- Liaise directly with Green Spaces team to make final decision on which parks to be included and the location of where the activities can take place. When making this decision we need to take into account events.
- Income is correctly coded for this scheme in order to understand the true financial value, including the annual increase in charges.
- Easily identifiable e.g. asking providers to have/display permits e.g. on armbands.
- Create an accessible location for documents to be shared with other departments.
- Monitoring and update website to promote scheme and generate income.
- Shared booking system for all, so all relevant departments within WDC can monitor.
- Realistic, achievable timescales need to be set.
- Regular planned monitoring of parks and permits determine.

Option 2- Reduce the scheme

- As above plus.
- Only operate the permit scheme within selected parks across the district. This would be decided which parks following discussions with Green Spaces, ahead of the reintroduction.

Option 3- Discontinue the scheme

The scheme could be discontinued as it has not been operating since August 2022. To our knowledge there have been minimal issues or complaints since it has stopped.