

REPORT TO FORMARTINE AREA COMMITTEE – 18 JANUARY 2022

ABERDEENSHIRE COUNCIL RANGER SERVICE – INTRODUCTION OF CHARGES

1 Executive Summary/Recommendations

1.1 To seek comments from the Committee on the proposal to introduce charges for the delivery of exclusive activity sessions which the Ranger Service can provide to commercial organisations. In accordance with the [Aberdeenshire Council Plan 2020-22](#) and [Ranger Service Strategy 2020-23](#), the Ranger Service are looking to increase their revenue by collecting income for delivering exclusive activity sessions to commercial organisations based on the on-cost hourly rate of a Countryside Ranger including direct and indirect costs, and overheads. Comments are being sought from all Area Committees in accordance with the Council's Corporate Charging Policy & Framework due to this being the first formal charge which the Ranger Service has introduced. Background information on the Aberdeenshire Council Ranger Service in relation to this matter can be found within **Appendix 1**.

1.2 The Committee is recommended to:

1.2.1 Comment on the proposal to introduce charges for the delivery of exclusive activity sessions which the Ranger Service can provide to commercial organisations.

2 Decision Making Route

2.1 Comments are being sought from this Committee and all other Area Committees prior to being presented to Environment & Infrastructure Services Committee for approval in accordance with the Council's Corporate Charging Policy & Framework. The proposal was presented to the Planning & Environment Member Officer Working Group on 8 September 2021 who were supportive of the proposals. A consultation with service users on the proposal was undertaken between 20 October and 10 November 2021. Out of 265 respondents to the question on the proposal to charge commercial organisations¹ for exclusive activity sessions, 230 people (87%) were supportive of doing so. A full copy of these responses and associated comments can be found within **Appendix 2**.

3 Discussion

3.1 The Ranger Service initially proposed to charge for exclusive activity sessions and where the Service is assisting with other public events (where the event organiser is charging attendees). However, following a discussion with the Planning & Environment Member Officer Working Group in October 2019, it

¹ A commercial organisation is defined as any business that sells goods or services for the purposes of making a profit.

was felt the proposal to just charge for the delivery of exclusive activity sessions was the most appropriate due to having less ambiguity when, for example, Rangers are delivering sessions with other non-profit organisations who are charging attendees. The items to be charged could include the following:

- Delivering guided walks for tour operators including cruise companies;
- Team building sessions and activities based around Aberdeenshire's natural and cultural heritage for companies.

3.2 The charge would be based on a Countryside Ranger's on-cost hourly rate taking into account preparation, delivery, tidy up and return travel to the site. In 2022/23, when the charge would be introduced, the rate would be £28.89. This rate includes both direct and indirect costs and overheads associated with delivering the service. The company booking the exclusive session would also have to meet the costs of any specific equipment and materials that require to be purchased to allow for the session to be delivered. The method of collection for the charge would be via invoice.

3.3 It is believed there will be demand for the delivery of such sessions in the future, especially as the tourism and cruise liner industry look to rebuild from Covid-19. An enquiry has already been received from a cruise service company about the Ranger Service's availability for providing guided walks in 2022. There is also now increased awareness of the benefits of being outdoors, engaging with the local natural and cultural environment brings to mental health and wellbeing, which is thought to be attractive to companies looking to improve staff morale. The implementation of this charge will not detract from the other services which the Ranger Service delivers. Nor would it exclude or discriminate against any individuals or groups which the Service currently delivers to, including those classed as vulnerable or disadvantaged. The Ranger Service will continue to deliver its services in accordance with the approved Aberdeenshire Council Ranger Service Strategy 2020-23. Work which the Service could charge for would not take priority over work that was viewed to be of a higher priority in terms of the key priorities, aims and objectives of the Ranger Service Strategy. If approved, the Ranger Service would advertise this service and cost through its website and social media channels, along with assistance from the Corporate Communications Team.

3.4 Looking at the responses from the consultation on the charging proposal with service users undertaken through October and November, there was overwhelming support to the question of whether the Service should charge commercial organisations for delivering exclusive activity sessions – 87% of those who responded (265). The following comments were also received and are addressed below:

- *Commercial organisations should be providing these exclusive activity sessions* - it is not considered that the Service are undertaking this work to be competitive with other commercial providers. It has been proposed based on an existing demand for this service while also maintaining a focus on working towards full cost recovery and commercialisation in line with [Aberdeenshire Council's 2020-2022 Plan](#).

- *Donations* (as a means of reducing overall budget expenditure of the Ranger Service) – the Ranger Service are currently part of a cross Service Officer Working Group looking at developing an Aberdeenshire Council Policy and Procedure to allow for donations to be collected. This would allow the Service to accept donations for any service which it delivers in addition to charging for exclusive activity sessions to commercial organisations.

- 3.5 It should be noted that although a private school could be classed as a commercial organisation, they would not be charged for receiving an educational session, as the Ranger Service would not charge any school groups.
- 3.6 Any practical session undertaken with a commercial organisation which benefited the local community directly, e.g. tree planting, beach clean, would also not be charged for.
- 3.7 As detailed in paragraph 3.3 above, this chargeable work would not take priority over work that was viewed to be of a higher priority in terms of the key priorities, aims and objectives of the Ranger Service Strategy, and it would just be undertaken where there was capacity to do so. The workload undertaken by the Ranger Service is continually reviewed, and this would continue to be the case if this specific element of work was charged for. The Ranger Service have previously provided exclusive activity sessions to commercial organisations, but have not charged for doing so.

4 Council Priorities, Implications and Risk

- 4.1 This Report helps deliver the Strategic Priority “Economy and Enterprise” within the Pillar “Our Economy”, by ensuring the Ranger Service has responsible finances.
- 4.2 This Report helps deliver key priority 4 of the Aberdeenshire Council Ranger Service Strategy 2020-23 by looking to increase income generation potential for the Service.
- 4.3 The table below shows whether risks and implications apply if comments are made and taken into consideration in relation to the charging proposal.

Subject	Yes	No	N/A
Financial	X		
Staffing		X	
Equalities and Fairer Duty Scotland		X	
Children and Young People’s Rights and Wellbeing		X	

Climate Change and Sustainability		X	
Health and Wellbeing		X	
Town Centre First		X	

- 4.4 The financial implications are that the implementation of charges by the Ranger Service would result in increased income for the Service.
- 4.5 The screening section as part of Stage One of the Integrated Impact Assessment process has not identified the requirement for any further detailed assessments to be undertaken. This is due to the proposal for the Ranger Service to implement charges for the delivery of exclusive activity sessions to commercial organisations not impacting upon any elements taken into account within assessments relating to Childrens' Rights and Wellbeing; Equalities and fairer Scotland Duty; Health Inequalities; Sustainability and climate Change; and Town Centres First.
- 4.6 The following Risks have been identified as relevant to this matter on a Corporate Level ([Corporate Risk Register](#)):
- *ACORP001 Budget pressures. Any comments on this proposal may have an impact on the Ranger Service budget. This is through the potential to be able to increase the amount of income which the Service receives.*
- 4.7 No Risks have been identified as relevant to this matter on a Strategic Level ([Directorate Risk Registers](#)).

5 Scheme of Governance

- 5.1 The Head of Finance and Monitoring Officer within Business Services have been consulted in the preparation of this report and their comments are incorporated within the report and are satisfied that the report complies with the Scheme of Governance and relevant legislation.
- 5.2 The Committee is able to consider and comment on this item in terms of Section B.1.2 of the List of Committee Powers in Part 2A of the Scheme of Governance as it relates to providing comments on a matter which will impact upon the Formartine area.

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Report prepared by Malcolm White, Team Leader (Specialist Services)
Date: 23 December 2021

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- Appendix 1 – Aberdeenshire Council Ranger Service Background Information
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APPENDIX 1 – ABERDEENSHIRE COUNCIL RANGER SERVICE BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 1.1 Aberdeenshire Council Ranger Service seeks to connect people to place and is committed to increasing appreciation, understanding and care of our natural and cultural heritage for and by the public, for both residents and visitors.
- 1.2 Connecting people to place through improved engagement with our natural and cultural heritage will enable responsible use, protection and enhancement of these resources. Connection with our natural and cultural heritage can improve health and well-being, provide volunteering opportunities, combat biodiversity loss and climate change, provide learning opportunities and increase skill levels, and support regeneration and tourism. The Ranger Service looks to achieve this through the delivery of the [Aberdeenshire Council Ranger Service Strategy 2020-23](#).
- 1.3 The Ranger Service is part of the Specialist Services Team in the Planning & Economy Service, Environment & Infrastructure Services. The Ranger Service has six full time equivalent (FTE) Rangers, one based in each administrative area of Aberdeenshire and is line managed by a (0.6 FTE) Co-ordinator. The overall expenditure to Aberdeenshire Council to deliver the Ranger Service, including salaries and associated staff costs over the last 3 years is as follows:

Table 1: Ranger Service Expenditure including salaries and associated staff costs

Year	Costs	Revenue	Net Expenditure
2018/19	£265,642	£453	£265,189
2019/20	£275,839*	£2,698	£273,141
2020/21	£293,527	£35	£293,492

**A significant contributor to the increase in costs from 2019/20 is due to the inclusion of management costs which is now shared across appropriate teams within the Service and includes short term costs associated with voluntary severance.*

- 1.4 In 2019/20, £2,513.62 worth of donations were received by the Ranger Service. Only £25 worth of donations were received in 2020/21. This was as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and the limits it placed on the Ranger Service undertaking public facing work where it would usually generate donations from. The other revenue generated was for the reimbursement of equipment and materials used at some sessions delivered, e.g. material to allow for participants to build and take home their own bird box. In May 2021, the Finance Service removed the ability for the Ranger Service to accept donations. This was due to there being no Aberdeenshire Council Policy and Procedure on the matter which had been developed and approved in accordance with Part 4B – Policy Development and Review Framework of the Scheme of Governance. The Ranger Service are now part of a cross Service Officer Working Group looking at developing such a policy and procedure.

- 1.5 [Aberdeenshire Council's 2020-2022 Plan](#) states about how as a Council we are going to do things differently, in particular:

Focus on working towards full cost recovery: The financial challenges faced by the Council have been exacerbated by COVID-19 forcing us to actively consider and review our charging policy. In order to present a balanced budget, the Council will work towards full cost recovery - ensuring that we recoup the cost of the service we are delivering wherever possible.

Focus on commercialisation: We need to protect our valuable frontline services and ensure positive outcomes for local communities. To do this we are working innovatively to develop a more commercial approach to our activities.

- 1.6 Key priority 4 of the [Aberdeenshire Council Ranger Service Strategy 2020-23](#), which was approved at Infrastructure Services Committee on 21 January 2021 (Item 13) states:

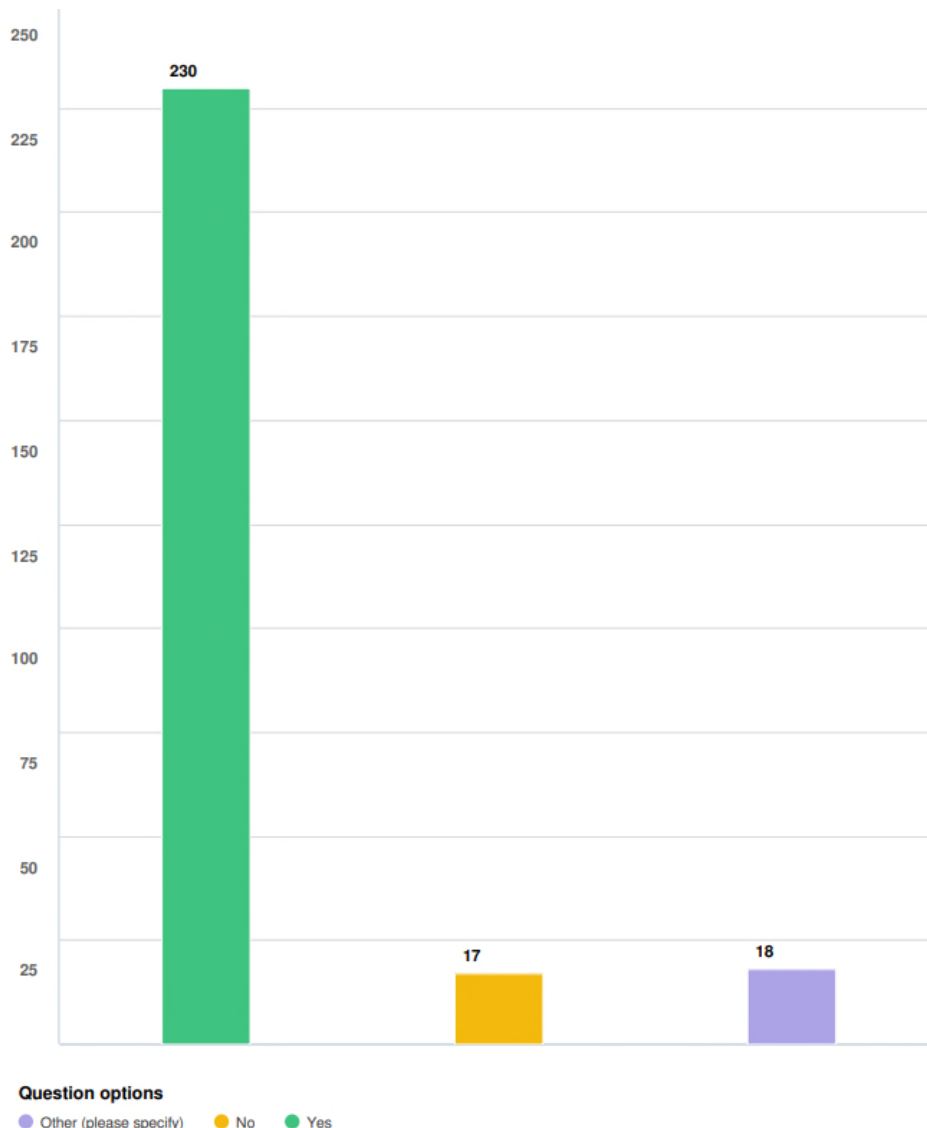
Promote Aberdeenshire's countryside and coast as a green tourism destination and increase opportunities for income generation potential for the Service.

- 1.7 In accordance with the above Aberdeenshire Council Plan and Ranger Service Strategy, the Ranger Service are looking to increase their revenue by collecting income for some of the services which it provides. A Report seeking comments from the Planning & Environment Member Officer Working Group was considered on 9 October 2019 regarding a proposal to introduce charges for certain services; proposed approach for publicising that the Ranger Service accept donations; and the proposed consultation process for implementing the above. This included a benchmarking exercise with other Scottish Ranger Services, within both local authority and non-local authority services. It was apparent that there was no consistent approach being taken with a mixture of charging for services; not charging; and seeking donations. Members were generally in support of the Ranger Service accepting donations, but they were not so comfortable with charging for the services which had been outlined (delivering exclusive activity sessions and where the Service is assisting a third party to deliver a session which is being charged for).
- 1.8 Following these comments by the Member Officer Working Group the Ranger Service reconsidered and revised its approach to charging for certain services. The matter was not progressed throughout 2020 due to the limited amount of public facing work which the Ranger Service was able to undertake as a result of Covid-19 restrictions. With all Covid-19 legal restrictions which could impact on the delivery of services which the Ranger Service provide being lifted, it is felt to now be an appropriate time to take the proposal forward again.

APPENDIX 2 – CONSULTATION TO SERVICE USERS FOR INTRODUCTION OF CHARGES

Below is the question and results relating to the introduction of charges by the Ranger Service. It was one question contained within a public survey issued by the Ranger Service between 20 October and 10 November 2021. IN addition to this, the survey sought feedback on how people view Aberdeenshire’s natural and cultural heritage and what parts of the service’s work are most important to people. It also looked to get people’s feedback on the Ranger Service’s Seasonal Access Rangers (funded through the NatureScot Better Places Green Recovery Fund) who were working in Aberdeenshire’s rural hotspot sites (excluding the Cairngorms National Park) from June to October 2021.

We occasionally get requests to provide exclusive activity sessions by commercial organisations. We are considering charging to cover our costs for this service. We will continue to provide our core public, school and group services free of charge. Do you agree we should charge commercial organisations for delivering exclusive activity sessions?



Comments under the other responses:

- Donations.
- Maybe for catering and the like but ranger service foc
- the council shouldn't offer this. There are plenty of freelance providers of outdoor experiences who would do a better job
- There are plenty of independent providers who can do this. You probably don't have the resources to do this in addition to your public service.
- no to commercial organisations - they can use another commercial organisations for their team-building event.
- You ought to refuse them! This is a public service, established for the public, and undertaking commercial activity is a slippery slope from managing the Cairngorms on our behalf to assuming rights over it that you just do not have and were never given. Let the commercial outfits find their own expert guides. There are plenty of outdoor activities instructors and mountain guides available, and you are inhibiting their free enterprise by doing this. I know it may seem like a logical move for you, but only to a vaguely socialist ranger who does not respect or understand the position that was granted them. Would commercial outfits be able to exploit public libraries or use subsidised bus routes? What you are proposing would be exactly the same in principle, allowing private businesses to exploit our public resources for business gain. I am opposed to this on principle, and fear the dangerous precedent it sets. Compile a list of private businesses who can help those commercial organisations making the enquiries. Send it to them as a standard response and a service to those trying to make a living this way in the Cairngorms, and kindly get back to serving the public ALONE in this regard, as THAT is the only remit you HAVE!
- I am not sure, as it depends on the charges, it may then put these organisations off of using the service at all.
- Invite contribution with guidance based on size of organisation and activity type.
- If the activity sessions are helping eg beach clean, clearing scrub etc then no payment. If educating, providing activity or guiding etc then yes to a fee.
- If the activity furthers your aims then you shouldn't charge
- Maybe there should be different charge rates based on ability to pay?
- It depends on the impact of the session, the benefit. A private school is a commercial organisation. I would say for groups smaller than X then charge. lots of charities doing good work with "new audience" groups are commercial organisations. In principle make a charge, depends on who is making a "profit".....yes can see the issue but the key is dependant on the nature of the target audience
- A nominal fee, but not for profit
- Yes but not on demand to the detriment of others
- Not sure about this question. Commercial organisations should not be spending public money for services so on one hand they should pay. However private businesses/individuals will provide some of these services. Would it be

fair for the public body to compete against these businesses from earning a living?

- No, I think you should leave this to the private sector
- Council should not run these. there are private providers for this.
- Perhaps not a set charge, but a suggested donation per person? Or charge whatever needed to cover staff costs on those days. However, they are already volunteering their time - depends on how large the organisations are.