

NEWCASTLE-UNDER-LYME BOROUGH COUNCIL

EXECUTIVE MANAGEMENT TEAM'S REPORT TO CABINET

Date 19th October 2016

1. **HEADING** Car Park Management
- Submitted by:** Head of Housing, Regeneration and Assets
- Portfolio:** Town Centres, Property and Business
- Ward(s) affected:** Primarily the Town Ward

Purpose of the Report

To consider the information provided through the Car Park Review and to give direction to the future management of the Council's car parks.

Recommendations

- i) That members note the key issues raised in the recent Car Park Review.
- ii) That the current geographical charging arrangements remain the same – i.e. no charging on car parks outside of Newcastle Town centre's environs.
- iii) That officers explore the scope for local management of the non-chargeable car parks and report back to the relevant Portfolio Holder within six months.
- iv) That the current charging tariff structure remains as currently arranged and that this position be reviewed on an annual basis to take account of changing demands.
- v) That, at this stage, the Council continues to provide free car parking for Blue Badge Holders subject to further review within six months following consultation with appropriate local groups.
- vi) That, at the earliest practical opportunity, the town centre car parks become chargeable on a 24-hour/day basis and a new overnight rate is introduced as described in the report.
- vii) That the Council continues to work with the County Council to improve signage to the car parks in general and in particular to expedite the introduction of variable message information signs on key highway approaches to the town centre.
- viii) That the Council informs the Business Improvement District company to cease the council's contribution to the free parking arrangements with immediate effect after the end of 2016/17 and that officers seek to agree an appropriate succession arrangement with them.
- ix) That the Council considers the allocation of funding in future capital programmes to deliver physical improvements to the town centre car parks, specifically the Midway MSCP.
- x) That the current "Pay by phone" arrangement be reviewed within the next 12 months.
- xi) That "Pay on exit" not be reviewed further at this time.
- xii) That a clear strategy for issuing parking Permits should be developed within 6 months.

xiii) That officers continue to engage on a multi-disciplinary basis with not only prospective developers and the two Local Universities but also the bus operators to minimise the risk of unmet demand for car parking causing nuisance to existing local residential neighbourhoods.

xiv) That the current level of parking provision should be further reviewed by the year 2020 in order to inform future decisions about the Council's car parks estate.

Reasons

The Council has a responsibility to manage its car park portfolio effectively in order that it is fit for purpose and meeting its objectives. An independent parking consultant has been commissioned to undertake a review, this raises many important issues for which a local decision can be taken, it is therefore relevant that the Council considers the issues to direct the preferred approach.

1. Background

- 1.1 The Council has a range of car parks both in Newcastle town centre, Kidsgrove and other villages. They provide a valuable resource to support the function of town and village centres including local communities and businesses. In providing such facilities the Council has a duty to provide them in a safe manner and in order to maximise usage they should provide a good quality environment that customers value. Should the car parks not fulfil a valid business purpose then they should be considered for disposal.
- 1.2 The Council currently only charges customers to park on the car parks in Newcastle Town Centre. The charging times and fees vary between car parks as historically the charges have been introduced by different Traffic Management Orders and, to an extent, the tariffs have been set to reflect the preferred customer usage.
- 1.3 The Council offers a range of "Permits" both to customers who purchase them directly and to companies who block purchase them for their staff; where this occurs it is normal practice to offer a discount to block purchases based on the number of Permits purchased.
- 1.4 On a broader note members will be aware of the changing face of retail centres and car parking provision must be kept under review in order that the quantum and nature of it keeps pace with such changes. Consistent with the Council's corporate priority relating to 'Borough of opportunity' the town centres should be supported to develop economically and there are several key issues to consider in relation to the development of important sites in Newcastle town centre, most notably the Ryecroft redevelopment, the new Civic Hub and the various sites currently or potentially developable for student accommodation.
- 1.5 Consequently Alpha Parking, an independent parking consultancy, have been commissioned to produce a car parks review and they have made some recommendations that should assist the Council in the future management of its car parks.

2. Issues

- 2.1 The main issue is that the Council needs to consider the report prepared by the expert consultants and, in particular, decide how to respond to the recommendations it makes (noting that some recommendations identify the need for longer term reviews – e.g. to take account of the evolving function of the car parks in the context of changing demands).
- 2.2 Officers acknowledge that the consultants' recommendations need careful consideration and, helpfully, the report suggests timescales for either implementing or considering actions which appear realistic and reasonable.

2.3 Consequently in the following paragraphs officers have sought to reflect upon those recommendations which the consultants have suggested should be considered either immediately or within twelve months. Additionally the issues raised have been blended with local management matters (e.g. item 6 in relation to concessionary charging).

1) Introducing car parking charges to car parks across the Borough

The Council could consider introducing charging to car parks outside of the town centre, specifically Kidsgrove and the other villages. Many of these car parks have either been recently resurfaced or will need resurfacing over the forthcoming years; the Council could therefore consider that it is appropriate to charge for these facilities on the basis that users/customers are or will be receiving a better quality offer. In short the income would assist in meeting the capital costs of the resurfacing. Should this be considered then the Council would need to take into account the resource requirements for the Civil Enforcement (staff and vehicle) and the practical collection of money. In reality, based on current enforcement methods, this option is not considered to represent value for money. On balance your officers would not recommend any changes at this stage. However there may be merit in exploration of some form of local management in the future to reduce the Council's financial liabilities.

2) Change charges

As part of the fees and charges annual review the Council considers whether to alter car parking charges. Over the past few years the Council has not increased charges largely for reasons relating to the wider programme of town centre management taking into account economic vitality of the town centre.

The current charging structure is based on the simple premise of car parks further away from the town centre being cheaper. Alpha Parking have highlighted that it may be simpler for customers if all car parks had the same charges. It is recognised by customers however that the parking on the edge of town is cheaper to reflect the fact that it is less convenient (i.e. they have further to walk into town). Alpha Parking also recommend trials to see whether altering charges would change usage patterns. Comparisons are given to Stoke-on-Trent whereby they have charging for the first 2 hours compared to Newcastle charging in hourly bands.

This would possibly encourage more people to stay for 2 hours however evidence suggests that the vast majority of our customers choose 1 hour parking and therefore they may see this as a loss of choice and some may be reluctant to pay a 2-hour charge. In addition the anticipated Ryecroft development will bring the introduction of limited stay shopper parking in the next few years and this will have an impact on the Council's car parks. Given the risks associated with making radical changes to the charging structure, particularly income loss, it may be considered unwise to make changes prior to the planned Ryecroft development coming into operation. On balance your officers would not recommend any changes at this stage.

3) Charging for blue badge holders

A significant number of councils have introduced charges for disabled drivers who use the blue badge facility. Alpha Parking has recommended that the Council considers this on the basis that the first hour is free and then a charge of £2.50 for the next 2 hours. Clearly this recommendation raises a point of principle which requires sensitive handling. Accordingly members may wish to consider this particular matter with the benefit of some local consultation with relevant interest groups. It should be noted that the primary objective of providing dedicated parking bays for blue badge holders is to ensure that these spaces are in the most convenient and accessible locations.

4) Reviewing the charging Hours

Currently the town centre car parks have a range of different chargeable periods with some being chargeable to 6pm and others to 9pm. Most are chargeable on a Saturday except for King Street. There is little reasoning behind some of these differences and it makes sense to consider aligning them all.

Whilst several of the car parks have 24 hour charging, the normal hourly day rate continues until 9pm. The Council could therefore consider an overnight charge of 8pm to 8am for £1.

An overnight permit of £60 could be considered for a quarter or £210 24hr permit (Band C car parks specifically King, Hassall, Windsor, Cherry and Corporation St).

Officers would recommend that both of these charges should be implemented as soon as practically possible.

At this time it would be advisable to consider extending the opening hours of all floors on the Midway up to 7.30pm and retain the currently locking of floors beyond floor 4 and 5 on the grounds of safety and to minimise anti-social behaviour (particularly car racing) on the site late at night. This would align with the private sector provision of The Square being open late at night to accommodate those using the Lymelight Boulevard and other evening entertainment.

Wider considerations include the opportunities to provide convenient car parking for additional residents who will be living in the emerging residential accommodation in premises such as the former Blackburn House, the former Jubilee Baths site and the former offices at Hassall Street. This consideration would need to be balanced with a current persistent problem with rough sleepers in the building (which is the subject of a separate multi-agency response). Consequently it is also recommended that officers review these various considerations at the Midway MSCP with the relevant Portfolio Holder at quarterly intervals in order that the optimum timing of any new arrangement can be determined.

It should be noted that Civil Enforcement Officers would be required for periodic evening enforcement.

5) Signage

Signage is extremely important in order to provide clear directions to reach the car park and information within the car park itself. Alpha Parking have highlighted that most of the signage within car parks is clear, however there is a need to update some signage (e.g. out of date signs that still refers to clamping). They do however highlight the need to improve external signage (on the approaches) to the car parks with very little directional signage being provided which they consider discourages some people from stopping. The use of Variable Message Signs is recommended to show not only where the car parks are but the number of spaces available. This is currently provided in both Stoke-on-Trent and Stafford on principal approach roads. Discussions are taking place with the County Council (in its capacity as the Highway Authority) with the aim being to introduce Variable Message Signs. At present the County Council's Integrated Transport Strategy identifies the variable messaging for introduction by 2018 and your officers propose to seek the earliest possible installation of such signs.

Signage on the car parks or by their entrances could also be considered and would be subject to planning permission. It should be noted that the car parks within the

Conservation Area would need to be considered by the Conservation Advisory Working Party before Planning Committee. Electronic signs would not be considered appropriate but the Council could consider signs of suitably sensitive design. At this stage it is premature to make any formal decision without there being any clear proposals; consequently this matter should be reviewed in consultation with the Portfolio Holder within the next 12 months.

6) Cease the Council contribution to the free parking days that are currently offered in conjunction with the Business Improvement District.

Members will recall that, over a number of recent years, the Council has provided free parking to support the steps being taken to improve the economic vitality of the town centre. This concession was predicated upon an anticipated windfall payment which would cover the lost income.

For Christmas 2016 the Council has agreed to provide free parking after 3pm. The BID requested additional free parking and it has been agreed that the BID will “purchase” parking between noon and 3pm to enable customers to have free parking all afternoon for the four Saturdays in December.

The original funding allocated to cover the loss of income through free parking on key dates has now passed and the Council needs to consider the future income loss of offering additional free parking to the Business Improvement District. Given the other financial pressures facing the Council and the establishment of the BID it is recommended that the free/subsidised parking ceases with immediate effect after the end of 2016/17 and that officers seek to agree an appropriate succession arrangement with the BID company.

7) Investment in improvements

The management of any asset or service needs to take into account the quality of the product on offer. It is important that the Council considers the quality of the car parks, particular those for which the customer is paying to use. In undertaking the parking review Alpha Parking met with a Focus Group of local interested parties to gauge opinions about car parking provision in Newcastle town centre. Alpha Parking have identified that safety and security is important, this is both in terms of the car park surface and the surrounding area. Alpha have also highlighted that the Midway MSCP spaces are considered to be restricted compared to the increasing size of modern cars; your officers would note that this is difficult to address as many of the columns and the ramps are structural components of the building thereby providing very limited scope for modification. Nevertheless it is recommended that the Midway MSCP is prioritised for investment in decorative refurbishment in the future Capital Programme to make it more attractive to users.

8) Local innovations

i) Pay by phone: the review report notes the recent introduction of this arrangement (the popularity of which seems to be increasing). The report recommends that this be kept under review.

ii) Pay on exit: the review report notes the Council’s previous consideration of this approach as a way of giving greater flexibility to customers (as compared to fixed time, pay and display). The technical constraints of the Midway MSCP are noted although the consultants indicate that there may be merit, in the future, in assessing systems which link barriers to camera detection arrangements.

iii) Permits: the report notes the existence of a number of Permit-holder arrangements which on the one hand provide value-for-money for customers (and

some employers) and allow the Council to direct them to preferred locations. In view of the increasing demand for Permits (particularly from employers and the promoters of town centre residential schemes) the consultants recommend that a clear strategy for issuing these should be developed within 6 months.

9) Future student parking demand

Further to the latter point the review report recommends ongoing and thorough review of the whole issue surrounding the movement of students to and from the two local Universities. This should include liaison with the bus operators and the Universities in order to promote behaviours which minimise demand whilst directing any parking requirements in the town centre to the most appropriate locations (to minimise potential nuisance arising from parking in the local residential areas around the town centre). In overall terms the report recommends that the level of parking provision should be reassessed in 3 to 5 years; i.e. once a number of the planned/current developments have been completed and occupied).

3. Proposal and Reasons for Preferred Solution

1) Introducing car parking charges to car parks across the Borough

Taking into account the potential benefits and disadvantages it is not proposed at this time to progress with introducing charging to car parks in Kidsgrove and the other villages. Nevertheless it is proposed that officers should explore the scope for local management of the non-chargeable car parks and report back to the relevant Portfolio Holder within six months.

2) Change charges

When reviewing the Council car parks and that of other private sector providers, it is believed that our charges are appropriate and should not be increased. Retaining the current prices will continue to support the town centre and the option to provide hourly charges rather than 2 hourly bands provides the customer with the greatest choice in length of stay and cost. Once further information is available on the Ryecroft retail parking, along with other information on customer parking times, the Council may wish to consider a pilot of 2hr/4hr/6hr and 24hr parking. Therefore it is recommended that the current charging tariff structure remains as currently arranged and that this position be reviewed on an annual basis to take account of changing demands.

3) Charging for blue badge holders

At this stage, it is recommended that the Council continues to provide free car parking for Blue Badge Holders subject to further review within six months following consultation with appropriate local groups.

4) Reviewing the charging Hours

Taking into consideration the changing nature of the town centre with the introduction of student accommodation and the recommendation of Alpha Parking to have a clear understandable charging policy, it is recommended that all Newcastle Town Centre car parks become chargeable 24hours Monday to Saturday, retaining Sunday as free parking. Then a lower specific evening charge between 8pm and 8am of £1, together with overnight parking permits being made available for Band C car parks. These changes should be made at the earliest practical opportunity.

5) Signage

The joint working with the County Council should be continued with the aim to introduce Variable Message Signs to improve customer knowledge of available spaces and to minimise road congestion of people driving around the town centre looking for available spaces at peak times. Signs within the car parks should also be

reviewed to remove out dated messages; this will most effectively be undertaken when the signs are updated with the changed charges. External signage should also be considered in line with the conservation area requirements.

6) Cease the free parking days that are currently offered in conjunction with the BID.

The original funding allocated to cover the loss of income through free parking on 5 event days and free after 3pm for Christmas has now passed and the Council has not yet budgeted for the loss of income through offering further free parking to the Business Improvement District beyond this financial year. The Council has an agreement with the Business Improvement District that states 'The Council makes an annual decision on the car parking charges and additional concessions to support specific objectives which align to the Corporate Priorities.

Requests for concessions or support for specific projects from the BID would need to be considered alongside other requests from partner agencies such as the Town Centre Partnership). It is therefore recommended that the free parking ceases immediately at the end of 2016/17 through negotiation with the Business Improvement District.

7) Investment in improvements

That the Council considers the allocation of funding in the 2017/18 capital programme to deliver physical improvements to the town centre car parks, specifically the Midway MSCP.

8) Local innovations

i) Pay by phone: it is recommended that this arrangement be reviewed within the next 12 months.

ii) Pay on exit: given the availability of pay-by-phone and the known technical constraints of the Midway MSCP (and the nature of use/modest size of other car parks) it is not considered that this option be explored at this time.

iii) Permits: it is recommended that a clear strategy for issuing Permits should be developed within 6 months.

9) Future student parking demand

(a) It is recommended that officers continue to engage, on a multi-disciplinary basis (including Planning, Assets and Engineering staff), with not only prospective developers and the two Local Universities but also the bus operators to minimise the risk of unmet demand for car parking causing nuisance to existing local residential neighbourhoods.

(b) It is recommended that the current level of parking provision should be further reviewed by the year 2020 in order to inform future decisions about the Council's car parks estate.

4. Outcomes Linked to Sustainable Community Strategy and Corporate Priorities

4.1 The Council manages a range of car parking facilities to provide car parking for business and leisure users. The recommendations in this report have been considered in the context of the priorities of a Borough of Opportunity and a Clean, Safe and Sustainable Borough.

5. Legal and Statutory Implications

- 5.1 The Council operates the off-street car parks in line with the Traffic Management Act 2004 and each car park has a Traffic Regulation Order to state the operational conditions. The Traffic Regulation Order will need to be updated to include the charging changes.

6. Equality Impact Assessment

- 6.1 The recommendations in this report do not adversely affect any protected groups. However, should further consideration be made to implementing a charge for disabled drivers in the future, equality impacts identified during consultation with appropriate groups will be considered.

7. Financial and Resource Implications

- 7.1 Over the last five years car parking income per year has decreased by £200,894, from £1,226,627 in 2011/12 to £1,025,732 in 2015/16, it is therefore appropriate that the Council considers the charges alongside the decreasing car park usage.
- 7.2 Introducing a range of different approaches to charges as outlined above, in particular ceasing the free parking sessions for Christmas/ events and increasing the charging periods to 24 hours will assist in maintaining the income whilst supporting the town centre economy. The Council has retained the current charges for car parking for several years and importantly this report recommends continuing this freeze on car park charges.
- 7.3 Failure to deal with the decrease in income will result in a further significant pressure having to be added into next year's budget process. Members will recall that in the Medium Term Financial Strategy, approved at the last cabinet meeting, that the Council is already having to deal with a £2.5m "gap" in next year's budget.
- 7.4 The option to improve the car parks will be subject to the allocation of capital funding through the annual budget setting process and future Cabinet reports. Any such investment will have to be considered against other competing pressures for capital expenditure and in light of the Council's position in respect of capital funding.

8. Major Risks

- 8.1 The delivery of the actions recommended will need to be phased to take into account the staffing resources to implement the changes and the finance to make physical improvements to the car parks.

9. Key Decision Information

- 9.1 The report raises issues affecting more than two wards so this is a key decision regardless of any financial implications the quantification of which is difficult to forecast at this stage.

10. Earlier Cabinet/Committee Resolutions

- 10.1 In July 2013 the Council agreed to utilise grant funding to support the free parking in conjunction with the Town Centre Partnership:

<http://moderngov.newcastle-staffs.gov.uk/documents/s8173/Town%20Centre%20Car%20Parking%20-%2005%2007%2013%20tracked.pdf>

11. List of Appendices

11.1 None

12. Background Papers

12.1 The Car Park Review from Alpha Parking Ltd.