

NEWCASTLE-UNDER-LYME BOROUGH COUNCIL

EXECUTIVE MANAGEMENT TEAM'S REPORT TO THE CABINET

Date: 17 October 2018

1. <u>REPORT TITLE</u>	Review of town centre car parks
<u>Submitted by:</u>	Executive Director (Regeneration & Development)
<u>Portfolio:</u>	Finance & Efficiency
<u>Ward(s) affected:</u>	Town

Purpose of Report

To review options for modifying the management and operation of the Council's town centre car parks with the aim of increasing utilisation thereby increasing footfall to improve the town centre economy and stabilising income for the Council.

Recommendations

- a) That officers be authorised to take all the necessary steps to introduce a flat rate charge of £1 for all town centre car parks after 3pm at the earliest opportunity (by no later than 1 December 2018).
- b) That officers be authorised to take all necessary steps to implement a variation to the current Traffic Regulation Order to establish short stay pay and display in respect of the spaces on the former Civic Offices forecourt (Merrial Street) at the earliest opportunity (by no later than 1 March 2019).
- c) That officers, in liaison with the relevant Cabinet Member, be authorised to engage with the Newcastle Business Improvement District with a view to implementing the following:
 - i) A BID-supported Permit parking arrangement targeted at BID Members on the basis described in the report;
 - ii) To enable discounted town centre parking on up to five occasions in any financial year on the basis described in the report and;
 - iii) To facilitate free parking on all town centre car parks from noon to 8pm on the date of the 2018 Christmas Lights switch-on.
- d) That officers take steps to promote the sale of Permits to medium to large size businesses and organisations (minimum 20 employees).
- e) That officers be authorised to take all necessary steps to introduce parking charges on the Town Centre Car Parks on Bank Holidays at a flat rate of £1 with effect from no later than 1st April 2019.

- f) That officers continue to promote “Pay by phone” on all appropriate town centre car parks.
- g) That officers be authorised to explore through consultation with local partners the potential for establishing Pay on Exit arrangements on key town centre car parks (particularly The Midway MSCP, Goose Street and King Street) and to report back the outcome at the earliest opportunity.
- h) That officers be requested to monitor the impact of the above proposals (particularly (a) to (f)), and be asked to report back by no later than 1st February 2020 so that Members can review future approaches.
- i) That officers, in consultation with the relevant Portfolio Holder(s) report back by no later than summer 2019 with a 10 Year Parking Strategy for the town centre, taking account of any comments or suggestions made by the Economy, Environment and Place Scrutiny Committee and including the following matters within the Strategy (not an exhaustive list):
- to engage with the Highway Authority to explore the potential for enabling greater traffic movement within the town centre and provision of short term parking;
 - to review options for introducing more convenient (cashless) payment methods for car parking charges and;
 - to explore the potential for collaboration with University Hospital North Midlands with a view to achieving accessible and affordable parking to serve the needs of the hospital (staff and visitors) and minimise the adverse impact of on-street parking on local communities.
- j) That this matter be referred to the Economy, Environment and Place Scrutiny Committee for its comments and any suggestions to inform the proposed 10-year Strategy.

Reasons

The proposals seek to achieve a reasonable balance between the Council’s ongoing need for income generation (noting the responsibility for management, maintenance and repair) and making the town centre more accessible and affordable thereby supporting the town centre economy.

1. Background

- 1.1** The Council has recently approved a new Council Plan which sets out clear priorities up to spring 2022 (see section 4 for more detail). In particular the priority “A town centre for all” confirms the Council’s commitment to “Delivering car parking services that support the town centres”.
- 1.2** The Borough Council owns, maintains and operates a number of town centre car parks. Members will note from the table at Appendix 1 that income from the Council’s town centre car parks has been steadily declining in recent years. In view of this and the clear policy direction of the Council the Portfolio Holder has been working with officers with the aim of ensuring that the right balance is struck between enhancing the attractiveness of the town centre through its management and operation of the public car parks whilst optimising income from

the charges that are applied. In other words the Council is seeking to achieve an appropriate balance between its charging regime and the relative attractiveness of the centre in the hope of enticing more people to spend their time there whether that be to work, visit, live, shop or eat/drink.

- 1.3 At the time of writing and further to the content of paragraph 1.2 the Council was engaged in ongoing dialogue with the Newcastle BID with a view to identifying opportunities for both parties to achieve the said objectives by working in partnership together (consistent with the Council Plan's intentions as set out at paragraph 4.3).
- 1.4 The other relevant context for this report is the planned investment by the County Council, in its capacity as Highway Authority, in updating and improving road signs in the town centre environs to assist in 'wayfinding'. This initiative will offer motorists clearer direction to the available town centre car parks.

2. Issues / Proposals

- 2.1 As indicated above the relevant Portfolio Holder has been working with officers to review the Council's arrangements for managing and operating town centre car parks with the dual aim of trying to encourage greater footfall into the town centre to improve the overall economy whilst stabilising the level of income to the Council derived from the charging regime. In view of the current trading conditions in the town centre this review has been undertaken with a view to identifying "quick wins" that are capable of early implementation. In addition it has helped to identify some key opportunities for further exploration as part of a future long-term (10-year) parking strategy for the town centre environs.

New off-peak tariff

- 2.2 Having reviewed the general profile of car park utilisation it is evident that it falls away noticeably around mid-afternoon and those that do come tend to stay for relatively short periods. It is clear from discussion with the BID representatives that some form of incentive to encourage people to come into town late afternoon into the early evening may help both the retailers and food/beverage businesses. Also there is some evidence of other local centres (notably Stoke on Trent) introducing a flat-rate nominal fee from 3pm onwards.
- 2.3 Additionally there is considered to be some potential for this approach to encourage more people to visit the centre after 3pm thereby counter-balancing any loss of income. The proposal is that officers be authorised to take all the necessary steps to introduce a flat rate charge of £1 for all town centre car parks after 3pm (until 8am the following day) at the earliest opportunity (target date of no later than 1st December 2018).

Merrial Street pay and display/TRO revision

- 2.4 There is a short-term opportunity to utilise the forecourt of the former Civic Offices for pay and display parking purposes. It is a convenient location and would complement the provision on Corporation Street (which is well-used) and should be progressed on the basis of the same charging regime.
- 2.5 The proposal is that officers be authorised to take all necessary steps to implement a variation to the current Traffic Regulation Order to establish short stay pay and display in respect of the spaces on the former Civic Offices

forecourt (Merrial Street). It is envisaged that this will be in place (taking account of the need for minor civil engineering works) by no later than 1st March 2019.

Proposals in partnership with Newcastle BID

- 2.6** The Council is a significant partner in the Newcastle BID partnership and were instrumental in helping to set it up as a successor body to the former, informal, Town Centre Partnership. The two parties continue to engage on matters of mutual interest in order to consider actions and/or initiatives that might assist in achieving improvement in the town centre economy. Car parking charges remains a significant point of discussion and whilst the BID appreciate that the Council needs to protect income it continues to reflect its Members wishes for the Council to consider options for improving footfall and the general operating conditions for the many businesses within the town centre environs.
- 2.7** So in addition to the other measures referred to in this report there are some specific proposals which the Council and BID representatives have explored on a joint basis; the preferred initiatives are summarised below:
- i)** Introduction of a discounted parking Permit arrangement on an area of under-utilised car parking within the town centre (the former Sainsbury's overspill area bounded by the former Civic offices car park and the ring road). The proposal is that the BID businesses are offered, on a discounted Permit basis (on the same basis as large businesses), priority use of the said area.
 - ii)** Secondly the BID has been keen for the Council to offer discounted town centre parking to support town special events (on up to five occasions in any financial year with the choice of days at the BID's discretion). Following a review of options the preferred option is to vary the proposed new off-peak tariff to bring forward the start time to midday; this would mean introducing a charge of a flat rate £1 to park from noon on the day of the event until 8am the following day. The BID has agreed to review with the Council any significant losses arising from this concession.
 - iii)** Thirdly on the basis of the above that the Council facilitates free parking on all town centre car parks from noon to 8pm on the date of the Christmas Lights switch-on.

The proposal is that officers, in liaison with the relevant Cabinet Member(s), be authorised to engage with the Newcastle Business Improvement District in respect of the detailed processes required to enable implementation of these initiatives at the earliest opportunity (noting that the Christmas lights switch-on event is approved for the purposes of early publicity).

Promoting Parking Permits

- 2.8** Ideally the Council would promote and sell permits via an electronic web based payment system. In the meantime the Council has developed an on-line form which once completed enables Customer Services to ring the customer and take a telephone payment or send an invoice. It is considered that there is scope to promote such Permits more proactively to the larger businesses and organisations in the town centre environs. To date there has been no significant interest in the overnight permits however it is known that on-street parking

around the town centre can create difficulties and as more student apartments are completed there is likely to be greater parking demand.

Pay by phone

- 2.9** A “Pay by phone” option is available on all town centre car parks. It is increasing in popularity and it is expected that this trend will continue for the foreseeable future. This arrangement allows customers to either pay in entirety or ‘top-up’ by ‘phone so it might be regarded as a “virtual” Pay-on-Exit arrangement because it avoids the user having to return to their vehicle once their ticket has expired (to either leave the car park or to purchase additional tickets). Regular customers or users may choose to download an “App” on their “Smartphone” which makes the transaction much more efficient. As we continue to move towards a more ‘cashless’ society this payment option provides customers with greater convenience and choice.

Pay on Exit

- 2.10** A range of stakeholders, including the BID, have commented upon the absence of “Pay on Exit” options in our town centre. It is considered to be more attractive to many customers and can help dwell time (and therefore potentially increase spending in the town centre). Your officers do not have the expertise or capacity to explore this option so officers are seeking authority to engage with local partners that have commissioned similar arrangements with the aim of being able to advise Members upon the potential for establishing Pay on Exit arrangements on key town centre car parks (particularly The Midway MSCP, Goose Street and King Street) and to report back the outcome at the earliest opportunity.

Bank Holidays

- 2.11** There is evidence that many Councils charge a flat rate for users parking on Council-owned car parks at not only weekends and evenings, but also Bank Holidays (including adjacent Local Authorities). Officers consider that the same principles could apply as in the case of the “Off-peak” tariff referred to above; i.e. that a nominal charge would be appropriate reflecting the fact that demand tends to be lower on these days (with many service sector businesses and some retailers not operating on these days). Therefore the proposal is that officers be authorised to take all necessary steps to introduce parking charges on the Town Centre Car Parks on Bank Holidays at a flat rate of £1 with effect from 1st March 2019. Members should be aware that some adjacent Councils also charge for parking on Sundays (typically a flat rate nominal sum). It is intended that free parking will continue on Sundays in Newcastle town centre.

Monitor and review

- 2.12** The potential benefit to the town centre economy, along with the financial impact upon the Council, of the above range of measures is difficult to quantify with any degree of accuracy. Therefore it is recommended that officers be requested to monitor the impact of the above proposals (particularly (a) to (f)) and report back to Members after 12 months of operation.

10-year Parking Strategy

2.13 As indicated earlier the primary focus of this report is to identify a range of measures or initiatives that have the potential to achieve positive impact upon the town centre economy in the relatively short term, whilst arresting the decline in income to the Council from car parking charges. However it is acknowledged that there is a need to take a longer term look at this matter in light of both the changing face of town centres and the opportunities which we know exist because of local circumstances. So in the ensuing paragraphs officers have identified a few matters which might benefit from further exploration with the ultimate aim being to produce a 10-year Car Parking Strategy. Realistically officers consider that this should be available by summer 2019.

Potential for increased permeability within the town centre

2.14 In view of the changing nature of the town centre members of the public and people within the business community have expressed views about the potential opportunity of increasing vehicular movement through some parts of the town centre to make it more accessible, with a view to providing more short term parking. As members will be aware the Traffic Regulation Orders in place currently inhibit east-west movement through Merrial Street, Ironmarket and Hassell Street whilst High Street south enjoys only limited vehicular movement.

2.15 It would be inappropriate to look at any individual routes in isolation; the preferred approach would be to engage with the Highway Authority in parallel with both the emerging Local Plan and any redevelopment plans on key sites such as Ryecroft. The thrust of the discussion would be to explore the potential for improving traffic movement within the town centre and consider the scope for provision of more short term parking.

Introduction of 'smarter' parking charging

2.16 As indicated earlier one of the perceived barriers to using town centre car parks arises from the increasingly 'cashless' society in which we live. So in addition to the "Pay by phone" option and the greater promotion of Permits there are other innovations to make payment easier such as credit/debit card payments as well as contactless payment methods. Acknowledging that such approaches would require investment in such technology officers should explore options with the aim of improving convenience for customers.

Collaboration with University Hospital North Midlands (UHNM)

2.17 Members will be aware that there are significant parking-related issues arising from the UHNM site, causing congestion in the locality and inconvenience for residents living in the area. So it is proposed that officers be authorised to explore the potential for collaboration with University Hospital North Midlands with a view to achieving accessible and affordable parking to serve the needs of the hospital (staff and visitors) utilising a combination of Council-owned land and town centre car parks.

Economy, Environment and Place Scrutiny Committee

2.18 In view of the significant and long-term implications of having a 10-year Strategy it is considered that the comments and suggestions of the Scrutiny Committee should be sought. As part of its scrutiny the Committee may also wish to

consider reviewing the range of short-term measures described in this report. The Committee met with representatives of the Newcastle BID at its last meeting and the matter of town centre car parking was discussed with them. Members were advised that the Cabinet would be receiving this report and so they resolved that it would be appropriate to scrutinise the matter at their next scheduled meeting.

3. Options / proposals

- 3.1** “Do nothing” on this occasion is not considered to be either an appropriate or viable option for reasons cited earlier. Without some form of intervention it is considered that the town centre economy may suffer further and, in addition, the Council’s income will continue to decline.
- 3.2** Therefore the proposal is to implement the range of measures set out in section 2 of this report and to monitor their effectiveness over the following 12-month period. In addition it is proposed to prepare a 10-year Car Parking Strategy for the town centre including exploration of opportunities identified above.

4. Outcomes linked to Corporate Priorities

- 4.1** “Growing our people and places” is one of the four strategic priorities set out in the recently-approved Council Plan. It states that the Council wants to grow the borough’s economy and build on what is already good - the borough’s identity, its location within the Staffordshire region with good motorway links, education opportunities with our acclaimed Keele University and Newcastle-under-Lyme College, and our strong local communities. Our future depends on how we take up opportunities to raise aspirations and achieve our ambitions.
- 4.2** It goes on to say that “Our aim is to strive for the borough to be a place where the economy is strong and sustainable, where local people have the skills and opportunities to take up the good jobs with good wages that are created, and where everyone benefits from economic growth. This also means that we need to ensure that there are good homes for everyone, and that every citizen has a safe and secure place to live.”
- 4.3** In addition the Plan confirms the importance of working with key partners indicating that “To deliver this we will engage with our partners, locally and regionally, including businesses already in the borough, and work with them to develop their plans and encourage inward investment and the growth of our existing businesses for the benefit of our communities.”
- 4.4** More specifically with reference to the town centre the priority “A town centre for all” states that “We want our town centres in Newcastle and Kidsgrove to be the vibrant and successful centres of life in the borough. We want to ensure that they have the right retail, public service, leisure, cultural, business and residential facilities that work for local residents and attract visitors and businesses to the town centres.”
- 4.5** The Plan says that “For the period of this plan, we will continue to support and work with partners, such as the Newcastle Business Improvement District (BID) to build on its good work, notably in relation to the town centre activities programme which continues to grow in stature, with annual highlights firmly embedded in events such as the Lymelight and Jazz and Blues Festivals. These events are vitally important to ensure that Newcastle Town Centre remains the

local centre of choice for the borough's residents given the evident challenges for the retail sector."

- 4.6 More particularly the Plan confirms that the Council is committed to "Delivering car parking services that support the town centres".

5. **Legal and statutory implications**

- 5.1 The Council is under no statutory obligation to provide, manage or operate public car parks but in choosing to do so it must ensure compliance with relevant traffic regulations. In addition there is other prevailing legislation relating to the safe operation and use of premises, buildings and land put to use for car parking purposes, notably Health and Safety legislation.

6. **Financial and resources implications**

- 6.1 At this stage it is difficult to quantify with any high degree of accuracy the actual financial implications to the Council. However officers feel that with this balanced range of measures it is reasonable to assume that the Council will achieve a neutral position (i.e. stabilising income levels overall).
- 6.2 There may be some modest costs arising from exploration of the Pay on Exit (PoE) option which would be funded from existing budgets.
- 6.3 Subject to any future decision about the introduction of PoE there would be a requirement for capital expenditure for modifications to associated car parks. In addition there may be capital costs arising from introduction of smarter charging initiatives. But both of these matters are for future exploration and do not require any budgetary provision at this stage.
- 6.4 Budgetary provision of up to £15k will be required to implement the range of measures described in the above table. The main cost will arise from works associated with the Merrial Street pay and display along with other costs of new signs and alterations to ticket machines. This budget provision will be made from within existing resources.

7. **Major Risks**

- 7.1 That the local community does not respond positively to the various initiatives set out in the report thereby failing to achieve the aim of increasing footfall for the benefit of the town centre economy. The main influencing action / mitigation in this case would be the promotion and marketing of the new charging regime through both the Council's own media and that of the Newcastle BID.
- 7.2 That insufficient income is derived from the sale of Parking Permits to large businesses / organisations to counter-balance the various concessions and discounts being made by the Council. The main mitigating action would be utilisation of a range of marketing approaches to promote such Permits.

8. **Key Decision Information**

- 8.1 This is not a key decision.

9. List of Appendices

9.1 Appendix 1 - Tables showing decline in income from town centre car parks over the past decade.

APPENDIX 1 – TABLES SHOWING DECLINE IN INCOME FROM CAR PARK TICKET MACHINES

