



Car Parking Charges

**A report produced by the
Environment, Climate Emergency and
Transport Committee**

December 2020 Final Report

1. Introduction

A report was brought to the Policy and Resources Committee on the 7th October 2020 by the Director of Neighbourhood Services. This report 'car parking charges options' informed Members of considerations for the reintroduction of the current car parking charges policy in Wirral in 2020/21 and alternative options for parking charges in 2021/22 and beyond.

Several Members of the Policy and Resources Committee expressed concern at the prospect of re-introducing charges at a time when Covid cases were once again on the rise and many local businesses were struggling.

On a motion carried by the Policy and Resources Committee, it was resolved (16:1) that:

(1) this Policy and Resources Committee agrees not to re-introduce car parking charges at this time; and

(2) authorisation is given to the Director of Neighbourhoods to consult on the implications of the medium to long term options detailed in Appendix 1 of the report and a further report is brought to the Environment, Climate Emergency and Transport Committee, as a matter of urgency, in the new year, with a particular emphasis on social inequalities and that in the meantime officers seek to find compensatory savings and that business traders are also consulted.

As a result of this the Environment, Climate Emergency and Transport Committee put together a working group to consider these options and inform this report.

2. Membership

Membership of this Working Group was cross-party and consisted of:

- Cllr Elizabeth Gray (Chair)
- Cllr Chris Cooke
- Cllr Andy Corkhill
- Cllr Tony Cox
- Cllr Christina Muspratt
- Cllr Irene Williams
- Cllr Alison Wright (Deputies for Cllr Tony Cox – 1st Session)

3. Discussion

The objective of this review is to provide an understanding of the car parking charging strategies which are currently in place, the impact these strategies have on town centre prosperity and footfall, and what other factors, separate to car parking charges influence why people visit town centres

- Develop a consistent and equitable pricing structure for both on-street and off-street parking;
- Use parking pricing as a demand management measure by adjusting the relative costs of on-street and off-street parking and park and ride services;
- Ensure that parking costs fully reflect the costs of providing and maintaining parking spaces;
- Enhance the commercial attractiveness and performance of specific urban areas by making best use of all modes of transport, particularly for travel into the city centre; and
- Ensure, as far as possible, that new parking developments do not distort demand for parking or public transport services.

Session 1

Members of the working group were presented with an overview from the Assistant Director for Highways and Infrastructure to discuss the remit of the working group and the scope. The working group were advised that they needed to consider all the options presented to the Policy and Resource Committee on the 7th October and make recommendations to be referred to committee.

An update was also provided by the Lead Commissioner for Transport and Tech on an upcoming transport strategy. This will be done in consultation with various stakeholders, such as the Birkenhead Business Improvement District (BID) and will consider all road users, businesses, and the community.

Members were informed that this will include a full review into car parking in Wirral as part of the regeneration projects in the Wirral, town centres, retail, and the Local Plan.

The panel voiced their concerns about struggling High Streets and out of town car parking and were reassured that this would be factored into the consultation. Also raised during this discussion was the need for integrated transport for the disabled and the provision of electric car parking points. It was agreed by all Members of the panel that this consultation should look at transport in Wirral in a holistic manner and factor in Environment and Climate Change implications as well as supporting local businesses and promoting active travel.

Members were keen to understand the impact that car-parking charges had on businesses and queried if this was a perception or it actually had an impact. Officers discussed that there had been no evidence found but agreed that a local study would be helpful moving forward. Some members voiced concerns that a significant number of families in Birkenhead were not car owners and queried the impact on inequality if infrastructure was skewed in favour of car parking.

Discussion then followed on the need for a decision on car parking charges long term, as part of a modal shift in Wirral. Members were concerned not to be seen to create an anti-car strategy but find a balance of all competing interests. An example was also given as to how increased pedestrianisation can in some cases, be beneficial to hospitality businesses with outside eating become more viable and adaptable in a post COVID-19 world. Members also wanted to note the health benefits of more active travel, whilst remaining inclusive.

Questions were raised over drivers with disabilities and the blue badge scheme. It was noted by one member that for some, the only transport option was to use a car and they should not be penalised for this.

Officers then asked the panel to prioritise areas for the next session. Members agreed that they wanted to look closely at the reason for having car parking charges and wanted to discuss this with the Wirral Chamber of Commerce. Also queried was the re-introduction of car parking charges in country parks and coastal locations. It was agreed by Members that that would be open to discussion, but local variables would need to be considered.

Session 2

Wirral Chamber of Commerce BID team had supplied Members with their comments as part of the Policy and Resources Committee report into Car Parking charges. In this report, they highlighted their concerns about the effect the re-introduction of car parking charges could have on Local Businesses, already feeling the effect of COVID-19. The Chamber of Commerce also confirmed that they were fully supportive of the Council's Climate Emergency and understood the need for active travel options. However, this was also countered with a need to support local businesses due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Wirral Chamber of Commerce were invited to attend the second session, on behalf of local businesses and to enable panel Members to ask further questions.

Members of the panel queried if there has been an impact assessment undertaken in Wirral and if there was any evidence to suggest that the removal of car parking charges had made a positive impact on Wirral's high street during the COVID-19 epidemic.

Also raised was the competition from out of town retail parks and Liverpool City Centre, all of which provide free parking or convenient public transport links.

Wirral Chamber of Commerce commented that Birkenhead is currently second in the country for recovering high streets. Also mentioned was other methods of supporting businesses such as click and collect and using social media for purchases, alongside championing local high streets through initiatives such as Independent Wirral. It was noted that the economy is all encompassing and that saving jobs and keeping traders in business is the current priority. Wirral Chamber of Commerce are consulting daily with businesses, shoppers and traders and free parking regularly comes up in conversation.

Members agreed that the impact of car parking charges on commerce is something they would recommend being looked at in depth as part of any future transport strategy, but stressed the fact that it is not a black or white issue in Wirral and local considerations and concerns need to be factored in.

A representative from Wirral Environment Network was also invited to speak to Members. They emphasised their belief that there is no such thing as free parking, in that payment for the facilities themselves had to come from somewhere. Post Covid - 19 they felt that it is now vital for business to recover and by reducing car travel, this should increase 'dwell time' and more time for visitors to shop. Also raised was the impact on equalities and the potential benefits of a modal shift for car free families.

The representative also highlighted that there is no evidence to date that free car parking has a causal benefit to retail centres, but noted that there is evidence that retailers overestimate the impact of car parking charges and highlighted the positive impact of living streets and the 'pedestrian pound'.

Members queried the 'stick and carrot' approach to highlighting the benefits of active travel and retail as part of a leisure experience, by enticing shoppers with hospitality offers. WEN agreed with this, but said the issue was providing options in the first place.

Some Members felt that car use was less prevalent than it appeared, with full car parks leading to the assumption that everyone uses that mode of transport. The panel agreed that a Wirral focused survey needs to be done on this, with member input regarding the questions to ensure a 360 perspective was captured. Wirral Chamber of commerce also suggested that Business owners be included in this as they also pay for parking.

All in attendance agreed that the primary focus currently is COVID-19 and that economic recovery is vital, but that needed to be a sustainable recovery and that other transport options are promoted.

4. Summary and Recommendations

Members undertook this review in two sessions, during which a lot of information and ideas were discussed and reviewed. Overall, the panel agreed the need for the subject of car parking charges to be looked at locally and the need to produce information that was data driven and not anecdotal. There was also agreement that there needs to be a holistic transport strategy in the Wirral and members would support further reviews and studies undertaken by the Council, Wirral Chamber of Commerce and Wirral Environment Network.

Recommendations:

- Members support the upcoming transport strategy and recommend that any future transport strategy consults with Members, businesses, communities to ensure that it is environmentally, economically, and socially sustainable.
- The panel also recommends that a comprehensive review and survey is undertaken in Wirral as to the local impact of car parking charges on footfall and spend in retail areas and the high street.
- Members considered the request made by the Policy and Resource committee to consider the options attached in appendix 1 of this report. After much debate, Members considered the following options were acceptable and wish to submit them to the Policy and Resource Committee for consideration.

➤ **Option 4 (re-introduce parking charges immediately at all locations)**

Members understood that there would be no reintroduction of car parking charges until early 2021. They acknowledge the need to support local retailers during the second lockdown and in the run up to Christmas. Five of the six working group Members wished to put forward Option 4 to be considered alongside any subsequent reviews or studies.

Two of the five Members requested an additional caveat that Country Parks remain free until after lockdown due to the perceived health and wellbeing implications. Concerns were raised that introducing car parking charges in Country Parks would limit their accessibility to low-income car owners, especially during COVID-19 when more people are

facing financial pressures. One Member also raised the point that charging for parking in country parks did not reduce visitor number and that the income generated would help with repairs and maintenance of the parks.

Option 6 (re-introduce charges at long-stay and on-street and County parks but not 'shoppers' car parks)

One Member of the working group also wished to put forward option 6 for consideration. This Member was satisfied with this option in its entirety, however other working group members again raised concerns about re-introduction of car parking charges in Country Parks, for the reasons stated above and because of the environmental impact.