

DECISION REVIEW COMMITTEE

Thursday, 29 July 2021

<u>Present:</u>	Councillor	P Hayes (Chair)	
	Councillors	T Anderson K Cannon C Carubia P Cleary T Cox	A Gardner Joe Walsh S Frost (In place of S Jones) K Greaney (In place of I Williams) J Robinson (In place of KJ Williams)

1 MEMBERS' CODE OF CONDUCT - DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST/ PARTY WHIP

The Chair welcomed attendees and viewers to the meeting and reminded everyone that the meeting was webcast and retained on the Council's website.

There were no declarations of interest, and the Chair emphasised that there was no party whip applied to this meeting.

2 DECISION REVIEW PROCEDURE

The Chair talked through the procedure to be followed.

3 DECISION REVIEW - CAR PARKING CHARGING OPTIONS

Councillor Simon Mountney introduced the reviewed decision notice on which he was lead signatory. He stated that the Environment, Climate Emergency and Transport Committee had failed to carry out a car parking review and this had led to a poor and wasteful decision. He asked the Committee to look at:

- 1) Information on car parking usage which had been lacking and therefore had not been used to come to the decision, and could cause a 30% reduction in footfall.
- 2) Displaced parking which was not considered as some areas would be affected more than others.
- 3) Lack of discussion on town centre development plans which would heavily influence car parking in some areas, including the fact that some car parks could be removed as part of developments.

He explained that businesses were in a difficult financial position because of the pandemic and that introducing car parking charges would have a detrimental effect on them.

Councillor Simon Mountney answered Members questions which established:

- Over 8,500 residents had indicated opposition to the charges, and their views would be presented to a future Council meeting
- There had been no discussion about carbon footprints of setting up the infrastructure required to implement the decision, and there had been only limited discussion about the cost
- The budget savings which the Committee were called to find should be achieved both through charges and the review of car parking charges
- The budget saving was for the 2021/22 budget and the review of car parking was not scheduled to be complete until Autumn 2021
- The 30% reduction in business footfall was mentioned in the report
- The Council was in a dire situation but businesses had not changed since the last review in 2017 and their situation had deteriorated since 2017
- There were ways to achieve more sustainable travel such as electric vehicle use

Councillor Phil Gilchrist then introduced the reviewed decision notice in which he was a lead signatory and presented a slide show focussed on Bromborough village showing how it had changed, the effects on the high street of parking restrictions and nearby free parking. His conclusion was that parking charges would kill the village and would dissuade people from using shops and other services.

Councillor Phil Gilchrist answered Members questions which established:

- there were approximately 70 staff using car parking places who may choose to park elsewhere in the community.

Councillor Chris Cooke then spoke as a decision maker and stated that the decision to increase charges was to be set in the context of the parking review and the budget emergency. All groups came together to support the budget which included £10.7 million borrowed from central Government if the Council could prove competent to make savings. The Environment, Climate Emergency and Transport Committee was tasked to find £1 million savings from car parking, with any excess income paying for road management, safety and maintenance. He believed that the least well off, through their Council Tax, had been subsidising the better off who had free car parking. The review notice stated that charges will reduce demand by 30% but this was a misquote and did not appear anywhere else. It assumed that shoppers would defer shopping rather than try other modes of transport. The Climate Emergency required using parking charges to encourage people to use other modes of travel.

Councillor Liz Grey then spoke as a decision maker. She stated that the Council had lost hundreds of thousands of pounds in 2020 and £30,000 in 2021 because of this decision review and it showed a contempt for fiscal responsibility, breaking a promise made at full Council where all parties agreed to increase charges. She outlined potential alternatives to finding savings including closing leisure centres, closing public toilets, dismissing school crossing people, closing art galleries, closing golf courses and compulsory staff redundancies. She reminded Members that Environment Committee had not been tasked with deciding if charges were increased, as that had previously been decided by all parties at Council. Parking charges were supported by residents in the budget consultation and there was only anecdotal evidence of detrimental effects. She felt that Car parking should pay for itself and she stated that Wirral's charges remained lower than our neighbouring authorities even if these changes were implemented.

Councillors Chris Cooke and Liz Grey then answered Members questions which established:

- Although the point of the process was financial there could be environmental and social justice implications as affluent areas had free parking.
- Car parking had been loss making and subsidised from other budgets
- Surplus income was restricted in its use under the Road Traffic Act 1984 and the Government had issued guidance in April 2020 regarding permitted use of funds
- There could be wear and tear costs on car parks where there was no charging
- There was not a consensus amongst Members about whether it would be detrimental to businesses because of a lack of precise evidence
- Consultation would form part of the review of car parking
- The funds from central Government were to cover Council costs arising from the pandemic. Money provided for businesses had been distributed
- There had been an opportunity cost for car parks as the land could have been used for alternative purposes.
- Air quality changes may be balanced once a modal shift took place
- There were issues where people parked outside Country Parks to avoid charges such as at Eastham Country Park
- There was initial capital investment required for some options

The witnesses then made statements.

Witnesses for Councillor Simon Mountney

Mr Simon Trout and Mrs Ruth Trout, West Kirby residents spoke. They had been involved in 2018 in an action group against the introduction of car parking charges in coastal towns, and their reasons had not changed, in fact they had strengthened during Covid because of the influx of new leisure visitors and increased use of the coastal areas, encouraged by social media and apps, including by motor homes. There was little off-street parking in the

area, including on new developments, and many streets had restricted on-street parking which displaced residents parking and caused traffic congestion. They felt that a comprehensive car parking charge policy should take into account the differences between towns. They recalled that a 2018 review noted that visitors, the disabled and elderly used the waterfront for their mental and physical health.

Mr and Mrs Trout then answered Members questions which established:

- Using side streets for parking could cause more accidents and less ability for residents to park
- A consultation would enable an organised objection to proposals similar to the leaflet drop done in 2018
- The installation of electric charging points on streets caused concern as well

David Wooley, Secretary of New Brighton Marine Lake users, and Mike Ellis, Model Boat Society, talked about the history of the Marine Lake where people come to watch model craft which were brought from all over the country to be sailed. The user group of 31 people took a role in cleaning the surroundings, treating the water and salvaging sunk models rather than have the Council do it. There were 30 parking spaces adjacent to the lake. if the proposal was agreed there would be a loss of attendance to the lake and reduced membership of the Model Boat Society, affecting people's well-being and being detrimental to the area.

Mr Wooley then answered Members questions which established:

- Volunteers can have an exemption of parking charges
- In one hour recently, 380 people watched the craft

Kathy Morgan, manager of the Little Gift House in Bebington spoke of feeling defeated and demoralized as Bebington had suffered during her 10 years working there with the opening of a supermarket and closure of the civic centre and town hall. The temporary closure of the library had disrupted classes and services it had provided. The major issue was the lack of short stay parking allowance on the high street, which caused stress and anxiety for business owners. She also noted that staff would have to pay parking fees. Shops faced challenges from out-of-town retail centres, garden centres and online shopping, and parking charges appeared to be a tariff for buying local. She asked the Council to recognise the benefits of local shops.

Ms Morgan then answered Members questions which established:

- The planned approach showed no recognition of what small businesses had gone through
- The uncertainty does require consideration of mitigation plans
- Customers included parents with prams on the school run and fewer elderly since the lockdowns began
- There was nowhere to park bikes near her shop

- Takings had reduced to about 57% of the required amounts as costs had continued to increase
- Displacement parking could destroy businesses
- A consultation and fine tuning of policy was required without assumptions

Sue Ramsey, a representative of a community group aiming to regenerate West Kirby, spoke next and was aware of the serious concerns of the impact of charges. She highlighted issues including the impact on residents of displaced parking into residential areas and the effect on local businesses, especially service-related ones such as hairdressers, who only needed short term parking. She believed it would send people to other areas and deter lower income families using the prom as a cheap day out. She pointed out that there had also been no consultation on the proposed parking issue. She believed a consultation would have the same opposition campaign as the 2018 proposals, and she would prefer the Council to wait for the review.

Ms Ramsey then answered Members questions which established:

- Many people would try and get free parking where possible.
- Public transport as an alternative added a higher cost for most visitors and may be difficult for families, the elderly or those with equipment for their day out
- Blue badge holders had unlimited free parking, although not everyone with a disability had a blue badge.

Dawn Wormell, a shift worker, then related that there seemed to be no consideration for displacement of vehicles as they avoided parking charges, as if it happened residents may not be able to park outside their own houses after a shift and may spend a long time driving round to find a space in the area. She could also anticipate people fearing the inability to park on the seafront. The train was expensive for her with three children, and she couldn't get to hospital on public transport when required. She suggested having two hours free parking.

Ms Wormell then answered Members questions which established:

- A petition had been raised by West Kirby retailers around 2019 who felt car parking charges were affecting them and if removed would benefit them.
- It may become impossible for local residents to park on the side streets where they lived.

Andrew Cain of outfitters store Cain of Heswall, spoke of car parking always being a hot topic in Heswall with people abusing it by parking and taking the train to Liverpool. He knew that some consumers used out of town facilities then the internet. He felt that if more shops were occupied then rates revenue would increase. He was aware that people buying inexpensive items, such as

a newspaper, would not want to pay for parking, and that elderly people were less likely to bike or walk to shops.

Mr Cain then answered Members questions which established:

- The Business Association kept a list of vacant shops and listed 20 ground floor premises empty which was double the normal rate.

Witnesses for Councillor Phil Gilchrist

Philip Spencer then spoke as a member of the Bromborough Village Community Association. He had two petitions, one from the shops and visitors with 5,000 names and one online with 2,000. He pleaded for an exemption from charges as The Croft Retail Park and Lidl supermarket were both nearby threats to the village with free parking, and parking charges in the village would only worsen that. Over one day, a survey showed 84 staff parking which included food tasters who came for only an hour and earned £10 so a charge would eat into that. He felt that the Council's income would come at a cost.

Mr Spencer then answered Members questions which established:

- Recent evidence for losses was partly anecdotal but he was aware that footfall had reduced. Two years prior there was a traffic count twice a day which was duplicated more recently. Previously the figures were 120 in the morning and 109 in the afternoon whilst recently it was 89 and 86 respectively.
- He was not aware of the budget consultation that took place last year.

Decision-makers witnesses

Naomi Graham of the Wirral Environment Network spoke of the published material which she had presented to the Car Parking Working Group in November 2020, showing that transport contributed 20% of greenhouse gas emissions. The Council was to embed sustainable transport solutions and encouraging modal shift across the Borough, which should have a positive impact on the economy. She detailed how the top 10 most prosperous high streets in the country had a variety of car parking charges. The top had no free parking, and, statistically, pedestrian, bus users and cyclists returned more and spent more overall than car users, but shop owners overestimated car owner footfall. Displacement was location specific and there was no major change in parking patterns caused by parking charges.

Ms Graham then answered Members questions which established:

- Reports based on London identified it as a network of villages so were applicable to Wirral
- Having good local transport links was a benefit but it did need balancing with car use
- Data showed that parking charges encouraged more turnover in cars and therefore more visitors

- Evidence also showed that free parking allowed people to stay longer which prevented turnover
- Signage reduced displacement and consistent pricing encouraged car park usage
- A study in Warwickshire showed little evidence that there was any change in parking availability in residential streets once parking charges were introduced
- The reduction in footfall of 30% was anecdotal and she had not seen any published evidence of it
- There was statistical evidence across a wide range of situations
- On the Wirral 28% of people did not own cars, with 48% in the lowest 10% of incomes

Moira Gommon, an Oxton resident, then spoke to the Committee, stating that she was happy to pay to park and believed others would too, as they would prefer to buy things in their usual shops. She saw her spending on car parking as maintaining services to those living in low-income communities as well as spending on art galleries, lollipop people etc. She thought it would be awful to lose those.

Ms Gommon then answered Members questions which established:

- Shops may not be interchangeable, such as some shops offering no plastic wrapping, so required journeys rather than being able to buy the same in supermarkets
- Many people like her would make the same choice to pay for parking as their choices were less limited
- People less able to carry shopping were more likely to drive

Officers

Officers were then asked to speak to the Committee. The first was Shaer Halewood, the Director of Resources and the Council's Section 151 Officer. Ms Halewood provided details of the process of the Council's current financial position and the fact that as the capitalisation directive offer was not guaranteed, there was still a budget gap for this year of £10.7m. She explained the process for receiving Government grants for specific Covid 19 costs and emphasised that car parking was not covered by the grants and had not been identified as a covid pressure when the budget was set. If car parking charges were not introduced, Policy and Resources Committee would need to find alternative funding. She reminded members that the budget vote and the identification of car parking to help bridge the budget gap was unanimously voted for at Council and as a result her advice was that the proposal should be implemented.

Ms Halewood then answered Members questions which established:

- Under the rules for Government providing money to cover Council expenses which were due to the pandemic, the Council had to cover the initial 5% of costs then could claim 75% of the remainder of costs

incurred during lockdown. Once out of lockdown, the lack of income is regarded as the Council's choice so could not be claimed

- There was money set aside for remobilisation of assets such as buildings including leisure centres which included ventilation
- Using provided funds for non-Covid purposes, such as providing free car parking as a direct support to high street businesses, would reduce the amount of funding the Council could claim so increasing the budget gap
- Assets such as buildings which were surplus to requirements were scheduled to be disposed of in a managed programme to take maximum advantage of the changing market, so they could not be liquidated quickly. The Council's external auditors had cautioned against using short term funding to cover a budget shortfall. Selling assets would impact on the capitalisation but not the budget or the sustainability of car parking
- There is no contingency plan as the decision was made by full Council
- Implementing the proposal would partly relieve the budget shortfall which would increase the gap for future years

As it was 11.30 pm, the Chair then proposed to adjourn the meeting to a future date to be agreed with the Chair and spokespersons to continue the decision review process.

This was seconded by Councillor Kate Cannon

Resolved – that the decision review meeting on car parking charges be adjourned to a date to be agreed with the Chair and Spokespersons.