

ENVIRONMENT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Thursday, 30 July 2020
6.00 - 7.25 p.m.

<u>Present:</u>	Councillor	T Anderson (Chair)	
	Councillors	C Muspratt T Cottier G Davies K Greaney B Kenny L Rennie	S Spoor I Williams H Cameron A Hodson A Brame S Hayes
<u>In attendance:</u>	Councillors	J Johnson I Lewis J Williamson	B Berry C Povall, JP

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

Members were asked to consider whether they had any disclosable pecuniary interests and/or any other relevant interest in connection with any items on the agenda and, if so, to declare them and state the nature of the interest.

Members were reminded that they should also declare whether they were subject to a party whip in connection with any items to be considered and, if so, to declare it and state the nature of the whipping arrangement.

No such declarations were made.

51 CALLED-IN BUSINESS - REINTRODUCTION OF CAR PARKING CHARGES

The Chair introduced the item of business 'Reintroduction of Car Parking Charges' considered by the Cabinet Members as a delegated decision made on 9 July 2020, the decision relating thereto having been called-in in accordance with Council Procedure Rule / Standing Order 35.

The Chair detailed the procedure for the consideration of called-in business that had been circulated with the agenda. The Committee further received -

- the details of the call-in and reasons submitted;
- The decision notice for the delegated decision; and

- the report and appendices considered by the Cabinet Member. These had been erroneously considered confidential at the time of publication and had subsequently been published as a supplement.

The delegated decision made on 9 July 2020 had been called in by Councillors Jenny Johnson (lead signatory), Tom Anderson, Bruce Berry, Wendy Clements, Mike Collins, Tony Cox, Andrew Gardner, Jeff Green, Paul Hayes, Andrew Hodson, Kathy Hodson, Mary Jordan, Ian Lewis, Cherry Povall, Lesley Rennie, Les Rowlands, Steve Williams, Alison Wright, on the following grounds:-

“While Wirral shops and small businesses in our retain areas have shared in the £63 million given to Wirral Council to support them, the economic recovery of the high street is not yet assured.

The medium-term impact of consumer demand shifting to online shopping has yet to be assessed or understood.

Many consumers remain understandably wary of a return to traditional means of shopping and reintroduction of charges will act as a further discouragement.

The justification for the decision is, itself, based on very rough estimates of potential income and loss of income to the Council.

The wider budget of the Council has yet to be reviewed or amended following the outbreak and so piecemeal budgetary decisions should be avoided.

This issue should be deferred until the new Committee system is in place from September, enabling the decision to be reached in public.”

Councillor Jennifer Johnson, as lead signatory, added that:

- there were reports that retail was changing with a rise in online sales
- the high street needed to offer unique customer experiences and shared spaces
- there had been local closures of shops and banks but there was innovation and improvements in confidence.
- Reinstating the car parking charge just as recovery was underway would disregard businesses competing with online and out of town shopping.
- We needed: evidence-based decision making with clear research; to prioritise safety; to encourage people back into local shops; to incentivise people to return with the Council playing their part.
- parking charges hit vulnerable people.

Councillor Janette Williamson, representing the decision taker Councillor Julia McManus, stated that the debate was needed because of factors including:

- Free parking in country parks encouraged exercise
- Restarting charges will be informed by the Council agenda to avoid use of cars, ship local, use public transport
- The Council would want to push forward the environmental agenda

- People were reluctant to public transport for various reasons – a second wave of the virus, wearing masks
- The wording of central Government support was specific in that they would not be giving any reimbursement after 4 July and any loss of income after that was regarded as a Council decision

Councillor Williamson expressed her feeling that the car parking charges should remain suspended until the issue was considered by the Policy and Resources Committee in the new Committee system in October because of concerns over the second wave and a precarious economy.

Councillor Williamson responded to Members' questions:

- Allowing people to pay, if they wished to, had been considered by other Councils and was an option but the decision had been taken in Wirral to suspend charges. It meant lost revenue but helped residents, and most Councils had reintroduced parking charges
- It would have been difficult for anyone to pay during the suspension period as there was signage and meters had been covered over but there would be communications about the state of restrictions
- Any review will look at which socioeconomic group were most affected by the charges
- The loss of income would need additional resources determined by Policy and Resources
- Traders groups would need to be included in any consultation.

Julie Dala from Shrimps Hair Design in West Kirby then spoke as a witness for the signatories. Julie had worked as a hairdresser in West Kirby since 1987. Julie made a number of points:

1. She understood from customers that people block the local car park to use the train. Traders there would welcome permanent two-hour free car parking with signage to the Concourse, which people often bypass and park at Morrisons.
2. Patients attending the GP surgery do get stressed at having to top up at the car park whilst waiting and occasionally missing appointments by doing so.
3. Gym membership – West Kirby had the only sports facility in Wirral where people pay for parking.
4. A touch payment machine would be another new idea.
5. Footfall had reduced again since lockdown restrictions were eased and a few shops had closed.

Julie responded to Members' questions:

- The Council had sought her views about how to help the high street
- Julie was willing to be a contact for local businesses and had an active WhatsApp group of traders with 77 members.

The witnesses for the Cabinet Member were called up to give statements and answer questions.

Shaer Halewood, Director of Resources for Wirral Council, provided the context of the decision and the compensation from central Government. Quarter 1 in 2020/2021 showed an overspend of about £30 million. There had been additional funding of around £3.2 million and in July the Government had announced a compensation process for claiming back lost income where Councils withstand the first 5% and can claim back 75% but precise amounts were not yet available. It was estimated that there would be about £21 million in lost income with about £9 million able to be recouped. That gave an overall budget of £18 million overspend and no options to recoup that.

The Director responded to Members' questions:

- The £63 million business grant had been allocated
- It was hoped that additional funding from Government would be forthcoming if there was a second wave of the virus
- Direct expenditure for the management around the virus, such as for humanitarian aid, was fully funded. It was income that was only partly reimbursed

Sarah Cox, Senior Finance Business Partner, provided some estimations for the finances around car parking. There had been an income target of £2.4 million, with approximately £1.8 million in charges and £300,000 for fines. In the pandemic, there was a projected shortfall of £1.6 million if charges were reinstated in August but that would deteriorate if they were not reinstated. Most costs involved were for employees and existing contracts which had to be honoured, such as paying for enforcement even when it was not carried out. The total shortfall may be in the region of £2 million.

The Business Partner responded to Members' questions, including that there was a loss of income from car parks near Council buildings due to staff not being in the offices and the Council does benefit from staff working from home. The breakdown between staff permits/parking costs and external income can be looked at.

Simon Fox, Assistant Director for Highways and Infrastructure, gave the context of the service – there would normally be 1.8 million ticket sales for the year but in the next 6 months there was expected to be 60% of that giving around £500,000 rather than £900,000 income.

The Assistant Director responded to Members' questions, including

- because it is an unusual situation the financial figures are all estimates based on research in other areas
- enforcement of limited time street parking was in force in target areas such as near hospitals and on yellow lines

Councillor Jennie Johnson, as Lead Signatory, summed up by thanking those who had acted as witnesses and was pleased at the indication of acceptance of the intention of the call-in. Councillor Johnson recognised that the council needed to be solvent and raise income but felt that the strategy needed to be thought through.

Councillor Janette Williamson, acting for the decision maker summed up as follows:

We do listen as a Council and we agree with evidence-based analysis. We do work with local businesses and I would be delighted to work with the representatives from businesses here tonight. We want to look after health, protect the environment and encourage public transport. We have got budget problems and I'm more than happy for car parking charges to continue to be suspended. It is incumbent on all councillors to put other options on table.

The Committee debated the issue which included the following points:

- the costs associated with motoring were more than the income derived but the income helped offset the problems caused by pollution and congestion so the cost was not unfair
- During the pandemic free parking may not being people in if they were scared
- Climate emergency should be taken into account
- There were Wards where driving was essential to access services and shops
- There was no option being proposed to replace the lost income
- There may be an opportunity to introduce cashless payments

Councillor Brian Kenny moved a motion that

“This Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee welcomes the statement made this evening by Councillor Williamson and agrees that car parking charges remain suspended until October 2020 when Policy and Resources Committee will be invited to review and consider at that time.”

This was seconded by Councillor Christina Muspratt.

Councillor Leslie Rennie proposed the following amendment to replace the first sentence of Councillor Kenny's motion:

“Council regrets that Cabinet saw fit to reintroduce car parking charges next week but is grateful to the Members who actually brought the matter to this Committee tonight for full debate and would also like to thank those people from small business who contributed but propose that car parking charges remain suspended until after the matter can be fully reviewed at the first meeting of the Policy and Resources Committee in October 2020.”

This was seconded by Councillor Helen Cameron.

The amendment was put and lost (9:4)

The original motion was then put to the vote and was carried unanimously.

RESOLVED: That

this Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee welcomes the statement made this evening by Councillor Williamson and agrees that car parking charges remain suspended until October 2020 when Policy and Resources Committee will be invited to review and consider at that time.