

BUSINESS OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Tuesday, 18 July 2017

<u>Present:</u>	Councillor	M Sullivan (Chair)	
	Councillors	P Hackett	W Ward
		E Boulton	KJ Williams
		G Ellis	S Williams
		D Mitchell	G Wood
		J Stapleton	
<u>In attendance:</u>	Councillors	C Muspratt (In place of A Leech)	
		I Williams (In place of RL Abbey)	
		D Burgess-Joyce (In place of J Hale)	
		D Elderton (In place of T Pilgrim)	
<u>Apologies</u>	Councillors	J McManus	

13 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting and noted apologies had been received from Councillors Ron Abbey, John Hale, Anita Leech, Julie McManus and Tracey Pilgrim, four of whom had deputies standing in for them.

In advance of the meeting commencing, Mark Smith, Strategic Commissioner – Environment, informed the meeting that having taken advice from the Assistant Director: Law and Governance, the Committee should be mindful to give due regard to a petition of 1,195 signatures objecting to the proposed introduction of parking charges, which had been presented to the Council on 10 July, 2017.

14 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 item(s) on the Committee's 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 item(s) to be considered and, if so, to declare it and state the nature of the whipping arrangement.

Councillor Steve Williams declared that the Conservative Members of the Committee were all signatories to the call-in.

No other declarations were made.

15 **CALL-IN OF CABINET MINUTE 10 - CAR PARKING CHARGES TRAFFIC REGULATION ORDER - CONSIDERATION OF FURTHER REPRESENTATIONS**

The Chair referred to the Cabinet decision of 19 June, 2017 (minute 10 refers) in respect of Car Parking Charges Traffic Regulation Order – Consideration of further representations.

The decision had been called-in by Councillors Tom Anderson, Bruce Berry, Chris Blakeley, Eddie Boulton, David Burgess-Joyce, Wendy Clements, David Elderton, Gerry Ellis, Jeff Green, John Hale, Paul Hayes, Andrew Hodson, Kathy Hodson, Ian Lewis, Tracey Pilgrim, Cherry Povall, Lesley Rennie, Les Rowlands, Adam Sykes, Geoffrey Watt and Steve Williams, on the following grounds:

“The signatories wish to call-in the following decisions by Cabinet:

(2) approves the increase in car parking tariffs at all Council operated car parks, where charges already apply, by 20p;

(3) approves the introduction of car parking charges in country parks with charges of 50p for 1 hour, £1 for 2 hours and £2 all day in Arrove Country Park, Royden Country Park, Eastham Country Park and Thurstaston Country Park.

(4) approves the introduction of a household membership scheme for the use of country parks in (3) at a cost of £50 per annum

Reasons for Call-in:

Whilst we note and welcome the considerable changes since the original proposals for car parking income generation were put forward in December 2016 which proposed:

- a 50p tariff increase at all Council operated car parks
- the introduction of a flat rate tariff of £4 per day at the country parks
- the introduction of parking charges at New Brighton and other shopping centres

We still believe that ANY increase in car parking tariffs will have a damaging effect for Wirral’s shopping centres and the introduction of car parking

charges in our parks will do untold damage to the small businesses associated with them.

We are also concerned that the introduction of car parking charges at Wirral's parks is incompatible with the Council's Public Health responsibilities and the following Pledges from the Wirral Plan:

Older people live well
Thriving small businesses
Greater job opportunities in Wirral
Vibrant tourism economy
Leisure and cultural opportunities for all
Wirral residents live healthier lives

Accordingly, we consider it appropriate that the Cabinet decision be reviewed as insufficient weight has been attached to the non-compatibility of these charges with the Wirral Plan Pledges and the serious concerns raised by local businesses and users of the parks.”

The Chair then invited the lead signatory to the call-in to address the Committee for up to five minutes.

Explanation of Call-in by the Lead Signatory – Councillor Tom Anderson

Councillor Anderson referred to the number of signatories to the petition and that the 1,195 signatory petition was in addition to the 20,000 signatories who had already signed the petition. Comments and objections should have been considered by the Highways and Traffic Representation Panel which had been by-passed in the decision making process. A number of witnesses would be called before the Committee to explain the impact the proposed charges would have on their businesses and their lives. He referred to the partial u-turn the Leader of the Council had taken in January of this year in respect of proposed car parking charges and suggested that allowing for the costs of the installation of pay and display equipment, the Council would be left with a net income of £48,000 from the charges being introduced at the four car parks. He referred to the charitable work undertaken by the friends groups and that 21 employees would be directly affected by the proposals.

It was predicted that there would be a 30 per cent decrease in visitor numbers to the Country Parks. This was not in line with a number of the 2020 pledges. The Council needed to be mindful of the impact this could have on mental health because of the role played by parks and open spaces on people's health and wellbeing.

He commented that the Leader of the Council had listened to businesses but he did not believe that any businesses had been consulted by him or the Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport.

Councillor Anderson suggested that the policy was perverse and the Council needed to think about the knock on effects introducing such charges would have. He proposed that the decision should be sent back to the Cabinet for reconsideration.

The Chair invited questions to the Call-in lead signatory from the Committee and his responses included the following:

- He believed the figure of a 30 per cent decrease in parks' use was a figure which came out of the last call-in meeting.
- He understood that a commitment had been given at the last call-in meeting to speak to all the witnesses but that none had been contacted.

Explanation of the decision taken by the Cabinet – Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport, Councillor Stuart Whittingham

Councillor Stuart Whittingham stated that nobody wanted to increase charges or make cuts to services and he would like nothing more than to provide all services for free but the Council was being forced into this position by the Government decimating services with £45m to come out of the budget this year. £135m was to be saved by 2020. The Rate Support Grant would be removed from every Council by 2020 and a £45m gap in services had to be funded. 50p for an hour's parking and £2 to park all day would raise badly needed revenue to provide services. He thanked all residents and businesses who had taken part in the consultation process.

The Chair invited questions to the Cabinet Member from the Committee and his responses included the following:

- It would not have been appropriate to go out and talk to businesses about specific issues during the consultation process. His door was always open if people wished to come and talk to him.
- He asked if the Committee was aware of how much spending power the Council would have by 2020. Austerity had meant there was £613 per household less to spend on services.
- Officers had suggested there would be a 30 per cent reduction in vehicular traffic at the country parks.
- He had not been to speak to the people at Royden Park.
- He was aware of objections on traffic grounds to the proposals and this would be monitored once the charges were introduced.
- On 8 June, the people of Wirral overwhelmingly rejected austerity in the general election. Austerity was being rejected across the country and if the Council received proper funding from the Government then these charges would not have to be introduced.

- There had been a large number of signatories to the petitions and these had been taken into account as the original proposals had been a lot more severe than the current ones.
- He did not have the figures to hand as to the overspend on holes dug up in roads in 2016/17 and the fines for utility companies.
- Any underspend the Council had in 2016/17 would go into resources
- He was proud of the country parks and all those involved in running and maintaining them for the benefit of everyone.

Evidence from Call-in Witnesses

1. Julie Webster – Acting Director for Health and Wellbeing

Ms Webster declined to make a statement and at the invitation of the Chair her responses to questions from the Committee included the following comments:

- She was currently the Acting Director for Health and Wellbeing having been Fiona Johnstone's deputy for the last 4 years.
- Parks were one of the Borough's best assets and access to open spaces and being outside was good for people's health.
- Her department would work closely with parking services to evaluate the impact the proposals would have.
- She hadn't herself been party to any consultation on the proposed charges, although Fiona Johnstone might well have been.
- Her department had not made any formal representations to the highways authority.
- Until the proposals were introduced it would be difficult to know what the impact would be.
- She was not aware of the amount of her department's budget reductions over the past few years.

2. Councillor Phil Gilchrist - Ward Councillor, Eastham

Councillor Gilchrist stated that he had circulated a series of photographs to the Committee showing a range of motorbikes and cars parked in the vicinity of Eastham Country Park at the weekend. People might not want to park where there were charges and there would be a risk of parking being extended up Ferry Road. He asked what officers envisaged spending the revenue from parking on and would signs be put up to explain where the money was being spent. He stated that there was a risk of damaging local businesses and the area might end up with unsightly yellow lines, which according to the Council's traffic engineers speeded up traffic.

The Chair invited questions to Councillor Gilchrist from the Committee and his responses included the following comments:

- There would be pressure on other car parks if these charges were implemented.
- There could, indeed, be a problem of displacement parking to surrounding roads and the problem would not be helped following the withdrawal of a bus service in April, 2017.
- Ferry Road was long and narrow and cars could find it difficult to pass if parking increased along the road, though he would not like to see the area covered in yellow lines.
- The larger car park at Eastham Country Park had about 60 spaces with the smaller one having about 24.
- He wanted people to enjoy their visit to the park and not have to be looking at their watches worrying about the time left to get back to their car.

3. Andy Wood, Secretary of Arrowe Park Golf Club

Mr Wood stated that parks helped people in a number of ways from public health to tackling obesity and parking charges would put the majority of people off visiting them. People would look to park on roads and this could cause a health and safety issue. In 2003 Wirral Council vetoed Arrowe Park Hospital from implementing charges because of a covenant, was this covenant no longer recognised? Arrow Park Golf Course would be the only golf club in the country with parking charges. The club stood to lose 10 to 20 per cent of its membership and Mr Wood questioned whether there would be any concessions for golfers. The money spent on the 'foot golf' course at Arrowe Park would go to waste. It had been suggested by Council officers that there would be a 30 per cent reduction in the use of country parks and with an income of £240,000 for golf fees and £90,000 from 'foot golf' in 2016 there would be a loss of income of £99,000. He suggested that there were more proportionate ways in which cuts could be made.

The Chair invited questions to Mr Wood from the Committee and his responses included the following comments:

- There had been a reduction in members from 150 to 136, and 53 members had rejoined a month later as they were worried about the proposed charges.
- He praised the Council department responsible for the upkeep of the golf course and the fact that people had been attracted to the course. The introduction of charges could be detrimental to this.

4. Jayne Smith – Arrowe Country Park

Ms Smith was a Member of the Arrowe Park Ladies Golf Club and commented that charges would have a huge impact financially and socially. The club was at full capacity and members did not just participate in golf but other activities such as bridge and it was a lifeline for older ladies who had

lost husbands or partners. The introduction of charges would have a serious impact and be detrimental in encouraging older people to be more active.

The Chair invited questions to Ms Smith from the Committee and her responses included the following comments:

- The club was a lifeline for the older members and a big part of their lives as they went there most days for various activities.

5. Richard Fahy – Eastham Country Park

Mr Fahy commented that he walked his dog in Eastham Country Park, four or five times a week and as an outdoor enthusiast had walked and climbed all over the world. He suggested that the proposed car parking charges were a disgrace and that the revenue raised would be minimal. The Council should have regard to its twenty pledges which included business and the environment as these would be harmed by these proposals. He referred to a scheme for parking charges in Snowdonia, which had been abandoned due to opposition.

The Chair invited questions to Mr Fahy from the Committee and his responses included the following comments:

- He believed that the Snowdon scheme involved consultants and it had been thrown out as it was not considered feasible.

The Chair referred to parking charges at Moel Famua, which had recently doubled and there were car parks around Snowdon which were quite expensive.

6. Pat Gibson-Saxty – Owner of the Mimosa Café, Eastham Country Park

Ms Gibson-Saxty stated that she had lived in her home for 60 years at Eastham and was there before it became a country park. She believed that the soul would be ripped out of the country park if the charges were introduced. She considered that the installation of parking meters would urbanise the country park, it would be official vandalism and the damage would be irreparable. There would be some people who would no longer visit the park if they had to pay.

The Chair invited questions to Ms Gibson-Saxty from the Committee and her responses included the following comments:

- It was difficult to quantify what the impact would be on her business, customers had said they would not come as often.

- She had built her business up since 1971 and did not have any parking on her property, she stated that the repercussions would be long lasting.
- She suggested the need to work together and come up with more creative solutions to raise revenue for the Council.

In response to a question on signage for the car parking charges, Mark Smith, Strategic Commissioner - Environment stated that there would be meter square signs and the process of introducing car parking charges also covered the associated signage required and that this was the final step.

7. Karen James-Hunt – Owner of Eastham Woods Boarding Cattery

Ms James-Hunt described Eastham Country Park as a very unique place in Wirral with five businesses drawing customers from far and wide. Her cattery had customers from Cheshire, North Wales and Merseyside. People visiting the businesses wanted to park outside the business. The car parks did get very busy and there would be an issue of displacement once charges were introduced. She questioned why her customers would have to pay to park to drop off their cats, and informed the committee that no consultation had taken place. There appeared to be no interest in the impact this would have on businesses, their viability and the vitality of the community around them.

The Chair invited questions to Ms James-Hunt from the Committee and her responses included the following comments:

- There would be a risk that her customers would go elsewhere.
- She had lived at Eastham Ferry for over 10 years and the impact on the community would be devastating.

At 6.05pm, the Chair agreed to adjourn the meeting for 5 minutes.

The meeting reconvened at 6.15pm.

Evidence from Cabinet Member's witness – Steve Atkins, Parking Services Manager

Mr Atkins clarified a number of matters which had been referred to during the meeting so far, the 30 per cent reduction figure referred to vehicular trips to country parks not the visiting numbers to the parks and was an estimation based on the experience of where an increase in parking charges had been undertaken and not when completely new charges had been introduced to a particular area. The operational running costs would be £21,000 and the predicted income of £150,000 was net of this figure. The double yellow lines on Station Road at Thurstaston Country Park were already in place and had been repainted.

The Chair invited questions to Mr Atkins from the Committee and his responses included the following comments:

- It was quite difficult to do a detailed model of estimated parking charges income and they had used their best experience to arrive at what he thought would be a conservative estimate of £150,000 income.
- The access road for the caravan park and sailing club at Thurstaston were not Council owned and the impact on these would be monitored as would the impact on Station Road.
- The department did not engage directly with public health but discouraging people from driving might encourage people to use other means of transport, or indeed cycle or walk.
- The £50 per annum annual membership scheme was per household not per vehicle and different payment mechanisms would be explored.
- With the pay and display ticket there was an opportunity to advertise and the possibility of some free advertising for local businesses could be examined.
- A campaign for the annual membership scheme would be organised with the communications and engagement team.
- The impact of charges would be monitored and an appropriate amount of time would be allowed, e.g for customers dropping off cats at a cattery.
- Enforcement officers would visit at appropriate times but not around 3/4 times a day.
- The car parking revenue predictions did take account of reductions in visitor trips.
- Permits could be shared although if somebody passed it on to a family friend they could run the risk of it not being returned.
- The present policy of not charging blue badge holders would remain in place.

(At this point, Councillor Dave Mitchell declared a personal interest as a 'Blue Badge' holder.)

- The permit would cover all four Country Parks.
- Other car parking sites would be monitored as to any effect the implementation of charges might have.
- The only costs to the authority for any advertising on parking tickets would be printing costs.

Summary of the Lead Signatory – Councillor Tom Anderson

Councillor Tom Anderson stated that the Cabinet Member had admitted that he had not spoken to anybody and it was a disgrace that nobody had been consulted. The Council was working in silos and Julie Webster didn't bother to give her views on the impact on public health nor did she know her own department's budget. The charges would lead to social isolation, impact on businesses and cause displacement. There had been no assessment

whatsoever of the potential impact. The Leader of the Council had said that he wanted to be held to account on the 2020 pledges, including, 'older people live well', 'thriving small businesses', 'cultural opportunities for all' and 'Wirral residents lead healthier lives', but he had not had regard to them here. There were choices the Council could make to save money, such as deleting the post of Director of Strategy, discontinuing the Wirral View, not spending money on a feasibility study for a golf course or using some of the £42m in reserves.

Summary of the Cabinet Member – Councillor Stuart Whittingham

Councillor Stuart Whittingham thanked everyone who had attended, he too was passionate about the country park areas. People expect to pay something when they visit a tourist attraction. The initial proposals had been reduced following feedback from residents and businesses. The cuts were due to Government imposed austerity and savings had to be delivered. There was a need to fund services and raise income and if the Council didn't introduce charges the parks would deteriorate and this would be much worse for businesses.

Committee debate

A Member commented that there had been a distinct lack of consultation with the businesses affected by the proposed charging policy either by the Authority or the Cabinet Member. The figures on the likely reduction in visitor numbers were based on guesswork.

Another Member commented that she was pleased the proposed charges had been halved. Had the Government considered all the unintended consequences because of the cuts it was imposing across the country. By 2020 the Government would stop providing the Council with any financial support.

Some Members expressed their disquiet at the lack of consultation with businesses that would be affected, though they understood the need to have to plan to make money to keep the Borough running, especially with the withdrawal of central government funding by 2020. There would be a need to judge the system of charges after 12 months or so to see the impact then.

Another Member commented on the farcical approach to enforcement and the fact that permits could be handed around. There appeared to be a piecemeal approach to the whole proposal.

A Member further commented on the need for the Council to balance its books which it had an obligation to do, whilst making sure the effect on residents was minimal.

It was moved by Councillor Jean Stapleton and seconded by Councillor Warren Ward, that –

“This Committee upholds the decision of the Cabinet taken on 19 June, 2017 in respect of the Car Parking Charges Traffic Regulation Orders.”

It was then moved by Councillor Dave Mitchell and seconded by Councillor Gerry Ellis, that –

“Given the proposed loss of income from Arrowe Park Golf Club, plus the effect on all businesses in areas next to the country parks, and the potential impact it would have on those businesses, plus the amenities that local communities expect, this issue should be taken back to the Cabinet and looked at again.”

A further motion was moved by Councillor Steve Williams and seconded by Councillor David Elderton, that –

“Having listened to evidence the witnesses have provided, the apparent conflict with five of the Council’s 20 Pledges and the damage it would cause to businesses and to Council income, these proposals be referred back to the Cabinet Member for reconsideration of withdrawing this proposal.”

The motion moved by Councillor Steve Williams was put and lost (6:8).

The motion moved by Councillor Dave Mitchell was put and lost (6:8)

The motion moved by Councillor Jean Stapleton was put and carried (8:6).

Resolved (8:6) - This Committee upholds the decision of the Cabinet taken on 19 June, 2017 in respect of the Car Parking Charges Traffic Regulation Orders.