

Cabinet – 27 July, 2011

Town Centre Parking working group report

Report of the Environment Scrutiny and Performance Panel

Portfolio: Councillor Ansell

Report detail

A working group led by Councillor L. Beeley undertook an investigation into Town Centre Parking. The working group's objectives included,

1. To clearly understand the influencing factors and constraints to the provision and management of parking facilities.
2. To review the current pricing structure, its impact on the local economy and its influence on demand for commuter parking.
3. To review the number and location of car parks;
4. To develop recommendations for a report to Cabinet on the future provision of car parks.

The working group report was presented by Councillor R. Carpenter, To the Environment Scrutiny and Performance Panel at its meeting on 16 June, 2011.

Whilst considering the report Members of the Panel expressed the view that recommendations 3 and 4, as detailed below be removed from the report:-

- 3) That Officers now implement a charge for off street parking charges for blue badge holders in Walsall;**
- 4) That charges for blue badge holders remain the same as for other members of the public with an additional concession that they be allowed an additional 1 hour following the expiration of their ticket;**

Having considered the report, the Panel voted unanimously to endorse the Town Centre Parking working groups' final report and to recommend to Cabinet the proposals as set-out in the report, with the omission of the above recommendations.

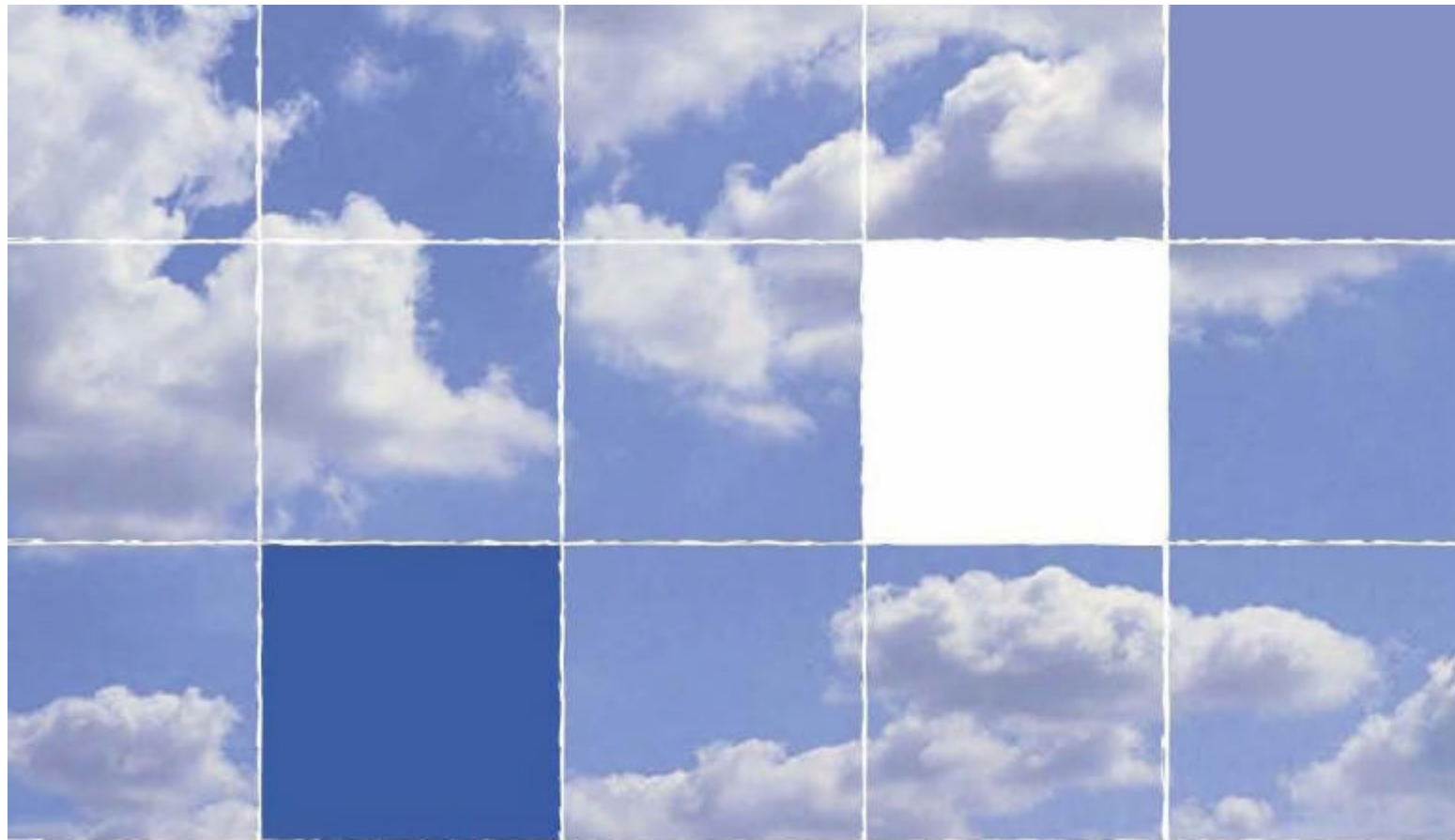
Recommendations

- 1) That the cost of parking at Ward Street and Dudley Street car parks be reduced to £3.00 per day, for a trial period of 6 months from the date of implementation;**
- 2) That the 4 hour parking charge on all town centre car parks be reduced by £1.00 to £2.80 for 4 hours for a trial period of 6 months;**

- 3) That the staff parking policy be reviewed once the impact of the Smarter Workplace Initiative has been established;
- 4) That Officers continue to work with the business community to constantly review parking provision in and around the Crown Wharf and Premier Business Parks;
- 5) That Officers in conjunction with representatives of the Crown Wharf and Premier Business Park, determine the demand for dedicated permit holder only car parks in Frederick Street, Charles Street and Brook Street. Subject to a suitable level of demand, to introduce permit holder business parking at a cost of £30 per month
- 6) That pay and display parking be introduced at the above car parks subject to the demand for permit holder business parking. The level of charge to be set at £3 per day but to be reviewed after 6 months;
- 7) That Cabinet and the Planning Committee be requested to consider the Council's Policy with regard to parking spaces allocated to residential properties built within the town centre as it was the Scrutiny Panel's view that current permitted spaces per property, in reality, created tensions and issues for existing residents and businesses.
- 8) That planning enforcement action be taken swiftly where appropriate to close down unauthorised car parks;
- 9) That the Parking Guidance System and Variable Message Signing be introduced as soon as possible;
- 10) That the current approach to planning restrictions relating to car parking at all developments, for supermarkets and schemes with their 'own' parking facilities be enforced.
- 11) That an update on actions arising from the Working Groups recommendations be considered by the Environment Scrutiny and Performance Panel in the 2011/12 municipal year;

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Town Centre Parking Working Group

**To be presented to Cabinet on 27th
July, 2011**



Walsall Council

Foreword

This working group was tasked to look at town centre parking, as this is an issue that affects residents, businesses and the Council. The working group agreed to investigate areas including charges and locations of car parks whilst having regard to The Traffic Management Act 2004 and the change in Government direction with regard to car parking.

We hope that this report will focus the attention of all community leaders on how working together on moving forward with our recommendations will help tackle this important issue for residents, businesses and the Council.

Finally, I would also like to thank the Officers and witnesses who have contributed to this report.



***Councillor L Beeley
(lead member)***



***Councillor R
Carpenter***



Councillor J Cook



Councillor D Anson

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Introduction

The Environment Scrutiny and Performance Panel identified the need to consider town centre parking when establishing its work programme in May, 2010. The Panel raised the matter again when considering the quarter 2 financial monitoring position for 2010/11 (at their meeting held on 16 November, 2010). This report identified a potential risk relating to income received from car parking and enforcement thereof. The Scrutiny and Performance Panel established a working group to consider and report on a number of matters in relation to car parking within the Town Centre.

Terms of Reference

The draft terms of reference were considered and agreed at the Environment Scrutiny Panel held on 4 January, 2011. The working group subsequently considered and agreed the final terms of reference at its first meeting held on 18 January, 2011.

The objectives of the working group were:

1. To clearly understand the influencing factors and constraints to the provision and management of parking facilities.
2. To review the current pricing structure, its impact on the local economy and its influence on demand for commuter parking.
3. To review the number and location of car parks;
4. To develop recommendations for a report to Cabinet on the future provision of car parks.

The full version of the working group's terms of reference can be found at Appendix 1 to this report.

The working group was supported predominantly by three Officers:

Steve Pretty	Head of Service, Engineering and Transportation
Paul Leighton	Group Leader Traffic Management / Urban Traffic Control / Parking Services
Neil Picken	Senior Constitutional Services Officer

Methodology

The working group held several meetings where they met and discussed issues with a range of Council Officers and external witnesses.

Witnesses

The working group met and discussed Town Centre Parking with the following witnesses:

Helen Kindon	Town Centre Manager, Walsall Council
Richard Chadwick	Team Leader – Regeneration, Walsall Council
Jacqueline Hodgson	Team Manager - Asset Management, Walsall Council
Mike Smith	Regeneration Manager - Planning Policy, Walsall Council
Sue Cyster	Black Country Chamber of commerce
Charlotte Ritchie	Black Country Chamber of commerce
Steven Parkes	Chair Town Wharf Business Park
Pat Newland	Chair Premier Business Park

Report Format

The report is a summary of the evidence the working group received along with comments and suggestions for future action.

Context

The provision and management of car parking facilities have a significant impact on the vitality of the town centre. The quality, price and location of car parking facilities all influence travel patterns, traffic congestion and demand for parking.

A range of policies, legislative constraints and user surveys already influence day to day operation and future development of parking facilities. These include:

- Traffic Management Act 2004
- West Midlands Local Transport Plan
- Council Approved Parking Strategy
- Planning and Regeneration Policy
- Town centre survey
- Blue Badge community survey
- Availability of public transport
- Budget constraints

In addition, there are a significant number of users with competing demands such as businesses, commuters and shoppers. All have a choice as to where they park their vehicles including Council run car parks (both off and on-street), private car parks such as NCP/supermarkets or indeed a number of illegal car parks that have recently come into use. Competition means that the Council's car parking provision needs to be well priced, suitably located and of a high quality in order to meet the needs of customers and generate demand.

In order to ensure that the future provision of car parks in Walsall is as robust as possible, the working group have undertaken a thorough review and identified key areas for improvements. These are set out in a number of recommendations as detailed on page 23.

Town Centre Parking

Legislation, Plans and Strategies

The Traffic Management Act 2004

The Traffic Management Act 2004 places a network management duty on local authorities to keep traffic flowing, and to co-operate with other authorities to the same end. Local authorities have to exercise all of their functions that have an impact on traffic in a more co-ordinated way. The Act places a strong emphasis on the local authority taking responsibility for parking enforcement through the development and implementation of decriminalised parking enforcement.

The Act encouraged the use of alternative modes of transport into the town centre and parking charges were used as a tool to discourage those travelling into the town from using their cars.

The Working Group noted that Governments view on vehicles accessing Town and City Centres had changed since the Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition came into power in 2010. The minister for Communities and Local Government wrote to all Councils to inform them of a Ministerial announcement made on 3 January 2011 that outlines the Government's position on certain aspects of parking policy

Reference to using parking charges to encourage the use of alternative modes of transport had been deleted from Planning Policy Guidance 13 'Transport'.

Planning Policy had been amended giving the freedom to local authorities to set parking charges that reflect their needs. The Government believes it is for the local authority to decide what its parking charges should be. Therefore, the particular reference to using parking charges to encourage the use of alternative modes has also been deleted.

Planning Policy

PPG13 still says that local authorities should use parking policies alongside other planning and transport measures *"to promote sustainable transport choices and reduce reliance on the car for work and other journeys."* As part of an overall land use and transport strategy it advises that major generators of travel demand should be located in town centres, so they can be accessible by public and private transport and so that a single trip can fulfil a variety of purposes.

PPG13 says also that the approach to car parking should complement planning policies on the location of development and support town centre investment. It recognises that *'good quality secure parking is*

important to maintain the vitality and viability of town centres, and to enable retail and leisure uses to flourish.”

The Regional Spatial Strategy for the West Midlands (RSS – January 2008) is part of Walsall's statutory development plan. It identifies Walsall as one of a number of 'strategic centres' where investment in shopping, leisure, offices, etc. is important to support regeneration. However, it also says that local authorities should *manage “the supply, location, and price of parking in town and city centres to limit the provision of longstay spaces, where this is necessary to reduce congestion”*

Walsall's Unitary Development Plan (UDP) seeks to strengthen Walsall and the borough's other centres. It proposes that short stay public parking provision for shoppers and visitors to each centre as a whole should be maintained, enhanced and, where necessary, increased, whilst long-stay car parking for commuters will be strictly controlled or reduced. In town centre and edge-of-centre locations parking should be generally available to serve the needs of the centre as a whole, and be subject to a charging and management regime agreed with the Council. The plan also sets out parking standards for different types of uses. It recognises that within the town centre the Council will negotiate with developers over the appropriate level of parking, bearing in mind that for many development (including housing) it will not be possible to allocate sufficient dedicated spaces.

The UDP recognises the importance of car parking if Walsall Town Centre is to remain competitive. It seeks to ensure that car parks are well-distributed around the town centre where there is good access from surrounding roads and that the issues arising from the loss of any parking can be properly considered.

The Council recently adopted the Black Country Core Strategy. This is based on a strategy to accommodate large-scale growth for shopping, offices leisure and culture in four 'strategic centres', including Walsall Town Centre (as well as Brierley Hill, West Bromwich Town Centre and Wolverhampton City Centre). The plan seeks to strike a balance between ensuring the centres are attractive for investment and managing the demand for travel and for space. It includes that:

- pricing will not be used as a tool for competition between the strategic centres
- the amount and provision of long-stay parking will seek a balance between such parking and encouraging commuters to use more sustainable modes of transport
- except where there is a need for secure dedicated provision, parking should be available to the public to serve the centre as a whole
- “adequate” provision will be made in centres as a whole and in new parking facilities for all types of users, including those with reduced mobility, cyclists and users of powered two-wheelers; and

- maximum parking standards will be consistent with Government policy.
- the location of parking will be reviewed and short-stay parking will be preferred to long-stay provision in places where there is a particular need to serve shoppers and visitors.

West Midlands Local Transport Plan

The West Midlands Local Transport Plan 3 (LTP3) is a statutory document, which, when approved, will set out the transport strategy and policies for the West Midlands Metropolitan Area to 2026, including a detailed delivery programme for the first five years (2011 – 2016).

The Integrated Transport Authority will work with Local Authorities to ensure car parking policies and provisions support the LTP3 aims of encouraging sustainable transport patterns across the Metropolitan Area and promoting vitality of centres. Such policy interventions may include availability and car park pricing.

Continue pursuing a common parking management and pricing approach to deter long stay off-street public parking in locations with high public transport accessibility.

Walsall Council Parking Strategy

Walsall Council's Parking Strategy states that the Council will set and maintain long stay car parking charges at a level that takes account of charges applicable on publicly available car parking facilities whilst promoting the use of sustainable travel choices that reduce the reliance on a car for work and other journeys.

It also identified that where the potential disposal of under utilized or poorly located car parks is being considered Officers would identify and address the financial position of the parking service.

Further, it states that the Council would review parking levels on all Council car parks and consider the need to retain car parks if their size is out of proportion to usage.

With regard to reviewing parking levels, Members considered that a number of car parks were not being utilised effectively. This information is set out in more detail on page 8 of this report.

The Council's Car Parking Service

The car parking service is responsible for managing, maintaining and repairing council operated car parks, providing parking enforcement for off-street and residential parking areas in accordance with the parking orders.

The parking service provides:

- Over 500 short stay pay and display spaces;
- Over 500 long stay pay and display spaces;
- 2,000 free long stay spaces in district centres;
- Designated spaces for blue badge holders;
- Designated spaces for carer and child users;
- Free all day parking in long stay car parks for blue badge holders;
- Free parking up to 4 hours in a short stay car park for blue badge holders;
- A number of car parks covered by the town's closed circuit television security system.

Location and Capacity of Town Centre Car Parks

A map detailing each of the car parks within the town centre is attached as appendix 2 to this report.

In excess of 5,000 publicly available parking spaces are offered within the Town Centre.

Financial Position 2010/11

The Working Group noted that the revenue generation from the Council's car parks was expected to be £1 million per year. This included income from civil parking enforcement which, in its first year (2009/10), raised £50k surplus above operational costs. The combined figure was expected to be up to £100k lower in 2010/2011. This was due to a fall in the number of people frequenting Council owned car parks and an increase in the number of people complying with restrictions, meaning that less penalties from enforcement and subsequently less income.

In addition, pressures on the budget were anticipated as a result of the New Tesco development opening which offered further parking facilities. This risk was identified in the budget report submitted to the Environment Scrutiny and Performance Panel on 16th November, 2010.

An extract of the 2010/11 budget report showing the relevant risk areas is shown below. This has been amended to show that the financial exposure to risk is £100k:-

POTENTIAL RISK	LOWEST COST	ASSESSMENT OF RISK	HIGHEST COST	ASSESSMENT OF RISK	TOTAL FINANCIAL EXPOSURE TO RISK
Loss of car park income with the opening of the new Tesco store - unable to quantify until store / car park is open	0.000	HIGH	?	HIGH	0.100
Further loss of car parking income - pay and display and penalty charge notices	0.000	MEDIUM	0.250	MEDIUM	0.100

Members noted with concern that since Tesco had opened, income received from Hatherton Street Multi Storey Car Park had fallen from £10k per month to £2k per month.

Members acknowledged that income generation formed an important part of the review however income needed to be balanced against the needs of businesses, commuters, staff, shoppers and the vitality of the town centre as a whole.

Occupancy Rates

The working group considered car park occupancy rates and noted that data for both private and public car parks was collected. Surveys were carried out on Monday, Friday and Saturday each week. Three tables detailing this information are attached as appendix 3 to this report.

Analysis of the information gathered indicated that for both long and short stay car parks, there was 60% occupancy and 40% spare capacity on any given day.

Hatherton Road Multi Story Car Park occupancy rates had also fallen since the opening of Tesco resulting in a loss of £8k a month in revenue. Officers stated that planning conditions which formed part of the planning application were not yet being adhered to in relation to the parking restrictions at Tesco.

It was recognised, however, that the approach to be applied to the Tesco car park should be consistent with that applied to other privately-managed car parks within and adjoining the town centre (such as at Crown Wharf) in supporting the strategy to serve trade and investment in the town centre as a whole. In particular, privately-managed car

parks should not be enabled 'to charge off' shoppers and visitors so they could not visit the rest of the centre.

Members noted that Dudley Street and Ward Street Car Parks, both on the periphery of the Town centre, had incredibly low occupancy rates throughout the week with neither achieving over 15% occupancy (statistics taken week commencing 14/07/10).

Members recommended that current approach to planning restrictions relating to car parking at all developments, for supermarkets and schemes with their 'own' parking facilities, should be supported and should be enforced.

Pricing Structure

The Working Group considered the existing charges in place (detailed below).

	Up to 2 hours	Up to 4 hours	All Day	Disabled permit holders
Short stay - 4 hours maximum stay in any day	£1.40	£3.80	N/A	Free (4 hours maximum stay)
Long stay	£1.40	£3.80	£5.00	Free
	1 month	3 months	12 months	
Long Stay Season Tickets	£80.00	£220.00	£800.00	

Members deliberated at length about possible amendments to charges, especially in relation to those car parks on the periphery of the town centre with low occupancy rates.

The Working Group considered the risks associated with lowering charges in all Council run car parks and whether reducing costs alone would encourage more people to park in town. A potential risk was that usage may not increase and income could subsequently fall. Free parking offered during Christmas 2010 was referred to as an example as occupancy rates during this period did not differ greatly from the previous year despite free parking being offered. Revenue of circa £30k was lost as a result.

Despite this the Working Group recognised that the initiative was a good tool to encourage shoppers into the town centre which in turn boosted the local economy.

Members heard that the 4 hour tariff was not well used by customers with 7,959 tickets sold during the first quarter of 2011 compared to 53,172 tickets sold at the up to 2 hour band.

Members recommended that the 4 hour charge on all town centre car parks be reduced to £2.80 for 4 hours for a trial period of 6 months.

Members explored the possibility of reducing the cost of parking all day within the town centre to £4.00. It was agreed by Members that the risks associated with this approach was too great as it could potentially result in a further reduction in revenue. This was due to the fact that reducing costs did not necessarily increase demand to such an extent that additional revenue would be generated. The level of demand would have to increase sufficiently so that the costs of maintaining and enforcing car parks (which would remain the same regardless of price structures) would be covered and exceeded to generate profit.

Members discussed the option of reducing the cost of parking at Dudley Street and Ward Street. Both car parks were further out of the centre of town and had occupancy rates of around 5% on any given day. This would, it was hoped, increase usage of these car parks and in turn increase revenue.

Members recommended that the price of parking all day at Dudley Street and Ward Street should be reduced to £3.00 for a whole day, for a trial period of 6 months.

Blue Badge Scheme

The Disabled Persons' Parking Badge Scheme ('the Scheme') was introduced in 1971, under Section 21 of the Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Act 1970 ('the 1970 Act'). The Scheme provides a national arrangement of on-street parking concessions for severely disabled people who are unable, or find it difficult, to use public transport.

According to 5.10 of The Blue Badge Scheme Local Authority Guidance (England) 2008 the scheme does not apply to off-street car parks, enforcement of disabled persons' parking bays in these car-parks is a matter for the individual owner or operator concerned. In the case of local authority off-street car parks, parking place orders normally either make it an offence for someone not displaying a valid Blue Badge to park in a disabled persons' parking bay or make it subject to the payment of a penalty charge.

Members noted that in Walsall, parking is currently free of charge in off-street car parks for blue badge holders. In other Authorities such as Weymouth and Portland, charges for use of off street parking are the same for blue badge holders as for other members of the public.

Guidance issued by Weymouth and Portland Council is attached as appendix 4 to this report.

Members further noted that the introduction of parking charges for disabled users of council operated off - street car parks and disabled employees using staff parking provisions was considered and noted by Cabinet on 3rd February, 2010 and subsequently by Council on 22nd February, 2010 as part of the budget setting process.

On Street Pay and Display

A total of 32 ticket machines (solar powered in order to be greener and cut down on energy costs.) had been installed across Walsall town centre and started operating from 7th March, 2011.

Streets covered by on street pay and display include:-

ABLEWELL STREET	BOTT LANE
BRADFORD STREET	FREER STREET
GOODALL STREET	HATHERTON STREET
LICHFIELD STREET	LITTLE NEWPORT STREET
LOWER FORSTER STREET	LOWER HALL LANE
MIDLAND ROAD	STAFFORD STREET
STATION STREET	TANTARRA STREET
WALHOUSE ROAD	WARD STREET
WAREWELL STREET	WEDGE STREET

On street parking charges had been introduced in Walsall town centre in a move to help shoppers, businesses and disabled motorists. On street parking would:-

- Free-up parking bays close to shops which had previously been blocked by motorists;
- Enable motorists to be able to use the bays for shopping which would help boost business in the town;
- Make life easier for disabled motorists who use a blue badge to park as more spaces are freed-up.

At a cost of 20p per 10 minute slot up to a maximum of 30 minutes or two hours depending on the location, it was suggested that motorists had a clear choice and that the pricing would encourage people to use off street car parks as a first choice for longer parking.

Members noted that the new on street parking charges did not apply to Blue Badge motorists. This was in line with the national scheme.



Illegal Car Parks and Enforcement

The Working Group learnt that demand for council owned and privately operated car parking was decreasing. A number of illegal car parks were still operating and this provided motorists with increased choice. Illegal car parks offered parking at a lower rate to those operated by the Council and legitimate private car park operators however the quality of provision was not as high. The existence of illegal car parks still had a detrimental effect on the usage of car parks operated by the Council and legitimate private operators.

It was acknowledged that fundamental to any parking strategy is the need for efficient parking enforcement, to ensure that on-street parking supply is managed effectively, to prevent inappropriate parking that could cause congestion and increase dangers for other road users, and to ensure proper management of off-street car parks and time limited on-street parking. Revenue raised through the operation of Civil Parking Enforcement was used to pay for enforcement activities with any surplus being used for other highway authority activities.

The Working Group, having regard to the impact of unauthorized car parking facilities within the town centre, recommended that planning enforcement action be taken swiftly where appropriate.

Staff Parking Scheme

The Working Group considered the use of the staff parking scheme. It was noted that 636 permits had been issued in 2010 with a further 45 for use of the underground car park (not accessible by the public).

The staff parking scheme, which include Councillors and members of staff with car allowance in their job descriptions, generated approximately £230k per year and enabled pass holders to park in the following locations:-

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Hatherton Street	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Hatherton Road Multi Storey levels 4 – 8
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Challenge Building	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Civic Centre Underground
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Paddock Lane multi storey levels 1-5	

Members noted that not all staff were eligible for a staff parking permit.

Members noted that the matter of staff car parking was originally considered by Cabinet in April, 2008. This was at a time when Government direction was very much in favour of alternative modes of transport. It was the working group's view that the matter should now be reconsidered by Cabinet.


Members also noted that a number of initiatives such as Smarter Workplace were being undertaken. This aimed to reduce the overall number of buildings which the Council operated from with a view to bringing staff back to the Civic Centre. This would have implications for town centre car parks as there may be additional parking demand from staff with essential and casual car user allowance and also other staff whom would use pay and display car parks.

Members recommended:-

That the staff parking policy be reviewed once the impact of the Smarter Workplace Initiative has been established.

Hatherton Road Multi Storey Car Park

The Working Group discovered that there was 59 years left on the lease relating to Hatherton Multi Storey Car Park. The car park offered 338 spaces with 248 spaces reserved for staff parking on levels 4 - 8. The car park, leased from Rail Track PLC (now Network Rail), cost the Council £16k per year. In addition, the Council were responsible for



keeping the building in a good state of repair. Further costs were incurred for rates and cleaning. In the 2011/2012 budget £200k had been allocated to undertake remedial maintenance works. The lease had been checked by Walsall Council's Legal Department and confirmed as valid.

With regard to income it was stated that previously the Car Park had generated £10k per calendar month however it was now generating £2k due, it was thought, to people preferring to use the recent Tesco development. Usage on 6 of the 8 floors was by Council Staff who had permits and also blue badge holders.

Members recommended:-

That the staff parking policy be reviewed once the impact of the Smarter Workplace initiative has been established.

Working Together

Given the need to adequately fund the provision and maintenance of strategically located Council car parks, the working group has highlighted an opportunity to trial a revised charging mechanism. If successful this would encourage increased usage on a number of currently under utilised car parks whilst generating an additional revenue stream. This approach will help in identifying the true parking demands for specific car parks and assist with the identification of strategic parking locations that need to be retained and enhanced.

Regeneration and Neighbourhood officers will continue to work together to identify and explore the implications of redevelopment projects and their parking implications. This will ensure parking solutions continue to support the regeneration of the Town Centre whilst also assisting with the efficient use of the public highway and promotion of public transport usage where appropriate"

Witnesses

Business Representatives

Representatives of the business community expressed a number of concerns in relation to the parking matters in and around both the Premier and Crown Wharf Business Parks.

Concern centred on the use (and status of) the 3 car parks within the business parks, directional signage to off street car parks, on street parking and the impact of the new residential developments at Crown Wharf on businesses. All of which were encompassed in businesses view that Walsall was seen as 'anti-car'. It was also their view that the town centre needed to offer more to encourage trade and improve the vitality of the town.

Overall, representatives from the business community stated that Walsall was perceived as a no car/lorry area. This had a negative impact on businesses and the town itself. In addition a number of planning applications submitted by businesses to relocate and or expand had been rejected as they would have attracted more vehicles into town. A number of vacant units existed and more work was needed to welcome cars and improve trade.

Status and use of car parks within business parks

The original designation of the car parks within the business parks was contested. Business representatives were adamant that the car parks were originally intended for business use whereas it was the Council's view that they were public car parks. Businesses were experiencing difficulties as these car parks were being used by shoppers and workers in the town whom would park and walk into work.

It was noted that Officers had been working with business representatives to try to overcome the difficulties faced at the business parks. The Council supported businesses and had suggested a permit scheme with the cost never being lower than the £30 pcm. This was the cost applied to Council staff, as detailed earlier in this report.

Businesses argued that this was an additional tax and the cost was too high. Officers reiterated that the cost was in line with the scheme operated by the Council for its own staff. A trawl of businesses had previously been undertaken by Charlotte Ritchie, Black Country Chamber of Commerce, to establish how successful the scheme would be. It was advised that there had been little support for such a scheme.

Officers advised that the alternative option would be to introduce pay and display which could cost £5 per day which was the same charge applied on other Council operated long stay car parks.

Members recommended:-

- 1) **That Officers continue to work with the business community to constantly review parking provision in and around the Crown Wharf and Premier Business Parks;**
- 2) **That officers in conjunction with representatives of the Crown Wharf and Premier Business Park, determine the demand for dedicated permit holder only car parks in Frederick Street, Charles Street and Brook Street. Subject to a suitable level of demand, to introduce permit holder business parking at a cost of £30 per month**
- 3) **That pay and display parking be introduced at the above car parks subject to the demand for permit holder business parking. The level of charge to be set at £3 per day but to be reviewed after 6 months;**

On street Parking

Business representatives reported that significant problems were experienced as there were no restrictions on parking on, amongst others, Queen/Long Street. Many people parked on these streets due to the fact that it was free and relatively close to the town centre. This created access difficulties for lorries trying to access business premises.

It was stated that the introduction of on-street parking metres could hinder as well as improve matters as there was concern that should on street parking be introduced, people would seek out alternative areas which were not controlled. This could intensify the problem in smaller areas.

In essence, the business park was incredibly congested during the working week which caused problems for businesses trying to operate.

Members noted that there was an ongoing review of parking restrictions within the business parks. There were no proposals to introduce on street pay and display but the use of additional double / single yellow lines were being considered.

Residential Developments at Town Wharf

A great deal of concern was expressed at the new development of residential units along Charles Street. It was stressed that parking in and around this area was already stretched with on street parking causing difficulties for local businesses. It was understood that an application had been submitted by the developer to reduce the number of spaces further. It was argued that this would worsen existing

problems. Cars also parked at the Wharf development by the Art Gallery (Gallery Square) which again caused difficulties.

Officers advised that Civil Enforcement Officers were now enforcing illegal parking. This was causing tension amongst residents who did not have allocated parking.

Members noted that Civil Enforcement Officers would be frequenting the area to enforce parking infringements. Members stated that planning permission did not appear to allocate sufficient parking for developments within the town centre.

It was recommended:-

That Cabinet and the Planning Committee be requested to consider the Council's Policy with regard to parking spaces allocated to residential properties built within the town centre as it was the Scrutiny Panel's view that current permitted spaces per property, in reality, created tensions and issues for existing residents and businesses.

Parking Guidance System and Variable Message Signing

The Council's Parking Strategy states that the introduction of a Parking Guidance System (PGS), using Variable Message Signing (VMS), providing information on available spaces at key public car parks for drivers approaching Walsall town centre could provide a significant contribution to improving the quality of information provided to visitors and reduce unnecessary traffic circulation and congestion.

The cost of introducing PGS for the town centre would be circa £300k with on-going revenue costs of some £10k per annum.

It was reported that there had been technical difficulties not just in Walsall but at a National level with the implementation of the systems. Pressure was being placed on the contractors to rectify the matter.

It was anticipated that PGS & VMS would be in place in 2012. Private car parks had expressed an interest in becoming involved with the scheme.

Members acknowledged that the Parking Guidance System and Variable Message Signing was incredibly important and urge for the system to be in place as soon as possible.

Regeneration Perspective

The Working Group learnt about the 3 main areas of regeneration within Walsall town centre namely: -

- Walsall Gigaport/Office Corridor
- St Matthews Quarter
- Waterfront

Gigaport/Office Corridor

It was explained that discussions were continuing to take place on the future of the police station. Options included demolition and replacement of the existing building or relocating, possibly to the Challenge Building site.

In relation to the new Walsall Housing Group (WHG) building at Littleton Street, Officers stated that permission was now being sought for further car parking. Officers stated that WHG were seeking additional parking for staff and visitors. The original allocation was based on a transport assessment.

In the wider sense of the Gigaport, the Working Group learnt that the original concept included large 'shared use' car parks however, due to economic conditions the Gigaport was now being developed in a piecemeal way. This in part contributed to WHG requesting further car parking. There were alternative sites such as the Booth House and O'Hare House in Teddersley Street although this would be unattractive for residents in the locality. Officers stated that should WHG be looking for a depot Officers would discuss their needs and identify suitable sites.

Members noted that the car park at Stafford Street/Green Lane which had consistently high occupancy rates and generated circa £80k a year would possibly be lost due to a regeneration scheme. This could, if it was to come to fruition, impact on the income generated from car parks, however this would need to be viewed in the context of any regeneration benefits that it would permit.

Waterfront

With regard to the Waterfront, it was anticipated that construction of a hotel on the site would commence in May 2011. An interim car park at surface level would be introduced.

Members were advised that development at Waterfront South had begun with 322 residential units being built along with ground floor commercial units.

Members recognised that this development was a key concern to local businesses based at the Town Wharf business park. The Working Group acknowledged that tensions were apparent when balancing regeneration with provision of car parking and generating income.

Overall Context

Members agreed that given the overall context of the vitality of the town centre, development was necessary. It was important however that developments had sufficient car parking available (on-site or nearby) to mitigate any disruption within the locality.

Members of the Working Group agreed that in order to ensure that car park usage was maximised there needed to be:-

- An attractive and vibrant town centre offering both shopping and leisure facilities;
- Good quality car parking in suitable locations;
- Competitive and fair charging structures for both private and Council car parks (a cohesive approach);
- A mix of long/short and on street car parking.


The Working Group urged all parties to share an overall perspective and vision for the town centre to reduce any possible friction. Walsall was competing with nearby towns and cities such as Wolverhampton and Birmingham and so providing sufficient good quality car parking at reasonable rates and in suitable locations was a piece of the jigsaw of enticing customers and business into the centre. This would only work however should there be sufficient shops, cafes and restaurants to draw people in.

Town Centre Management Perspective

The Working Group heard from the Town Centre Manager who gave a view of centre parking from a town centre management perspective. The town centre, previously run by a private company, was now back in Council control. A town centre survey had been carried out to establish the current perception of the town centre and generated some 1200 responses. Key issues which received criticism were:-

- The general appearance of the town centre;
- Town centre parking;
- Anti social behaviour.

Car parking provision at Tesco, Asda and Crown Wharf were identified as risks to town centre parking provision. Officers advised that the scheme of parking was due to change. For example, Crown Wharf was



to remove the 1 hour free parking and introduce number plate recognition software.

Members expressed concern about the number of vacant shop units within the town and questioned how parking provision impacted upon the vitality of the town centre. In response, it was stated that the Council's Economic Development Team were assisting by offering start up business grants and re-location grants. Many businesses still complained about the level of business rates. With many new businesses folding in the first 3 years it was important to encourage businesses to use car parks with possible incentives such as half price discounts. This was not something offered currently.

With regard to customers of the town centre it was reported that many people had a poor perception of the town and would fail to return after their initial visit. That said, it was stated by members of the Working Group that there were many good aspects to the town but it needed to be promoted more. The market and its location was an issue which would be considered by Cabinet in the near future. The removal of the Overstrand would also improve the appearance of the town.

Members noted that the location of car parks had been a common theme throughout the review and that recommendations had been made to try to address some of the existing problems.

They also recognised that the town centre needed to offer shopping and leisure facilities and accommodate office development to entice people to Walsall and to support the local economy.

Conclusion

Addressing car parking needs of local businesses, commuters, shoppers and blue badge holders is a delicate balance. Pricing, enforcement, competition, location and regeneration schemes are all pieces of the jigsaw that need to be considered when offering car parking. It is essential that the right balance is achieved to ensure that the town centre thrives in what are increasingly difficult economic times.

Walsall Council currently provides a number of car parks, many of which are under occupied and some are poorly located. It is the Working Group's view that these issues can be addressed and have made a number of recommendations.

Recommendations

- 1) That the cost of parking at Ward Street and Dudley Street car parks be reduced to £3.00 per day, for a trial period of 6 months from the date of implementation;
- 2) That the 4 hour parking charge on all town centre car parks be reduced by £1.00 to £2.80 for 4 hours for a trial period of 6 months;
- 3) That the staff parking policy be reviewed once the impact of the Smarter Workplace Initiative has been established;
- 4) That Officers continue to work with the business community to constantly review parking provision in and around the Crown Wharf and Premier Business Parks;
- 5) That Officers in conjunction with representatives of the Crown Wharf and Premier Business Park, determine the demand for dedicated permit holder only car parks in Frederick Street, Charles Street and Brook Street. Subject to a suitable level of demand, to introduce permit holder business parking at a cost of £30 per month
- 6) That pay and display parking be introduced at the above car parks subject to the demand for permit holder business parking. The level of charge to be set at £3 per day but to be reviewed after 6 months;
- 7) That Cabinet and the Planning Committee be requested to consider the Council's Policy with regard to parking spaces allocated to residential properties built within the town centre as it was the Scrutiny Panel's view that current permitted spaces per property, in reality, created tensions and issues for existing residents and businesses.
- 8) That planning enforcement action be taken swiftly where appropriate to close down unauthorised car parks;
- 9) That the Parking Guidance System and Variable Message Signing be introduced as soon as possible;
- 10) That the current approach to planning restrictions relating to car parking at all developments, for supermarkets and schemes with their 'own' parking facilities be enforced.
- 11) That an update on actions arising from the Working Groups recommendations be considered by the Environment



Scrutiny and Performance Panel in the 2011/12 municipal year;