

Minutes

of a meeting of the

Scrutiny Committee

held at 7pm on Thursday 4 August 2011

at the Abbey House, Abingdon



Open to the public, including the press

Present:

Members: Councillors Jim Halliday (Chair), Melinda Tilley (Vice-Chairman), Eric Batts, Andrew Crawford, Jane Crossley, Jason Fiddaman, Bill Jones, Sandy Lovatt, and Julie Mayhew-Archer

Substitute members: Councillor Kate Precious (as substitute for Councillor Fiona Roper), Councillor Janet Shelley (as substitute for Councillor Charlotte Dickson) and Councillor Richard Webber (as substitute for Councillor Tony de Vere)

Non-participating members: Councillors Matthew Barber and Elaine Ware

Officers: David Buckle, Steven Corrigan, Ian Price, Matt Prosser, Anna Robinson and Chris Tyson

Number of members of the public: Nil

Sc.20 Notification of substitutes and apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were submitted Tony de Vere, Charlotte Dickson and Fiona Roper.

Sc.21 Declarations of interest

Councillors Matthew Barber and Elaine Ware declared a personal and prejudicial interest in item 5 call-in of cabinet decision as required by the councillors' code of conduct paragraph 11. As permitted by paragraph 12 of the code, they took part in the meeting to answer questions, then left before the committee debated the item.

Councillor Andrew Crawford declared a personal interest as a user of car parks.

Sc.22 Urgent business and chair's announcements

None

Sc.23 Statements, petitions and questions from the public relating to matters affecting this meeting of the Scrutiny Committee

None

Sc.24 Call-in of Cabinet decision

Councillors Matthew Barber and Elaine Ware declared a personal and prejudicial interest in this item, as required by paragraph 11 of the councillors' code of conduct. As permitted by paragraph 12 of the code, they took part in the meeting to respond to questions, and then left before the committee debated the item.

Councillor Andrew Crawford declared a personal interest as a user of the council's car parks.

The committee considered Cabinet's decision made at its meeting on 8 July 2011 to introduce two hours free car parking (Minute CA.5 refers).

The specific reasons provided for the call-in were as follows:

- **An explanation of the options that were considered before a decision was taken, and the reasons for that decision** – *on the assumption that the aim is to stimulate town centre vitality, we are unclear about what other costed alternatives were considered, rejected, and why.*
- **Clarity of aims and desired outcomes** – *The precise aims of the policy are unclear as are the desired outcomes, how they will be monitored, and whether the scheme will be modified until the aims are fully achieved.*
- **The social, economic, and environmental well-being of the community** – *we are unclear about the practicality of the changes being proposed, why a differential increase in tariffs is being proposed, and are concerned that the effect of the period of free parking may be negated by the increase on post 3 hour fees and the extended charging period to 6pm.*
- **Proportionality ie the action must be proportionate to the desired outcome** – *We are concerned that the estimated cost of £250,000 is a dis-proportionately excessive cost to introduce an initial 2 hour free period of parking whilst at the same time removing the free period between 4pm and 6pm*
- **Due consultation and taking of professional advice from officers** - *we are unclear exactly what consultation has taken place about the policy, about the proposal to fund the scheme from the New Homes Bonus reserve, and about how the scheme should be funded in future years. We are also concerned that consideration of the item at Cabinet took less than seven minutes, particularly given the strong concerns expressed by the Officers in the report.*

Councillors Elaine Ware, Cabinet member for car parks, and Matthew Barber, Leader of Council, attended the meeting to respond to questions.

Committee members sought clarification on a number of issues the responses to which are set out below.

In response to questions, Councillor Matthew Barber confirmed that the aim of the two hour free car parking proposal was to stimulate town centre vitality.

He was unable to quantify the number of business which would benefit from the proposal but was of the view that all retail traders and businesses could potentially benefit from the increased footfall generated.

Ideally, all car parking would be free. However, due to capacity issues, Cabinet agreed the two hour period, although he did not believe there should be a limit on the consideration of a time limit.

In response to a question, Mr Chris Tyson, Head of Economy, Leisure and Property, advised that the existing free parking period between 4pm and 6pm was introduced to increase town centre visits. No data was available to evidence the success of this scheme.

Councillor Barber confirmed that the proposed scheme would be monitored and agreed that the scrutiny committee could comment on the proposed form of monitoring.

In response to a question, Councillor Matthew Barber agreed that the number and variety of shops was an important factor in attracting people into the towns. However, he believed free short stay car parking would benefit the market towns and that the offer of free car parking could potentially attract new retail traders to locate in the towns.

Although there was no firm evidence to show that free parking would increase footfall, local businesses had supported the measure as a means to encourage local people to visit the town centre shops and revitalise the local economy. He stressed that the proposal would form part of a range of measures to improve the economy and that, if successful, the next challenge could be the capacity of the car parks.

In response to questions, Councillor Matthew Barber confirmed that a number of monitoring options would be considered, including footfall surveys, vacant shop surveys and surveys of traders and businesses, together with anecdotal evidence. He confirmed that he would welcome the views of the committee on the retail trade survey prior to its circulation to local traders.

He confirmed that the requirement to obtain a ticket for the free parking period would be communicated via the media and signage in the car parks. Initially, non-enforceable tickets would be issued to offenders advising them of the new requirement to obtain a ticket. Whilst the ideal scenario, the capital cost of the required infrastructure and the revenue costs of monitoring made a payment on exit system costly.

He acknowledged that Abingdon residents would pay more to subsidise the free car parking due to higher increases in both short-term ticket prices and long-term resident and business permits. However, he stressed that resident car parking schemes already subsidised the car park account.

He did not believe that the proposals would lead to an increase in CO2 emissions. The proposal should attract users currently driving to towns outside the district and, therefore, would not increase car journeys. It could even reduce the number of miles travelled and,

therefore, CO2 emissions, if people living in the district travelled to a local town. In response to a further question, he confirmed that the environmental officer had not been consulted on the likely effect of the proposals on air quality in Abingdon, although he reiterated that he did not believe the impact would be significant.

He confirmed that Oxfordshire County Council had not been consulted about the impact of the free parking scheme on the financial viability of their on street parking scheme. The existing arrangements would continue whereby holders in Abingdon of Oxfordshire County Council Residents' Permits were able to park in the West St Helen Street Car Park overnight until 9am rather than 8am.

He confirmed the continuation of the current free day car parking offered in the run-up to Christmas.

In response to questions relating to why cabinet viewed a two hour free car parking period as a better option than the current free parking period between 4pm and 6pm, Councillor Barber stated that the current offer was inconvenient for users, underused and that the revised proposal would achieve improved economic benefit.

He defended the proposed use of the Home Bonus Fund for funding the scheme initially, as it would benefit all communities living in the Vale, whether living in towns or the rural areas.

In response to concerns that the proposals to encourage people to shop in the towns could have a detrimental impact on local rural shops, Councillor Barber responded that the convenience offered by local rural shops should not be affected.

He confirmed that the Conservatives did not embark upon a fully costed budget exercise prior to the inclusion of the proposal in their election manifesto. However, they did have regard to budget information in the public domain. Advice had been sought from officers since the election. Whilst the s.151 chief finance officer strongly advised against the introduction of free car parking, councillors had previously acted against such advice, and in this case the decision was not based on purely financial factors. He believed the council could cover the loss of income.

David Buckle, Chief Executive, confirmed that he agreed with the s.151 advice. The council faced uncertain times with new initiatives impacting on resources. The loss of income as a result of the proposal represented a substantial commitment at a time of uncertainty over the medium term financial strategy and the financing of council services.

Whilst the committee did not refer the decision back to cabinet for reconsideration, members agreed that the committee would comment on the retail trade survey questionnaire and the method of monitoring the impact of the scheme and consider the monitoring reports in due course.

Officers agreed that the recommendations passed by Cabinet contained inaccurate information about the proposed fees and charges, while the annexes contained correct data. The Officers undertook to ensure the Order and schedules detailing the fees and charges were accurate.

RESOLVED:

- (a) not to refer the decision back to Cabinet for reconsideration;
- (b) to review the retail trade survey at its meeting in September prior to circulation to retailers and the method of monitoring the impact of the scheme on town centre vitality; and
- (c) to consider the monitoring reports on the impact of the scheme on town centre vitality and consider whether, in light of experience, the scheme should be modified.

Exempt information under section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972

None

The meeting closed at 10pm