

Scrutiny committee



Report of head of economy, leisure and property

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To: Scrutiny committee

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Review of free two hours parking scheme

Purpose of report

1. Officers have compiled a report which summarises the impact of the free two hours parking scheme on the towns in the Vale of White Horse district for the Scrutiny Committee to consider.

Corporate objectives

2. The provision and pricing of car parking impacts on two of the Vale of White Horse District Council's strategic objectives: excellent delivery of services and building the local economy. Continuing to offer a period of free parking may help to improve the viability and attractiveness of our towns.

Background

3. On 8 July 2011, cabinet agreed to introduce free car parking for up to two hours in the Vale Council's off-street car parks. This decision was called in and considered by the scrutiny committee at its meeting on 4 August 2011. The committee resolved:
 - (a) not to refer the decision back to cabinet for reconsideration;
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(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.

4. Officer proposals for monitoring the impact of the free parking scheme were discussed by the scrutiny committee on 22 September 2011. The officer report included an appendix with a table listing the means by which this monitoring could be carried out - this table is attached to this report as appendix 1. Officers and the relevant cabinet member took account of the scrutiny committee's suggestions before finalising the monitoring arrangements. In addition to the list in the table, officers and the cabinet member agreed that the monitoring arrangements would include additional information, such as evidence from bus companies and results of the 2013/14 budget consultation.
5. The two hour free car parking scheme was implemented on 11 December 2011.
6. A report published by the Association of Town and City Management (ATCM) and the British Parking Association, "Re-think! Parking on the High Street" (January 2013) highlights the conflicts that local authorities face in balancing the needs of town centre users, transport strategies and budgets. The report suggests there is no simple formula that can be given on determining the right kind of tariff in car parks. Car parking must be viewed holistically as part of an overall accessibility strategy for town centres. Therefore, having a period of free parking is just one factor to be taken into consideration.

Results of the monitoring of the free two hours car parking scheme

7. Each of the measures referred to within the table attached as appendix 1 to this report is dealt with in turn below.
 8. OFF-STREET CAR PARK USAGE
 9. Information taken from car park 'pay and display' machines allows for calculations showing how many people either bought 'pay and display' tickets or obtained free tickets. The average number of users of car parks per month prior to the implementation of free parking in December 2011 was some 44,690 between October 2010 and July 2011. During the period October 2012 to July 2013, this increased to over 77,000, an increase of some 72 per cent. Table 1 below shows a breakdown for each car park.
 10. Comparisons show that all the car parks show a considerable increase in the number of vehicles staying for short periods compared to before the free two hours was introduced. The biggest proportional increases are in Cattlemarket car park in Abingdon and Limborough Road in Wantage.
 11. Direct comparisons for short stay monthly usage is not possible as the tariff ranges changed with the introduction of the free two hours parking. However, it is clear that the number of people staying for short stay has increased. This has
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been accompanied by a reduction in the number of people staying for up to three hours in most car parks. Also in the majority of car parks the number of vehicles parked for more than three hours has decreased, apart from car parks at Audlett Drive, the Civic, the Charter and Portway in Wantage. It should be noted that the usage figures are based on tickets taken from the machines and, therefore, do not include people parking and displaying a permit.

12. Table 1 below summarises all car parks' average usage per month during part of 2010/11 before the free parking scheme started and in part of 2012/13 after the free two hours parking had been introduced.

Table 1 Average monthly use of car parks per tariff band before and after introduction of free two hours parking

| Car park | Before free two hours (monthly average usage October 2010 to July 2011) | | | After free two hours (monthly average usage October 2012 to July 2013) | | |
|----------------------------|--|--------------|-----------------|--|------------|--------------|
| | 0-1 hour | 1-3 hours | over 3 hours | 0-2 hours | 2- 3 hours | over 3 hours |
| ABINGDON | | | | | | |
| Abbey Close | 292 | 426 | 545 | 1,886 | 178 | 128 |
| Audlett Drive | 129 | 284 | 193 | 1,410 | 136 | 236 |
| Cattlemarket | 399 | 986 | 720 | 5,006 | 371 | 185 |
| Civic | 2,260 | 1,389 | 1,307 | 8,679 | 411 | 1,569 |
| Hales Meadow | 389 | 387 | 421 | 1451 | 137 | 300 |
| Charter | 5,766 | 5,111 | 670 | 14,857 | 754 | 672 |
| Rye Farm | 424 | 774 | 969 | 2,460 | 348 | 665 |
| Rye Farm lorry park | 0 | 0 | 70 | 0 | 0 | 60 |
| West St. Helen's Street | 2,301 | 2,391 | 1287 | 9,691 | 613 | 501 |
| WANTAGE | | | | | | |
| Portway | 2,004 | 3,330 | 424 | 8,237 | 839 | 461 |
| Limborough Road | 79 | 220 | 143 | 873 | 86 | 109 |

| | | | | | | | |
|------------------------------|---------------|--------|-------|--|---------------|-------|-------|
| Undercroft | 178 | 300 | 336 | | 902 | 81 | 134 |
| FARINGDON | | | | | | | |
| Southampton Street | 4,960 | 1,487 | 0 | | 10,883 | 211 | 0 |
| Gloucester Street | 723 | 453 | 164 | | 1,954 | 100 | 110 |
| TOTALS | 19,902 | 17,539 | 7,249 | | 68,289 | 4,263 | 5,100 |
| Total monthly average | 44,690 | | | | 77,652 | | |

ON-STREET CAR PARK USAGE IN ABINGDON

13. Oxfordshire County Council is responsible for managing on-street car parking, and has indicated that the income from on-street pay and display in Abingdon decreased by £2,100 in the period December 2011 to November 2012, compared to the same period in the previous year. This represents about one twelfth of the total on-street income from Abingdon. This would indicate that some people are choosing to use the free two hours parking rather than pay to park on-street.

CAR PARK OFFENCES

14. The number of ECNs issued has increased from 1,843 to 2,411 (30 per cent increase) when comparing the calendar year 2011 with 2012. Table 2 below summarises the changes. The increase in ECNs issued for 'no ticket' reflects the relative increase in the usage of the car parks and also the impact of having to display a ticket for the free period. The number of ECNs issued for 'no permit' has decreased as, since April 2012, the council no longer enforces the restricted parking areas behind Market Place and Queen Street in Abingdon, which used to be for permit holders only. Although the number of ECNs issued for other offences has increased, their proportion has stayed the same in relative terms.

Table 2 Comparison of excess charge notices issued by offence between 2011 and 2012

| | Expired ticket | No ticket | No permit | Other offences (no disabled badge, outside bay, etc) | Total |
|------|----------------|-----------|-----------|--|-------|
| 2011 | 663 (36%) | 593 (32%) | 199 (11%) | 388 (21%) | 1,843 |

| | | | | | |
|--------------------|-----------|------------|---------|-----------|---|
| 2012 | 825 (34%) | 1052 (44%) | 62 (2%) | 472 (20%) | 2,411 |
| 2013 (Jan to July) | 518 (39%) | 585 (44%) | 18 (2%) | 195 (15%) | 1,316 (estimated end of year of 2,256) |

EXCESS CHARGE NOTICES CANCELLED

15. The number of ECNs cancelled during the calendar year 2012 has decreased compared to 2011. In 2011 it was 237 out of 1843 issued (some 13 per cent) and in 2012 it was 226 out of 2,411 issued (some nine per cent). To the end of July 2013, the number of ECNs cancelled is 119 out of 1316 issued (nine per cent). This decrease reflects how difficult it is to successfully dispute the ECNs issued due to the clear communication campaign in the car parks. Permanent signs to remind people about having to display a pay and display ticket at all times, including during the free two hours are in place in all car parks.

COMPLAINTS

16. The car park team received a few complaints from users about having to obtain and display a ticket. When the scheme was introduced in December 2011, only warning notices (rather than actual ECNs) were issued for the first six weeks to allow people the chance to get used to having to display a ticket, even though it was free. During the year, the complaints received have generally been from users who have received ECNs, claiming they were not aware of the regulations in the car park. Initially large yellow temporary signs were displayed prominently in the car parks informing users that they had to display a ticket at all times, including during the free two hours. These signs have been replaced by standard permanent signs.

17. Some users advised that they had difficulty understanding the tariff structure and complained that it is confusing as to whether the tariffs for three, four, six or eight hours include the free two hours or not. The tariff boards display the various fees as being '£1.50 for up to 3 hours' for example, which includes any free time.

18. Being able to obtain a free ticket does lead to some low-level abuse in certain situations, but officers consider the numbers are quite low. Officers carried out some spot checks in the Civic and Cattlemarket car park in May 2013. This showed that a very small minority of people take advantage of the free parking and enhanced enforcement on an ad hoc basis has helped to reduce this.

INCOME

19. In the original report to cabinet in July 2011, officers initially estimated that the reduction in income as a result of the free two hours would be £192,500 a year. This figure was based on the reduction in income from the ticket sales for the zero to one hour tariff plus 50 per cent of the income from the one to three hour tariff band.

20. The total income from car parks for the year 2012/13 was £454,000. This compared to £760,000 in 2010/11. This represents a reduction in income of £306,000, a variance of some £113,500 from the officers' estimate.
21. The figures in table 1 above would suggest that the change in habit has been different from what officers anticipated when calculating the estimated loss of income. Not only have all the people who used to park for up to one hour taken advantage of the free two hours, but a larger than anticipated proportion of those that used to stay for one to three hours now only stay for up to two hours. In addition, it would also appear that less people are staying for more than three hours.

FOOTFALL SURVEY

22. The economic development team undertakes annual surveys in Abingdon, Faringdon and Wantage to monitor the number of pedestrians in a range of locations in each of the towns.
23. In Faringdon, footfall declined by around ten per cent between 2011 and 2012, though this masked some variation between different locations. For example, mornings were busier outside Budgens, but were quieter in the Market Place and on London Street. Officers are also aware that the Budgens supermarket was closed for refurbishment in 2012, which will have contributed to the decline of footfall.
24. In Wantage, footfall stayed around the same level. There was a slight increase in footfall outside Sainsbury's and in Mill Street in 2012 compared with 2011.
25. In Abingdon, detailed surveys were carried out for the town at the same period. However, due to the extensive refurbishment work in the town centre, the usual survey locations were not possible and, as such, different flow levels were experienced. However, with this caveat on the data, footfall appears to have remained fairly static over the period. The Choose Abingdon Partnership Manager advised that independent retailers in the town reported a drop in footfall of around 15 per cent during the refurbishment works; however, the Choose Abingdon Partnership Manager considers that the introduction of two hours free car parking ensured that this loss wasn't more significant.
26. The full survey is available at www.whitehorsedc.gov.uk/services-and-advice/business/support-businesses/market-research-and-data-0

VACANT SHOP SURVEY

27. The economic development team also carries out annual vacant shop surveys in the towns of Abingdon, Faringdon and Wantage in order to monitor the number of empty shops.
28. Table 3 below summarises the figures for each town. Between September 2011 and September 2012 the retail vacancy rate increased by one per cent on average across all three towns. This overall increase was due to an increase in vacant premises in Wantage, whereas there was a reduction in the number of
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vacant premises in Abingdon. The improvements to the Abbey Shopping Centre in Abingdon in 2012 may have affected the occupancy of some of the retail units, as the developer was holding empty units in preparation for major refurbishment work at the time when the survey was undertaken.

Table 3 Retail vacancy rate in the Vale towns for 2011 and 2012

| | Abingdon | Wantage | Faringdon | Vale average |
|--------------------------|-----------------|----------------|------------------|---------------------|
| Vacancy rate 2012 | 8.7% | 14.2% | 1.5% | 8.2% |
| Vacancy rate 2011 | 9.5% | 10.3% | 1.5% | 7% |

29. In July 2012, the national average of vacancy rates was 11.4 per cent as recorded by the Springboard Research on behalf of the Association of Town and City Management (ATCM). Overall, there has been a varying picture in terms of vacancy rates across the Vale towns. As a district, the vacancy rate has increased by 1.2 per cent since 2011. Whilst Abingdon has seen a positive decline in the number of vacant units and Faringdon has maintained an extremely low level of vacant units, Wantage has seen a relatively significant increase to above the national average.

30. A full copy of the report is available at www.whitehorsedc.gov.uk/services-and-advice/business/support-businesses/market-research-and-data-0

BUSINESS SURVEY

31. The economic development team carried out two business surveys. The first one was in October/November 2011 before the two hours free car parking initiative was introduced. The second one was carried out a year later in December 2012. A summary of these surveys is set out below.

32. There were a total of 489 businesses in the town centres. In 2011, 88 businesses responded (18 per cent). In 2012, 97 businesses responded (20 per cent).

33. In 2011, 73 per cent thought that the free two hours parking would have a positive impact on the future of their business. Also, 65 per cent predicted that footfall would increase.

34. In 2012, there was a good, and proportionate, spread of those businesses that chose to take part in the 2012 survey, as below:

- Abingdon 50 per cent
- Faringdon 20 per cent
- Wantage 23 per cent
- Botley – two businesses responded.

35. Almost 70 per cent of businesses reported that the free two hours car parking had a positive impact on their business. Of the 97 businesses that responded, only one business, which was located outside of Abingdon, reported a negative impact.

36. Table 4 below summarises the top line results for the 2012 survey:

Table 4 Summary of top line results for the 2012 business survey

| Question | Top line results 2012 |
|---|--|
| What impact, if any, has the introduction of two free hours car parking had on your business? | 61 per cent agreed that it made it easier for people to access their business. |
| What effect has the introduction of two hours free parking in your town had on number of people visiting your business? | 52 per cent reported an increase in visitors to their premises. No businesses reported a reduction in footfall. |
| How much do you think the footfall to your businesses has increased by, per week, as a result of the introduction of two hour free car parking? | Most businesses indicated an increase in footfall of at least five per cent. |
| What effect, if any, has the introduction of two hours free parking in your town had on your turnover? | 35 per cent reported an increase in turnover. No businesses reported a decrease in turnover. |
| How much do you think your business turnover has increased by per week, as a result of the introduction of two hours free car parking? | The largest response was 36 per cent who reported less than five per cent increase in turnover. |
| Do you have any other comments about the two hour free car parking initiative in Vale's towns? | Positive: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - excellent initiative (Faringdon) - has made business life a lot easier (Abingdon) - compensation for the building upheaval (Abingdon) - encourages people to Wantage. Negative: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - having to get a ticket is an inconvenience - lack of parking for employees and residents - needs to be longer, three hours would be better - need to make it cheaper to buy long-stay parking permits. |

AIR QUALITY

37. It is impossible to measure the impact of free car parking on air quality levels because the monitoring equipment cannot detect small changes in traffic movements. Air quality data is assessed over long periods and small changes would be masked by other impacts such as changes in district wide traffic levels, changes in traffic make up and weather impacts. Monitoring of nitrogen dioxide has continued to be undertaken at a number of sites within the Abingdon Air Quality Management Area (AQMA) and at other locations. In the 12 month period following the introduction of free car parking, levels at these sites have either remained static or have fallen in central Abingdon compared to 2011 monitoring results.

Other results (not included in the original table to scrutiny)

38. Officers received feedback from the Waitrose store manager in Abingdon to indicate that, although detailed car park usage information is not available, there has been no noticeable impact on the turnover at the Waitrose store.
39. Officers also received feedback from the Stagecoach commercial officer. He states that any fall in passenger numbers has been masked by Stagecoach's 'significant investment and marketing campaigns' although he considers that there has undoubtedly been 'urban patronage loss'. He continues to say that Stagecoach as a company is completely opposed to having free parking as it 'encourages congestion and pollution and undermines public transport networks'.
40. No feedback has been received from the Oxford Bus Company.
41. The Faringdon community bus showed a small increase in users in early 2012, compared to the same time in 2011.
42. The council's budget consultation for 2013/14 included questions on car parking and there were 137 responses. In addition, 48 people were recruited to take part in a workshop. Half of those who took part (51 per cent) said they were more likely to visit Abingdon, Faringdon or Wantage since the two hours free parking was introduced. Two thirds of those who took part (68 per cent) rated providing two hours free parking as a high or medium priority.
43. However, there were some comments that the free parking is restrictive and could be extended to up to three hours. Also that the charges to stay for more than two hours were 'excessive', which meant that people stayed for just two hours taking advantage of the free period only and fitted in what they needed to do within a limited amount of time.

Financial implications

44. Offering free parking has meant a significant loss of income. Actual figures from the car park budget for 2010/11 and 2012/13 show that the income has reduced by just over £300,000 due to the introduction of the free two hours. This loss of
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income has been funded from contingencies and built into the 2013/14 base budget.

Equality implications

45. Officers consider that the period of free parking has had a positive equality impact, as it increases access to the shops and facilities in the towns for everyone, and they are not aware of any negative equality impact arising from this scheme.

Options

46. Reducing the free parking to just one hour or one and a half hours would reduce the loss of income. However, the retailers fully support the free two hours and any change would be confusing for the car park users.

Conclusions

47. Most of the indicators show that the introduction of the free two hours parking has had a positive impact on the towns in the Vale district. The car park usage data shows a large increase in the number of people staying for short periods, although it appears that this is to the detriment of those people who used to stay longer. All car parks, apart from those at Audlett Drive, the Civic, the Charter and Portway, are showing less people now staying for periods longer than three hours compared to before the free two hours was implemented.

48. In terms of the economic benefits of the introduction of the free two hours parking, in some of the towns, the effects on footfall and vacant units haven't been as significant as may have been anticipated. For example, the footfall in Faringdon has declined and vacancy levels have increased in Wantage. Businesses in the towns however have stated that the free two hours parking has had a positive effect on footfall, number of customers and turnover in the Vale's towns.

49. In addition to the changes in the parking scheme, there are a number of wider economic factors to be considered when looking at the economy of each of the towns. As ATCM highlights in its recent report (see paragraph 6 above), a period of free parking is just one part of creating a vibrant economy. Officers within the economic development team are working closely with each of the towns to deliver a range of projects to improve the viability and attractiveness of the towns. This includes delivery of annual market town action plans and high street innovation funding.

50. There have been some negative impacts on the towns. For example, there is evidence from the county council that there is a small shift of people from on-street parking places into the off-street car parks resulting in a loss of income for the county council. More people using the car parks has meant there has been an increase in the number of ECNs issued, particularly to those people not displaying any ticket at all, which may relate to an assumption that free parking does not require the user to display a ticket.

51. Officers are aware that there is some abuse of the free parking. Spot checks during May 2013 show that this at quite a low level and ad-hoc enforcement deters this.
52. The most significant impact has been a reduction in the income from the car parks. This has been larger than officers originally predicted and may be explained by a larger than anticipated number of users who stayed for medium and long periods now taking advantage of the free two hours.
53. Overall, businesses have stated that the free two hour parking has had a positive effect on footfall, number of customers and turnover in the Vale's towns.
54. Although the scheme is not supported by the one of the bus operators, there is no evidence to support a major shift from public transport to car use due to the free parking scheme.
55. Businesses have commented on the increase in the price of the long-stay parking permits (for example, an all day permit for West St Helen Street car park in Abingdon for Monday to Friday increased from £613 to £650). Users were also unhappy about having to display a ticket.
56. Based on the available evidence, officers consider that overall the free two hours parking has had a positive impact on the towns. Officers invite members of the scrutiny committee to consider the outcomes of this review and to pass any appropriate comments on the review to the cabinet member.
57. New and more substantial signs are now displayed in the Vale Council's car parks to indicate that a ticket is required to be displayed, even during the free parking period. Officers are currently reviewing the signs on the approach roads into Abingdon, which are the responsibility of the county council, to indicate the free parking in the longer term.
58. Officers will review the car park fees and charges on an annual basis (normally in December each year), taking into account the annual car park account and the overall impact on the vitality of the towns, and will make recommendations to cabinet as necessary.

Background papers

- none
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Appendix 1. Monitoring of the impact of free two hour car parking on the towns.

| Name of survey | Measure | How information currently collected | Cost | Benchmark data/past info currently available | Future data to be collected | Comments |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|--|
| Off-street car park usage | Council pay and display and free tickets taken from machines | From number of tickets issued per car park for: - up to one hour - up to three hours - up to four hours - up to six hours - over six hours | None – collected in house | Yes, collected and updated monthly | The number of tickets issued per car park for: - up to two hours - up to three hours - up to four hours - up to six hours - over six hours | N.B. There is currently no 'up to two hours' ticket, so a direct comparison is not possible. We can back up data by anecdotal evidence from car park inspectors who patrol each car park daily |
| On-street car park usage in Abingdon | The number of vehicles using the on-street parking in the towns | Income from the pay and display machines averaged out over the year | None – collected by Abingdon Town Council | Yes | Will be supplied by Abingdon Town Council | |
| Car park offences | The number of tickets issued for not displaying a valid ticket and ticket expired | Information available from car park ticket processing system | None – collected in house | Yes, collected and updated monthly | Information available from car park ticket processing system | |
| Excess charge notices (ECNs) cancelled (fines) | No of ECNs cancelled per month | Information available from car park ticket processing system | None – collected in house | Yes, collected and updated monthly | Information available from car park ticket processing system | |
| Complaints | The number of complaints to the car park team from users and residents about the new system of free parking | n/a | None – collected in house | From the consultation that will be carried out to implement the new Order | Complaints to the council about the new system to be recorded by car park team | |

| Name of survey | Measure | How information currently collected | Cost | Benchmark data/past info currently available | Future data to be collected | Comments |
|-----------------------|--|--|---|--|--|--|
| Income | The income from the pay and display car parks and the ECNs (fines) | Information available from car park ticket processing system and uploaded onto Agresso | None – collected in house | Yes | Information available from car park ticket processing system and uploaded onto Agresso | |
| Footfall survey | Monitoring the number of pedestrians in a range of locations in each town | Surveys are carried out on range of dates/times – once a year in Faringdon and Wantage, and twice a year in Abingdon | None – surveys carried out by economic development team staff and Choose Abingdon Partnership | Yes, 2009 and 2010 data available | Yes, annually in Faringdon and Wantage, and twice a year in Abingdon | Next survey for all three towns is due in October 2011 |
| Vacant shop survey | Monitoring the number of empty shops in each of the towns | Surveys are carried out annually for the three towns | None – surveys are carried out by economic development team staff / Choose Abingdon Partnership | Yes, 2008, 2009 and 2010 data available. Published on website. | Yes, annually | Next survey for all three towns is due in October 2011 |
| Business survey | Monitoring the views of businesses about the impact of parking charges on their business | Not currently collected – plan to undertake first survey in October / November 2011 to establish benchmark | None – survey will be carried out electronically by economic development team | No – benchmark to be established and published on website. | Yes, annually | |
| Air quality | Monitoring for nitrogen dioxide at various locations throughout the district | Diffusion tubes exposed for a month and then analysed. Results collated and the annual average is recorded | None – as part of current work on air quality | Yes and published on website, reports for 2008, 2009 and 2010 | Data collected monthly and published annually | Note of caution as many variables affect results. Not to be used individually to measure impact. |