

Cherwell District Council

Joint Meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Resources and Performance Scrutiny Board

Minutes of a Joint meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Resources and Performance Scrutiny Board held at Bodicote House, Bodicote, Banbury, OX15 4AA, on 12 July 2011 at 6.30 pm

Present: Councillor Kieron Mallon (Chairman)
Councillor Nicholas Mawer (Vice-Chairman)

Councillor Alyas Ahmed
Councillor Ann Bonner
Councillor Patrick Cartledge
Councillor Margaret Cullip
Councillor Tim Emptage
Councillor Chris Heath
Councillor Lynn Pratt
Councillor Neil Prestidge
Councillor Leslie F Sibley
Councillor Daniel Sames
Councillor Lawrie Stratford
Councillor Rose Stratford
Councillor Patricia Tompson
Councillor Douglas Webb
Councillor Martin Weir
Councillor Douglas Williamson

Substitute Members: Councillor Mrs Diana Edwards (In place of Councillor Carol Steward)

Also Present: Councillor G A Reynolds

Apologies for absence: Councillor Andrew Fulljames
Councillor Alastair Milne Home
Councillor Trevor Stevens
Councillor Carol Steward

Officers: Ian Davies, Strategic Director Environment & community
Chris Rothwell, Head of Safer Communities, Urban & Rural Services
James Doble, Democratic, Scrutiny and Elections Manager
Catherine Phythian, Senior Democratic and Scrutiny Officer
Karen Muir, Corporate System Accountant

9 **Appointment of Chairman and Vice-Chairman**

Resolved that Councillor Kieron Mallon be elected Chairman of the joint meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Resources and Performance Scrutiny Board.

Resolved that Councillor Nicholas Mawer be elected Vice-Chairman of the joint meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Resources and Performance Scrutiny Board.

10 **Declarations of Interest**

Members declared interests in the following agenda item:

4. Car Parking Provisions and Charges

Councillor Alyas Ahmed, Personal, as a relative of a blue badge holder.

Councillor Ann Bonner, Personal, as President of Banbury and District Multiple Sclerosis Society.

Councillor Chris Heath, Personal, as a relative of a blue badge holder.

Councillor Daniel Sames, Personal, as a relative of a blue badge holder.

Councillor Lynn Pratt, Personal, as a blue badge holder.

Councillor Patricia Tompson, Personal, as a blue badge holder.

11 **Car Parking Provisions and Charges**

The Chairman accepted a petition submitted on behalf of residents from Bicester objecting to the current parking charges in the town. It was noted that a further petition on behalf of residents from Banbury objecting to evening charges would be submitted to the Council shortly.

The Chairman reminded Members that car parking provisions and charges had been the subject of a detailed review by the Resources and Performance Scrutiny Board in the autumn of 2010 as part of the 2011/12 Budget preparation; that the matter had been the subject of a Call-in held in January 2011; and that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee had discussed the topic at their meeting on 14 June 2011 and agreed that it should be considered at a further joint scrutiny meeting.

The Chairman informed the committee that since the meeting on 14 June 2011 he and the Chairman of the Resources and Performance Scrutiny Board had met several times with the Strategic Director Environment and Community, the Head of Safer Communities, Urban and Rural Services and to consider the issues and explore alternative options for car parking provision and charges. He explained that in the course of those meetings

they had looked at all of the individual complaints received from members of the public and at the local press and media coverage.

The Strategic Director Environment and Community gave an overview of the Council's budget position and the pressure to find savings and/or raise income as a consequence of the significant reduction in Government grant which equated to £2.7M for the current year out of a total Council budget of £18.5M. Fees and charges across the Council had been reviewed and were contributing some £400,000 to the budget reduction. He drew Members' attention to the areas of the Council's Parking Service that had been raised at the June Overview and Scrutiny meeting and the information set out in the report on these.

The Chairman referred the committee to two supplementary documents which had been tabled at the meeting (attached as annexes to these minutes as set out in the Minute Book):

- Appendix 2a - Options on parking policy and charging
- Appendix 2b - Facts and Figures April to June 2011

In the interests of a timely and constructive meeting he asked the Members to focus their debate on the impact of the car parking provisions and charges that came into effect on 4 April 2011 and on the range of alternative options presented in Appendix 2a. He asked Members to be mindful that any proposals or recommendations to change the existing car parking provisions and charges would have a domino impact on the overall budget and on other service areas.

In the course of debate the following general observations were made:

- All Members had received a large number of complaints and objections to the parking provisions and charges from their constituents.
- It was important to listen to the concerns of the residents and to take appropriate action in response to those concerns.
- The Committee must demonstrate financial prudence and propose alternative options that fall within the balanced budget and avoid any increase on council tax or loss of other key services.
- In view of there being some public confusion resulting from some of the changes introduced on 4 April 2011 any revised proposals for new car parking provisions and charges should be simple to implement and easy to understand.
- Members noted that the Council had recognised that, as in any project, there were lessons to be learnt and improvement to be made regarding the implementation of the changes, particularly in view of the number of changes made. Extensive communication and consultation had been undertaken but further thinking on how to widen the awareness of changes with Cherwell residents and with visitors from out of district would help to reduce the negative feedback.

- That the problems facing the night-time economy of the district's town centres was not solely attributable to the introduction of evening parking charges and was to some extent the result of the national economic downturn. It was also noted that, contrary to some of the press and trader coverage, ticket sales for evening parking indicated high volumes of take up in Banbury with potential income of £100,000; but lower in Bicester with potential income at £40,000.

The Committee then reviewed and discussed each of the alternative options set out in Appendix 2a (Supplementary Information and Options on Parking Policy and Charging) in turn.

1. The introduction of Evening Charges

The following options were considered by the Committee:

1a	Return to free evening parking
1b	Free 10 minute period drop off/collection
1c	Charging to 1900hrs only on current hourly tariffs and free thereafter
1d	Charging to 2000hrs only on current hourly tariffs and free thereafter

A majority of Members advocated option 1c on the basis that the estimated £144,000 loss of income from evening parking charges was not sustainable in the current financial climate and on the assumption that 1900hrs was a watershed for the night-time economy in Banbury and Bicester. Some Members were in favour of option 1a and argued that the fact that the latest projections of car parking income from the £0.10 increase were greater than the original budget estimates and could therefore be used to offset any losses from the cessation of evening charges.

In addition there was general support for option 1b on the basis that a 10 minute period of grace would offer residents an element of flexibility and the financial impact on the Council would be negligible.

On a point of clarification officers explained that when the original decision to introduce evening charges was taken there was only limited financial information available and the budget figure included an estimated income of £39,000. The options presented in Appendix 2a were based on analysis and extrapolation of car park usage and income for the first three months of the financial year and were believed to be a more accurate estimate of the true income figure. It was therefore appropriate for the Committee to use this data in their deliberations.

2. The introduction of charging to Blue Badge Holders

The following options were considered by the Committee:

2a	Return to free blue badge charging
2b	Reduce charges for blue badge holders – flat rate of 70/80p
2c	Free parking in designated disabled spaces, chargeable in general spaces
2d	Refine policy in line with vehicle tax exemption to offer free parking for the most disabled

A majority of Members advocated option 2c on the basis that i) not all blue badge holders were on low incomes and the consultation undertaken on introducing charges for blue badge holders identified many would be prepared to pay; ii) similar schemes were in operation elsewhere in the UK; iii) that the confusion around free off-street parking and chargeable on-street parking would be removed; iv) the loss of income (estimated at £50,000) should be more readily accommodated within a balanced budget; v) it recognised the needs of a vulnerable group of residents. Some Members were in favour of option 2a and argued that the fact that the latest projections of car parking income were greater than the original budget estimates and could therefore be used to offset any losses from the cessation of blue badge charges.

On a point of clarification officers confirmed that the “additional one hour free after the paid for period” would still apply to blue badge holders parking in general spaces, subject to the maximum length of stay conditions

3. Parking charges in Bicester given the forthcoming redevelopment works and impact these will have on residents and businesses.

The following options were considered by the Committee:

3a	Return to Free evening parking in Bicester
3b	Reduce cost of evening parking to £0.50/stay in Bicester
3c	Reduce charges during redevelopment by £0.10/hr
3d	Designate the Market Square as free parking for up to 1 hour
3e	Return to free Sundays and Bank Holidays

Most Members were in favour of option 3c as they believed it recognised that there were special circumstances in Bicester during the redevelopment works and offered the greatest benefit to the broadest range of Bicester residents. Some Members spoke in favour of option 3a and 3c.

The Committee also commented on the need to address the longer term implications for the Council's income stream as a result of the loss of car parks in Bicester following the completion of the redevelopment. It was noted that this had been considered within the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy and reported at 2.2 of Agenda item 4. The Vice-Chairman added that this would be further reviewed by the Resources and Performance Scrutiny Board as part of their fees and charges scrutiny in 2012 to inform the 2013/14 budget.

4. Excess Charge Notice Levels and Early Payment Incentives

The following options were considered by the Committee:

4a	Increase early payment discounts to 50% on all contraventions
4b	Increase discount to 25%
4c	Reduce the level of ECN fines to CPE levels of £70/£50
4d	Cease the current £16 Admin Charge (already implemented)

The Committee were unreservedly in favour of option 4a as they felt that this, combined with the 10 minutes grace period, was a reasonable penalty for the offence. The Committee were pleased to note that option 4d had already

been implemented and that a review of the Enforcement Policy wording would be undertaken.

5. Transferable Tickets

The Chairman said that on initial consideration this had seemed like a very good idea which would have a negligible impact on the budget. However, on more detailed analysis there were a number of practical issues to be resolved, primarily around the need to maintain the distinction between long and short stay car parks. This would mean that tickets could only be transferred between the same types of car park (short to short / long to long) and this could be confusing for residents.

The Committee felt that this sort of scheme would be very valuable to some residents, for example the elderly and blue badge holders who might need to go to several retail locations across the town centres. They felt that there were likely to be practical solutions to the problems identified (such as colour coding car parks and tickets) and that the idea warranted further research by officers.

(Meeting adjourned at 8.30pm)

(Meeting reconvened at 8.45 pm)

The Chairman proposed, and the Vice-Chairman seconded, a series of 11 draft recommendations based on the earlier debate.

Speaking to the recommendations in general and recommendation 11 in particular, the Vice-Chairman explained that he and the Chairman had met with officers prior to the meeting to identify funding streams for any recommendations put forward by the Committee. The savings identified were generated by i) the transfer of some Treasury functions from external investment houses to our own in-house team (who had been out performing the professionals) and ii) additional interest accrued because of the delay on the £10,000,000 investment in Bicester redevelopment. He said that it seemed particularly appropriate that the savings on funding allocated to Bicester should also be spent on Bicester.

The Chairman assured the Committee that the recommendations as proposed could be accommodated within the savings identified and that there would be no impact on any other service area.

In response to a request from the Committee the Chairman agreed that, in view of the late submission of some of the financial information, the recommendations should be presented to the Executive with a supporting document detailing the comparative cost implications of the majority and minority choice options.

Resolved

That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Resources and Performance Scrutiny Board recommend to the Executive:

- (1) That there is a need to make some adjustments to the new car parking charges and policies in recognition of concerns raised by Councillors and the public.
- (2) That any adjustments must try to balance real benefit to car park users and town traders with the accepted effects on the Council's limited and reducing finances.
- (3) That the current charges for evening parking be changed to charging to 1900hrs only on current hourly tariffs and free thereafter – Option 1c of Appendix 2a.
- (4) That there should be free parking for blue badge holders in designated disabled spaces but blue badge holders should be charged in all general parking spaces – Option 2c.
- (5) That there should be a 10 minute maximum period of grace for parking period expiry and non purchase of tickets - Option 1b (as amended here) of Appendix 2a.
- (6) That the discount for early payment of excess charge notices within 14 days be increased to 50% for all contraventions – Option 4a of Appendix 2a.
- (7) To note the withdrawal of the current £16 administration charge for appeals which are upheld but where the ECN was issued correctly – Option 4d of Appendix 2a.
- (8) That the effects of the redevelopment of Bicester Town Centre warrant an adjustment to the current charging regime until the new development is complete (anticipated summer 2013) by reducing the current charges by 10p per hour – Option 3c of Appendix 2a.
- (9) That officers determine the earliest implementation of the changes agreed by the Executive according to the appropriate legal processes.
- (10) That a detailed communications plan be compiled to signify these changes which takes into account the lessons learnt from the April changes.
- (11) That the Executive consider funding the loss of income of 4 and 6 above (estimated to be £93,000 per annum) from the additional income and lower cost arising from the transfer of some treasury management functions in house; and the fixed term Bicester loss of income from 8 above (estimated to be £80,000 per annum over two years) from the additional interest secured from the later £10m investment of the Council's contribution to the Bicester Town Centre Redevelopment

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Scheme due to the delay in its start.

The Strategic Director Environment and Community informed the Committee that the recommendations would be considered at a special meeting of the Executive on 26 July 2011. He cautioned the Committee that any changes to car parking provisions and charges, if approved by the Executive, would be subject to statutory, legal processes that would take at least three months to complete.

The Deputy Leader of the Council thanked the Committee for its consideration of the issues and said that he was confident that he, and the Leader of the Council who had been observing the meeting, would be able to brief their Executive colleagues on the full flavour of the scrutiny debate which he believed would complement the formal recommendations.

The Chairman closed by thanking the Members, Officers and the members of the press and public present for their contributions to and interest in the debate.

The meeting ended at 9.00 pm

Chairman:

Date: