

MINUTES of the meeting of Environment Scrutiny Committee held at Brockington, 35 Hafod Road, Hereford on Tuesday, 21st October, 2003 at 10.30 a.m.

Present: Councillor J.H.R. Goodwin (Chairman)
Councillor W.L.S. Bowen (Vice Chairman)

Councillors: B.F. Ashton, H. Bramer, P.J. Dauncey, Mrs. A.E. Gray, K.G. Grumbley, R. Mills and J.W. Newman D.C. Taylor.

In attendance: Councillors: Mrs P.A. Andrews, A.C.R. Chappell, P. J. Edwards (Cabinet Member) Mrs J.P. French, P. E. Harling, Mrs J.A. Hyde, T.M. James, Brig. P. Jones CBE, R.J. Phillips, Mrs J.A. Powell, Mrs S.J. Robertson, J. Stone, J.P. Thomas, W. J. Walling, R.M. Wilson (Cabinet Member).

27. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillors G.W. Davis and T.W. Hunt.

28. NAMED SUBSTITUTES (IF ANY)

Councillor H Bramer substituted for Councillor T.W. Hunt and Councillor D.C. Taylor for G.W. Davis.

29. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

**30. CALL-IN OF CABINET MEMBER (HIGHWAYS AND TRANSPORTATION)
DECISION ON CAR PARKING CHARGES**

The Committee considered the decision of the Cabinet Member (Highways and Transportation) made on 9th October, 2003 on revised car parking charges for car parks across the County, in accordance with the Countywide Car Parking Strategy, which had been called-in by three Members of the Committee in compliance with the Scrutiny Committee Rules.

The stated reason for the call-in was "concern at the impact the proposed car-parking charges could have on the future economic viability of our Market Towns".

The report to the Cabinet Member (Highways and Transportation) on 2nd October 2003 on the issue and the Decision Notice was enclosed with the agenda papers. A copy of the Countywide Car parking Strategy was also appended. Shortly after despatch of the papers it been discovered that this version of the Strategy was not the final one, a copy of which had accordingly

then been circulated to Members of the Committee.

Additional correspondence provided by the Cabinet Member (Highways and Transportation) had also been circulated as a separate document. This included letters from Hereford City Council, Kington Town Council, Leominster Town Council, Monkland and Stretford Parish Council and Councillor H Bramer in relation to Ross-on-Wye.

The report set out the reasons for the proposed changes to car park charges and a schedule showing the revised charges was appended to the report.

The Chairman invited the Cabinet Member and the Director of Environment to make short statements informing the Committee of any additional matters not set out in the report which they considered relevant.

The Cabinet Member commented on the background to the development of the car-parking strategy and noted that charges had not been reviewed since 2001.

The Director of Environment advised that the Strategy had been developed by an Officer and Member Working Group representing all parts of the County. The Strategy addressed the findings of a District Audit report by linking car parking policy to transportation and other policy aims of the Council as set out on page 2 of the Strategy. He reminded the Committee of the contribution income from car parking charges made to the Council's budget and the financial implications of any recommendations it might choose to make.

The Cabinet Member emphasised that the proposals he had made arising from the annual review were in line with the Strategy. As a Unitary Authority there was a wish to achieve a unified approach across the County. He added that he was disappointed not to have received any representations when the Forward Plan had been issued. When he had undertaken consultation more recently he had received representations requesting free car parking in certain locations.

He reminded the Committee of the costs associated with maintaining car-parks, which also had to be taken into account when setting charges. Whilst recognising the differences in the characteristics of the market towns he had sought to devise an equitable solution.

He was not prepared to discuss the Strategy within the context of the car park charges review although consideration could be given to the Strategy in future if that was thought necessary. He requested the Chairman to restrict

the discussion to the car park charges review on several occasions.

In setting the charges he had also had regard to the increase in income required when setting the Council's budget, renewal of car-parking meters and the expected loss of grant from the Countryside Agency towards community transport funding.

The Chairman then invited comments from Members of the Committee on the general approach. In summary these were as follows:

- Economic viability was important.

- There was an inconsistency of approach. In some areas increases were being proposed which were significantly above inflation whereas charges were not being levied in other areas. This was increasing the present anomalies.

- That a review did not mean that there had to be increases, there could surely be decreases as well.

- That regard had to be had to the particular circumstances in each of the Market Towns. There was for example severe pressure on car parking in the centre of Ross on Wye and it would make sense to reflect the circumstances there by making the Wilton Road car park at the foot of the hill free of charge so encouraging its use, freeing up the Town Centre.

- That the proposed increases in Hereford City would exacerbate the problem of on-street parking. The bus service was not operating effectively enough to encourage drivers to view it as a satisfactory alternative.

- The City Council wanted a much wider consultation to be undertaken.

- That the proposal to operate the Military Club in Friar Street, Hereford as a public car park was fraught with practical difficulties.

- That a cross-party working group should be formed to consider the issue.

- In the course of further general discussion it was suggested that the

increases were being rushed through without the support of Members of the Council, most of whom were unhappy with the proposals. It was also asserted that the individual market towns had their own individual characteristics and circumstances, as did Hereford City itself. This had to be recognised when setting charges.

The Chairman then invited comments from Members of the Committee on specific considerations relevant to Hereford City and the Market Towns.

These were as follows;

Bromyard: The Town was less affected by the proposals than others. However, it was considered that the review had not been conducted thoroughly.

Hereford City: That the variety of rates was confusing and made people resort to on-street parking. As a tourist centre the City faced stiff competition from surrounding Cities and a proper detailed review was needed prior to imposing the proposed increases.

Ledbury: The Town Council had not been formally consulted on the proposed charges. Instead of introducing charging at Lawnside car park by the swimming pool in Ledbury to maintain turnover, time limited car parking should be considered. Further review was required.

Leominster: The review had not taken account of changes taking place in the Town as listed in the letter from the Town Council to the Cabinet Member as circulated to the Committee. These included a new retail development on the edge of the Town, a possible extension to the Safeway Store, long term roadworks, and the relocation of a significant number of Council staff to Hereford. A retail impact study had been commissioned by the Town Council and the charging proposals should be deferred until this was complete. It was a misconception that charges reduced congestion. In Leominster this had been achieved by enforcing time limits on parking.

Ross-on-Wye: The proposal to charge by the hour in some cases rather than for longer periods was accepted as was the proposed continuation of free parking at Christmas. However, the Town was the only Market Town without any free parking throughout the year. It was acknowledged in the Strategy that the Town acted as a gateway for Tourists and it was important that their needs were met.

In the course of discussion the following principal comments were made:

- That the proposals would not benefit the Market Towns and it was suggested would not in a number of instances generate a net income on individual car parks once the costs of metering, collection and enforcement were taken into account.
- Concern was expressed about the level of consultation on the proposals. It was suggested that this had not taken place with Hereford City or Ledbury Town Council.
- In response to questions the Transportation Manager commented that a full cost benefit analysis had not been undertaken and it would be difficult to do so. The charges raised did cover costs and overheads taken as a whole. He could not say whether the cost of individual car parks was covered by the charges at those car parks. The costs of servicing car parks and emptying meters was small. The bigger costs were enforcement, monitoring and overheads which were hard to attribute to individual car parks. The income and cost was assessed by reference to each Town as a whole. The Assistant County Treasurer added that there was a net income of some £1.2 million but the income was not evenly drawn from across the County.
- In the absence of categorical information Members remained concerned as to whether it might in fact be to the Council's financial disadvantage to introduce charges at some lightly used car parks and uncertain as to how decisions could be taken in the absence of this information.
- In relation to central car park Leominster and the proposal to introduce charges at Etnam Street car park the Cabinet Member commented that charging was more effective at generating turnover than enforcement of a time limit without tickets. He also suggested that it was less costly to enforce. This was challenged by Members of the Committee.
- It was suggested that there had been a reduction in the use of the central car park, Leominster, since the introduction of charging and concern about the implications for Etnam Street car park which was already not used to its capacity, and this was before the implications of the relocation of Council employees were clear.
- That the Council as a whole benefited from the sharing of non-domestic rates across the County and this should be borne in mind when considering moves to make car parking charges uniform.
- There was some debate between the Cabinet Member and Members

over interpretation of the Strategy. It was suggested that circumstances changed and a review was required to establish whether the Strategy was still appropriate. The Committee could legitimately request the Cabinet Member to consider this point.

- The Assistant County Treasurer emphasised that increased income from car parking was necessary to avoid a budget deficit. The Director of Environment reinforced this point stating that, this being the case, it was incumbent on the Committee, if it did not support increases, to identify how the shortfall could be met. He reiterated that the car park charging strategy was linked to other council strategies and initiatives such as reduction in travel by car.
- That Members were not seeking to reduce the generation of income but were identifying inconsistencies in the proposals which it was suggested needed to be reappraised accordingly.
- Concern was expressed that there did not appear to be a clear understanding of the return on individual car parks which were one of the Council's biggest assets. If there was low usage of these prime sites this should be reviewed and acted upon.
- That further consideration should be given to the matter and full consultation undertaken.
- The Cabinet Member maintained that he had consulted on his proposals and had held a seminar open to all members. In relation to Hereford City Council's request for wider consultation he reported that the Chief Executive had written to the City Council stating that "charges for car parking in the City had last been revised in January 2001. When the Council determined policy which included provision for inflation proofing the Council would find it difficult to accept the principle that consultation was necessary in relation to such revisions when they are made in pursuance of published policy."
- A number of Members continued to question whether appropriate and meaningful consultation had taken place and expressed dissatisfaction with the Cabinet Member's approach.
- The Director of Environment explained the recommended maintenance programme for the car parks.
- It was suggested that the change in approach by the Countryside Agency and its intention to invite bids from individual Parish Councils in relation to

community transport would lead to a fragmented approach. The Transportation Manager confirmed that it seemed unlikely that the Council would have the opportunity to secure grant funding into 2004/2005 for projects ending in March, 2004.

- It was suggested that the Committee should invite a representative of the Countryside Agency to explain the position providing an opportunity for the Committee to question its approach.
- The Head of Transportation explained the aims of the Green Travel Initiative referred to in part 5 of the Strategy, and confirmed that the initiative was underway and concessions to staff would be reviewed as part of that process.

At the Cabinet Member's request the Chairman permitted him to comment on issues raised in the discussion. He commented as follows:

- That it was logical to introduce charges at Mill Street, Kington. It was the one most likely to be easily located by tourists and currently was being used for school car parking. There was ample other parking behind the High Street and the proposal would mean that 71% of car parking would not have a charge.
- In Leominster, no increase in the charge on the Central car park was being proposed. A charge on Etnam Street would ensure sufficient capacity and turnover of spaces. Implementing the proposal would mean that 69% of car parking would not have a charge. An article in Leominster Pride a journal produced by the Leominster Civic Trust had said that introducing charges on the central car park had not had a detrimental effect.
- In Ledbury he had asked the 3 Herefordshire Councillors for the Ledbury Ward for their views and the proposed increase at Lawnside car park was in response to comments he had received.
- In Bromyard an equitable balance had been struck. The proposal would mean that 66% of car parking would not have a charge.
- In Ross-on-Wye the current basis for charging had been confirmed when Town Centre enhancements had been agreed and this approach was being maintained.

The Committee was asked whether it wished to accept the Cabinet Member's decision or refer the matter back to him. It agreed that it wished to refer the matter back to the Cabinet Member. It then agreed to a short adjournment. On reconvening a proposal was put before the meeting.

RESOLVED:

That the Cabinet Member (Highways and Transportation)'s decision on car parking charges be referred back to him for further consideration with the following recommendations:

- a) **That as Councillors the Committee are well aware of their financial responsibilities but are still unhappy with the proposed charging structure and the Cabinet Member is therefore asked to revisit the individual charges being mindful of the overall goal, and accordingly charges be retained at the levels existing as at 8th October, 2003 pending further consultation and collaboration with Members of the Council and other appropriate representative bodies; and**

- b) **That a full review of the car parking strategy be undertaken and arrangements for this be put in hand as soon as practicable.**

The meeting adjourned between 11.55 am and 12.20 pm and ended at 12.25 p.m.

The meeting ended at 12.25 p.m.

CHAIRMAN