

3 January 2008

A MEETING OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

WAS HELD ON 3 JANUARY 2008

Councillors Davis, Dickson, Foster, Foster-Reed (P), Jacobs (P), Kimber (P), Mrs Mudie (P), Philpott (P), Mrs Salter (P), Mrs Searle, Train (P) and Ward.

It was reported that Councillors Allen, Clinton and Edgar had been nominated to attend this meeting in place of Councillors Dickson, Foster and Ward.

49. APOLOGIES

Apologies for inability to attend the meeting were received on behalf of Councillors Davis, Dickson, Foster, Mrs Searle and Ward.

50. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Edgar declared a personal interest in the review of car parking charges in his capacity as a taxi proprietor but remained in the meeting room throughout and participated in the discussion.

51. REVIEW OF CAR PARKING CHARGES

The Chairman introduced Messrs Tony Salter (Lee Traders Association) and John Bowles who were in attendance to answer questions from the Committee and to provide their views on car parking charges. Councillors Wright (in place of Councillor Cully) and Hook were also in attendance for the same purpose.

Apologies from invitees for their inability to attend the meeting had been received from Councillor Smith, Gosport Business Forum, Gosport Police, Hughmark and the Federation of Small Businesses.

Mr Bowles advised the Committee that he was not representing any particular organisation and, in response to questions from Members, made the following points:

- In principle he was not in favour of car parking charges in the Borough but, since the introduction of two hours free parking, it had not been so much of an issue.
- Initially the charges had affected all businesses in the Town Centre and people complained that they found them restrictive. Previously people would do their shopping and then, for example, go for coffee but now they had to return to their vehicles by a certain time.

- For him, trade had dipped initially following the introduction of car parking charges but, as people became used to paying for parking, it had picked up again. However, the service he provided was of a specialist nature and was unlikely to be obtained in an alternative way, for example, via the internet.
- He felt that the charges had been introduced possibly due to Central Government influence and that so much Council Tax revenue was used for the maintenance and management of car parks. Car parking revenue now more than covered these costs.
- The introduction of two hours free parking had been welcomed by customers and this was regarded as an appropriate length of time for free parking.
- Car parking charges did not dictate how well businesses were doing. At one time there had been many independent businesses in the Town Centre but these had been taken over by multi national companies.
- There were many reasons for the downturn in trade, including the opportunity nowadays for people to shop in other ways. However, if the two hours free parking facility were to be withdrawn, this would be detrimental to trade but would not affect the number of people taking the ferry to Portsmouth.
- The Tuesday and Saturday markets used to be full but were now very sparse.
- Although he knew there was a degree of car parking enforcement, this service was not particularly visible. There was abuse by people working in the Town Centre who moved their vehicles every two hours to avoid parking charges.
- Before car parking charges were introduced, he had suggested a permit scheme to be considered for people working in the Town Centre. He felt that a scheme should be considered for spaces to be made available at a reduced rate for Town Centre workers. This would free up spaces and increase revenue to the Council. The South Street car park was often only half full and may be used more if such a scheme were introduced.
- With regard to the closure of some businesses in the Town Centre, he was not aware of the specific reasons for this but was concerned that the government now received the income generated by business rates. There were too many charity shops and too many empty premises.
- Major factors that made moving businesses to Gosport difficult were that the town was on a peninsula and that there were many grade one and two listed buildings which could prove to be restrictive for potential businesses.
- Car parking charges in Gosport appeared to be fair when compared to those of other local authorities but any increase in charges would be detrimental to the town as Fareham and Portsmouth had more to offer to shoppers.

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- It was unlikely that Gosport businesses would be able to reverse the trend of a downturn in trade. This was little to do with car parking charges. Gosport was the “last town on the trail” in Hampshire and people would now buy from larger concerns having previously bought in the town.

In response to Members’ questions, Mr Salter made the following points:

- The introduction of free parking at Lee would improve trade. People begrudged paying even £0.50p for car parking. There was plenty of free on street parking in Lee but this was generally taken up by people working in shops and businesses.
- The police had advised him that Gosport Borough Council was one of the only Councils not enforcing on street parking.
- Whilst he tended to agree with charging for parking, people at Lee felt aggrieved that they did not have parity with the free parking in Gosport Town Centre.
- The last few years, and particularly last year, had been difficult for trade. Many complaints had been received from customers saying they were unable to park. Lee seemed to be going slightly backwards. There were numerous estate agents and charity shops but there were also some good independent traders. His own business was very much influenced by parking facilities and he had at one time been looking to relocate due to the parking problems.
- Trade was also partly affected by internet shopping.
- He did not regard Lee traders as being in direct competition with Gosport although it appeared some trade had been lost at Lee following the introduction of two hours free parking in the Town Centre.
- Upon being advised by the Chairman that, in the six months following the introduction of free parking in the Town Centre, there had been a 4.7% increase in short stay parking at Lee and a 17.1% increase on the corresponding six months of the previous year, Mr Salter expressed surprise. He said that on New Year’s Day Lee car parking areas had been full but the High Street was quiet. Drivers did not always visit to shop but used Lee as a place to walk.

To sum up, Mr Bowles thanked the Committee for its invitation and courtesy. He said that Gosport had great potential and had its own sports centre and ice rink. He felt that if the town “died” he would have to find some other kind of employment.

Mr Salter summed up by saying that parity with the two hours free parking in Gosport Town Centre should be introduced at Lee. General parking at Lee was not good in terms of policing and he would like to see the provision of parking for traders and residents.

The Chairman thanked Messrs Bowles and Salter for their contributions.

In the absence of Hughmark (the market operator), the Chairman read out the contents of a letter received from them:

“We would make this comment – we believe that to charge a nominal fee for short time parking (say up to two hours) or to allow two hours free parking, makes very little difference to the market attendance.

We trust that the existing arrangements regarding trader parking will remain in place. To charge traders for parking will certainly have an adverse effect on the market.”

Councillors Hook and Wright were then asked questions by the Committee and responded as follows:

Councillor Hook stated that in 2000 a survey had indicated that 32.9% of residents were prepared to accept the introduction of car parking charges. In 2001 the Audit Commission had put forward a paper on car parking services and at the end of 2002, car parking charge options had been reviewed. At that time 42% of Gosport residents were non-car owners.

In 2002 slightly under 39% of people were in favour of car parking charges and 54% were not.

In July 2004 officers produced a car parking charges package. The reason for this was that retailers said that car parks were full by 8.30 a.m. with cars belonging to commuters, Town Centre workers and visitors to Portsmouth. It was apparent that there was a need to encourage people out of their cars and into other forms of transport, including public transport, or car sharing. There was also the incentive of financial gain for the Council.

At the time the Council’s working balance amounted to £421,000 with no reserves. As a result of car parking charges, the balance was increased to £840,000. Car park management and maintenance was costing £300,000 per year and it was anticipated that £750,000 of income to the Council would be generated.

At present the Council did not have enough money to improve grass cutting or public signage and would not meet its 40% recycling target.

Two hours free parking was not sensible and the Council had lost a great deal of money through its introduction. Mr Bowles had indicated that there had been an initial dip in trade but there had been no effect thereafter.

Councillor Wright stated that car park management costs were probably now higher since the introduction of charges but he felt that not enough enforcement work was being carried out. The inspectors now worked generically and this was a mistake. Regular meetings had been held with the Chief Executive where the subject of enforcement had been raised. More money could be raised through penalties if more enforcement were carried out.

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Councillor Hook advised that the cost of enforcement in 2004/05 had been estimated at £168,000.

Councillor Hook stated that the introduction of two hours free parking was of no benefit to traders. It encouraged the use of the car parks by people wanting to visit Portsmouth or look around the shops. Traders needed customers who were going to spend money but people would rather pay £1.00 to shop at Fareham. A charge of £0.50 per hour would guarantee spaces being available.

There were a number of car parking concessions already in existence but he had no objection to these being reviewed.

Councillor Hook stated that he had sympathy with the people at Lee with regard to the lack of parity. Very few businesses were against charging once it had been introduced. All indications from surveys suggested that charging for car parking was the right thing to do.

Councillor Wright stated that parking charges had been used to augment Council Tax income. All parties on the Council had tried to attract major shops to the Borough but, in the main, the town contained only small traders. The Council should support them but customers still had the opportunity to go elsewhere to large shops or shop through the internet.

Councillor Wright stated that the charges had been introduced without proper consultation and that all amendments relating to concessions had been defeated upon the casting vote of the then Chairman of the Policy and Organisation Board. The process had been ill thought out and rushed through.

Following many complaints from the public a number of concessions, including two hours free parking, had eventually been introduced. He would support a review of concessions.

Councillor Hook stated that the scheme had originally been worked up during a Labour Group administration. The Conservative Group, when gaining power, had had to react to a poor financial situation.

The people who appreciated the introduction of car parking charges were the non-car owners. The value of the Council's car parks was over £5 million.

The removal of charges would enable non Gosport residents to park free of charge. Car parking charges were not a vote winner but had reduced the burden on Council Tax revenue.

Councillor Wright stated that car parking charges encouraged people to shop at Fareham where there were more shops.

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In response Councillor Hook expressed the view that traders in Gosport and Fareham would encounter more difficulties from a large Tesco development than from car parking charges. The Council was trying to make the Gosport High Street more attractive and should look at initiatives for the Market and the Town Centre. If people were serious about spending money they would come to Gosport despite parking charges.

Councillor Hook advised that green issues were increasingly important now. Car parking charges would help to finance these and other future challenges such as improved grounds maintenance.

Councillor Wright stated that, due to car parking charges, more people used the A32 thus increasing the use of private vehicles.

Councillor Hook reported that 298,000 people had used the Gosport Ferry in December 2004 and 301,000 in December 2005.

With regard to the lack of parity for Lee, Councillor Wright stated he would support any motion to remove this anomaly but it was up to the Conservative Group to make the necessary proposal.

Councillor Hook questioned whether parity should mean two hours free parking at Lee or whether the car parks in Gosport Town Centre should be the same as the Lee car parks.

Councillor Wright stated that the cancellation of charges at Jamaica Place came about due to the specific problem of shops closing in Stoke Road. The decision was a correct one and should not be changed.

To sum up, Councillor Wright stated that there were a number of anomalies and that his group would support a review and changes, for example, the echelon parking by St Georges Barracks. Also, the issue of enforcement needed to be looked into, particularly with regard to the introduction of specific car park inspectors.

Councillor Hook summed up by stating that the main problem was that all parties were entrenched in their views on the matter. The Committee would need to look at evidence and facts in order to come to its conclusions.

He felt it was significant that few invitees and no members of the public or press had turned up at the meeting and suggested that the issue may not be as important to the public as had been originally thought.

There were difficult decisions to be made and, to move forward, all forms of income should be looked at. All parties needed to talk to officers to try to identify future income streams. Spend to Save and introducing efficiencies could only be effective for a limited time.

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He felt that issues should be looked at non-politically and that the bigger picture should be viewed. For example, waste recycling, green issues and best practice indicators would require funding in the future. The Council continually provided services over and above those required by law and this would also need to be looked at.

Councillors Hook and Wright were thanked by the Chairman for their contributions.

52. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

There was no further business to discuss.

The meeting ended at 8.59 p.m.

CHAIRMAN