

A MEETING OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

WAS HELD ON 9 JANUARY 2008

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

It was reported that Councillor Clinton had been nominated to attend this meeting in place of Councillor Foster.

53. APOLOGY

An apology for inability to attend the meeting was received on behalf of Councillor Foster.

54. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

55. CAR PARKING CHARGES

Consideration was given to a briefing note of the Borough Treasurer which provided background information and highlighted a number of issues to assist the Committee's scrutiny of car parking charges.

The Chairman advised Members that any recommendation made by the Committee would be referred to the Community and Environment Board

The Chairman put forward a number of proposals to the Committee for recommendation to the Community and Environment Board which were:

- That the Board take full cognisance of the evidential findings of the Committee
- That, in considering the existing charging regime or in making any alterations to the existing charging regime in the Borough's car parks, the Board give full regard to the evidence presented by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee as well as the implications to the Borough Council's finances
- That the Board note the advice of officers regarding the best utilisation of income streams
- That the Board note the Overview and Scrutiny Committee's concern over the lack of parity in charging between short stay car parks in Lee-on-the-Solent
- That the Board note the conclusion of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee that car parking charges are only one of many factors that influence shoppers

Officers were questioned regarding the current cost of car parking enforcement and advised that the current revised figure was £174,000 per year including oncosts. Officers carrying out car parking enforcement work were generic officers and spent time on other tasks.

Concerns were raised that some members of the public appeared to be evading car parking charges due to lack of enforcement and therefore income was not being maximised. Officers advised that, if a vehicle did not have the required parking permit, it did not necessarily mean that it would not be ticketed later in the day. Enforcement was carried out although not every day. Members of the public would be unaware of which days enforcement would be taking place. Two hours free parking meant that less enforcement was required and the existing regime was the best that could be provided within the Council's budgets and was considered to be adequate.

Officers advised that, originally, five officers carried out enforcement work on a part-time basis and there were now eleven. Officers had been brought in from other sections to work in this area and at least one of them was dedicated to car parking enforcement. Previously enforcement work had been carried out between the hours of 8.00 am to 4.00 pm but this had now been extended to cover the hours between 6.00 am and 10.00 pm.

Since the introduction of the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act, due to Members' concerns, a policy of zero tolerance had been adopted. This had resulted in a reduction from 77 cars advertised for sale on the highway in 2005 to five in 2007. During the same time period, requests in relation to dog fouling had fallen from 60 to 33, streets affected by graffiti from 4% to less than 0.5%, fly posting was almost down to zero and fly tipping incidents from 746 to 575. Three prosecutions were pending.

Streets affected by unacceptable levels of litter and detritus had fallen from 33% to below 9%. Fixed penalty litter notices had risen from nine in 2006 to 33 in 2007.

Penalty tickets issued in short stay car parks had totalled 1213 in 2005, 952 in 2006 and 389 in 2007. For the same years, 604, 333 and 268 tickets respectively had been issued in long term car parks.

Parking fines in 2006/07 had totalled £51,856 whilst the projected figure for the current year was £32,670.

Officers were questioned as to how the Council could balance its budget when £300,000 of revenue would be lost annually due to the introduction of two hours free parking. The Borough Treasurer explained that the Council received a windfall in 2006/07 due to an underspend in 2005/06. Despite this, it had been necessary to use some of the reserves in 2006/07.

Links between free car parking and specific changes to other services to balance the budget could not be drawn. The possible exceptions were the reduction of car park maintenance and Explosion! Museum.

The Borough Treasurer stated that his concerns were more concentrated on the Council's future financial position. At present the Council Tax increase forecast for 2009/10 was in the region of 20% whilst the percentage increase in 2010/11 was forecast to be in double figures. Action would need to be taken either to increase income or reduce services. To avoid capping a 4% Council Tax increase would have to be adjusted which would involve cutting expenditure or increasing income by £860,000 in 2009/10 and over £500,000 in 2010/11.

At this point in the meeting the fire alarm bell sounded. The Town Hall was accordingly evacuated and the Chairman decided that, in the circumstances, the meeting should stand adjourned.

The meeting was adjourned at 6.40 pm.

The meeting was reconvened at 6.00 pm on 31 January 2008. Councillors Dickson, Jacobs, Kimber, Philpott, Mrs Searle and Train were in attendance.

In answer to a Member's question, the Borough Treasurer advised that the loss of income from the introduction of free short stay car parking had been met from reserves. There were no plans to use money from reserves for this purpose during 2007/08 or 2008/09. There was no direct link between cuts in services and the introduction of free car parking.

There was no shortfall in the 2008/09 budget although there were some reductions in services.

The projected shortfalls for the years 2009/10 and 2010/11 were £860,000 and £516,000 respectively. Action was being taken to address this situation and the contract with Verdant, the Council's waste collection contractor, was to be extended. This would have a beneficial effect on the shortfall figures.

A Member suggested that, although savings could be made in the short term, this was not a situation that could continue and asked whether the Council's financial commitment to the Bus Pass Scheme had been under estimated, this having a significant impact on the Council's finances.

The Borough Treasurer advised that the Bus Pass Scheme was a high impact, high risk area. Additional income streams would need to be found in the future otherwise Council services would be seriously reduced.

Budget proposals for car parking charges in 2008/09 included increases from £0.50 to £0.60 per hour and from £3.00 to £3.60 per day. An increase in charges to make up for the income lost through free car parking would not be achievable.

Reserves of 7% of the net revenue budget were being maintained and all projections assumed that this would be maintained.

A Member asked whether the information sent to all Members on 13 July 2006 anticipating losses of between £300,000 and £400,000 if free car parking were introduced and stating that people would re-locate from long stay to short stay car parks was accurate. The Borough Treasurer confirmed that this information was accurate.

The Borough Treasurer was asked how budget savings and efficiencies were achieved during the budget process. He advised that the process had changed in the last year or two. An initial draft budget was put together and the budget strategy agreed in June. Managers then put together their draft budgets. These were then reviewed and economies sought. This process involved discussions with Members.

A Member stated that in July 2006 Councillors had decided to remove one third of a million pounds in income and asked whether any Councillors had made suggestions as to how that loss of income could be made up. The Borough Treasurer replied that no suggestions had been made in that particular year nor in the 18 months since then.

The Chairman thanked Members of the Committee and officers for the work they had put into the scrutiny of car parking charges.

The proposals put forward by the Chairman earlier in the meeting were seconded and agreed by the Committee.

RESOLVED: That the Community and Environment Board be recommended to:

- a) take full cognisance of the evidential findings of the Committee;
- b) in considering the existing charging regime or in making any alterations to the existing charging regime in the Borough's car parks, the Board give full regard to the evidence presented by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee as well as the implications to the Borough Council's finances;
- c) note the advice of officers regarding the best utilisation of income streams;
- d) note the Overview and Scrutiny Committee's concern over the lack of parity in charging between short stay car parks in Lee-on-the-Solent; and
- e) note the conclusion of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee that car parking charges are only one of many factors that influence shoppers.

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56. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

There was no further business to discuss.

The meeting ended at 6.35 p.m.

CHAIRMAN