

Briefing for Scrutiny on Town Centre Car Parks, Tiverton

Within Tiverton Town Centre there are a number of car parks. These are both owned by the District Council and others are privately owned. The car parks are fairly evenly spread around the centre.

The Council owns car parks in Phoenix Lane (multi storey), Becks Square, at the Market, William Street and West Exe South. These are 'Pay and Display' car parks with different levels of charges. There are also two well used privately owned car parks in the town centre, the Marks and Spencer car park (which has a charge which is refundable within the store following a purchase) and a free car park at Tesco with a limitation of 3 hours. There is also limited on-street parking in Bampton Street, Gold Street and St Peter Street.

There is a feeling amongst businesses within the town as to the effect of charges on trade within the town centre. This is a very common complaint, not only in Tiverton but in most towns and cities across the country. In my experience, most business groups in meetings across the country, at one time or another, approach the issue of car park charges or on street charges.

A recent report for the Welsh Assembly states:¹ Charging for car parking is a complex issue. There is very little evidence base on the relationships between car parking charges and town centre footfall. It is only one aspect of a complex interplay of factors influencing willingness to travel by car, time and money spent and the business activity of the town centre. It is very difficult to separate the influence of car parking charges from other factors.

Car parking is often perceived, particularly amongst businesses, as being a key determinant for changes in footfall levels in town and city centres. Over three-quarters of business owners and employees would state that car parking options (i.e. charging/free) have an impact on the number of people coming to the town centre and therefore their custom. However, there is very little published evidence which links changes in car park charges to changes in footfall. Research undertaken in 2007 for Yorkshire Forward on car parking in market towns found:

“When changes to parking restrictions, charges or enforcement are made, the evidence suggests that the primary responses to that change tend to be:

- an acceptance of the new arrangements (in which case people's behaviour broadly remains unchanged);

¹ Assessing the Impact of car parking charges on town centre footfall, March 15, MRUK Research for the Welsh Government.

<http://www.senedd.assembly.wales/documents/b8912/Impact%20of%20Car%20Park%20Charges%20Research%20Report%20commissioned%20by%20the%20Minister%20for%20Economy%20Science%20and%20Tr.pdf?T=9>

- a change in parking location (people park further away from their destination in an attempt to avoid paying a charge); or
- a reduction in the length of stay in order to reduce parking costs.

Despite fears to the contrary, there is little evidence to suggest that the primary response to parking management is more extreme than this; there is no evidence that visitors use alternative destinations more.”²

In visitor interviews it is suggested that car park charges impact on how long they stay in the town and consequently, how much they spend. However the general availability and size of spaces is felt by the visitor to be more important than the cost in the overall decision about visiting. Traffic flow and signage to car parks also have a considerable effect on their decision to visit a town centre and on how long they stay.

There are many other issues around what affects the detrimental impact on footfall in a town and these include issues such as ‘out of town’ shopping areas. The fact these centres tend to offer free parking may be interpreted as giving a shopper a reason to visit them rather than a town centre.

Blanket free parking does not benefit the visitor or business as the spaces tend to be used by town centre workers thus having a detrimental negative impact on footfall.

There is need to reach a compromise between generating sufficient parking revenue and keeping charges at a rate that will not alienate shoppers/visitors and drive them out of the town. The Council should consider the impacts of car parking charges in the broadest possible sense and should not be viewed in isolation from other factors which affect visiting the town centre.

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² Car Parking Research: Renaissance Market Town Research, Yorkshire Forward 2007