EXETER CITY COUNCIL

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – ECONOMY

8 MARCH 2012

REPORT OF CAR PARKS TASK AND FINISH GROUP

1.0 PURPOSE OF REPORT

1.1 This report informs the Committee of the deliberations, conclusions and recommendations of the Car Parks Task and Finish Group.

2.0 BACKGROUND

2.1 At its meeting on 8 September 2011, this Committee agreed to establish a Car Parks Task and Finish Group (CPTFG) to focus on the broad question of optimising income from the Council's car parks in the current very challenging financial climate. A verbal report on the proposed terms of reference for the Group was made to the meeting of this Committee on 10 November 2011. Recognising that the detail and implementation of tariff policy was in the domain of Executive, it was agreed that the work of the CPTFG would look at broader ways in which parking income might be safeguarded and developed. Following a point raised by a Member at the November meeting, it was also agreed that the Group would look at the issue of potentially raising additional revenue from the various off street parking areas in Newtown.

2.2 Members of the Task & Finish Group comprised Councillors Cole, Crow, Morris and Ruffle. Councillor Sutton also attended meetings in her capacity as the relevant Portfolio Holder. Officer support was provided by a Member Services Officer and the Assistant Director Public Realm. The CPTFG met on five occasions between October 2011 and February 2012.

2.3 Discussions coalesced around five main areas: the charging regime in Exeter; permits; parking in Newtown; pay-by-phone parking; and the signage and 'branding' of car parks. The Group's conclusions and recommendations in respect of each of these areas are set out in the following paragraphs.

3.0 THE CHARGING REGIME

3.1 Members of the Group examined parking charges in a wide range of other towns and cities, noting in particular the overall level of tariffs, the number of tariff bands, the periods during which charges apply and the policies in respect of charging for blue badge holders. The conclusions members reached as result of this exercise were as follows:

- The overall level of parking charges in Exeter is broadly comparable to that in similar cities, although it was acknowledged that it was difficult to make comparisons on a like-for-like basis. Some of Exeter's car parks were cheaper than similarly located car parks elsewhere, while others were more expensive. It was recognised that the health of the local economy, and the quality of the retail environment and visitor attractions, would have a big influence on the level of parking charges an area was able to sustain.

- The tariff structure in Exeter, and the number of different tariff bands, appear overly complex in comparison to tariff structures elsewhere, especially cities like York.

- Exeter is relatively unusual among significant regional centres in having a charging period which ends at 6pm. A number of cities extend charging until later in the evening and some have 24 hour charging in their premium car parks.

- There is a very wide variation in charging policies for blue badge holders. The majority of towns and cities considered by the CPTFG do not offer free parking to blue badge holders in their multi-storey or barrier controlled (usually pay on foot) car parks. A number continue to offer free blue badge parking in 'surface' car parks, but a number offer no charging concessions to blue badge holders at all.

4.0 PERMITS

4.1 Consideration was given to the City Council's current permit schemes which have been in existence for a long time and now appear quite arbitrary and inconsistent in terms of the car parks in which they are available, the charges that are made for them and the eligibility criteria that apply. The Group felt there was a strong case for a much simpler and more coherent system to be introduced which priced permits competitively and capped the numbers in circulation to a fixed percentage of overall parking spaces.

5.0 OFF-STREET PARKING IN NEWTOWN

5.1 The Group looked into this issue in response to a question raised by a Member at full Scrutiny Committee. The situation, in essence, is that there are a number of off-street parking areas in Newtown that are not part of the Council's core car parking stock and where no City Council charges apply. They are, in effect, additional capacity for Devon County Council's on-street residents' parking scheme in Newtown and are intended for the use of on-street residents' parking permit holders only. The City Council therefore derives no income from this arrangement despite the fact that it owns the relevant sites.

5.2 One of the Ward Councillors for Newtown, Councillor Branston, was invited to a meeting of the CPTFG to discuss this issue and offer his views. While recognising and sympathising with the point regarding the loss of revenue, Councillor Branston was strongly opposed to any changes to the current arrangements in Newtown on the basis that he felt they were a pragmatic solution that worked in the best interests of residents. He added that the other Ward Councillor and appropriate County Councillor shared this view. The Group noted the points made by Councillor Branston.

6.0 PAY-BY-PHONE PARKING

6.1 The Group invited a representative from RingGo, the dominant brand in the mobile phone parking marketplace, to attend its meeting on 6 February 2012 to give a presentation on how pay-by-phone works and the advantages it has. The system is increasingly gaining in popularity and is being rolled out across a large number of local authorities, although it should be noted that RingGo is not the only provider. In essence, it allows a customer to pay for their parking by mobile

phone and top up the time they need if necessary, offering much greater customer convenience and the potential, for the Council, to realise efficiency savings through reduced numbers of pay and display machines and lower cash collection costs. There are, however, potential financial drawbacks associated with the system, specifically the percentage charge that is deducted from each and every transaction to cover merchant processing costs. Members of the CPTFG were very attracted to the positive customer service implications of introducing pay-by-phone but had lingering concerns about the potential impact on the Council's revenue.

7.0 THE SIGNAGE AND BRANDING OF CAR PARKS

7.1 These were themes the Group kept returning to. In summary, there were a number of concerns that some of the Council's car parks were not adequately or appropriately signed on the highway, with the result that potential customers may not know they were there; other car parks (especially Civic Centre and Broadwalk House) were not appropriately named or 'branded' to take advantage of their target customers (visitors to Princesshay); and that problems with the highway access to Princesshay were having a potentially detrimental effect on custom for the Council's car parks as a result of motorists being unable to bypass the Princesshay queue.

8.0 CONCLUSIONS FROM THE TASK AND FINISH GROUP

8.1 As a result of its discussions of the issues summarised above, the Task and Finish Group reached the following conclusions:

- Executive should give consideration to a simplified tariff structure with effect from January 2013. The group would be in favour of four tariff bands:
    1. Premium car parks (Guildhall, Mary Arches Street, the refurbished King William Street multi-storey);
    2. Short-stay shopper car parks (all current short-stay car parks except Guildhall, Mary Arches Street, King William Street multi-storey and Fore Street, Heavitree, but including Fairpark, Howell Road and Parr Street);
    3. Long-stay visitor car parks (Cathedral & Quay, Triangle, Belmont Road, Bystock Terrace, Richmond Road and Haven Banks);
    4. Local car parks (Fore Street, Heavitree, Okehampton Street, Holman Way, Tappers Close).

    (The proposed new classifications are attached at Annex A for reference)

    The medium-stay category should be abolished and tariffs equalised, up or down, within each tariff band. Each tariff band should be 'colour coded' on signage, the website and publicity material to make it easier for customers to identify what type of car park they needed and how much they would be expected to pay.

- Executive should review evening parking charges and the overall level of evening parking provision to strike a balance between maintaining a vibrant night time economy and generating potential additional income for the Council or reducing costs (by closing some car parks earlier).

- Executive should give consideration to revising the present permit arrangements for off-street car parks and introducing a simpler, more

streamlined system. While the details, and costs, of any new scheme would be a matter for Executive, the Group discussed the possibility of just two permits that could be purchased by anyone: a Gold permit that would allow parking in any City Council car park (except pay-on-foot sites) day or night; and a Silver permit that would allow parking in any long-stay or local car park by day, and any car park by night (again, excepting pay-on-foot sites). In conjunction with this, Executive should consider making a limited number of car parks 'permit only' by night and limiting the overall number of permits sold to no more than 10% of the total number of car parking spaces. The cost of permits would need to strike the difficult balance between providing a worthwhile saving on daily tariffs for the motorist and generating sufficient income for the Council, and Executive should also be asked to consider whether any form of residents' discount should be offered.

- o No changes should be made to the parking scheme in Newtown for residents, although the Portfolio Holder for Sustainable Development and Transport may wish to ask officers to raise with the County Council the question of an appropriate payment to the City Council for the continuing use of these sites and the income derived from them through residents' parking permits.

- o Officers should be asked to explore more fully the business case for the introduction of pay-by-phone parking and report back to Scrutiny Committee and Executive in due course.

- o Discussions should take place with the County Council on changes to the highway layout in Paris Street to mitigate the impact of queuing on the approach to Princesshay, and Executive should consider renaming the Civic Centre and Broadwalk House car parks in order to attract a greater proportion of customers for Princesshay.

9.0 RECOMMENDATION TO SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

9.1 (i) That the Committee note the contents of this report and comment as appropriate.

ROGER COOMBES
ASSISTANT DIRECTOR PUBLIC REALM

Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1972 (as amended)
Background papers used in compiling this report:-
None

ANNEX A

TARIFF BAND 1 : PREMIUM CAR PARKS

Guildhall
Mary Arches Street
Refurbished King William Street Multi-Storey

TARIFF BAND 2 : SHORT STAY SHOPPERS' CAR PARKS

Bampfylde Street
Bartholomew Terrace
Broadwalk House
Civic Centre

Magdalen Street
Matthews Hall
Parr Street
Smythen Street
Topsham Quay

Fairpark
Harlequins
Howell Road
King William Street (annex)/Leighton Terrace

TARIFF BAND 3 : LONG STAY VISITORS' CAR PARKS

Belmont Road
Bystock Terrace
Cathedral & Quay

Haven Banks
Richmond Road
Triangle

TARIFF BAND 4 : 'LOCAL' CAR PARKS

Fore Street, Heavitree
Holman Way

Okehampton Street
Tappers Close