

CUSTOMER FOCUS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

2 December 2021

Present:

Councillors Mitchell, M, Allcock, Atkinson, Begley, Denning, Mrs Henson, Pearce, Sparkes, Sparling, Wardle and Warwick

Apologies:

Councillors Vizard, Martin, Quance and Ghusain

Also present:

Director Net Zero Exeter & City Management, Engineering, Waterways, and Parking Services Manager and Democratic Services Officer (HB)

In attendance:

Councillor Harvey

Portfolio Holder City Management

26 **Chair**

In the absence of the Chair, the meeting was chaired by the Deputy Chair, Councillor M. Mitchell.

27 **Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting of the Customer Focus Scrutiny Committee held on 7 October 2021 were taken as read, approved and signed by the Chair as correct.

28 **Declarations of Interest**

No declarations of interest were made by Members.

29 **Questions from the public under Standing Order No. 19**

In accordance with Standing Order 19, a member of the public, Mr Peter Hill, had submitted the following question, which in Mr Hill's absence had been tabled together with the answer.

Question

Since the Clear Streets Charter launch in 2018, pavement obstacles to the visually impaired have, undeniably, persisted. A Freedom of Information reply states there is no Charter implementation plan and no performance measures - i.e. no effective management of Charter aims. Why have the Charter commitments not been given dedicated resources?

Answer

The Clear Streets Charter was a collation of all of the duties and responsibilities that both the City Council and the County Council already had, in relation to keeping the streets safe for people of all abilities. This included pavement obstructions but also continued into other areas such as planning, licencing and designing new public spaces. Bringing all these duties and responsibilities together into one charter

underlined the importance of these existing duties to both authorities and to the businesses and residents in the City.

To both the City and County Councils this is business as usual and so there is no need for a charter implementation or performance measures which overcomplicate the message. The message is simply that in all of our decisions and actions we need to consider the safety of all of our residents and visitors. The Charter does not need additional resources it just required embedding into all of our decision making. There will always be challenges and occasions where we need to take action over pavement obstacles but the Charter has proven to be a success. One such example of this is the involvement of the RNIB in the design of the new bus station from its inception to completion.

The Chair reported that he had submitted a request for a review of the Implementation of the Council's Street Charter for Exeter for consideration by the Strategic Management Board and the Scrutiny Programme Board.

30 **To receive questions from Members of the Council under Standing Order No. 20**

No questions had been received from Members under Standing Order No 20.

31 **Car Parks and Environmental Considerations**

The Chair reported that at the meeting of the recent Combined Strategic and Customer Focus Scrutiny Committee when a number of work streams were discussed as part of the Medium Term Financial Plan, Councillors were asked to consider how they could be involved in the future development of the Council's car parking service.

The Council's Engineering, Waterways and Parking Service Manager, attended the meeting and took Members through an overview of the service setting out the number, location and condition of the Council's car parks. The presentation provided detailed figures for each of the 49 car parks showing their type, the income for the last two years including income per bay and options for re-purposing. An annual surplus of £5,858,381 had been returned in 2019/20 compared with £1,093,970 for 2020/21.

The Council's Engineering, Waterways and Parking Service Manager explained that the previous Council approach to car parking had been to aim the city centre car parks at short-stay shoppers with a pricing structure designed to encourage high turnover in sites with the more peripheral sites such as Triangle and Howell Road providing cheaper, long-stay parking for commuters, the emphasis being to facilitate as many cars as possible to boost the city centre economy. Regular, incremental tariff increases had followed as the Council sought to maximise income generation.

The intention of the current strategy was to reduce the number of cars travelling into the city centre, prevent congestion within the central area by encouraging drivers, where possible, to walk a longer last leg of their journey and to encourage a longer dwell time in central car parks so that the shopping public also saw the High Street as a place to visit at leisure to eat and drink. Increasing, or at least maintaining, car park income was also a goal.

The current parking stock was being reviewed to ascertain where it might be prudent to either re-purpose or re-develop current car parks

The presentation set out the current tariffs with the following suggested as potential options for the way forward:-

- extend the charging period;
- introduce flat-rate overnight charging;
- introduce 'Dynamic' charging which could seek to levy an additional fee on top of the usual parking tariff for those arriving or leaving a car park during designated 'rush hour' periods. The aim being to smooth out peak travel times;
- reduce Blue Badge concession;
- re-classify some 'Local' car parks;
- introduce charging in current 'free' car parks;
- all the above estimated to deliver an additional £300,000;
- any tariff changes would require a lead in period of eight weeks, once Council approval confirmed;
- enforcement and compliance; and
- competitors meet market demand.

(A copy of the presentation is attached to the minutes)

The Director and the Council's Engineering, Waterways and Parking Service Manager responded to Members' queries:-

- £8.8 million would have been a predicted income generation without the Covid Pandemic at an occupancy level of 86%. Confidence was returning and a 75% level was anticipated for 2022/23. However, maintaining current tariff levels would result in a £2 million shortfall in 2022/23, whereas implementing the agreed tariffs would reduce the shortfall to £1 million if in place before April 2002, for which there was a eight week lead in period;
- key players in the commercial sector considered that tariffs were less of a barrier for trade and that congested arterial roads and slow journey times were more off-putting for visitors. Individual businesses however had regularly campaigned against tariff rises when advertised. Free car parking however would fly against the city's environmental ambitions so it requires a balanced approach;
- it was not considered that consolidating the parking estate and reducing overall car park numbers would see competitors seeking to capture the market as there was little land opportunities for such speculation;
- re-purposing of car parks could be explored where they were in close proximity to each other and duplicated provision. Of the Guildhall, Harlequins and Mary Arches Street car parks, the latter was in a poorer condition and, on this basis, could be a choice for an alternative use. Re-purposing could involve replacing car park income with alternative revenue streams;
- research was required on the night time use of car parks with view to charging. At present, it was estimated that there were 200 vehicles parked across the city in the car parks. Apart from the Guildhall, John Lewis and Mary Arches car parks, which offered premium night time parking, other car parks were free between 6pm and 8am;
- the recently created Net Zero team would be developing a strategy in respect of electric charging points in our car parks and looking at the business case for their installation and operation to meet anticipated future demand. A small number of charging points were already available within a handful of car parks;
- additional enforcement would protect income. The current nationally set penalty charge was £25 (with prompt payment discount), whereas one city was known to charge £26 per day;
- costs for future maintenance of car parks has been factored in to the capital programme and did not impact on the car parking budget; and

- an income of £101,297 had been generated in 2019/20 from miscellaneous rentals to commercial businesses etc.

The following questions had been put to the Committee in advance of the meeting by Councillor Sparling, with the answers provided by officers for each set out in italics below:-

- what would a tariff look like that did not lead to a shortfall, taking into account that electric vehicles, whilst better in regards to air pollution, are not a solution to congestion and also seeking to protect the ability of Blue Badge holders to access the City without an increase in cost;
there are 1.9 million users of car parks annually; a 50p across the board increase on top of the agreed tariff for 2022/23 would eliminate the £1million shortfall;
- what would be the effect of removing free parking periods from all car parks and potential revenue from introducing car parking fees in open spaces and leisure centres and how much would this generate over a three year period?;
- *there are 194 bays that fall into this category. Assuming every bay brought in £1 per day, that would equate to £70,000 per annum;*
- what research has been undertaken into a Workplace Parking Levy for the City and what were the outcomes?; Could secure cycle parking provision be made available at all car parks, especially in light of the car parks rarely being at 100% capacity?
a comprehensive work place levy can only be implemented by a unitary transport authority and a good example is Nottingham City which used the levy to fund its tram network. A number of parking bays at Princesshay 3 car park have been given over to provide cycle locker facilities for businesses within the Broadwalk House offices above and other commercial opportunities are being explored such as secure cycle parking.

Members made the following observations and suggestions with the responses of officers, where given, set out in italics below:-

- future policy should not discourage coach visits to the city;
- *the increase from £5 to £18 for coaches in the Haven Banks car park was viewed as being easier to absorb by a commercial operator rather than steep percentage increases impacting directly on individual motorists;*
- consider introducing a different, cheaper tariff structure for the weekends. Increasing charges could lead to the public using other shopping centres;
- *car parks are busiest at weekends. When free parking on Sundays was offered, shop workers had predominantly taken advantage. Congestion was considered by the local Chamber of Commerce as being more off putting to shoppers than parking charges. Our charging strategy is designed to reduce congestion;*
- support a tariff increase to reduce the income shortfall of £1 million and suggest that Exeter City Living would not be able at present to incorporate a car park such as Parr Street into its portfolio. Also suggest using the Triangle Car Park for coach use and maximising the use of the Bromhams Farm Car Park and a previously approved charging scheme to limit all day parking will be implemented;
- *the Triangle Car Park would have insufficient space for coaches. The Environment Agency will shortly hand back Bromhams Farm Car Park;*
- a broader approach is necessary to examine opportunities on the fringes of the city as slow access to the city centre, as for example along Alphington Road, can result in visitors avoiding the city. Retail outlets offer free car parking along this artery. Develop a strong, clear message for the city in line with environmental ambitions;

- support a holistic approach and working with the County Council as part of the Net Zero goal. As vehicle ownership is expensive in any event, increased charges should not prove an obstacle. Improve cycle parking provision at car parks. Technical solutions should be examined for better enforcement;
- *the City has a good relationship with the County Council and terms of reference will be brought forward for the new Transport Working Group which will be an advisory body. Use of Automatic Number Plate Recognition for enforcement purposes in car parks by local authorities is restricted but is under review by the Government;*
- important to achieve balance to continue ensuring Exeter is a prime visitor and shopping destination. Increased charges would discourage hotel use;
- potential longer term solutions could include:-
 - charging to reflect emission levels of vehicles via vehicle registration;
 - city to bring forward its own Park and Ride sites; and
 - free hopper buses from outlying car parks, possibly for coach users only;
- hire of cargo bikes from retail outlets, possibly in conjunction with Co-Cars;
- introduce Clean Air Zones;
- future policy will need to achieve a balance and be mindful of diverging goals including:-
 - maximising income;
 - bringing people into Exeter;
 - reducing congestion; and
 - reducing pollution;
- focus should be on encouraging improved, affordable access to the city centre for residents as, in the current economic climate, shopping visits to this and other centres may be economically prohibitive;
- *Exeter still offers a premium shopping experience and the High Street is recovering well; and*
- utilise capital funding to enhance our parks and open spaces to attract more visitors into the city and make it a place for families.

The Chair thanked Members for the useful and informed suggestions which would help the preparation of an officer report to feed into the new 2022/23 tariffs included within the proposed budget as part of the Medium Term Financial Plan. In order for Members to input further into car parking policy and tariff setting, future reviews by the Committee should ideally be timetabled earlier in the year.

32 **Forward Plan of Business**

Members noted the Forward Plan.

The meeting commenced at 5.30 pm and closed at 6.52 pm

Chair