

EXETER CITY COUNCIL

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – ECONOMY 5 SEPTEMBER 2013

PETITION - MAGDALEN ROAD CAR PARK CHARGES

1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 To report to Scrutiny Committee on the petition that was submitted to full Council on 16 July concerning parking charges at Magdalen Road car park and to seek Members' views.

2. PETITION

- 2.1 The petition read as follows:

“As I am sure you are all aware of the recent price increase at Magdalen Road (formerly known as Fairpark) car park. Whilst I support the need to reduce pollution from cars in our city centre, my fear is this change increase is driving the regular visitors out of our city, for whom the motor car is a necessity and not a luxury, to the detriment of local business. So that said, I wish to invite you to voice your opposition to both this and future disproportional Parking Charge Increases.”

The petition received 438 signatures.

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 In 2011 the Council agreed to establish an all-party Car Parks Task and Finish Group to consider options for protecting and maximising income from the council's car parks against the backdrop of very serious economic and financial challenges. Members have previously received and agreed the recommendations of this Group, but in summary the Group concluded that the overall level of parking charges in Exeter was comparable to that in similar cities of regional significance and economic importance. It recognised the importance of the level of charges in respect of the health of the local economy, the retail environment and visitor attractions, but also recognised that the charging structure was, at the time, overly complicated.
- 3.2 Among the Task and Finish Group's recommendations were that the overall tariff structure be simplified and Magdalen Road (then Fairpark) and Howell Road car parks be re-designated as short-stay car parks in order to generate turnover of spaces and thus support traders. These recommendations were agreed by Executive.

4. IMPACT OF CHANGES

- 4.1 Although it is too early to draw meaningful conclusions from car park income or ticket sales data; income from Magdalen Road car park has risen slightly in the period March to June although ticket sales have dropped. The initial reduction in use was to be anticipated given that the impact upon those that previously parked for long periods is immediately apparent, whereas it will take longer for short term users to become aware of the additional availability of parking and travel behaviour to change accordingly.

- 4.2 The change in designation of Magdalen Road car park seems to have achieved the objective of freeing up additional short term shopper's parking spaces. Lowering charges in a car park that is designed to assist traders is self-defeating, since the facility becomes a commuter car park which, from early in the morning until the end of the working day, has no available spaces for those wishing to shop. The change of tariff has encouraged those parking all day to make use of long-stay car parks which are specifically priced to cater for commuters and others who wish to stay for long periods.
- 4.3 The petitioners believe parking charges are acting as a detriment to local businesses by driving out visitors to the city, and this is a view that seems increasingly to be gaining exposure. However, it is not clear what evidence is being used to establish this 'cause & effect', since there are many other very significant factors – sustained real cuts in incomes, reductions in benefits, a desire on the part of households to pay down debt rather than spend money and a consequent weakness of demand and growth right across the economy – that are major contributors to the very difficult environment faced by businesses, and are arguably far more significant than parking charges (that will typically form only a small proportion of the total costs of a shopping or leisure trip). While in no way wishing to minimise the genuine concerns of the petitioners, officers remain of the view that traders are best supported by a pricing structure that encourages regular turnover rather than one that results in all car parks becoming commuter parking facilities from early in the morning. The present tariff structure caters for a variety of different users, and continues to generate an essential income stream for the city, in line with the objectives of the Task & Finish Group.

5. RECOMMENDATION that:

Members note the petition and debate the issues raised.

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR PUBLIC REALM

Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 (as amended)
Background papers used in compiling this report:

None