

Scrutiny Committee 21st November 2013

Parking Scrutiny Working Group

Interim Report

At its meeting on 18th July the Scrutiny Committee agreed to the establishment of a Working Group to look at Parking Issues Relating to the Provision and Management of On Street and Off Street Parking, and Parking Enforcement.

With the incidence of the summer holiday period starting immediately after the agreement to set up the working group, it did not meet initially until 2nd October for the initial scoping and decisions on initial evidence required. We also received background information from Richard Wilson and Gary Connor.

A second meeting was held on 4th November at which evidence was heard from Cllr Hogarth as Cabinet Member, Cllrs Fittock and Brookbank, representing Swanley, Richard Wilson, Gary Connor and Adrian Rowbotham.

Context

Broadly speaking parking can be categorised as **on street** or **off street**.

On street parking, stating the obvious, is on the highway. It may be controlled or uncontrolled. Control may be by the familiar yellow lines or by restrictions in designated areas. Controls are usually put in place for traffic purposes or to protect residential or other amenity. Any surplus revenue from parking machines or permits can only be used for specific highway related purposes governed by legislation and with the approval of KCC.

Off street parking may be owned by SDC or by other operators such as Waitrose, town or parish councils, Network Rail and so on. Net parking revenue to SDC from off street parking is approx. £1.5m, so it is a very significant budgetary item

Approx. 61% of on street parking revenue arises in Sevenoaks Town and station area, the figure for off street parking is approx. 95%.

Given the budgetary implications, the working party has to date focused mostly on off street parking.

Role of Scrutiny

Judging from comments received, there remains some confusion over the difference between the roles Scrutiny and Advisory Committees – one councillor phoned to ask why there was a Scrutiny Group looking at parking when it was already on the agenda of the Economic and Community Development Advisory Group.

In scoping this Scrutiny, we are looking to see whether:

- Parking policy is properly formulated within the regulatory environment
- It is consistent with Community Plan
- It is consistent with the Economic aspirations SDC has for the District

- It is properly implemented and administered in accordance with policy and the regulatory environment

Depending on the outcome of the Scrutiny, it may be that the Advisory Committee will see fit to set up a working group to make recommendations on how (for example) to address a perceived shortfall in long term parking.

Evidence to date

As we have focussed so far on off street parking, let us start by acknowledging that we are for the most part talking of Sevenoaks Town. Sevenoaks is both a destination town for shoppers and a train hub for commuters. The bulk of attention seems to focus on the “destination” aspect. Off-street income this year, including season tickets but excluding PCNs, breaks down (figures in brackets are pay & display only) as follows:

Sevenoaks Town Centre	75%	(82%)
Sevenoaks Station	20%	(12%)
Sevenoaks St John’s	1%	(1%)
Swanley	2%	(2%)
Westerham	2%	(2%)

This shows that the vast majority of shoppers’ parking is in Sevenoaks Town Centre

SDC parking spaces total 1658 (excluding Pembroke Road, being redeveloped for M&S) of which 1262 or 76% are Sevenoaks Town, Station or St John’s, 162 are in Swanley and 145 in Westerham.

Although there is quite a lot of basic data available, the inability of the suppliers to provide data for Blighs before the end of 2012 makes comparative analyses difficult. With the exception of May and June, total other ticket sales for Sevenoaks Town Centre are ahead of the corresponding period a year earlier, suggesting that visitors are not necessarily put off visiting the town centre by the increased charges. That said, there has been a suggestion that parking durations may have changed. Cumulative income had fallen slightly below target as a result of a poor July. However from comments made by the Cabinet Member for Economic and Community Development, there is work to be done to improve the data available and allow a better understanding of factors which may impact on usage and revenue. What is clear is that weather, special events such as the Olympics and the closure and reopening of the Waitrose car park can all have an impact on revenue.

The evening parking charges within Sevenoaks generate c. £45,000 net (after deduction of VAT) on an annualised basis.

The working group sought evidence from councillors representing Westerham, Edenbridge and Swanley. Westerham was unable to attend and Edenbridge councillors stated that as SDC did not have any car parks in their town they had no wish to be involved. Swanley was represented by Cllrs Fittock and Brookbank, who averred that SDC is a small part of the overall Swanley provision, most shopper parking is free, there are perhaps 30 commuter spaces so that commuter parking may overflow onto neighbouring streets, but that overall there is little difficulty. It was clear from the presentation to the Economic and Community

Development Advisory Group that the Westerham Town Partnership sees scope for a more nuanced approach to car park tariffs to benefit business in the town.

Sevenoaks is already represented within the working group. There was a suggestion from one member that increasing parking charges discouraged people from visiting the town, a view also expressed by some retail businesses at various times. The parking statistics do not necessarily support this view. Some businesses have also complained that there is insufficient parking provision which also discourages trade, which also would suggest the contrary (one retailer was heard to express both views more or less in the same breath).

We also heard the view that the evening charge was a major deterrent to the night time economy, though this was not a universal view of the group, and Cllr Eyre who is General Manager of Stag stated that in his experience, patrons were more concerned about availability/proximity than the cost.

Sevenoaks Town Council has regularly voted against increases in parking charges. There is a strong feeling that it is a cash cow from which the remainder of the District benefits.

It was noted in our evidence gathering that Ventnor had bid to take over the town's car parks, but had to prove that the "donor" authority would not suffer. If it did, then compensation would be payable. Sevenoaks Town Clerk has a different view.

Adrian Rowbotham made the following points:

- On street parking revenue is applied according to the appropriate guidelines to the management of on street parking – this has to be justified.
- Off street parking revenue can be applied to finance SDC's other activities and is a vital source
- The 10 year budget includes a 3.5% increase in parking revenues p.a.
- 3.5% currently equates to c.£90,000 (or £900,000 over 10 years) equivalent to (say) 3 staff members
- Most other charges are directly or indirectly controlled/regulated, severely limiting options for replacing any lost parking revenue

Interim Conclusions/Comments

Themes that have emerged so far mostly relate to off street parking:

1. Parking policy has hitherto been largely driven by budget considerations
2. Although there were some encouraging signs at the last Economic and Community Development Advisory Committee, there has been little indication in the past of joined up thinking in parking policy. For example, how does it further (or work against) the aims of the Community Plan and our ambitions for economic and business development within the District?
3. There is a marked lack of partnership working with towns and parishes – for example Westerham would like a more nuanced approach to raising the same amount of revenue to encourage visitors to businesses in the town. Sevenoaks has ambitions to be a Purple Flag town (the car parks do assist in that by being well maintained, CCTV, well lit and so on, but coincidentally rather than as a policy of working together).

- They are consulted on proposed increases in charges and then feel their comments are ignored, rather than being engaged the proposals or policy are formulated.
4. Parking signage is currently hopeless and potentially a major barrier to visitors. When Stag has a popular event (e.g. Pantomime) strangers who have difficulty parking behind the theatre have no idea where else to go.
 5. There appear to be no credible plans to deal with increased demand leading up to Christmas, especially in the face of reduced provision resulting from the M&S development.
 6. Whilst the real time notice boards promised as part of the M&S development will help, they seem to have taken a lot longer than expected for reasons not entirely clear – is there effective project management?
 7. There appears to be divided opinion about whether charges or inadequate provision are greater disincentives to visitors – in the absence of any substantive evidence or data, the group is unlikely to be unanimous as to whether either is myth or fact at this stage.
 8. Our PR is poor. The reaction to the recently proposed parking charges was very negative as it focussed purely on the increased costs and what some would regard as the myths surrounding parking. Efforts, if any, to place these in context were clearly not effective, leaving the impression that we are not proactive in our PR policy. This is not to suggest that we should indulge in misleading spin – far from it as it will come back to bite us.
 9. There is a move to increase parking provision in Sevenoaks which is currently perceived to be inadequate. A detailed parking survey was conducted in support of the M&S development which suggested otherwise. The working group has yet to see data to support an increase, or identify what provision is needed – anecdotally for example there is a shortage of long term provision for low paid workers commuting into Sevenoaks and logically the Pembroke Road spaces lost to M&S could be replaced. How much more is needed?

The foregoing comments are not intended to be critical of officers, who have been extremely helpful and supportive. They do however indicate a direction of travel largely predicated on the budgetary imperatives set by the Council. It may be that on completion of this Scrutiny, the Council will seek through the appropriate advisory groups to adopt a more nuanced and coordinated approach while still meeting the budget imperatives.

In the meantime the working group will be seeking more evidence from other interested groups such as businesses and residents associations, and taking a more detailed look at on street parking and enforcement before finalising its report to the Scrutiny Committee