

Scrutiny Committee 4th February 2014

Parking Scrutiny Working Group

Final 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.

An Interim Report was submitted to Scrutiny Committee at its meeting on 21st November 2013 which advised of the evidence received at that time and set out some Interim Conclusions/Comments. This Final Report builds on the Interim Report (which is attached for ease of reference), sets out activity since then and draws up final recommendations to be considered by Scrutiny for submission to Cabinet.

Evidence taken since the Interim Report

The Working Group has met on 3 further occasions, 10th December 2013, 9th January 2014 with a meeting to agree the Final Report on 24th January.

In addition the Chairman accompanied one of the Community Enforcement Officers on duty in Westerham to see how enforcement was carried out.

Evidence was received from Westerham Town Partnership, Sevenoaks Town Partnership, Sevenoaks and District Chamber of Commerce, Bradbourne Residents' Association and Hollybush Residents' Association whose representative was also able to talk about the Hartslands Conservation Area.

Evidence from the business/commercial organisations was consistent with the conclusion/comments made in the Interim Report resulting from earlier evidence:

1. Parking policy is seen to be driven by revenue considerations and the need to increase parking revenue by 3.5% per annum
2. There has been no meaningful two way consultation with business or towns/parishes on future parking policy. Any consultation recently has been focussed on the proposed annual 3.5% increase
3. In particular Westerham Town Partnership highlighted the potential 500,000 tourists who visit the attractions such as Quebec House, Chartwell and so on, and the need to encourage them to spend money in the town
4. Sevenoaks Town Partnership maintains that Sevenoaks Town is a residential/retail hub that needs appropriate support
5. The public relations (PR) that comes with the proposed increase in charges is poor, with the risk of discouraging potential visitors to Sevenoaks (as the most affected) by allowing the impression that parking is expensive compared to neighbouring shopping centres.

Evidence from residents' associations and individuals was focussed mostly on Sevenoaks as it was felt that the two areas chosen exemplified the sorts of issues likely to occur elsewhere. In the case of Bradbourne Residents' Association, this is a well-established residential area close to Sevenoaks Station which is a commuter railway hub. Commuters

are not only local, but also travel by car from outside the town, and outside the district, to take advantage of the excellent train service to London. Hollybush and Hartslands are largely residential areas within walking distance of the town centre and station, with a small compact specialist retail and commercial business area as well as a growing primary school (St John's) and private secondary school (Walthamstow Hall).

The Bradbourne area has in the past suffered from serious parking issues with commuters who are reluctant to pay for the off street parking available closer to the station, provided by either Sevenoaks District Council or the train operating company. Even if they were prepared to pay, there is insufficient off street parking. SDC issues some parking permits for lower Mount Harry. Much of the problem with on street commuter parking around the Bradbourne Lakes area was resolved following a review of restrictions about 5 years ago. However we were advised that the restrictions were not rigorously enforced, some houses had been extended over their original off street provision and more cars were ignoring the restrictions. Inconsiderate/illegal parking had on occasion restricted road width to an extent that blocked emergency vehicle access. It was also stated that there was some displacement parking as a result of commuters using up parking spaces in Riverhead

Other areas were affected by displacement parking, in particular in the Hollybush area. Some of this is permit controlled, however this does not necessarily help the residents. Cllr Purves, who lives in the area, frequently finds that she cannot park on the street close to her house when returning from a trip despite having a permit.

We received evidence from a number of people that parking restrictions are frequently abused throughout the District, to be fair with just 7 Civil Enforcement Officers (CEOs) enforcement capability is restricted. Also there was frustration that vehicles causing obstruction (across drives or on pavements for example) fall within the responsibility of the police rather than CEO. Experience of residents suggests that enforcement in these circumstances has low priority. CEOs' powers are laid out in statute

The Hartslands Conservation area has a particular problem, since the housing is high density most of it predating the advent of widespread car ownership. The streets are narrow, there is virtually no off street parking and there simply is not enough space to meet demand. It was suggested by Richard Wilson that there was little point in imposing any parking restrictions as this would ultimately reduce the amount of available space.

Spending time with a CEO evidenced a realistic and common sense approach to parking enforcement. It appeared normal practice to allow reasonable time for motorists to get a parking ticket. Similarly, about 10 minutes grace were allowed at the end of a designated period before a Penalty Charge Notice (PCN) was issued. If the motorist arrived before the PCN was issued he/she would generally be allowed to go, though once the issuing process had started it would stand and the motorist would have to appeal. Efforts were made to see whether a ticket was dislodged, and telephone payment was checked online. No charge is due for vehicles displaying Disabled Badges.

For the financial year to 31.03.13, 9,451 PCNs were issued. Of these 1,981 (21%) were challenged, and 919 (46% of those challenged) were cancelled as a result of a successful challenge. 6 went to adjudication. The CEOs are not given a target for the number of PCN's issued, and the one accompanied to Westerham commented that the greater satisfaction

came from not having to issue any. That particular morning, 4 PCNs were issued over two hours. Part of the role also is to ensure that the machines are working, and in the case of battery powered ticket machines, to replace the batteries.

We sought information on whether revenue meets the 10 year budget, and were advised that it runs at about £90-100,000 below the amount budgeted for 2012/13. A consistent 3.5% increase per annum will merely embed the shortfall which over 10 years will total £1 million unless action is taken to replace the revenue.

The options for increasing SDC revenue from other sources are very limited, which has meant that the main driver of parking policy has been to achieve the budgeted increases. This in turn has meant that scope for consultation on other aspects of parking policy has had low priority – see comments 3 and 4 above re Westerham and Sevenoaks towns.

Risk factors raised were:

- Kent County Council deciding to take control of parking management and enforcement on their highways. Whilst use of proceeds of on street parking is strictly controlled, it would have cost implications for SDC as enforcement and management are closely integrated with SDC's own off street parking management
- Political pressure/action from Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) arising from publicity when charges are increased – much lip service is paid to the impact on town centres
- The interim report also made mention of towns/parishes bidding to take on responsibility for car parks.

Summary Conclusions

1. A parking strategy was developed and implemented in full about 5 years ago covering Sevenoaks Town, Sevenoaks Station, Westerham and Swanley. There has been no subsequent overall review of parking strategy though there have been some specific initiatives, particularly around on street parking.
2. Parking revenue is a vital component of the SDC budget, generating c. £1.6 million per annum, about 95% of which comes from Sevenoaks. There is a breakdown of revenue/tickets sold in attachments to this report.
3. Retailers in Sevenoaks frequently complain that the cost of parking in the town discourages customers, but in contrast
4. A number of residents, visitors and potential visitors to the town have complained that the difficulty in finding a parking space discourages them from shopping in the town
5. Businesses within the town complain about the lack of long term parking spaces for employees. In particular one business that takes 40 parking permits states that permit holding employees are frequently unable to find somewhere to park when returning after going out on business
6. Lack of sufficient residential parking in parts of Sevenoaks is a major problem for residents
7. As a commuter hub Sevenoaks attracts a substantial amount of all day weekday parking – lack of parking capacity or reluctance to pay results in on-street parking. As

neighbouring streets become controlled, parking is displaced to more distant residential areas

8. Abuse of parking restrictions and inconsiderate parking leading to obstruction being caused is a recurring theme
9. Rural Parishes have expressed their special need for parking and monitoring in their congested centres, caused through the necessity to provide for the local communities, schools, businesses and the seasonal influx of tourism
10. Parking for low paid workers in Sevenoaks Town can be a significant cost, again causing displacement parking further out from the Town centre
11. Current parking signage is inadequate. In particular popular events which may attract visitors to Sevenoaks who have no idea where to park (if adjacent car parks are full) and no indication how to get from a different car park to their chosen venue
12. Little or no research has been done on parking needs. Parking surveys have concentrated on vacancies between 11-12 a.m. and 2.30-3.30 p.m. – and indicate spare capacity ranging from “some” to “significant” depending on the day and the time. The Variable Message Signs to be installed as part of the Marks & Spencer development will provide much more accurate and extensive real time data.
13. There is a perceived need for (say) an additional 220 long term long term spaces and 40-50 short term spaces in Sevenoaks Town, however
14. In the absence of identifiable demand, there has been no informed planning to meet actual needs
15. The budget is over dependant on parking revenue, and the 10 year budget over dependant on 3.5% increase from a base that is overstated – whether members have sufficient information or are aware of this (or other aspects of the budget) is open to question
16. PR is very limited in function – it appears reactive (announcing the increase without assessing the impact of the announcement and taking steps to mitigate the adverse effects)
17. There appears to be very limited communication between departments to ensure parking policy is consistent with SDC’s other objectives
18. Such policy as there is created in a vacuum without consultation with other interested parties such as other councils and business groups (beyond telling towns and parishes how much the increase will be each year)
19. There is a limit to what the CEOs can achieve, however the evidence when accompanying a CEO suggests a common sense and polite approach to enforcement which is a credit to SDC.

Recommendations

Apart from being a vital revenue earner for SDC, parking is an integral component of sustaining any vibrant commercial centre and delivering economic and community development in the district. SDC should therefore:

1. Re-examine the 10 year budget to validate the parking revenue component in the light of current revenue and likely future developments
2. Identify and quantify likely future risks to revenue (e.g. political/KCC as above) and measures to mitigate identified risks

3. Urgently take steps to assess feasibility and viability of increasing parking provision to meet perceived needs in Sevenoaks town with particular emphasis on ensuring adequate long stay capacity for those who have paid for parking permits
4. As this would be a major project, conduct an audit of project management skills to ensure SDC has the capability to deliver on time and on budget
5. Develop a robust and evidence based parking strategy which takes account of likely future developments
6. In developing that strategy, there needs to be greater cooperation between SDC towns, parishes, the Local Enterprise Partnership, business associations etc. to identify:
 - a. Their assessment of future trends
 - b. Possible partnership opportunities
7. Involve Parishes with and the Managers of specific tourist attractions, in an overall parking review, which would address the special requirements of the villages and surrounding countryside that suffer congestion through the concentration of vehicular traffic in areas that were not designed for the 21st Century
8. Review working practices within SDC to ensure there is a multi-disciplinary approach to parking strategy (and maybe other areas as well)
9. As part of 7. review the role our PR function. Our parking charges are benchmarked, but that did not come across. Sevenoaks is a unique shopping experience – that did not come across. It has a major tourist attraction – that did not come across
10. Look at more innovative ways of dealing with periods of high demand – as an example, a suggestion was made that Park & Ride should be introduced in the immediate pre-Christmas period. It was further suggested that for example such a scheme could be run cost effectively in partnership with Sevenoaks Town Council if it was minded to reintroduce the Vintage Bus at Christmas
11. SDC should work in partnership with other authorities and organisations to identify further opportunities through a combination of resources
12. Signage should be improved in conjunction with the VMS signs to be installed on the major access points to ensure that visitors can easily see where to go to find car park spaces
13. A parking app is being developed in conjunction with Stag, and this should be implemented when the VMS go live to ensure a live update
14. A review should be undertaken of maximum parking times to ensure they are compatible with economic needs – for example a visitor to Stag has a maximum of 4 hours in an afternoon to see a show leaving no time to have lunch or go shopping in the town; similar examples may exist elsewhere
15. SDC should lobby central government to extend the powers of CEO's to allow them to deal with minor obstructions such as parking across drives or on pavements