

EVENING & WEEKEND CAR PARKING TASK GROUP

INTERIM REPORT



January 2016



Bromsgrove
District Council
www.bromsgrove.gov.uk

Background

At its meeting held on 24th August 2015 the Overview and Scrutiny Board considered a topic proposal entitled Review of Evening Car Parking which had been submitted by Councillors Karen May and Luke Mallett, the aim of investigation was to assist officers in evaluating the success of the trial of free evening car parking which had been implemented in February 2015, with the possibility of recommendations being made for future car parking arrangements.

During discussions at that meeting Members were advised that a Task Group review of evening car parking would investigate use of the car parks during the evenings and the impact that this had had on the night time economy. It was envisaged that Members would consult with both local businesses and residents to ascertain the impact that free parking had had on the local economy and whether this free parking provision represented value for money for local tax payers. A review would also explore the potential for alternative parking arrangements to be introduced in the town. Following discussion the Board agreed that a Task Group review of this subject would provide information which could help the Cabinet when reviewing the outcomes of the trial and it was on this basis that Members agreed that the Task Group should be launched. It was also agreed that a report would be brought back to the Board in January 2016 before being presented to the Cabinet at its February 2016 meeting, which would be in time for the final budget setting process to be completed.

The Task Group is made up of 5 Members:

Councillor Karen May (Chairman)
Councillor Margaret Buxton
Councillor Malcolm Glass
Councillor Sean Shannon
Councillor Shirley Webb

The Task Group held its first meeting on 30th September when it discussed how best to carry out its investigations. A number of key witnesses were identified together with data which was requested from the appropriate sources. It quickly became apparent from the work already carried out at the early stages of the investigations that an assessment of the success of the introduction of the free evening car parking was difficult to measure and any recommendations would have to be based on assumptions and anecdotal evidence.

This led the Members of the Group to unanimously agree that car parking as a whole needed to be reviewed in order to widen the area of benefit to residents and contribute to economic growth for the local traders and the district as a whole. The Task Group was mindful that part of the regeneration of the Town Centre will impact on car parking provision and believe that it would be prudent to undertake a full review at this time in order to ensure that going forward the Council's car parks meet the needs of both visitors to the Town Centre and the traders.

The Task Group therefore requested, at the Overview & Scrutiny Board meeting on 23rd November, an amendment to its terms of reference together with an extension

of the time to complete its work. Following discussion the Board agreed to amend the Task Group's remit to cover Evening and Weekend Car Parking and to extend its timescale for completion to March 2016, with an interim report being produced in January 2016.

To date the Task Group has held 7 meetings and interviewed the following witnesses:

Kevin Hirons - Environmental Services Manager
Martin Ashcroft – Partnerships & Projects Manager

Councillor Geoff Denaro – Portfolio Holder for Finance
Councillor Peter Whittaker – Portfolio Holder for Environmental Services

Representative from the Older People's Forum
Representative from the Bromsgrove High Street Improvement Forum

At the time of writing the Task Group Members have also arranged to attend a meeting of the Bromsgrove Town Team (14th January 2016) and are looking to interview a number of other witnesses, including officers and Councillors. It is likely that it will also invite Councillors Denaro and Whittaker to attend further meetings as the Task Group begins to formulate its recommendations.

From the work carried out so far the Task Group has broken down its findings into 4 categories and this report contains details of two potential recommendations and a number of salient points (more detailed comments and evidence will be provided in the final report) which will formulate the basis of the evidence supporting those and any further recommendations it makes when presenting its final report in March 2016. It should also be noted that each recommendation will include supporting evidence together with any legal, financial and resource implications.

What is the Council's Strategic Approach to its Car Parks?

Following its investigations it has become apparent to the Group that there is no car parking strategy which provides clear guidance on the purpose of the Council's car parks. The main points arising from this are whether it is purely an income stream for the Council or whether it is a tool to be used to support economic development of the town centre. Whilst it is understood that this will be a balance of the two elements it would be useful to all concerned to have this written down in order for Environmental Services and the Economic Development team to be able to work together to meet the needs of all concerned.

It is likely therefore that the Group will put forward a recommendation along the lines of the following:

Recommendation
The Council needs to formulate a clear strategy for car parking as soon as possible.

Data

When the original report was put before Cabinet on 7th January 2015, suggesting the 12 month trial of free evening car parking, it was made clear that it would be difficult to monitor the success of such a scheme, due to a large number of variables. The suggestion was made that either the Town Centre Regeneration Team or the Economic Development Team could assist with any form of monitoring the impact on the night time economy.

From the Group's investigations to date; it is clear that there is no efficient way of monitoring the impact of the free parking trial or assessing whether it has been a success or what the financial impact to the Council has been. The Group has been well supported by the Environmental Services Manager and he has been able to provide a variety of data which has been requested, however this has been both difficult and time consuming for him due to the system and the way that the pay and display car parks are set up. It is believed the Council is the only Council which, as change is not given, allows these car parks to take account of the amount paid and provides extra "time" on tickets, in 10 minute intervals.

It is likely therefore that the Group will put forward a recommendation along the lines of the following:

Recommendation
Prior to any further trials (of any nature) being carried out the necessary data should be collated in order to have appropriate comparative information available to ensure that any such trial can be measured successfully.

Consultation

At an early stage of the investigation the Group were in agreement that they needed to consult with both residents and local traders to get their views on car parking in Bromsgrove. An online questionnaire was set up and promoted through the Council's website, a press release and the Together Bromsgrove magazine. The Group have been disappointed with the number of responses received and do not feel that, at the moment, there is sufficient evidence from those responses to support any recommendations. Further details and copies of the questionnaire will be provided in the final report.

The Group discovered, shortly after issuing a press release on the consultation, that a survey was also being carried out by the Bromsgrove High Street Improvement Forum. After making a number of enquiries it was discovered that this group had been set up by a number of local residents who were keen to promote the Town Centre and support the local high street. The Group were able to make contact with a representative of the Forum and who subsequently attended a meeting of the Task Group. She informed the Group that the Forum had already received over 450 responses to its survey and provided details of the areas covered by it (largely retail related and car parking) and a summary of the responses. Following discussions she was happy to provide the Group with the final results of the survey (which was open until 20th December). The Group were appreciative of this and assured her that credit would be given to the Forum within the content of the final report.

At the time of writing the Group are awaiting sight of those final results, but from the information already provided they are hopeful that these will go some way towards provide supporting evidence for further recommendations.

Charges and Concessions

As detailed in the Data section of this report, the Group are having difficulties in being able to assess whether free evening car parking has been a success. From the consultation responses and from anecdotal evidence provided by a number of witnesses, the Group are in the process of considering a number of other options covering both charges and concession schemes for car parking. More detailed investigation and costings need to be carried out before any firm recommendations or observations can be provided. However, these have been briefly discussed with both the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Environmental Services and the Group were encouraged by the responses given. As these ideas are at an early stage the Group feel that it would be inappropriate at this time to provide any further details.