

**FINAL REPORT OF THE COUNCIL'S
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY MANAGEMENT
COMMITTEE INTO
THE EFFECTS OF ON-STREET CAR PARKING
PROPOSALS WITHIN WOKINGHAM TOWN CENTRE**

**Overview and Scrutiny
Management Committee Members:**

**Councillor Angus Ross (Chairman)
Councillor Alistair Auty (Vice-Chairman)
Councillor Chris Bowring
Councillor Prue Bray
Councillor Phil Challis
Councillor Gerald A Cockroft
Councillor Michael Firmager
Councillor Lee Gordon-Walker
Councillor Tim Holton
Councillor Norman Jorgensen
Councillor Abdul Loyes
Councillor Julian McGhee-Sumner**

REVIEW INTO THE EFFECTS OF ON-STREET CAR PARKING CHARGES ON RETAIL ACTIVITY, TRAFFIC FLOWS WITHIN WOKINGHAM TOWN CENTRE AND ENFORCEMENT OPTIONS

Report by the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee

Introduction

1.1 At the Executive meeting held on 28 May 2009 the Executive agreed to the development of detailed proposals for the introduction of on-street car parking charges within Wokingham Town Centre and their formal advertisement. At that meeting the Executive also passed the following resolution:

“5) the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee be asked to look into the following matters, and to report back in a timescale to inform the Executive’s decision on this matter at its September meeting:

- a) how charging for on-street car parking might assist retail activity in the town centre;
- b) how traffic management associated with on-street car parking can be used to improve traffic flows and reduce congestion in the town centre; and
- c) how future enforcement should be undertaken.”

1.2 The Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee, at its meeting on 15 June 2009, agreed the Terms of Reference for the review (attached at Appendix A) and that the Committee itself would carry out the review. The key objectives of the review were agreed as:

1. To consider how charging for on-street car parking might assist retail activity in the town centre;
2. To consider how traffic management associated with on-street car parking can be used to improve traffic flows and reduce congestion in the town centre;
3. To consider how enforcement of on-street parking charges should be undertaken; and
4. To consider how the level of the proposed tariff might affect the objectives above.

Background

2.1 The report that was considered by the Executive on 28 May 2009 (attached at Appendix B) states that car usage is steadily increasing which has resulted in additional demand for parking in Wokingham town centre. There are several ‘on-street’ parking ranks within the town centre where short term parking is intended to encourage shoppers

and other passing visitors to the town centre. However, many of these areas are being used for long term parking to the detriment of local commerce.

2.2 Enforcement of 'on-street' parking restrictions in Wokingham Borough is currently undertaken by Thames Valley Police. However, the Association of Chief Police Officers and Thames Valley Police have indicated that public parking infringements will continue to be enforced at a low priority as resources need to be concentrated on other more serious policing activities. The result of this low key enforcement means some drivers are flouting the current parking restrictions.

2.3 In order to address the parking issues within Wokingham town centre and thereby support the vitality of local trade and commerce and provide a source of revenue for the Council proposals were therefore put forward to implement on-street parking charges in and around the town centre.

Information Gathering

Meeting held on 8 July 2009

3.1 The Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee met on 8 July 2009 to consider information contained in the Executive report and a number of written representations that had been received from members of the public, organisations and the local Member of Parliament in response to a press release which had been issued on 24 June 2009 and which resulted in an article in the Wokingham Times. The Committee had also invited a number of witnesses who provided their views on the on-street car parking charges proposal.

(Note: The comments were made prior to the Committee becoming aware that the proposals had been amended to that considered by the Executive, see para 4.2.)

3.2 Alun Hicks and Robert Ashton reported that the view of the Chamber of Commerce was that the Council's priority was the revenue generation potential of the proposed scheme and not the vitality of local trade and commerce. If revenue generation was the Council's priority then it was put forward that this could be raised without significant capital expenditure by opening the car park at Shute End Council Offices to long-stay public use at a charge of up to £5 per day which would generate around £200,000 in year one based upon 150 spaces. In response to whether evening charges for on-street car parking should be introduced Mr Hicks commented that this would have a negative impact on the thriving evening leisure and restaurant trade by deterring visitors.

3.3 The Chamber also felt that there was no real evidence to support the Council's view that the proposals would stop the abuse of parking spaces or have a positive impact on traffic flows. In fact, abuse of parking bays was not an issue that had been raised or discussed by members of the Chamber. The Chamber believed that free on-street parking was not detrimental to traffic flows and did not cause congestion. Although it was recognised that congestion did occur at peak times this was largely as a result of deliveries to retail premises which could be addressed by restricting when deliveries were allowed in the town centre.

3.4 The Chamber felt no attempt had been made by the Council to quantify what the negative impact of on-street car parking charges might be on traders in the town and that a tariff of £1 per visit would be detrimental to local trade by undermining short/casual visits to

the town and lead to shoppers deferring their visits and probably ending up using a free supermarket car park or go to another town.

3.5 In relation to enforcement it was noted that only the Police had the authority to issue fixed penalties and this would also be the case with metered on-street parking unless a traffic warden was employed. The Chamber therefore believed that a warden could be financed from penalties received from enforcing the existing system as well as from over-staying at parking meters. If the public were aware that checks were being made by traffic wardens then they would be less likely to risk overstaying.

3.6 The number of empty shopping units in the town centre contributed to its run down feel and it was anticipated that metered on-street parking would further aggravate this image. The town centre therefore needed to increase its appeal for short term visitors by increasing the availability of short term free on-street and off-street parking. The net cost of the proposal, £145,000 in year one, was deemed to be unacceptable in the current economic climate as well as being totally unnecessary, undesirable and wholly avoidable.

3.7 Richard Oughton, Chair of the Wokingham Town Centre Retail Forum agreed that since the withdrawal of traffic wardens in the town, and drivers thereby knowing that there was no enforcement of restrictions, some short stay free car parking spaces had been abused and were used by some drivers for long stay car parking, which was to the detriment of local commerce. If this abuse was stopped then it would improve the opportunity of attracting new custom and business.

3.8 Of the 187 parking spaces identified for inclusion in the scheme only the 61 spaces located on Peach Street, Rose Street and Broad Street appeared to have a direct correlation to footfall within the town centre. The businesses Mr Oughton had consulted believed that the remaining 126 spaces were utilised by town centre workers and commuters. It was also believed that if metered parking was introduced in Milton Road and Rectory Road this would result in the displacement of users to other residential areas and would also have a negative impact on recruiting staff who would have to pay additional expenses. The Forum also believed that spaces in areas such as Milton Road and Rectory Road would not achieve 50% occupancy rates as they would not attract consumers wishing to find convenient town centre parking.

3.9 It was recognised that both Marks & Spencer and Waitrose operated privately owned car parks within the town centre and both retailers believed that if the scheme was introduced there would be potential for abuse from those seeking medium to long term parking and from commuters. If this was the case consideration would have to be given to closing the car parks at close of trade which would have a negative impact on the town's vibrant restaurant trade.

3.10 It was therefore the view of the Forum that the introduction of on-street car parking charges was not supported as it would impact negatively upon commerce. The Forum did however support the need to have a mixture of free on-street parking and competitively priced short/long term off-street parking and therefore would support improvements to the management of free car parking spaces within the town centre by the re-introduction of a traffic warden.

3.11 John Piasecki, retail trader informed the Committee that he felt that the proposals were based on conjecture and not evidence based and were just a revenue raising exercise dressed up as a measure in favour of retailers. He also believed that the

proposal would actually be a poor revenue generator involving heavy initial capital investment and on-going running costs. Mr Piasecki felt that those motorists using free on-street parking would not be prepared to pay for metered on-street parking and as a result the scheme would be open to persistent abuse with motorists moving to areas with double yellow lines which they knew would not be policed, or park in residential areas. As a consequence the projected revenue generated would not be achieved. Mr Piasecki also believed that there was insufficient evidence within the Executive report to substantiate the revenue generation potential of the proposals or that abuse of free parking bays was in fact a problem.

3.12 Mr Piasecki felt that the Council should be looking at alternatives to the current scheme e.g. the 'disc' based parking scheme which was part of the controlled parking zone within Ambleside town centre. There were limited waiting time restrictions in various streets within Ambleside controlled by parking discs which were available free of charge from local shops. The scheme was enforced by wardens and was established to encourage a quick turnover of spaces. Another alternative would be the introduction of evening charges as Mr Piasecki felt that charges could be more easily absorbed in the amount spent by evening visitors and would be less likely to discourage them from visiting the town centre. A charge of £1 for 2.5 hours in the evening would be better than metered on-street parking during the day.

3.13 Mr Semp and Mr Odedra, independent retailers reported that the introduction of metered on-street car parking in Barkham Road and Latimer Road would be devastating for their businesses as they felt that customers would not be prepared to pay parking charges when purchasing low value items e.g. bread and milk and would therefore drive to locations with free parking. Mr Semp and Mr Odedra strongly disagreed that the proposals would benefit their trade and in fact felt that it would be a hindrance to commerce, particularly to their businesses which were already adversely affected by problems with the nearby railway level crossing. The Committee noted that most of the time the parking bays in the vicinity of the shops were empty and congestion only occurred as a result of the railway level crossing.

3.14 Rex Roskilly, Chairman of the Wokingham Town Centre Neighbourhood Action Group (NAG) informed the Committee that one of the objectives of the NAG was to keep the town centre free from crime and that it was felt that a vibrant and healthy town centre was the best way to achieve that by promoting increased footfall as a deterrent. Although enforcement was an issue and there was some abuse of free on-street parking, it did not appear to practically impinge upon the availability of car parking spaces within Wokingham town centre. Enforcement of current restrictions could be achieved by way of periodic blitzes and the reintroduction of traffic wardens was an option that the Borough Council needed to consider. The Committee noted that it was felt that the introduction of on-street metered parking on selected town centre streets would simply cause and increase problems elsewhere.

3.15 Mr Roskilly felt that the financial assumptions made within the Executive report of 28 May 2009 for revenue generation were flawed, but that if the proposals were implemented, any revenue raised should be ring-fenced and used to help Wokingham town centre through the period prior to regeneration.

3.16 Neil Badley, Corporate Services Manager informed the Committee that the lack of availability of primary on-street car parking places was acting as an impediment to traffic flows due to the slowing down of traffic caused by motorists looking for a vacant parking

bay and this would be less likely if the proposals were introduced because more bays would be available. If more bays were available for parking, the vitality of the town would be improved. Following the decision of the Executive to authorise the development of on-street parking proposals, an on-street parking study undertaken by highways consultants WSP had confirmed the abuse of free parking bays.

3.17 The Committee noted that in the opinion of Officers, there was no evidence to suggest that free parking spaces acted as an attraction to visitors or shoppers in terms of increased footfall and that if the retail offer was strong enough people would be prepared to pay for parking.

3.18 Neil reported that Wokingham Borough Council had no enforcement powers of its own, but that some powers would be gained if the proposals for metered on-street parking changes were to be introduced. In his view, the best long term solution to the issues around enforcement was the introduction of decriminalised or Civil Parking Enforcement. The Committee noted that following the introduction of Civil Parking Enforcement, the enforcement powers of the Police would transfer to the Council. However, the process of obtaining approval for Civil Parking Enforcement would take approximately 2 years; have to apply to the entire Borough, have significant resource implications in terms of preparatory work, and once established, be self-financing.

3.19 The Committee noted that to act as an encouragement to the Police in the short term, the report to the Executive of 28 May 2009 had included proposals to gain additional Police support in enforcing waiting restrictions at an estimated cost of £50,000. This was required to seek to prevent displacement from roads with on-street metered parking to parking on roads with yellow lines and the consequential loss of revenue that the Council would incur as a result. Discussions would continue to be held between the Council and the Police concerning their support but that the enforcement of public parking infringements would continue to be a low priority for the Police.

3.20 The Committee was informed that the proposals and street map that had been included within the Executive report of 28 May 2009 had been based upon a desktop study of parking bays. Since that time additional work had been undertaken to develop the proposals further and changes had been made to the originally proposed scheme. The amended proposals included the provision of three different zones, 30 minutes, 1 hour and 2 hours. The amended proposals had only become definite in the weeks prior to the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee's meeting.

3.21 The Committee noted that in the scheme as proposed to the Executive, the meters required were to be purchased outright rather than obtained on a trial basis. The Committee felt that the scale and nature of this capital investment rather undermined the practicality of undertaking a 6 month review of the operation of the proposals as set out within the Executive report, given that it would be impossible to return the meters even if the scheme was judged to be unsuccessful after the trial.

3.22 Andy Nicholls, Economic Development Officer reported that a number of retailers were struggling and footfall was declining and therefore he felt that the proposals would be perceived as being detrimental to retailers regardless of any evidence about improvements in traffic management.

3.23 Andy informed the Committee that Marlow, an example of a market town, had recently taken over enforcement of restrictions from the Police and this had worked well

and had helped to reduce traffic congestion within the town. The Committee queried whether there was any real correlation between the retail offer in Marlow and Wokingham.

3.24 From the information provided at the meeting Members were unhappy that given the significance of the proposals for on-street car parking that the public consultation was being undertaken during the school holidays. Whilst also taking into account information from Officers that such a timescale was necessary if the results of the consultation were to be available for the Executive's meeting in September, the Committee agreed the following resolution:

“That the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee strongly recommend to the Executive that formal advertisement of proposals for on-street parking in Wokingham Town Centre not proceed until at least September 2009.”

3.25 It was also agreed that the Chairman of the Committee would seek a meeting with Officers and the Executive Member to clarify the detail of the proposals and how they had changed since the original Executive decision to approve the development of proposals.

Meeting held on 16 July 2009

4.1 The Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee had a further meeting on 16 July 2009 to consider the following information, including amendments to the proposals:

- Photographs of streets affected by the proposals;
- Comparison data from other authorities on levels of car parking charges;
- Reading Station 30min free parking scheme;
- Details of Ambleside Disc Parking System;
- A study of on-street car parking undertaken for the Council by WSP;
- Research undertaken into car parking in Yorkshire market towns;
- Additional written submissions from organisations, including Thames Valley Police, and members of the public;
- Detailed map outlining the currently proposed number of parking bays.

4.2 Members of the Committee noted the revised map which outlined the current proposals and showed an increase in the number of proposed parking bays from 187 to 240. The spaces had been divided into two bands: an inner ring which would provide 30 minutes parking at a cost of 50p to attract short stay shoppers and an outer ring providing 1 hour parking at a cost of £1 to attract those who wished to stay longer. It was also noted that Barkham Road and Latimer Road were currently not included within the scheme.

4.3 The Committee took into account the written comments received from Chief Inspector Blackburn, Thames Valley Police which stated that “in terms of on street parking charge infringements Thames Valley Police do not have additional resources in place to assist with parking infringements of this nature and it would be desirable to seek decriminalisation of this matter in order that this may be ‘policed’ by the local authority”. The Committee stated their disappointment that no one from the Police had been available to meet with them to discuss the issues of the proposals.

4.4 The Chairman of the Committee reported back that legal advice he had received from Officers was that the changes to the proposed scheme, as outlined to the Committee, did not invalidate the Executive's prior decision. The Chairman also reported back that although the Leader of the Council had considered the resolution of the Committee with regard to the timing of the formal consultation, he had not been prepared to call an

extraordinary meeting of the Executive prior to 23 July 2009 and therefore the consultation would go ahead as per the Executive's original resolution.

4.5 The Committee had invited a number of witnesses who provided their views on the on-street car parking charges proposal.

4.6 Councillor Chris Singleton, representing Wokingham Town Council reported that in the Town Council's view, the on-street metered parking would have an adverse impact upon retail trade which was already experiencing difficulties as a result of the economic recession. The proposals were seen as tactical but it was unclear whether they fitted into a broader parking strategy. There had not been any contact with the Town Council prior to the Executive considering the initial proposal.

4.7 The Committee noted that the Town Council was of the view that the abuse of parking restrictions within the town centre was well known and that difficulties were faced by residents with parking near the town centre and station. The issues that needed addressing were providing ease of access; traffic management; ease and choice of parking; charging for 15 minute stays and the provision of an attractive environment. There was concern that metered on-street parking would instead create an unattractive environment.

4.8 Councillor Singleton reported that it was felt that the proposals would not improve traffic flows as it was felt that traffic would be disrupted more by 30 minute stays than was the case under the present situation. Based upon the number of 240 parking spaces with an occupancy rate of 50%, the proposals implied that 120 cars would be looking for parking spaces. Although it had been suggested within the Executive report that revenue would cover costs, it was believed that 15 tickets per day would need to be issued to achieve the revenue forecasts. Those wishing to avoid charges or penalties would simply be displaced into surrounding residential roads.

4.9 Rather than introduce the current proposals, the Borough Council needed to investigate alternative ways of policing existing parking restrictions, possibly by the use of Police Community Support Officers, (PCSOs). However, the Committee noted that fines issued by the PCSOs would not be received by the Council.

4.10 Ken Lowe, Rose Street Residents' Association reported that Rose Street was unique in being the only street within the town centre that was primarily residential in nature. It was an integral part of the historic nature of the town and had been given Conservation Area status in 1986.

4.11 The Committee was referred to a report published by English Heritage which had stated that 1:7 conservation areas were on the decline due primarily to street clutter and poor traffic management. This was borne out in Wokingham as there was an unacceptable increase in street clutter and with the A329 running through the town centre there was nothing that could be done about the amount of traffic. It was therefore not felt that the proposed scheme would provide any improvement to traffic flow in the town.

4.12 From the perspective of the residents' association a key issue arising from the proposals was how metered on-street parking would be incorporated within existing arrangements for residents' parking given that under the existing provisions there were 16 residents' parking places for the 60 parking permits that had been issued. If residents had to pay for parking it would be seen as a tax.

4.13 It was believed that Wokingham Borough Council had allowed the Police to abdicate their responsibilities for parking enforcement and that it was felt that a lot of money would be spent implementing the proposals without the achievement of the proposals' objectives.

4.14 David Gaskin, Chair of Wokingham Area Access Group reported that if the proposals were to be implemented it would be difficult for disabled people to use Wokingham. The Access Group had campaigned for a number of years to reduce street clutter and was concerned that if meters were introduced that work would be negated and the safety and accessibility of roads within the town centre for disabled people would be compromised. It was queried whether appropriate equality impact assessments had been undertaken in developing the proposals.

4.15 Mr Gaskin informed the Committee that it was felt that existing fraudulent use of disabled parking bays would be made worse by the implementation of the proposals and disabled people would be forced out as other people sought to use disabled bays as a way to avoid paying.

4.16 Caroline Smith, Charity Shop Manager reported that even small changes to the environment around shops could make a big difference to the trade experienced by retailers and therefore the proposals for metered on-street parking needed to be seen in this context. Mrs Smith supported previous concerns expressed that although the argument for the proposals was that they would support the vitality of the town centre there was a lack of evidence to justify that claim. In her view it was difficult for the Council to justify the introduction of metered on-street car parking and the level of tariffs in the current economic climate and in comparison to parking charges in other areas such as Bracknell. Although problems did exist with enforcement there was no evidence to suggest the proposals would solve the problem.

4.17 Councillor Dianne King, local Ward Member reported that she understood the need for the Council to generate revenue income, but that she was concerned for the economic vitality of the town. The Council needed to do more to encourage footfall within the town centre.

4.18 Free short term parking needed to continue to be provided in streets such as Peach Street, Rose Street and Rectory Road in order to facilitate quick visits and encourage shoppers into the town. To stop the abuse of parking spaces discussions needed to be opened up with the Police about their role and randomly timed checks would help. Following the regeneration of the town centre it would be the appropriate time to consider a broader parking strategy in consultation with local businesses.

4.19 Councillor Philip Mirfin, local Ward Member reported that he opposed the proposals. Wokingham Town Council had invested a significant amount of time and money over the last 3-4 months to improve the appearance of the town centre and improve footfall by the planting of flowers and cleaning up of chewing gum. The siting of parking meters would be a negative solution and it was unclear if the objective of the proposals was to introduce prohibitive controls or to generate revenue. If revenue generation was an objective then an alternative was to charge for parking at the Shute End car park on Saturdays.

4.20 Councillor Mirfin agreed that there was a need for parking control and commented that if a Police Community Support Officer was funded or part funded by the Borough and Town Council there ought to be a degree of control by those authorities on their activities.

If they did not undertake this role then the option of withdrawing funding needed to be considered. The implementation of metered on-street parking would not address the problem of the abuse of free parking spaces and it was imperative that an equality impact assessment take place prior to their installation. There were particular issues around Rectory Road and Milton Road as there were two busy doctors' surgeries which did not appear to have been taken into account. The Borough Council needed to start the process of looking at Civil Parking Enforcement.

4.21 Councillor Keith Baker, Executive Member for Highways and Transport stressed that a final decision on whether to go ahead with the proposals had not been taken. The decision taken on 28 May 2009 had been to develop the proposal, refer it to the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee and advertise in order to gain more comments. It was also intended that a website page would be created to allow residents to submit comments and work had also been undertaken with the local press to stimulate participation. Once all the consultation responses had been received the proposals would be reviewed and a decision made on whether to implement would be taken by the Executive. He commented that personally he had an open mind on the issue.

4.22 Enforcement was an issue, but under the existing arrangements only the Police had the legal power to take enforcement action and issue penalty notices. However, given enforcement of traffic was not a top priority other options had been explored. If the proposals for metered on-street car parking were implemented the Council would have the power to enforce whether a charge for parking bays was imposed or not. The Council's car parking attendants would enforce the conditions of the parking bays and the proposals contained provision to fund a Police Community Support Officer who would take action against any displaced parkers who parked on double yellow lines.

4.23 The Committee was informed that the evidence, as set out in WSP study, indicated that on some occasions nearly 24% of all vehicles exceeded the time limit. This was an issue that had to be resolved either by the proposed scheme, the Police or by the introduction of Civil Parking Enforcement (decriminalisation).

4.24 Councillor Baker confirmed that the next steps for implementation of the proposals, as set out in para 4.7 of the WSP report, had not been costed or timed yet and further information on these issues would be investigated if a decision was taken to proceed. The decision taken at the Executive on 28 May 2009 had been one of principal to develop the proposals and therefore it had not been necessary to know the cost of specific items such as parking meters. With regard to the timing of the formal public consultation on the proposals it was acknowledged that timing was not ideal, but that the formal consultation was being boosted by the consultation undertaken as part of the scrutiny review which had been very inclusive.

4.25 The Committee noted that it had been decided not to review residents' parking permit schemes at the same time as developing the on-street car parking proposals because there were 20-30 different schemes and because that exercise in itself would be quite intensive. Under the proposals, if an area was identified as having dual parking, residents with parking permits would continue to be able to park for free.

5.00 Findings in relation to the Key Objectives of the Review

In formulating the following findings, the Committee had regard to the written submissions it received, (as set out in Appendix C), the verbal representations of witnesses, (as set out in Appendix E) and background information collated, (Appendices F and G).

(5.1) How charging for on-street car parking might assist retail activity in the town centre

In the Committee's view it had not been demonstrated that charging for on-street car parking would assist retail activity in the town centre and that based upon the evidence available, there was a risk on-street charges could have a negative impact. Whilst there was research and anecdotal evidence to suggest that successful traffic management could impact positively on a town, the Committee did not feel that the proposals would achieve that objective.

In coming to this view, the Committee took into consideration the following issues:

- Although anecdotal in nature, the evidence presented by the Wokingham Chamber of Commerce, Wokingham Town Centre Retail Forum and individual traders was overwhelmingly of the view that the introduction of on-street charges would be detrimental to retail activity as it would deter visitors and shoppers from choosing Wokingham, because it would become an unattractive proposition. In the view of these witnesses, the timing of the introduction of the charges during a severe economic recession was particularly detrimental. The Committee felt that the comments of these witnesses were representative of the perceptions of local people and traders at the 'sharp end' and on that basis should be given significant weight;
- That local ward members amongst others had felt that the effects of the regeneration of Wokingham town centre needed to be clearer before the proposals or a parking strategy were considered;
- The Committee noted that within the Executive report of 28 May 2009 there was recognition within the notes in Section 3 of the report, that *'it is very important that the on-street charges should be viewed as reasonable when viewed against the "commercial and retail offer provided in Wokingham"*¹. The submissions made to the Committee by the majority of witnesses suggested that Wokingham's retail offer was not strong enough to absorb or mitigate against the impact of on-street car parking charges and that therefore the proposals would in their view negatively impact on the economic vitality of the town;
- That research quoted within the 'Car Parking Research' study commissioned by the Yorkshire Forward Development Agency indicated within its key findings that the relationship between parking and economic performance was weak, but generally positive². However, although it was felt that if this conclusion was true, it was equally not an overriding endorsement of the argument put forward that the proposals would improve the vitality of the town. The Committee also noted that the study also set out a number of circumstances where greater management of parking could be a bad thing, e.g. when a town's economy was weak and retail vacancies were high³. The Committee felt that this and many of the other warning signs identified within this section of the study were currently applicable to Wokingham town centre.

¹ WBC Executive Report 'Introduction of 'On-Street' Car Parking Charges in Wokingham Town Centre, Section 3

² Renaissance Market Town Programme, 'Car Parking Research', Key Findings page 6

³ Renaissance Market Town Programme, 'Car Parking Research', Section 2 : Economic Impacts of Parking page 12

However, the Panel also took into consideration that:

- It was important to consider the 'Car Parking Research' study as a complete document as it presented a balanced analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of the types of parking provision and management;
- The submission made in support of the proposals by Officers that if the retail offer of a town was strong enough people would be prepared to pay for parking and that there was no empirical evidence to suggest that free parking attracted visitors or increased footfall;
- It was noted that the data collected as part of the WSP study report on turnover of parking bays had identified a number of vehicles parked in excess of time limits and the number of vehicles parked for more than 10 hours on the days that the survey was undertaken. In the words of the report, "*These long term parking vehicles reduce the car parking capacity and artificially reduce the turnover rate by blocking a space.*"⁴ This data appears to support the justification put forward as part of the report to the Executive of 28 May 2009 that parking bays were being used for long term parking to the detriment of local commerce. The Committee acknowledged that an argument in favour of the proposals was that the Council would as a result be in a position to enforce restrictions on street car parking bays. It followed that if this enforcement action was taking place, turnover of bays would be increased and as a consequence, the number of free spaces available to prospective shoppers and visitors increased. This could lead to increased footfall within the town centre.

(5.2) How traffic management associated with on-street car parking can be used to improve traffic flows and reduce congestion in the town centre

The Committee accepted that in principle, parking management could be a powerful tool in securing broader objectives including improvements to traffic flows, improvements to visual amenity and other environmental and social benefits. However, in the Committee's view there was no compelling evidence that the proposals would reduce congestion and that other alternatives might achieve the same objectives.

In coming to this view, the Committee took into account the following issues:

- The views presented by the Wokingham Chamber of Commerce, Wokingham Town Centre Retail Forum and individual traders indicated that although some blocking of parking bays did occur, it was not so significant as to impact upon traffic flows. Other factors such as problems caused by deliveries during peak traffic hours or infringement of yellow lines were considered to have more impact. In addition these witnesses' perception was that the introduction of metered on-street parking would displace those wishing to avoid charges into other streets thereby causing new problems;
- The views put forward that random enforcement of the present waiting restrictions was all that was required to solve the majority of the abuse of parking bays;

⁴ WSP, Wokingham Town Centre On-Street Parking Study, paragraph 4.6 page 9

- That there were practical alternatives to the introduction of metered on-street parking that potentially could achieve the objective of reducing congestion with fewer disadvantages than the proposed on-street charging proposals. The Committee noted that in some areas such as Ambleside in South Lakeland District, a 'Disc Based' system had been introduced whereby discs were available from local retailers and visitors used them to set their arrival time; the authorised amount of free parking time being indicated on signs nearby. The idea behind the scheme was to encourage a quicker turnover of places to enable the public a better opportunity of finding a parking space, a similar objective to proposals formulated by Wokingham Borough Council. Whilst the Committee noted that this system had been implemented following the introduction of Civil Parking Enforcement and it was acknowledged there would be also be disadvantages of such a scheme, it was an example of an alternative to metered on-street parking where the incentive of free parking was preserved, but enforcement could be taken against those who abused the scheme.

(5.3) How future enforcement of on-street parking charges should be undertaken

The Committee acknowledged on the basis of the submissions it had received that there was broad agreement that for a variety of reasons, enforcement of the current waiting restrictions was simply not taking place and had not for sometime. The Committee shared the concerns expressed by witnesses that the lack of enforcement within Wokingham town centre was untenable and that proper enforcement would be critical to success in managing on-street parking provision in the future, regardless of whether the present proposals for on-street parking charges were implemented or not. The Committee was mindful that the Car Parking Research study stated that whilst Councils had more control over parking than virtually anything else, to be effective, managed parking schemes had to be properly enforced.

In the medium term, the Committee felt that the evidence presented to it strongly suggested that the introduction of a form of decriminalised parking enforcement across the whole of the Borough would provide the best solution to the management of on-street parking and practical options for enforcement.

The Committee expressed the view that in the short term the role of the Police and Police Community Support Officers, funded by Wokingham Borough and Wokingham Town Councils, in enforcing existing parking restrictions needed to be discussed as a potential short term solution to the current problems.

In coming to this view, the Committee took into account the following issues:

- The evidence the Committee had received indicated that under the present arrangements the Police did not have the resources to enforce parking restrictions, which from their perspective were a very low priority for them as the revenue generated from fines went straight to the Exchequer. Under the proposals the Council would gain the necessary powers to enforce metered on-street parking, but Police support would still be required to deal with displacement and yellow line issues. A financial contribution to facilitate this had been included within the proposals;

- The Committee noted that acquiring the powers of decriminalised enforcement would mean the transfer of responsibility of non-endorsable parking offences from the Police to the Council, as the Highways Authority.
- Wokingham Borough was the only Berkshire unitary authority not to have introduced or taken steps to introduce decriminalised parking enforcement;
- The Panel was mindful that the introduction of decriminalised parking enforcement was often a controversial issue in itself. Detailed information within the 'Car Parking Research' study indicated that introducing Civil Parking Enforcement (decriminalisation) allowed Councils to take a central role in parking management and enforcement which was currently constrained by the lack of enforcement powers.
- The Committee was mindful that there were significant advantages and disadvantages of Civil Parking Enforcement and therefore care needed to be taken to avoid regarding it as a 'magic bullet' solution. The 'Car Parking Research' study sets out these advantages and disadvantages⁵ and further evidence was supplied by Neil Badley and in writing by, the General Manager Place and Neighbourhoods. It was not within the scope of the review to conduct a detailed consideration of Civil Parking Enforcement, but the advantages in terms of greater control for the Council of traffic management and opportunity for revenue generation needed to be balanced against the initial financial commitment required; that Civil Parking Enforcement had to be self-financing in the medium to long term and the likelihood that enforcement alone would not be likely to pay its way;
- The Panel noted that a number of witnesses had felt that greater efforts needed to be taken by the Borough Council to encourage enforcement by the Police of the current scheme through the use of the Police Community Support Officer's which were in part funded by the Borough and Town Councils. Enforcement 'blitzes' would be sufficient to discourage drivers from abusing the free parking bays. The Panel felt that discussion as to how Police Community Support Officers might be used in the short term should continue, but noted that the revenue of any fines collected by Police Community Support Officers would not go to the Council.

(5.4) How the level of the proposed tariff might affect the objectives above

In the Committee's view, the level of proposed tariff was not critical to the effect of the proposals on the vitality of Wokingham town centre, traffic congestion or options for enforcement. It was felt that whatever the level of tariff, the potential deterrence effect of on-street charging would be the same and could reinforce a perception that the town was unwelcoming or unattractive.

The Committee was more comfortable with the proposed split tariff, in terms of the potential impact on the proposals on the vitality of Wokingham town centre, but considered that there appeared to be a strong case that some parking in the town centre should be free in order to assist the vitality of the town.

In coming to this view, the Committee took into consideration the following issues:

- The views put forward by the Chamber of Commerce, Wokingham Retail Forum and others that on-street charges could make the difference in

⁵ Renaissance Market Town Programme, Car Parking Research, Information Sheet page 29

shoppers' behaviour and decisions on location of shopping, particularly with regard to low value items.

6.00 Other Findings arising from the Committee's review

(6.1) The need for a Comprehensive Parking Strategy for Wokingham Borough

The Committee was conscious of the comments made by a number of witnesses that issues around the abuse of free parking spaces and on-street parking were also linked to wider issues around availability and type of parking provision within Wokingham Borough. The Committee agreed with these sentiments noting the WSP study had within para 4.7 *Next Steps* indicated that a '*parking strategy for Wokingham including a parking charging scheme and analysis of Public Car Parks would be valuable*'⁶. The Committee felt that such a strategy should address as part of its remit:

- the provision of long and short term parking;
- parking for workers;
- on-street residents' parking;
- improvements that would make Wokingham town centre more parking friendly, eg signposting to car parks.

(6.2) The Timing of Consultation on Major Projects and the use of the Overview and Scrutiny Process.

The Committee felt that there were future learning points for the Council arising from the proposals for on-street car parking in terms of how consultation on major projects should be developed, together with the role and use of Overview and Scrutiny. In the Committee's view some of the hostility amongst witnesses towards the proposals as reported to the Committee had arisen as result of a lack of involvement of key groups and appropriate members of the community at the developmental stage prior to the Executive of 28 May 2009 and a perception, incorrect or not, that a final decision had been taken which could not be influenced. The Committee noted the Local Government and Public Involvement Act introduced a broad duty on local authorities to inform, consult and involve, (known as the 'Duty to Involve') and that the Council's existing Consultation Strategy had been amended to reflect this. It was also noted that the Disability Discrimination Act and the Equality Act imposed obligations on local authorities with regard to the consideration of disability, inclusivity and access issues.

The Committee felt that the following process should be considered in more depth, that had the following basics which could be applied to the development and consultation of future major projects *alongside the Consultation Strategy*:

- Development of initial proposals;
- Clarity as to the objectives of the proposals
- Wide consultation on proposals with consideration being given to the use of Overview and Scrutiny to facilitate this;
- Development of detailed proposals or scheme including the business case;

⁶ WSP, Wokingham Town Centre On-Street Parking Study, paragraph 4.7 page 10

- Submission of proposal to the Executive for decision.

It was noted that the current Executive report template did not contain explicit reference to the consideration of access and equalities issues in the development of proposals. In the view of the Committee, an explicit section on these issues within the template would reinforce the corporate importance of these issues being addressed by Officers in the development of proposals.

The Committee appreciated that the issues around consultation touched upon a wider discussion around the development of policy. The Chairman undertook to discuss the involvement of Overview Scrutiny in this process with the Chief Executive, Leader of the Council and Leader of the Opposition.

(6.3) Capital Investment and Value for Money

The Committee noted that the capital expenditure for the initial set up of the proposed scheme had been estimated within the Executive report to be £145,000 in 2009/2010, with full year running costs estimated at £151,000. Revenue over a full year had been estimated to be £199,000. It was acknowledged that the figures presented within the report had been based upon the original proposals for 187 parking bays and subsequently been reworked and that estimates for savings arising from the scheme within the Council's Medium Term Financial Plan were less than those indicated by the model used to estimate revenue as a safety factor against any inaccuracies in projection.

The Committee noted that during the course of the review various witnesses, including the Wokingham Town Centre Retail Forum, had expressed concerns regarding the amount of revenue the proposals were expected to generate and the overall value for money of the capital investment required to set up on-street car parking in the context of the current economic climate and pressures on budgets. Whilst the Committee was mindful that it was not within its terms of reference to examine the business case of the proposals the Committee did acknowledge that it was important that such perceptions were considered by the Executive, in light of the significant capital investment the proposals required and the gravity of the economic recession.

The Committee was also concerned that that the capital investment required to implement the provision of on-street meters would not be recoverable if a subsequent decision was taken not to continue with metered on-street car parking.

(6.4) Accessibility and Access Issue

The Committee noted concerns expressed by the Wokingham Area Access Group that an Equality Impact Assessment had not been completed in the development of the proposals and that parking meters would narrow pavements in a number of roads, restricting access for disabled people. The Committee acknowledged the submission made by the Executive Member for Highways that if a decision was taken to proceed such an assessment would be undertaken and the written submission of the General Manager Place and Neighbourhoods, that the type of meters proposed were not parking meters (as might be seen in cities), but pay and display meters that would be sited in suitable locations at the rear of footways or

other areas that would not impede pedestrian flow and address equality criteria. In the Committee's view, it would have been preferable if the Executive report of 28 May 2009 had made reference to the consideration of access and equality issues as this might have at least provided assurance that access and equality issues would, at a future point, be taken into account.

7.00 Recommendations to the Executive for consideration:

- (1) That the Council not proceed with the implementation of proposals for metered on-street car parking within Wokingham town centre;

Reason: In the Committee's view it had not been demonstrated that charging for on-street car parking would assist retail activity in the town centre and that based upon the evidence available, there was a risk on-street charges could have a negative impact on the town. The Committee felt that in the context of the severity of the economic recession and prior to the redevelopment of Wokingham Town Centre, it was not the appropriate time to proceed with the scheme even though this could have financial implications for the Council.

- (2) That new discussions take place with the Police over the possible use of Police Community Support Officers for the enforcement of parking bay restrictions in the short term.

Reason: The Committee was mindful that enforcement of the current restrictions was not taking place and felt that action did need to be taken to seek to address this in the short term, given the lead in time to implement decriminalisation.

- (3) That if the Executive is minded not to proceed with proposals, the Council move forward with the development of a Borough wide parking strategy covering both on-street and off-street car parking which should include consideration of decriminalised parking enforcement as a long term option for traffic management across the Borough;

Reason: The Committee felt there was a need for the development of a comprehensive parking strategy which would address the needs of the whole Borough because town centres were not the only places that need to be considered. With regards to decriminalisation, it was acknowledged that there were significant disadvantages as well as advantages in pursuing the option of decriminalised or civil parking enforcement. However, it was felt that in the long term this option was the best solution in terms of enforcement and traffic management.

- (4) That the Executive consider the opportunity of a further role for Overview and Scrutiny in the development of a Borough wide parking strategy, specifically linked to the regeneration of Wokingham, Earley and Woodley town centres;

Reason

The Committee felt that the future regeneration of Wokingham, Earley and Woodley town centres had links to parking management and that overview and scrutiny could add value to the development of such a strategy.

- (5) That consideration be given to the suggested process set out in para 6.2 in the development of consultation on major projects, in conjunction with the Council's Consultation Strategy;

Reason: That the consideration of engagement with residents and appropriate organisations through the use of the Consultation Strategy needed to be highlighted.

Appendices

List of Appendices for inclusion in the final report

Appendix A	Scrutiny Review Terms of Reference
Appendix B	Executive Report 28 May 2009
Appendix C	Written submissions to the Committee, including summary.
Appendix D	List of witnesses

Appendix available on the Council's website or on request from Democratic Services

Appendix E	Minutes of Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee meetings held on 8 July 2009, 16 July 2009 and 13 August 2009.
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List of Appendices to be available on request from Democratic Services

Appendix F	Information Pack sent to the Committee 9 July 2009 <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Photos taken of affected streets by Councillor Prue Bray;• Details of Ambleside Disc Parking System;• Details of parking charges from other authorities;• Parking arrangements in Reading Station Short Stay Car Park.
Appendix G	Information Pack sent to the Committee 14 July 2009 <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Wokingham Town Centre On-Street Parking Study, WSP;• Renaissance Market Towns Programme 'Car Parking Research'• Desktop Comparison Data of car parking schemes in other authorities.