

OFF STREET CAR PARK CHARGES – 6-MONTH REVIEW POST IMPLEMENTATION OF INCREASED PARKING CHARGES.

Purpose of Report

In July 2023 the Council increased its parking charges and introduced charges for the evening period 6pm to 10pm and charges for parking on Sundays 6am to 10pm in all the off street, car parks where charges applied. Past charging hours were between 8am to 6pm.

This report is the first review, looking at car parking data for the first six months after introducing the changes. The report considers what has been the impact on car park usage following the introduction of the increased parking charges and charging for evening and Sundays.

Charging for car parking is a complex issue, it is only one aspect of a number of factors which influence willingness to travel by car, time and money spent, and business activity in town centres. It is difficult to separate the influence of car parking charges from other factors. Car park charges is often perceived, particularly amongst businesses as being a key determinant for changes in footfall.

It is worth noting that nationally the last few years have been challenging for high streets across the UK and have seen towns struggle to bounce back from Covid lockdowns, factors including:

High Inflation – prices of consumer goods and services have increased, rising by 9.6% in the year October 2022, the fastest in four decades

(<https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/inflationandpriceindices/articles/costofliving/latestinsights>),

Cost-of-living crisis – with rising energy costs seeing 41% of energy bill payers struggling to afford payments (<https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/inflationandpriceindices/articles/costofliving/latestinsights>)

consumers have less disposable income to spend. A recent study by Grant Thornton found that one in three consumers were switching to cheaper brands and 88% of shoppers plan to cut back their spending ([https://www2.grantthornton.co.uk/rs/445-UIT-144/images/The Cut Back Economy 2023.pdf](https://www2.grantthornton.co.uk/rs/445-UIT-144/images/The%20Cut%20Back%20Economy%202023.pdf))
([https://www2.grantthornton.co.uk/rs/445-UIT-144/images/The Cut Back Economy 2023.pdf](https://www2.grantthornton.co.uk/rs/445-UIT-144/images/The%20Cut%20Back%20Economy%202023.pdf))

Looking closer to home in Wokingham borough there have been a number of changes that could have an impact on car park usage which has replaced or contributed to the pattern changes and influenced behaviour changes within our towns. Changes include:

- Changes to retail shopping habits (online shopping/closures of popular stores M&S/New Look/M & Co, Wallis)
- Changes to our high streets – bank closures, post office move, increase in cafes and restaurants.
- Change in working patterns/commutes/move towards more office workers working from home. We recently undertook a study into homeworking in the borough and 67% of respondents reported they work more from home since covid, and 21% said they shop more online since working from home.

- Weather /climate effects (extreme weather has been known to reduce town centre visitors by up to 10%)
- Town Centre regeneration and expansion of shopping locations /Elms Field & Peach Place; redistribution of where people park – new car parks open, old ones closed.
- Wokingham town centre Library relocation
- Carnival Hub opening
- Parking control measures and enforcement.
- Rail strikes with 19 days strike action impacting Wokingham trainlines between July and September many people chose not to travel
- Park and Rides delayed open with slow recovery nationally since Covid
- Reduction in Public Transport usage and recovery

Background

The council currently manages a total of fourteen chargeable and eight non chargeable off street car parks.

In July 2023, the council increased the off street car parking charges and made some alterations to charging periods, including the introduction of evening (6pm to 10pm) and Sunday charges.

Changes had not been implemented to increase car parking charging since 2018 and they were also not subject to annual inflationary increases, which misaligned with the rest of the Council's fees and charges. Essentially there had been a freeze on all car parking charges since 2018.

Changes to the parking charges were made to ensure the car parks and their maintenance and operational costs were not only covered by the revenue received, but that the increased revenue produced from these charges could further support the council funding of the highways service, help to improve our highways and footpaths and in turn free up the councils general budget to be used elsewhere; helping to contribute to the overall challenging financial pressures of the council and support wider council services for our most in need residents.

This report presents the findings of our first six months off-street car park review looking at the fourteen council owned off street car parks where there are charges for parking.

Tickets can be purchase from two sources, Ticket purchased at the machines and tickets from the use of the RingGo application. Data from these two sources is collected monthly and has been analysed using a PowerBI dashboard.

Analysis

Table 1.1 below compares quarter 3 pre (2019) and post (2023) covid activity for car parks ticket sales 8-6pm Monday to Saturday. Quarter 3 has been chosen as a neutral period following the introduction of the parking charge increases in July 2023 as it is the first full quarter since the increases were introduced and has allowed for a settling in period. The total highlights a 99.36% comparison between the two quarter 3 totals which is a minimal change. The data does not include evenings or Sunday usage.

Table 1.1. Comparison of ticket sales for pre and post covid.

Quarter	Q3 2019	Q3 2023*	Q3 2023 % of Q3 2019
Total number of ticket sales per quarter	282,615	280,802	99.36%

*During Q3 2023 FREE bus travel on all Reading and Thames Valley buses was offered on the 8 Saturdays on the run up to Christmas during November and December.

Table 1.2. Overview of all ticket sales for the last 9 months (Monday to Saturday, 8am to 6pm). It excludes Sunday sales, free vend and evening sales data.

Carpark	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec
Shute end	303	249	283	429	267	428	340	329	387
Carnival	6,314	5,399	4,556	7,428	7,752	6,311	6,488	6,155	6,902
Easthampstead Road West	3,900	4,072	4,120	4,362	4,045	4,454	4,095	4,240	4,158
Denmark Street	15,550	16,173	15,816	17,852	17,511	16,546	16,451	15,771	16,124
Rose Street	5,019	5,939	5,863	6,209	5,809	6,310	6,531	6,607	6,260
Cockpit Path	5,446	5,789	5,796	6,169	5,640	5,696	5,665	5,817	6,069
Easthampstead Road East	4,070	4,205	4,210	3,828	3,373	3,711	3,450	3,409	3,512
Sub Total per month (Wokingham)	40,602	41,826	40,644	46,277	44,397	43,456	43,020	42,328	43,412
Headley Road	17,748	19,325	19,661	19,611	17,716	18,944	18,712	18,535	18,146
Lytham Road East	6,013	6,571	6,721	7,206	6,680	6,968	6,694	6,722	6,347
Lytham Road West	3,056	3,504	3,351	3,421	3,139	3,409	3,026	2,982	3,347
Crockhamwell Road	17,264	18,976	17,594	19,975	16,457	19,715	19,357	20,537	21,543
Sub Total per month (Woodley)	44,081	48,376	47,327	50,213	43,992	49,036	47,789	48,776	49,383
School Lane Wargrave	846	885	879	849	832	827	891	926	773
Polehampton	842	824	883	1,059	1,076	913	871	801	998
Station Road Earley	315	292	324	302	276	291	271	296	267
Sub Total per month (Other)	2,003	2,001	2,086	2,210	2,184	2,031	2,033	2,023	2,038
Grand totals per month	86,686	92,203	90,057	98,700	90,573	94,523	92,842	93,127	94,833
Grand Total per Quarter			268,946			283,796			280,802

The data above indicates there is no evidence that the changes implemented in July have had any significant or detrimental impact on ticket sales across all the council's chargeable car parks. Ticket sales across all our car parks fluctuate across the months. New car park charges were introduced in quarter 2 2023 (July 2023).

The analysis shows an increase in total ticket sales in quarter 2 2023 from quarter 1 2023 by 5.52 % indicating that the introduction of the new charges did not have a negative impact on car park usage. Quarter 3 2023 shows a slight decline compared to quarter 2 2023 of -1.06%, but quarter 3 2023 is 4.41% higher than quarter 1 2023.

Wokingham Town Centre Footfall

The ticket sales data in Table 1.2 shows that ticket sales saw an increase following the introduction of new charges. If footfall was directly related to car park sales this would suggest footfall in our towns increased after the parking changes.

The council have some footfall counts within Wokingham town centre only. This data reveals an overall increase in usage of the town centre and appears to indicate no detrimental effects to our town centre since the off-street parking changes were introduced.

Table 1.3 Wokingham Town Centre Footfall data

Location	Period	2022 footfall	2023 footfall	Difference %
Denmark Street	Quarter 1	16,710	17,530	4.79
	Quarter 2	12,350	15,216	20.79
Rose Street	Quarter 1	472,850	434,052	-8.56
	Quarter 2	461,332	452,742	-1.67
Broad Street	Quarter 1	383,975	415,329	7.85
	Quarter 2	399,396	402,489	1.02
Wellington Road	Quarter 1	222,923	246,866	10.19
	Quarter 2	240,643	233,810	-2.88
Totals		2,210,179	2,218,034	0.35

Bus Patronage

Wokingham Borough experienced the greatest impact on bus passengers' journey because of Covid in the Southeast region. Our bus passenger journeys dropped 73% comparing 2019 with 2020 (-73%).

To date (2023) Wokingham Borough have recovered to 78% of pre-covid levels, which is in line with both the national average and the average recovery rate for the Southeast region.

The recovery rate comparing 2022 with 2023 was 30%, which was one of the highest in the Southeast region. Only Surrey (39%) and Oxfordshire (32%) were higher. Whilst Slough and West Berkshire experienced the same level of recovery as us.

Cycle trips

There are a number of survey cameras located at selected sites around Wokingham town centre, but analysis has found that some had data capture issues so have not been included within the evidence. However, data for 2022 and 2023 can be compared at the following sites as indicated in Table 1.4.

Table 1.4 – Cycle trip numbers

Site location	2022	2023	% change
Broad Street	61099	64782	6.03%
Wellington Road nr Finchampstead Road	26653	30007	12.50%
Earls Court	9254	12476	34.81%

Summary

Car parking charges have been increased across all car parks in line with the decision made by the executive on the 21 March 2023. All sales data from the start of this financial year 2023/24 has been analysed using PowerBI. This data includes sales from ticket machines and RingGo during the time period 8am to 6 pm as a direct comparison of data before and after changes.

To establish if there have been any notable changes in parking usage since the new parking charges, data has been analysed with evening and Sunday data excluded. Table 1.2 indicates there is no evidence that the changes implemented in July have had any significant or detrimental impact on ticket sales. The data shows that ticket sales fluctuate. The data shows that total sales in 2023/24 dropped slightly from May to June (prior to the increase) but then saw a rise in July, when the new charges were introduced. Sales started to drop slightly after, through the month of August and then increase again during September. When comparing these months in 2022 a similar pattern is observed which would indicate seasonal variation. However, when comparing Q1 and Q2 in 2023/24, Q2 has seen a rise of 5.52% across all car parks. Quarter 3 2023 shows a slight decline compared to quarter 2 2023 of -1.06%, but quarter 3 2023 is 4.41% higher than quarter 1 2023.

Ticket sales data, excluding evenings and Sundays, does not indicate a reduction in car park usage following the changes to our car parks, and therefore is assumed that any perceived decline in footfall isn't related to these changes.

The footfall in Wokingham Town Centre also confirms that the changes have had no detrimental impact on the Wokingham Town Centre. Bus patronage is also recovering which enable alternative modes of transport to our town centres.

Bus patronage data shows a continued recovery following covid and it should also be noted that FREE bus travel across the Wokingham Borough area on Reading and Thames valley buses was available on the 8 Saturdays on the run up to Christmas 2023. It is likely that some previous journeys taken by car would have transferred to bus as indications show a modest increase in patronage on those Saturdays.

Cycle trips have also increased from data collected on the 3 survey counters in Wokingham town centre when compared to 2022 figures. These additional journeys may have transferred from the car.

It is concluded that the changes made in July have had no discernible impact on car park usage and therefore there is at this time no reason not to continue. However, it is clear that usage of our car parks fluctuates across the year and therefore it is recommended the ongoing monitoring of our car parks should continue via the PowerBI reporting built which will be shared with our economic development team to inform and support our town centres. We will continue to monitor car park usage.

The council is currently in the process of developing an Economic Development Strategy to help us understand our current economic performance, strengths and challenges, as well as a Town Centre Strategy. Understanding our towns and the unique challenges they have will form part of this process. Working closely with our Town Councils and Parishes we have funded a range of support to businesses including free parking for Christmas events, free bus travel in the run up to Christmas and providing a range of business support programmes. It is our intention to work closely with our business community over the coming months to identify further ways we can strengthen our local economy.