

Report on Car Park Pricing Strategy Discussion Groups

**Produced by The Corporate Research Team, Borough
of Poole in September 2009**

On behalf of Transportation Services

Purpose of this Report

This report summarises the findings of three discussion groups convened to consider Council proposals for a new car parks pricing strategy (2010-2012).

The groups aimed to enable a small number of residents to have an informed discussion about car parking charges in the Borough, and to reach a conclusion as to their preferred options for an increase and changed tariff structure. In addition, participants provided their thoughts on the quality of car parks in Poole, in order to assist with future service development.

A total of 30 people took part in the groups, which were held in August 2009. These included resident permit holders, small trader permit holders and season ticket holders, as well as local residents who use car parks, chosen randomly from Poole Opinion Panel.

Key Messages

Local residents already subsidise the beaches and car parks through their council tax. The Council should do more to promote discount schemes such as beach permits and season tickets to enable residents' continued use. Similarly permits for local traders.

The Council should be working to keep cars in car parks. Raising charges causes displacement of cars onto the streets, creating issues for local residents and increasing congestion in and around the town.

Parking restrictions in areas subject to residents' permit schemes should be re-considered. Residents are still unable to find a space when returning from work in the evening as restrictions are lifted too early.

The beaches are Poole's main asset, but it is the town centre that is suffering most in the current economic climate. The town centre is already seen to be failing, whereas district and out of town shopping is being sustained by cheaper or free parking. More should be done to encourage people to visit the town centre, rather than introducing higher charges that will drive people away.

The proposed increase in town centre season ticket charges is strongly opposed. These are disproportionate to other increases, to local wages, and to inflation. The proposals suggest that the Council has no understanding of the economic pressures currently faced by local workers and businesses. Alternatives should be thoroughly investigated and conclusions reported on.

Views were mixed regarding the proposed car park tariffs. Overall, the participants would tend to park in town centre car parks for up to 5 hours, and preferred Option B, particularly if payment could be made on exit, rather than arrival. A visit to the beach would generally take up to 6 hours, and the proposed charges for this duration were felt to be reasonable under both Options, although concerns were raised about the charges for extended stays under Option B. Although the preference in District Car parks was for the much cheaper Option A, participants acknowledged that their visits to these car parks were likely to be short – and therefore the difference less marked.

Resident Permit Holders, Season Ticket Holders and Traders.

This first focus group was made up of local people who regularly use, and pay for, season tickets, part time workers permits, traders permits and residents permits.

Participants in this discussion group were primarily concerned with, and strongly opposed to, increased town centre season ticket charges.

Their arguments against these charges tended to fall into two areas

Firstly, that charging almost a month's wages¹ for parking is unsustainable and penalises individuals who are simply trying to work for a living.

The increase in charges for season ticket holders means that many workers will be priced out of employment in the town centre. The group felt that the majority of people working in the town centre are not highly paid, and during the recession their wages will be cut or frozen, yet the proposed charges show increases way beyond inflation.

"I haven't had a pay rise, so how in this current economic climate can this be justified?"

"If you have to pay out so much of your wages – why bother going back to work?"

The participants also noted that bus routes had been cut across much of the Borough, making a drive into work their only feasible option. Others had jobs where they needed to be mobile, yet parking was limited at their place of employment. In essence, their transport options were becoming restricted to the extent that they would be forced to seek alternative work. However, that too was impossible in the current climate.

The commuters amongst the group felt helpless, the other participants shocked by, and strongly sympathetic of, their situation, and therefore also strongly opposed to the proposed increase.

"There is nowhere else to park to go to work. It's not a case of I'm parking there for fun. I work in the town centre. I have no choice."

"That's presumably to cover administration charges – but to bank a cheque isn't £150 of work is it? Come on!"

In addition, the group felt that £150 extra per annum to pay by quarterly instalments was excessive and could not be justified in terms of increased administration costs.

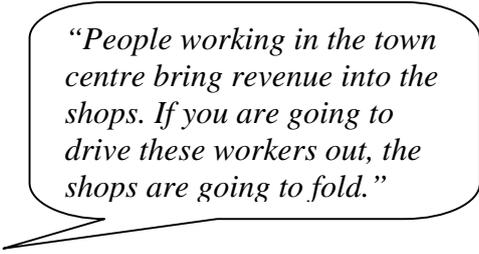
Secondly, the participants argued that higher season ticket charges would have an increasingly negative effect on the economic viability of town centre.

"Do they want to kill Poole Town Centre off completely?"

¹ [NB: A full time worker on the national minimum wage earns £931.13 gross per month. A full time worker on the median wage in Poole earns £2,038 gross per month. However, wages in the area are marked by polarisation.]

For example, they noted that if season tickets become too expensive, businesses would begin to find it difficult to attract workers and start to move away from the town centre, or even from Poole, to somewhere cheaper.

Furthermore, they emphasised that people who work in Poole town centre spend money in the town centre shops and cafes. If the businesses and the workers are driven out then the 'already increasingly desolate' town centre will suffer further.



"People working in the town centre bring revenue into the shops. If you are going to drive these workers out, the shops are going to fold."

In light of their opposition to the proposed season ticket increases, the Group suggested that the Council might consider:

Reducing the number of inclusive days on the season ticket.

As these types of tickets were primarily used for work, the participants felt that their scope could be limited to five days per week. They would be happy to pay separately for their less regular/shorter trips to the town centre at weekends.

Providing options for payment by standing order or direct debit

This would enable people to pay for season tickets in instalments (monthly being the preference) whilst keeping down the administration costs. The current process of charging more to pay by instalments only penalises those who can least afford it.

Promoting season tickets and other types of permit more widely to increase take-up.

Amongst the group, and reportedly amongst their friends and colleagues, awareness of these options is low, and people tend to find out by informal means.

Lowering the season ticket price

This would encourage more people to take up the option – and therefore the amount of income required could still be achieved. The participants had observed that the car parks appeared to be half empty for much of the year, and that a discount of 50% of the daily car park tariff would be sufficient to stimulate interest.

Increasing charging in other areas.

The participants generally felt that £8 per day for beach car parks was a reasonable rate, as use of the beach and amenities were essentially also included in the price. They felt that there was some scope for an increase in this area, although recognised that tax-paying residents should not be priced out of enjoying the beaches.

They also queried why the increase for boat launching was only £10, compared to £70 for town centre season tickets, although one participant, who had a small boat, noted that it was used only infrequently. Generally it was felt that this type of parking could absorb a higher increase, arguing that boating was a 'luxury' leisure activity, and therefore a lifestyle choice, rather than a necessity.

It was noted also that the charges for beach concessions were not rising. Participants queried the differentiation - these are people who work at the beach, the same as season ticket holders are people who work in the town.

Working with employers to offer subsidies.

The group queried whether the council had thought about approaching large employers that don't have onsite parking for staff, and asking them to subsidise season tickets/car parking in certain areas.

A car park zoning scheme

One participant recalled that in London, car parks are zoned off – so you have a level for visitors, a level for workers etc. Workers have to display a coloured badge in their cars. Then each pays a charge accordingly. In addition to keeping the charges down, this system allowed the council to more accurately monitor usage by workers.

With regards to resident permits, participants felt that:

The proposed price rises were less of an issue than the fact that, even with a permit, they still could not park near to their own home.

“It is very frustrating when you get home and can't park in close-ish vicinity to your house.”

Whilst their overall preference was for free parking for tax paying residents, the permit holders recognised that, due to the location of their properties, such a scheme was perhaps necessary to ensure that parking was available to them.

Unfortunately, the scheme in its current form was not perceived to be working - ultimately because of the timing of the restrictions, which finished in the early evening.

“In the evening you do find that you have to park about a 15-20 minute walk away. As a young girl I don't find it very nice walking back to my house on my own.”

This was particularly an issue in parts of Poole with an active night-time economy (eg. Ashley Road; Sterte and Heckford on a Wednesday night), but also around the hospital. Residents reported regularly arriving home from work to find their roads were full, and that they had to park a considerable distance away and walk home.

The participants asked that the Council consider re-visiting the timing of restrictions in resident permit areas, to help resolve some of these issues.

“When I come back in the evening, should it be speedway night, I have to park 2 miles away, after doing a 9 hour shift, and walk 2 miles to my home, and then after dinner, walk 2 miles further to get the car and bring it back.”

Unfortunately, the proposals to set permit charges based on vehicle emissions were met with derision. Participants felt that it would have little impact on people's decisions to buy a cheaper car, and that those who could least afford to change their vehicle, such as the elderly, would be penalised. They pointed out that many cars take up the same space, regardless of emissions, and therefore surely the Council could only justify tariffs based on size; vans, for example, take up twice the space of a family car.

“It's not the Council's business what car anybody drives.”

Poole Opinion Panel Residents

Participants in these two groups were shown the proposed increases, and asked to choose between Option A (based on current tariff structure) and Option B (new hourly tariff structure)

In the first residents group the participants' overall preference was Option B.

This was primarily because they intensely disliked the current '4-10 hour' tariff.

They noted that whilst 4 hours in the town centre can pass very quickly, a 'typical' visit is likely to last 5 hours, rather than 10. This small extension to their stay leaves them facing a very big leap in prices.

"I think that leap from 4 hours to 10 hours is a very wide band".

Similarly, whilst they felt that the current beach charges overall were not unreasonable, they maintained that the 'over 4 hours' charge needs to be broken down. On sighting 'Option B', they felt that the beach car park prices for up to 6 hours parking (a fairly standard stay) were an acceptable option.

However:

"You're going to add £100 a week, minimum, on to a holidaymakers expenses."

The participants expressed strong concerns about the charges for longer stays in beach car parks. They felt that £15 for a day at the beach was a huge amount of money that would price tourists out of the area. This would impact not only on the beaches, but also on the town as a whole, as the beaches were seen as Poole's main asset.

They also noted that increased beach charges would hit residents as well as tourists. Awareness of annual and 7 day beach permits, which offer considerable savings on parking charges, was extremely low. It was felt that these should be more widely promoted so residents, who already contributed through their council tax, could access beach parking at a reduced rate.

"Obviously it is targeting the visitors, but I do feel that it is a shame that they can't do something to help the locals with the beach car parks."

"There are some people who have to use those car parks for work, and that's going to be an awful jump for them"

There was also some surprise over the extent of the increases proposed in the District car parks under Option B. Participants noted that the current cost of parking in these car parks was very reasonable, but if that the increase was as high as proposed, it would begin to affect local traders. The increases would also be unfair on people who pay to park whilst working in the district areas.

In the second residents group, the participants' overall preference was for Option A.

This was primarily because it was perceived to be the more affordable option, particularly in the beach car parks, where an extended stay was likely, and in the district car parks.

"With the Districts, Option A looks quite reasonable, but anyone was wanting a longer stay, on Option B, they just wouldn't bother."

The Option A pricing in the District Car parks was felt to be more reasonable for a short stay – often the optimum visit to these car parks for people visiting local shops; but also for a longer stay for people who worked in the local area.

In contrast to the previous group these participants also liked the flexibility afforded by the longer time bandings of Option A – they could enjoy their visit without watching the clock to the same extent, and may be more inclined to extend their visit beyond their planned trip.

However,

The Group could see the advantages of Option B for the town centre in particular. They noted that if car park ticket machines were set to enable payment on exit from the car parks, instead of paying on arrival, this would enable people to take advantage of an hourly tariff, without forcing them to 'clock watch' throughout their visit.

"You just can't estimate how long you're going to be when you go shopping."

"It's a pity that residents would be prevented from accessing one of their own facilities."

The participants also noted that, generally, beach charges discourage residents, particularly families, who already subsidise their maintenance through their council tax. They felt a further increase would not be well received, and hoped that further thought could be given to providing discounts to

local people – perhaps through permits, or cheaper prices in a designated 'residents' car park a little further away from the prime tourist parking.

Behavioural Change

The participants in both groups felt that the proposed price increases, if implemented, would have a number of impacts on their behaviour.

As consumers, price increases in the beach car parks would see many of the participants restricting their beach visits to the winter months. Those who would still visit in the summer would look for alternatives to parking in the car parks, such as dropping off their family at the beach, and picking them up later, or searching for a space in the surrounding residential streets where parking is free. They also noted that charging had begun to creep in at Poole Park, which would have similar consequences.

"I drive my grandchildren down to the beach, and wave bye-bye to them and their parents "I'll come and pick you up later."

With regards to the town centre, participants would again restrict their visits either to a Sunday, or in terms of duration, which, they pointed out, would also mean spending less money. Some would only visit the town for a specific purpose – a short trip to buy a planned item, rather than to stay and browse. Again, people would also explore the free alternatives – such as shopping in ‘out of town’ locations such as Castlepoint or Tesco’s. However, they were extremely concerned that this would subsequently impact on the economic viability of the town centre.

“Whereas people might have parked, shopped and then gone on down the Quay, they’d now do what they came for and then go home again.”

Older participants would make increased use of their free Connect bus passes where bus routes permitted, rather than pay to park.

As residents, the participants expressed notable concern about the displacement of cars from the car parks to residential areas should charges continue to increase at the proposed rate. They feared that car parks would become under-utilised, whilst the streets become more congested, and expressed concern that this would eventually result in the extension of on street parking charges and locals footing the bill through residents’ permits. Surely better, they felt, to keep the car park charges at a reasonable rate, and the cars within them?

“It’s cheaper for me to bus into Poole, because I’ve got my bus pass . .but [for the Council] that’s a law of diminishing returns”

Quality and Equality in Car Parks:

Value for Money

The participants appreciated the opportunity to park for a very short stay (30 minutes) at a minimal cost. This allows them to 'pop-in' and complete small tasks without incurring higher charges. They felt that this initiative should be more widely available, as it also serves to limit 'ticket swapping'.

Perhaps surprisingly, most participants felt that, on the whole, the current car park tariffs offered reasonable value for money; and in the District car parks in particular, good value for money. However, being happy with the current charges meant that they generally saw no reason for a significant increase, and would begin to think twice about their visits, particularly given the current economic climate.

Size and Availability of Spaces

The participants recognised that, unfortunately, the car parking spaces, particularly in multi-storeys, were designed for older cars which were much smaller. As modern cars continue to increase in size, so does the requirement for larger spaces. This was seen as a general problem, although exacerbated when coping with wheelchairs, children's car seats and restricted mobility.

"A great number of elderly people need to open their doors completely to be able to get out, and they find this impossible to do with the narrowness of the spaces."

"People going to out-patients and close family members visiting shouldn't have to pay fees."

There was less concern about general availability of car park spaces, although specific issues were raised regarding parking at Poole Hospital, and in Dear Hay Lane on market days. The former issue related to the lack of free parking provision at the hospital – this was felt to be both unfair and difficult to manage when often visits were unscheduled and of uncertain duration.

The latter issue was in respect of the increased trader parking in the town centre on Thursdays and Saturdays, with large vans taking over on-street parking.

The participants queried developments on the Barclays site, and whether any unoccupied parking space that had arisen from the company's downsizing could be used to provide more space for commuter parking.

Car Parking Facilities and Safety.

Generally the participants feel safe within Poole's car parks as they are lightly coloured, and clean. The provision of CCTV also makes them feel more secure. However, some concerns were raised over the Quay visitors car park, which was perceived to be unsafe at night and unhygienic.

"I don't go and park in a car park by myself generally, but if I did have to I wouldn't feel too unsafe."

Participants observed that it is difficult for people parking in town to access public toilets. It was felt that these are an important facility for elderly people and for families visiting the area, who may have travelled a long way. For example, there are no toilets in Hill Street Car Park, and it is not easy to find the closest alternative facilities. They also perceived that the toilets in the Quay Visitors Car Park break down regularly.

“I do find it quite handy if I haven’t got any change. It’s quite easy as well.”

In terms of payment facilities, few of the participants had used the text/phone payment option. Those who had found it very convenient, particularly if they had insufficient change or if their plans unexpectedly altered.

All of the participants would prefer it if the parking machines gave change (as inevitably they would have none with them) and most agreed that a debit or credit card option would be handy – provided that they could rely on this facility to work and were not left stranded without the means to pay.

Disabled and Family Parking

With regards to free parking for Blue Badge Holders, participants queried whether this could be means tested, as disability did not necessarily equate to inability to pay. However, it was noted that the Blue Badge was universally recognised and having a separate scheme for Poole would be difficult. It was concluded that a scheme that offered free parking for the first 2-3 hours for Blue Badge Holders, would be preferable to completely free parking. Any such scheme should also be closely monitored, to avoid abuse, but also to ensure that any designated spaces were being used, and not standing empty.

“I think some people equate disabled with being hard up. It’s not necessarily so”

There are only two disabled bays in the Serpentine Car Park, which was felt to be insufficient. Also the bays provided are not big enough for manoeuvring.

Some participants queried that whilst obviously family spaces need to be bigger, why do they need to be located close to the entrance?

Parking Enforcement

Participants felt that a new approach to enforcement of parking laws is required. Wardens seem to work to a regular pattern. People are aware of this and move their cars accordingly to avoid paying. Visits need to be more random.

“It’s quite comical. You can set your watch by them sometimes.”

The disabled bays behind the Dolphin Shopping Centre usually have delivery vans parked in them in the mornings. The bays by the coach park are used by people dropping off and picking up. The participants felt that there are enough bays in these areas, but that they should be monitored better so that they are available for disabled people to use.

“It seems that if you’ve got a child seat, that’s ok, it doesn’t matter if there’s a child in there.”

Participants also expressed concerns about abuse of family parking bays. It appears that parents use the bays when they haven’t got the children with them – and get away with it because they have a child seat in the back. Could on the spot fines be adopted, as is done at Castlepoint?

Alternative Revenue Streams and Efficiency Savings

The participants did not feel that a reduction in Transportation’s face-to-face service would be an issue, if the outcome of this was a cost saving. However, they hoped that the Council would not rely solely on the Internet, as services do need to be accessible to all.

“We’ve got the facility and the technology, so use it for people who want to and are able to use it.”

“I do get fed up that every single year I have to give all the identical vehicle information, even though they have it on file.”

Permit and Season ticket holders commented that they were fed up with having to re-provide details and documents that are already held on a database when renewing their ticket. They felt that less of their own time, and that of administrators, would be wasted if there was a way of simply confirming that no changes had been made.

Increased advertising was unanimously supported by all the groups. The participants felt that anything that could bring in extra revenue is a good idea, and liked receiving the special offers on the back of tickets. However, they wondered about take-up amongst businesses in the current economic climate.