
TOWN CENTRE CAR PARKING

Responsible Cabinet Member – Councillor Nick Wallis, Highways and Transport Portfolio

Responsible Director – John Buxton, Director of Development and Environment

Purpose of Report

1. To request that Members' approve a set of actions that are designed to make shopping and accessing other facilities in the town centre easier by car.

Information and Analysis

Context

2. Darlington town centre is the fifth largest major retail centre in the North East and attracts people from both within and outside of the Borough. Some 51% of users come to the town by car¹. Shoppers coming by car to the town centre are vital to the economic health of the town centre, whilst managing the resulting demand for car parking space is essential to avoid negative consequences such as traffic congestion. Town centres, such as Darlington's, are one of the best ways of providing good accessibility to services for all local people as they are served by several means of transport throughout the day.
3. As part of the realisation of a town centre fit for the 21st century, the Council is refurbishing streets in the central core of the town, providing pedestrian and shared areas to improve the image of the centre as a place to do business. Like many building projects in constrained areas, the Pedestrian Heart works have meant that local people and business are being inconvenienced as works are carried out. This, coupled with the general downturn in high street trade due to competition from internet based retailers and out of town centres, means that some local businesses in the town centre are experiencing difficult trading conditions. After discussions with local businesses, it is recommended that a package of four measures be introduced, or continued, in Council run car parks to help business through this difficult period.

Shopping Initiative

4. A measure already in place is the 'Shopping Initiative' whereby traders offer a refund on parking charges if the shopper spends more than £16 in one transaction. This initiative applies to the Beaumont Street car park only and businesses in Blackwellgate, Houndgate and the Market.

¹ Darlington Retail Study, 2004

Seasonal Incentives

5. Traditionally, the Council has taken the opportunity to offer free parking during the Christmas season to help promote the town centre as a destination for Christmas shopping. In previous years, this has been for the four Thursdays before Christmas after 4:30pm to encourage shopping on late night opening. This year, it is proposed to repeat the 'four Thursdays' offer but to start the free parking period, on and off street, from 3:30pm to help local people who wish to shop in the late afternoon for example straight after picking their children up from school. It is also proposed to make parking free on Boxing and New Year's Day Bank Holidays to further encourage trade during the Christmas Sale season. The estimated cost of these additional seasonal incentives (over and above that currently offered) is £8,000.

Pay as you Go Parking

6. One issue that has been raised is the perception that some shoppers curtail their stay in the town centre, in order to return to their car before the expiry of the parking ticket. The current Pay and Display system used on-street and in the Council's car parks (except East Street which is Pay on Exit²), means that users have to estimate the time they need before leaving the car. Several pay on foot parking payment systems exist that would solve this problem in off street car parks, but they are extremely expensive to retrofit due to the civil engineering work required for cabling, payment and barrier areas. They are more economic to install in new car parks that have larger capacities, such as the new Cornmill car park. It is currently proposed that the planned 799 space Commercial Street multi-storey car park is so fitted.
7. Initial feasibility work has shown that retrofitting a pay on foot system into six, central area, short stay car parks would cost at least £1.049m to install, with annual staff costs of some £0.27m to provide adequate staffing to rapidly respond to barrier failure or to help users with any problems. If staff were not in attendance quickly at each car park, then considerable queues could form in the event of a malfunction of the barriers or other problem. Out of hours cover would also need to be provided, since the barriers would need to remain in use all day, every day. The system would also result in the loss of 175 car parking spaces due to the need to install entry and exit barriers, with associated changes in the internal layout of each car park. Table 1 illustrates the estimated work involved.

² The privately operated Cornmill car park uses a pay on foot system.

Table 1 Pay on Foot

Car Park	Barriers	Machines	Facilities	Total £000	Loss of parking spaces	Notes
Abbott's Yard	2x	2	Outdoor Pay Station	149	20	Private access issues
Beaumont St	6x	2	Outdoor Pay Station	255	50	Retaining wall issue, split site
Commercial St	4x	2	Lobby conversion	205	40	Additional space required for pay stations
East Street	2x	2	Lobby conversion	115	25	Need detailed site investigation
Town Hall	2x	2	Outdoor Pay Station	170	30	Extensive layout alteration required
Winston St	6x	2	Outdoor Pay Station	155	10	Small split site; one part would be extensively affected.
				1049	175	

8. Another problem with the pay on foot system is that Blue Badge holders have to pay for an exit ticket in order to leave the car park through the barrier. Currently the Council permits Blue Badge holders to park for up to three hours free of charge.
9. In terms of timescale, retrofitting pay on foot systems would take considerable time, with the need to install cabling to connect the barrier system with the Pay Station and central computer, as well as making physical alterations to the internal layout of each car park. This work would be complicated by the need to avoid significant disruption to all car parks throughout the town centre at the same time.
10. A significantly cheaper and quicker solution that essentially gives the same result is the 'pay by phone' system as used in York, Westminster and Birmingham among other locations. This system allows the user to arrange their parking over the telephone for a small (10p or 20p service charge) when they park, with the option of extending the time purchased as required – including being sent a text message reminder before the parking period ends. Practically, users need a mobile phone and have to register a credit or debit card with the supplier of the system; either in advance via a website or at the time of first use. The system can be used in parallel with the Pay and Display cash machines, both on and off street. It is enforced through information supplied in real time to the hand held computers used by the car park wardens. A big advantage to the user is the possibility of using a credit or debit card; avoiding the need to carry change. It is currently considered possible to implement pay by phone before summer 2007, since it only requires signage, a central computer and new/upgraded hand held computers.

11. In terms of cost, figures obtained from City of York Council suggest that six short stay car parks can be included in a pay by phone system for approximately £20,000 (signage and software), plus the cost of any equipment needed by the car park wardens, any cabling works and publicity. In addition, should the Council wish to absorb the user fees (i.e. the service charge of about 10p or 20p for paying by phone), it would need to factor in the cost of absorbing these and the loss of overpayment income from those using the pay by phone system (on the basis of York's experience this would be £2,000 to £3,000, since not all car park users will use pay by phone). Although more work is required to refine the budget estimate, it is considered that a capital budget of £50,000 and a revenue budget of £11,000 are reasonable. These sums would need to be identified through the Second Local Transport Plan (capital) and Medium Term Financial Plan (revenue).

Encouraging Shopping Activity

12. In the meantime, it is recommended that the Council tackle the length of stay issue by introducing a free "third hour" in short stay off street car parks. This offer would mean that three hours parking would cost £1.60; the same as for two hours, providing an incentive for users to stay longer in the town centre. This discount is seen as a direct action in response to the current difficult trading conditions in the town centre, so would need to be reviewed when matters improve and certainly after the end of the Pedestrian Heart works. It is proposed to alter subsequent values in the short stay parking tariff, so that all users receive the benefit of the third hour free, thus 4 hours would be charged at £2.40, 5 hours at £3.20 and so on. The discount cannot be applied to on street parking since the maximum length of stay permitted under the traffic regulation orders is two hours.
13. Using sample figures from May 2006, it is estimated that not charging for the third hour in the town centre short stay car parks would result in the loss of £60,000 per annum.
14. To summarise, the proposed package of measures are:
 - (a) a 'third hour free' offer to be implemented immediately in short stay car parks;
 - (b) continuation of the 'Shopping Initiative' using Beaumont Street car park;
 - (c) free parking both on and off street at selected times throughout the Christmas period; and
 - (d) the implementation of a pay by phone system to provide a longer term solution.
15. It is proposed to publicise the actions above in leaflets, as part of the Christmas marketing of the town centre and on the Internet. It may also be possible to advertise via banners placed at car parks.

Financial Implications

16. The estimated cost of the proposed initiatives for which additional budgetary provision is required is:
 - (a) Third hour free in short-stay car parks: £25,000 in 2006/7 revenue. The cost in 2007/8 will depend in the review of this incentive following the completion of the Pedestrian

Heart Scheme (pro rata to £60,000 per annum);

- (b) Thursdays before Christmas additional hour free, Boxing Day and New Years Day free: £8,000 per annum revenue;
- (c) Pay by phone: £11,000 per annum revenue and £50,000 capital.

17. The total estimated revenue cost of the proposed initiatives in 2006/7 estimated as £33,000 with the cost in 2007/8 dependent on the review of the 'third hour free' initiative following the completion of the Pedestrian Heart. The capital cost of establishing the pay by 'phone system would be met from the Local Transport Plan funding in 2007/8.

Outcome of Consultation

18. Discussions have been held with individual businesses, the Town Centre Board and Forum as well as others, on the role that the Council can play in helping local business through a period of difficult trading conditions, including the need for parking incentives and flexible charging systems. Businesses would welcome initiatives which use car parking to promote shopping visits to Darlington and which encourage people to stay for longer.

Legal Implications

19. This report has been considered by the Borough Solicitor for legal implications in accordance with the Council's approved procedures. There are no issues which the Borough Solicitor considers need to be brought to the specific attention of Members, other than those highlighted in the report.

Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998

20. The contents of this report have been considered in the context of the requirements placed on the Council by Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, namely, the duty on the Council to exercise its functions with due regard to the likely effect of the exercise of those functions on, and the need to do all that it reasonably can to prevent, crime and disorder in its area. It is not considered that the contents of this report have any such effect.

Council Policy Framework

21. The issues contained within this report do not represent material change to Council policy or the Council's policy framework.

Decision Deadline

22. For the purpose of the 'call-in' procedure this does represent an urgent matter, so that the incentives can be introduced for the Christmas trading period which is key to the economic health of town centre retailing.

Key Decisions

23. This is a key decision due to the effect that it could have on those who use the town centre.

Recommendations

24. It is recommended that:

- (a) no charge for on and off street parking is made in the town centre after 3:30pm on the four Thursdays before Christmas. Also, that no charges are levied on Boxing Day and New Year's Day public holidays. Both to apply until further notice.
- (b) from immediate effect no charge be made for the third hour in short stay off street car parks in the town centre. The need for this discount to be reviewed following the completion of the Pedestrian Heart works.
- (c) additional revenue resources of £33,000 be approved in 2006/07 and resources in 2007/8 determined through the Medium Term Financial Plan process.
- (d) tenders be sought for the implementation and operation of a Pay by Phone system, compatible with current car parking charging systems and decriminalised parking enforcement.

Reasons

25. The recommendations are supported by the following reasons:

- (a) To further encourage Christmas shopping in the town centre;
- (b) To tackle the need to encourage users to stay longer in the town centre in the short term;
- (c) To provide a longer term solution to encourage users to stay longer in the town centre.

John Buxton
Director of Development and Environment

Background Papers

Briefing Note: Pay as you Go Parking, October 2006

Simon Houldsworth : Extension 2701
cc