

**COUNCIL
26 JANUARY 2023**

TOWN CENTRE PARKING OFFER

**Responsible Cabinet Members
Councillor Andy Keir, Local Services Portfolio
Councillor Jamie Bartch, Economy Portfolio**

**Responsible Director
Dave Winstanley, Group Director of Services**

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. This report provides an update on the town centre car parking offer and seeks a budget variation and funding release.

Summary

2. Parking offers have been in place in various pay and display locations to support the town centre since June 2018. Since January 2021 the Tees Valley Combined Authority have provided the funding to support parking offers across the Tees Valley for a two-year period. In November 2022 Cabinet agreed to fund an extension of the parking offer from January 2023 until the end of March 2023.
3. The sustainability of the town centre is an immediate priority for Members, and it is the strong desire of the administration that the council should continue to support the town centre and encourage use of the town centre. On 10 January 2023 Cabinet agreed a further extension of the parking offer for a further 3 months, from 1 April 2023 to 30 June 2023.
4. The Cabinet approval is subject to Council considering varying the budget and release the funding because the further extension of the parking offer exceeds Cabinet's delegated authority to limit to vary the budget. This report seeks approval from Council to vary the budget and release the funding. The detail of the funding of this offer is covered in the financial implications section of this report.

Recommendation

5. It is recommended that Council approves the variation to the budget and releases £387k to enable the current parking offer to be extended a further 3 months, from 1 April 2023 to 30 June 2023, and at that point parking charges are reintroduced on 1 July 2023.

Reason

6. The recommendation supports the ongoing recovery of the town centre.

Dave Winstanley
Group Director of Services

Background Papers

Town Centre Car Parking Cabinet Report June 2018
 Town Centre Car Parking Cabinet Report October 2019
 Town Centre Car Parking Cabinet Report September 2020
 Town Centre Parking Cabinet Report December 2020.
 Town Centre Parking Offer Report November 2022

Dave Winstanley : Extension 6618
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S17 Crime and Disorder	Whilst anti-social behaviour and crime does on occasions take place in car parks, there is no impact on crime and disorder as a result of this report
Health and Wellbeing	Parking offers can potentially conflict with some other Council and Government policy objectives such as promotion of sustainable transport and climate change that have a positive impact on health and well-being. However, this is a short-term extension to ensure recovery post Covid is established
Carbon Impact and Climate Change	Parking strategy and controls are a method of encouraging more sustainable travel choices and impacting positively on climate change. If the offer is extended there may be an impact on carbon emissions as a result of encouraging car journeys into the town centre
Diversity	An Equality Impact Assessment was undertaken on the offer introduced in January 2021. The offer remains the same and therefore the assessment undertaken at the time remains in place.
Wards Affected	Car parks are located in Park East and Northgate, however residents from across the Borough and beyond will utilise them
Groups Affected	No group is affected any differently to any other
Budget and Policy Framework	This is a Council decision and is a variation to the MTFP.
Key Decision	This is a key decision
Urgent Decision	This is not an urgent decision
Council Plan	The proposals contained in this report have impacts on aspects of the Council Plan. The proposal seeks to provide a further period of support for the town centre recovery
Efficiency	There is no impact
Impact on Looked After Children and Care Leavers	This report has no impact on Looked After Children or Care Leavers

MAIN REPORT

Information and Analysis

7. The Council has funded a variety of Town Centre Parking initiatives to support the Town Centre Economy since June 2018. The Tees Valley Combined Authority Cabinet of 27 November 2020 approved funding to support parking offers across the Tees Valley for a two-year period. This funding ceased at the end of December 2022 and Cabinet agreed in November 2022 to fund an extension of the parking offer to the end of March 2023.
8. The November 2022 Cabinet report identified that parking numbers in car parks had returned to pre-Covid numbers. However, it recognised that the post-Christmas period is a tough trading period. The cost-of-living challenges will continue throughout the winter and beyond, and it is acknowledged this will be a tough period for both residents and business.
9. The sustainability of the town centre is an immediate priority for Members, and it is the strong desire of the administration that the council should continue to support the town centre and encourage use of the town centre. On 10 January 2023 Cabinet agreed a further extension of the parking offer for a further 3 months, from 1 April 2023 to 30 June 2023.
10. The Cabinet approval is subject to Council considering varying the budget and release the funding because the further extension of the parking offer exceeds Cabinet's delegated authority to limit to vary the budget. This report seeks approval from Council to vary the budget and release the funding. The detail of the funding of this offer is covered in the financial implications section of this report.
11. The Council is not immune to the cost-of-living challenges; inflation, energy cost rises and the post-Covid impacts are placing considerable pressures on Council resources and as such the Council is not able to sustain free parking offers indefinitely.
12. It is acknowledged that if the parking offer is extended it temporarily prioritises town centre recovery over other policy objectives, specifically the promotion of sustainable transport and climate change impacts. However, the Sustainable Transport and Climate change agenda and outcomes continue to be extremely important and high priorities for the Council.
13. The parking offer is only one factor in a range of activity being delivered by the council and businesses to support the town centre. Therefore, it is always difficult to isolate and quantify the benefits any such offer has made.
14. As previously reported, there are many factors that influence the success of a town centre, the businesses and what they offer in the town centre is a huge factor, markets and events also draw people into the town and many other factors.

15. It is also difficult to compare data as there have been several different parking offers in place since June 2018. Similarly, comparisons with pre-covid visitor numbers are difficult because consumer behaviour has undoubtedly been changed with the acceleration of internet shopping habits and online banking resulting in less frequent visits and homeworking changing patterns and behaviours.
16. Some of the metrics of the town centre have been reviewed and are presented below. Members consider a further extension of the parking offer through the winter and into the summer would enable the traders the best opportunity to succeed following the traditionally more challenging winter period:
 - (a) There is no doubt that the response to the initial three-month parking offer extension has been positive from town centre businesses and visitors, with feedback suggesting a further offer will help. This feedback in itself is not unexpected, but what cannot be quantified is whether visitors would continue to use the town centre if a parking charge was in place, or they would make other choices.
 - (b) In general car parking ticket numbers have been gradually increasing in Darlington since 2017 (other than during periods of national lockdowns). Prior to the lockdowns in 2020 car parking ticket numbers had reached around 100k per month from around 80k in 2017. The current parking offer has seen a recovery (post covid lockdowns) to levels of around 116k per month over the last 6 months. This equates to about 192,000 additional tickets per year.
 - (c) In terms of the off street car parks, where offers have been in place during 2021/22 these have seen an additional 261k tickets issued compared to 2019/20 (circa 21k per month). Around 140k of these were from visits to Feethams MSCP (circa 12k per month). The fact that there has been a significant increase in use of the offer car parks compared to the overall increase in ticket numbers suggest some displacement from car parks where charges exist to car parks where there is a free offer.
 - (d) In terms of the on-street parking bays the parking machines were installed in 2005 and there is no back-office system to analyse ticket data. However, some analysis has been done manually to gauge the use of the spaces. In Grange Road and Northumberland Street comparing ticket numbers pre-offer and during the offer there have been around 280 more tickets per month issued in Northumberland Street and 540 more tickets per month issued in Grange Road. It is estimated the overall numbers of people parking in the on-street bays has remained the same but there has been a change in pattern on where people park on-street, with people favouring the free-offer bays or free car parks. The scope to increase additional visits to the on-street bays was limited given the high occupancy levels that existed in some locations.
 - (e) Footfall figures in the town centre are analysed but the council moved to the springboard counter system in April 2020, so it is not an exact like for like comparison. The monthly average before Covid is still slightly higher than numbers today, but this is based on data from two different systems and recording points. Over the last 2 years footfall numbers have increased and the average this year so far is 1.25million per month. Pre-covid and on the old system it was 1.37million per month on average.

- (f) There have been issues with the performance of bus services post-Covid and bus patronage has not recovered to pre-covid levels. As such people boarding and alighting in the town centre is less. This could be for numerous reasons, more people working from home, the performance issues of bus services and the parking offer could mean more people are using the car to visit the town.
- (g) In terms of occupied units in the town centre the monthly average occupancy levels in retail areas of town have seen occupancy increase in 3 areas but decrease in three areas. Hospitality has seen a slight decline in the number of Cafes, Pubs and nightclubs.

Location	Average 2021/22 Monthly Occupancy	Average 2022/23 Monthly Occupancy	Trend
Retail			
Duke Street (68 Units)	97%	100%	↑
High Row (22 Units)	88%	91%	↑
Post House Wynd (27 Units)	88%	91%	↑
Grange Road (28 units)	97%	94%	↓
Skinnergate (59 units)	87%	86%	↓
Cornmill (55 units)	87%	85%	↓
Hospitality			
Pubs/Night (39)	92%	90%	↓
Restaurants (28)	86%	86%	↔
Cafes (26)	86%	85%	↓

Financial Implications

17. Council funding has been released by drawing down funds from the TVCA Indigenous Growth Fund (IGF). The Rail Heritage Quarter has drawn down further funding of £496k and a further drawdown of £150k is being sought for the purchase of Loco No.1 replica. A drawdown of £216k is also being sought from the IGF for the Crown Street Library restoration and refurbishment. These projects contribute to the aim and the targets of the IGF Programme to:
- (a) Remediate/regenerate vacant and derelict land and property
 - (b) Revitalise town centres and urban core and stimulate investment
 - (c) Enhance culture and tourism physical infrastructure
18. The drawdown of these funds from the TVCA IGF programme displaces an aggregated total of £862k of council funding. Members will note the November 2022 Cabinet report released £475k to support a further 3 months parking offer. Correspondingly, we believe that with the approval and release of a further £387k, the funds released would be sufficient to cover the extension of the parking offer through until the end of June 2023. This assumption is based on the historical profiles of income through these traditionally lower parking income months.

19. The extension of the offer will reduce the available Indigenous Growth Fund by the amount indicated in the report.

Legal Implications

20. Members must take into consideration that the parking offers for Council operated car parks are likely to have adverse impacts on providers of private car parks. The proposals set out in the report have been reviewed from the perspective of subsidy control and anti-competition law and it is considered that the proposals are lawful.