
PARKING CHARGES

1 SUMMARY

- 1.1 The purpose of the report is for Members to consider representations received to the Off-Street Parking Places Order following public consultation, and in the light of those representations, decide whether to make any changes to the published Order and proceed with its implementation, either as originally proposed or with amendments.

2 INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 The Council has agreed to a long-term strategy for car parking charges rather than a short-term tariff change. To achieve this the Council has agreed to review parking charges every two years and to examine the relationship of season ticket pricing to daily charges.
- 2.2 In February 2005, the Council approved proposals to revise the car park charging structure. These are attached as **Appendix A**. The Council also proposed to charge Blue Badge holders to park in the car parks, although free parking would continue to be offered to those Blue Badge holders whose vehicles are road tax exempt.
- 2.3 Both sets of proposed changes were published in the local papers and advertised in car parks in early March. This report considers the representations received in respect of both proposals.

3 CAR PARKING CHARGES

Proposed Changes

- 3.1 The proposed increases to the parking charges, under the proposed new charging structure, are shown in **Appendix A**. As Members will be aware, charges have generally been increased, some are new charges and some have been deleted as shown.
- 3.2 A key change to the proposed charging structure was the removal of the 30-minute band, as motorists felt that this did not give enough time to go to the bank or to the Doctor's surgery, although 2 hours was too long. The proposed new tariff structure suggested was, therefore, an hourly rate based on 50p per hour and this will be the minimum charge made.
- 3.3 There were also proposals to increase the season ticket charges in line with the metered tariff, these are again shown in **Appendix A**. The longer-term policy is to make the relationship of the season ticket charge to the metered tariff more realistic. At present the concession granted to season ticket holders is high, and this has been commented upon in the past by our external auditors, who feel that an unnecessary reduction is being granted to a captive audience. The objective was, therefore, to make the season ticket

charge 80% of the annual equivalent of the daily charge. This would be programmed over 3 years, therefore the season ticket charges on the appendix are shown for both 2005/6 and 2006/7.

- 3.4 Free parking on Saturday afternoons would continue to be offered in all car parks managed by Rochford Council. Members are reminded that car parking charges within the District remain one of the lowest in Essex.

Responses Received

- 3.5 The proposed changes to the Off-Street Parking Order were advertised in the Local Press and a copy of all the representations received was displayed in the Member's library for Councillors to inspect. This included a fully costed proposal submitted by the Chambers of Trade. However, this proposal made certain assumptions about projected ticket sales that are not borne out by fact. Additionally, this tariff structure would encourage ticket swapping and meter feeding, both of which mitigate against good traffic management.
- 3.6 There were seven objections made to the price increase, of which three, objected to the removal of the 30-minute charge. The other four objected to price increases in general.
- 3.7 On a weekly basis the Council has 25,000 visitors to its car parks, serving around 1.3million customers a year. Members will note the minimal number of objections to the proposed tariff increase in comparison to users.
- 3.8 It is therefore recommended that the proposed charging structure is implemented with effect from mid July 2005.

3 BLUE BADGE CONCESSION

Proposal

- 4.1 The Rochford Access Committee for the Disabled was set up in 1988 to advise the Council on any issues, strategies, policies and practices that may affect disabled residents. The Chairman of the Access Committee has in the past drawn the Council's attention to the fact that there was a considerable amount of abuse of the Blue Badge Scheme and asked the Council to reconsider the policy of providing free parking for Blue Badge holders. This would require all Blue Badge holders to pay for off-street parking, unless their vehicle was road tax exempt.
- 4.2 In February 2005, the Council approved this proposal to reduce incentives for abuse of the Blue Badge Scheme. In detail, the proposal was that Blue Badge holders should be treated no differently than other motorists using the Council's pay and display car parks, but that those Blue Badge holders displaying a Road Tax Exemption disc should enjoy unrestricted free parking.

Responses Received

- 4.3 There have been many articles in the press recently with regards to the proposal for charging Blue Badge holders in the car parks. Some of the articles were misleading and have led to objections being received that were not relevant to the proposals. Many Blue Badge holders were under the impression that the Council was to scrap the Blue Badge scheme and not allow on-street parking concessions for the disabled, which is clearly not the case.
- 4.4 There are around 3000 Blue Badge holders in the District of Rochford. Just 37 objections were received against the proposal to charge Blue Badge holders to park in Council car parks. This represents 1.2% of Blue Badge holders. A number of Blue Badge holders were confused with the proposals due to misrepresentation of the Council's proposals in some press articles and therefore submitted objections to issues that had not actually been proposed. These objections were for the 'Scrapping of the Blue Badge Scheme in the Rochford District' and not allowing Blue Badge holders to park in the designated disabled bays in the car parks, both of which were erroneous.
- 4.5 The majority of relevant objections were basically that it was unfair that charges would be applied to them when previously they had parked free. However, some respondents submitted that their restricted mobility would result in them having to purchase a longer stay ticket than able-bodied motorists. Also, access to the machines was an issue.
- 4.6 The main argument from disabled groups opposing the parking charges is that many Blue Badge holders are either unemployed, on low income or are pensioners. If this is accepted by Members, then free parking should be offered to all of these groups, whether they are disabled or not, to avoid challenges of discrimination. Disabled groups have requested that Council Parking Attendants tackle the misuse of Blue Badges. However, Parking Attendants, under Decriminalised Parking Enforcement regulations, do not have the power to inspect the name on the reverse of the badge, giving details of to whom the badge has been issued.
- 4.7 Abuse of the Scheme is a criminal offence and enforcement is very difficult, as it requires a Police Officer to be involved. Additionally, because Rochford's car park management regime (Pay and Display) is based principally on the manual monitoring of vehicles, it is the only regime where Blue Badge concessions can apply. If a mechanised Pay on Exit, Pay on Foot or other barrier system were employed, there could be no recognition of Blue Badges.
- 4.8 Some concerns have been expressed regarding walking to the ticket machines, however, use of any of the Rochford District Council car parks would involve an element of walking to access shopping facilities. The proposal may push Blue Badge holders on-street to park although, ostensibly, the very purpose of the scheme is for disabled motorists or passengers with

severe mobility problems to park as close to their destination as possible. There are a number of dedicated disabled bays in Rayleigh, Rochford and Hockley Town Centres, and other areas where Blue Badge holders may legally park free of charge for up to 3 hours.

- 4.9 The Transportation team carried out a short survey of Websters Way car park over various days to determine use of the car park by vehicles displaying a Blue Badge. While there was only a few that park most days (i.e. workers in the town), what did emerge was that around 50% of vehicles displaying a Blue Badge were less than 3 years old.
- 4.10 The survey also revealed that during the busiest part of the day there are consistently 20 vehicles, out of approximately 300 parked in Websters Way Car Park, displaying a Blue Badge and thus not paying for the facilities provided.
- 4.11 Despite the responses received, it is felt that Blue Badge holders should pay for the service provided along with other motorists wishing to use the Council's parking facilities. Although a charge will apply, all Blue Badge holders would continue to be able to use the dedicated disabled bays, which have been made larger and positioned at the pedestrian exit of the car parks to reduce walking distance.
- 4.12 The Rochford Access Committee for the Disabled proposed the original solution to Blue Badge abuse, and when contacted in January 2005 still supported the Council's current proposal. However, the Essex Disabled People's Association have filed an official complaint to the Disability Rights Commission. The Commission have had the complaint letter for over seven weeks and have not made contact with the Council.

5 OPTIONS

- 5.1 In the light of the responses received, if Members are not minded to proceed with the proposal, two alternatives would appear to suggest themselves :-

- Option 1** Continue to offer free parking to all Blue Badge holders in the Council car parks (status quo).
- Option 2** Charge the proposed minimal parking tariff (1 hour 50p) but allow Blue Badge holders to park with this ticket for up to 3 hours. Continue to offer free parking to those who are road tax exempt and allow all Blue Badge holders to park in the designated disabled bays.

6 RISK IMPLICATIONS

The Council's Budget has been constructed in anticipation that additional revenue will be forthcoming from revised car parking charges from around

July 2005 and any delay or change would clearly need to be taken into account within the five-year Budget Strategy Process.

7 ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 There is some concern that charging Blue Badge holders to park in the car parks could encourage disabled motorists to park on-street more frequently. It is the intention of the Blue Badge Scheme to permit the disabled motorist to park as close to their destination as possible. People that abuse the Scheme are less likely to park in the High Streets where their actions are more visible and are more likely to be challenged or reported.

8 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 The Council employs five full-time Parking Attendants that patrol on and off-street. Their duties also include ticket machine cash collections, which have recently been increased to four times a week. This new collection schedule will be sufficient to cope with the increased coinage if the above charges are agreed.

9 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 The Head of Legal Services advises that all legal processes to amend the Order have been observed and that minor amendments only may be accepted. However, major changes to the proposed tariff or changes to the proposals regarding charging Blue Badge holders may necessitate revisiting the advertisement and consultation process.

10 PARISH IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1 Pay and Display Car Parks are located in the Rochford, Hockley and Rayleigh Parish Council / Town Council areas

11 RECOMMENDATION

- 11.1 It is proposed that the Council **RESOLVES**
- (1) To implement the proposed parking charges and tariff structure set out in Appendix A.
 - (2) To agree that, over a three-year period, a season ticket charge structure be introduced equating to 80% of the annual equivalent of the daily charge.
 - (3) To agree the Council's strategy on charging Blue Badge holders.

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Background Papers:-

Objection letters in the members lounge.

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