

COUNCIL

9 July 2024

AGENDA ITEM 8 – QUESTION ASKED PURSUANT TO COUNCIL PROCEDURE RULE NO 5.5

The following question (24/003) has been asked pursuant to Council Procedure Rule No 5.5 by Councillor J Clokey:

‘Can the Cabinet Member for Transformation & Infrastructure detail the nature and output of any research, analysis and/or modelling (both quantitative and/or qualitative) performed to in relation to the impact of the decision to extend off-street car parking charges in Executive Decision D240034(1)CAB (including any analysis originally related to the proposals in decision D240034CAB), including specifically the financial impact on local businesses, the effect on charities, groups and other non-commercial entities, and the difference in impacts between the initial and revised proposals?’

Response of the Cabinet Member for Transformation and Infrastructure (Cllr M Coffin):

The work and time taken to develop and analyse the recently approved extension of off-street car park charges has been extensive, and the proposals have evolved to address issues raised by the public, businesses and community groups during a comprehensive public consultation exercise. In addition, the Leader of the Council attended face to face meetings with local groups at their request. These included the West Malling Chamber of Commerce and Martin Square Traders Association. Financial estimates were made on predicted additional income from an analysis of existing usage and income levels of each car park.

The proposals for car parking charges have been one of the most scrutinised decisions taken by this Council with reports considered at several Council meetings and every single consultation response shared with Members. Members also received copies of correspondence from key stakeholders including an MP. several Parish councils, church groups across the Borough, schools and West Malling’s Chamber of Commerce.

The proposal to extend off-street parking charges was first considered by the Community and Environment Scrutiny Select Committee, which made recommendations to Cabinet including undertaking detailed public consultation. Over 4000 responses were received to the parking consultations. These responses were received from all areas of the community including residents, businesses, voluntary groups and partners enabling Members to assess the impacts.

All these responses were reviewed and presented to Cabinet in early April this year. At this meeting, Cabinet considered all the views and opinions detailed in those

responses. It recognised that there was a need to be responsive to a number of the views expressed, and it chose to adjust some of the proposals at this meeting. Cabinet listened to the research and acted. It introduced 1-hour free parking for West Malling High Street to support the 'stop-and-go' customers. It included a free parking period for Martin Square following engagement with traders and the Parish Council. This assisted the local school providing free parking for parents to drop off and collect their children. It also adjusted the season ticket charges for Aylesford car parks to £200 helping local residents and businesses.

All these amendments were brought about through consideration of the responses from the whole community including businesses, charities and non-commercial groups. The discussion in all of these Council meetings was inclusive and the Cabinet listened carefully to all the views expressed.

Following a call-in, in late April the Overview & Scrutiny Committee fully reviewed the decision made by Cabinet. All areas of the decisions made were fully scrutinised with many Members present to add their views.

This resulted in additional recommendations being made to Cabinet which included-

- The extension of the 30mins free in Martin Square to 1 hour free.
- Aylesford season ticket for residents to be further reduced to £120 and to introduce 1 hour free.
- The proposal to extend the Upper Castle Fields car park be removed.

At the extraordinary meeting of Cabinet on the 30th April it reviewed two petitions that the Council had received linked to the parking proposals along with the recommendations made by Overview and Scrutiny.

At this meeting Cabinet went on to agree further amendments to the proposals as follows

- Free parking for Martin Square and Aylesford to be set at 1 hour and the one-month season ticket set at £10 and the annual season ticket reduced to £120.
- Upper Castle Fields extension was set aside and will not proceed.

Importantly it also chose to add a 30min free period into 6 of our car parks in Tonbridge to help with short stay visits.

In terms of qualitative and quantitative analysis, there is no direct research on the impact of the decisions made by Cabinet as this is complex due to a number of factors. Parking demand and the impact of charges remains an exceptionally challenging area to predict.

Many things affect trip generation and how parking impacts users and businesses. These include the weather, events, private and commercial rents and neighbouring Districts' 'pull' factors, regional premium shopping centres and out-of-town retail.

There are also wide-scale health factors that can affect parking trip generation, as demonstrated by the effects of the Covid pandemic and the rapid change in driver habits.

In terms of the approved Parking Proposals, the long-term parking patterns continue to be difficult to assess especially as Cabinet has added 'Free Parking periods' to a number of the established parking areas close to the High Street.

These 'free periods' will undoubtedly help benefit traders in Tonbridge as visitors to the High Street that are "popping in" for less than 30 minutes may be able to do so for free.

We do review parking charges annually and through this process we will be able to further shape parking controls and charges as required. This means that if there are opportunities to react to changes in the parking patterns we can do so. As with all things parking the demand, usage and impact can change and we are confident that we will be able to respond if necessary. Car park usage is constantly monitored, this will allow real time information to be assessed on a frequent basis. As part of our economic development strategy we will monitor usage to encourage easy and frequent parking to assist footfall. This information will inform the next review of car parking.

All of this demonstrates that Members have fully considered the views of all our communities and have engaged in thorough examination of the proposals. Cabinet listened and shaped the proposals to balance the needs of both the Council and the Community.