Wiltshire Council

Cabinet

14 December 2010

Item 5 – Public Participation
Wiltshire Local Transport Plan 2011-2026 – Car Parking Strategy (item 6)

Statement from Wiltshire Councillor Russell Hawker, Westbury West Division

Congratulations to all of you for grasping the nettle and coming up with what I regard as a good overall strategy for rationalising car parking charges in Wiltshire Council's car parks.
Thanks also to Robert Murphy for his patience and efforts in explaining to me the rationale (some of which is totally illogical) behind some of the proposals.

Unfortunately, some of the details in the proposals have not been thought through very well and, if implemented, will directly and quickly damage some of the weakest town and village centres.

My professional background is as a chartered valuation surveyor who, amongst other things, has specialised in valuing and analysing commercial property for investment, development, occupational and trading purposes and has worked for 5 of the current top 10 firms of UK / international surveyors and a major UK property Plc as group investment surveyor (now called Peel Holdings Ltd) In essence, ***you can verify what I am saying by speaking to any genuine specialist commercial property chartered valuation or general practice surveyor active in retail property agency or valuation work in the UK.*** Please be aware that most of the larger firms of chartered surveyors / international property consultants in the UK tend to run their retail property teams from bases in London. Local agents will tend to have a very incomplete picture outside their local patch.

What follows are brief points to illustrate the problem as I see it. I would be happy to explain further if asked.

1. It is irrational to lump all "market towns" in one banding - they are far too varied in strength

The true best indicator of the strength or weakness of a retail centre is it's top "Zone A rental value". Zone A represents the first 20 ft depth of shops measured from the front. All properly known deals are analysed to allow for shape and return frontages so that "Zone A equivalent" figures are obtained for every retail centre. This is the definitive common currency that allows retail centres to be instantly compared for attraction and trading strength anywhere in the country.

Top Zone A rents in several Wiltshire towns / large villages are as follows:

Salisbury £ 120 - 150 per sq ft (psf) - Salisbury has two separate prime locations.

Trowbridge	65
Chippenham	65
Marlborough	60
Devizes	50
Amesbury	35
Bradford on Avon	35
Warminster	35
Malmesbury	30
Melksham	25
Tisbury	19
Westbury	18
Mere	15

The towns in the proposed Band 3 have Zone As that range from £60 down to 15 psf.

A top Zone A will be achieved in the very best positions - typically by a Marks and Spencer in a large town or a Boots / main supermarket in a smaller town centre. Zone As will fall away quickly the further the distance from the prime location. Therefore many shops in Salisbury will be at sub-£60 psf. The overall mass of shops in any centre combines to create the top zone A location and its value, which represents a good indicator of the overall strength of the retail economy of the centre.

It is important to appreciate that any shop rents reflecting a Zone A of less than £20psf represents a seriously weak location where one can expect distressed businesses, charity shops, empty units for long periods of time etc

Such weak centres will typically provide only convenience shopping and no comparison shopping (such as shoe shops, ladies /menswear, jewellers). They do not have the critical mass to be attractive if parking is charged for.

Such centres often depend on free parking just for survival.
Removal of free parking in weak centres results in more closed businesses, empty units, charity chops and a more rapid cycle of decline.

Westbury town centre is in a clear cycle of decline such that the prime location itself now includes charity shops and long term empty units (compared to stronger centres where the charity shops are relegated to secondary or tertiary locations).

To propose the same car park charges for towns that are so varied in economic strength shows a complete lack of understanding (or a deliberate indifference to and lack of care towards) the difference in value customers place on the car spaces in different locations.

It would be completely rational to put Marlborough and Devizes into Band 2 and Westbury into Band 4 .

Marlborough and Devizes would easily sustain the increased charges because they would remain superior in their attraction to shoppers.

Locals would bleat about increased charges, but the reality is that they will continue to use the centre and the charges will better reflect the actual value of the car spaces.

2. It is irrational to only make up to 25% of short term spaces available for free in very weak centre.

Westbury currently has most of its short term parking available free for 1 hour. Until recently it was 2 hours free. The change has immediately reduced trade in the town with the streets noticeably quieter.

Let me be blunt. The proposal to take away free parking altogether in a weak and declining centre like Westbury if the town council refuses to be bullied into paying exorbitant subsidies WILL quickly destroy a significant proportion of the already weak retail businesses in the town centre. Several more shop units will be empty by Summer 2001.

The idea that reducing free parking will encourage other modes of transport such as bus journeys is pie-in-the-sky nonsense. Car drivers will simply drive to other towns more than they already do.

The West Wiltshire Retails Needs Assessment undertaken in early 2007 established that most retail spend by Westbury residents is undertaken outside the town already. It should be the council's objective to reduce journeys out of the town by helping to rejuvenate the town centre and its retail system. When starting from such as low base as one has in Westbury, only FREE PARKING will work to attract new businesses and customers.

NB. Only 25% of spaces free will simply cause too much irritation to shoppers who will end up waiting and losing their patience.

To ignore theses simple economic fact would be incompetence.

3. The proposed charge rate of £500 per space per annum is far too high and unjustified in very weak centres.

The proposed subsidy to achieve free parking should reflect the VALUE of the spaces - not the cost of management. To ignore the economic value (ie. what fees they can generate in a free market), is to lose sight of the need to base decisions affecting the economic strength of our towns on economic values and indicators in the first place. The proposed disconnect between economic value and cost of management reflects a lack of logic and lack of understanding of the economic dynamics of town centres, which harm the weakest town centres.