

**Cannock Chase Council**

**Minutes of the Call-In Meeting of the**

**Community Scrutiny Committee**

**Held on Monday 8 March 2021 at 4:00pm**

**Via Remote Access**

**PART 1**

**Present:**

**Councillors**

Jones, B. (Vice-Chairman)

Allen, F.W.C.	Hewitt, P.M.
Cartwright, Mrs. S.M. (substitute)	Smith, C.D.
Davis, Mrs. M.A.	Thompson, Mrs. S.L.
Dunnett, Ms. A.J.	Todd, Mrs. D.M.
Freeman, Miss M.A.	Witton, P.T.
Fitzgerald, Mrs. A.A. (substitute)	Woodhead, P.E.

**Councillors Supporting the Call-in Request:**

- Hughes, R.J.\*
- Johnson, J.P.
- Lyons, Miss O.\*

**Invitees (from Cannock Chase District Council):**

- Mr. R. Kean, Deputy Managing Director and Head of Finance
- Mr. M. Edmonds, Head of Environment and Healthy Lifestyles
- Mr. D. Piper, Head of Economic Prosperity
- Councillor J.A.A. Newbury, Environment and Climate Change Portfolio Leader
- Councillor A.S. Boucker
- Councillor P.D. Startin
- Councillor M. Sutherland
- Councillor Mrs. C.E. Martin\*

**Invitees (from Rugeley Town Council):**

- Councillor B. Dipple

\*District Councillors Hughes, Lyons and Martin are also members of Rugeley Town Council.

## **7. Apologies**

Apologies for absence were submitted for Councillors C. Bennett (Chairman) and Mrs. H.M. Sutton.

Councillors Mrs. S.M. Cartwright and Mrs. A.A. Fitzgerald were in attendance as substitutes for Councillor Bennett and Council Sutton, respectively.

In the Chairman's absence the meeting was chaired by Councillor B. Jones (Vice-Chairman).

## **8. Declarations of Interests of Members in Contracts and Other Matters and Restrictions on Voting by Members and Party Whip Declarations**

No declarations of interests or party whip declarations were received.

Councillor P.E. Woodhead reported that as Hednesford Town Council was directly referenced in the paperwork for agenda item 3, he, and Councillor Ms. A.J. Dunnett, were both current members of Hednesford Town Council.

## **9. Call-In Request: Car Parking Charges in Rugeley**

Consideration was given to the report of the Head of Environment and Healthy Lifestyles (Item 3.1 – 3.20 of the Official Minutes of the Council).

Councillor C.D. Smith read out and proposed the Motion as set out in paragraph 3.7 of the report, which was duly seconded by Councillor Mrs. S.M. Thompson.

The supporters of the call-in then spoke in turn, outlining their reasons as to why the motion should be supported, which covered the following matters:

- Traders and shoppers needed to be supported, especially with non-essential retail premises due to reopen from 12 April, but it was considered that the current timescales for the Cabinet's proposals did not support this work.
- This matter was about fairness as there were inconsistencies in the application of parking policy across the District, with Council Taxpayers in areas that didn't have free parking having to subsidise it for areas that did.
- Hednesford Town Council had been allowed to have an arrangement in place for free car parking, but a similar request from Rugeley Town Council was rejected. This was not intended as a criticism of Hednesford Town Council as they had clearly sought to have the best policy in place to support their local residents and traders, the criticism was aimed at the wider parking policy for the District.
- There were no details provided about the Cabinet's proposed trial scheme.
- Post-Covid recovery was key, and time was of the essence in terms of addressing the economic damage caused by the pandemic. There wasn't

the flexibility to undertaken feasibility studies and take reports through various meetings – this issue needed to be dealt with straight away to support struggling businesses.

The Vice-Chairman then opened the matter up for debate by the Committee, with the following points being raised by Members:

- The Cabinet report referenced the financial impact and potential income losses of the request from Rugeley Town Council, but it was considered the financial gap may not be as wide as the report suggested.
- The Conservative Group could have included the proposal as part its Alternative Budget recently presented to Council, but did not, so it was hard to see where the funding would come from to support it.
- Everywhere would like free car parking, but the reality was most town centres now had paid for parking. The comparisons between the Rugeley Town Council offer and the situation in Hednesford were unfair as Hednesford Town Council had funded free parking in the town for many years now via a legal agreement with the District Council. As such, if it was considered that free car parking couldn't be supported across the District then shoppers and businesses in Hednesford would be penalised, and the Council's income affected as visitors would likely use the free car parks at Tesco and Aldi instead.
- To ensure fairness, this matter should be considered as part of the annual budget cycle so the financial implications and wider impact could be properly assessed and considered.
- If free parking was to be offered in Rugeley, then Cannock also needed to be looked at.
- It wasn't the case that the Conservative Group didn't support free parking in Hednesford, and nor would they want to penalise those who already had access to that provision. Clarity was needed as to whether car parking income was ring fenced and whether any studies had been done to look at the impact of free parking options in Rugeley. A fresh look was needed at the car parking provision in the District as the town centres needed to be unique and support the businesses and residents using them.

*The Head of Finance confirmed that car parking income was not ring fenced and formed part of the General Fund budget. Any specific proposals for improvement works would be put through the capital programme.*

*The Head of Environment and Healthy Lifestyles confirmed that studies had not been undertaken due to the Council dealing with the pandemic, but this matter would have been picked up as part of the car parking strategy review included in the new Corporate Plan.*

- Several other councils had worked with businesses in their areas to devise an incentive scheme to provide all or some of a shopper's car parking for free if they shopped in that area. This was something this Council could conceivably look at and would take much time to do so.

The following questions were then raised with the Environment and Climate Change Portfolio Leader, to which he replied in turn (responses shown in *italics*):

- Did Councillor Dudson speak to you about his attendance at the Rugeley Town Council meeting last year and what was subsequently proposed?

*Aware that he was attending the meeting, but car parking matters were not discussed as this only came up whilst the meeting was taken place.*

- What was the view on the concerns raised about the timescales for completing the work agreed by the Cabinet?

*The Hednesford Town Council arrangement was agreed in a different time, but the focus now had to be about what the Council could do going forward to support businesses, hence why the review would have proper processes and options for consideration.*

- What was the rationale for the wording in the final sentence of the reasons for the Cabinet's decision of 28 January?

*The Cabinet's view was that free car parking could be used by commuters travelling to other areas, thereby taking up spaces that could be used by local shoppers. Also did not want to encourage behaviours that would not support the recovery of businesses in the town centres, hence the need for the review to look at wider impacts on hospitality and leisure too, and the best way forward.*

- As referenced in paragraph 6.4 of the Cabinet report, what package of support measures were being considered?

*This was outside the scope of the portfolio area, but more use of the 'ShopAppy' scheme could be encouraged to help more local businesses advertise online and the Council could promote the town centres and businesses in the area. The Economic Development team did this on an ongoing basis throughout the year, and the new Corporate Plan included a number of objectives linked toward economic recovery etc.*

*The Head of Economic Prosperity further advised that the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic needed to be properly assessed, but Officers were looking at the marketing of the town centres, including the holding of markets and other events, and other options for regeneration. Much of the focus over the past year had been supporting businesses through the payments of different grant funding schemes, with a further scheme announced in the Government's budget last week.*

- Issues had been raised about the timing of the Cabinet's proposal and the need to support businesses as soon as possible post pandemic.

*The Council should be doing everything it could to help businesses bounce back, but it was still unclear at this stage how businesses would be affected going forward. It was therefore prudent to look at the impact and assess how best to help rather than putting in knee jerk reactions on specific aspects without looking at the wider picture. Officers were trusted to look at what could be done to provide support.*

- Had there been any review of the arrangements agreed with Hednesford Town Council since they were first put in place?

*Having spoken to Officers it was understood that a review took place in 2008 that encompassed a wider review of car parking in the District. The review recommended that no action be taken.*

The debate then continued, with the following further points being raised:

- Relationships with parish and town councils needed to be fostered, regardless of the outcome of this meeting, and embraced by both Members and Officers. It was understood that Rugeley Town Council had been given an offer on the same basis as the Hednesford Town Council agreement some years ago, but this was declined.
- It was vital for areas to work together hence why other Members were supportive of Rugeley. Cannock did not have similar support due to not having its own town council, so a much wider review was needed than proposed by Cabinet.
- Further to an earlier comment about an incentive scheme, the Cabinet decision of 28 January set out that a trial scheme be looked at to refund parking for shoppers using the town centres.
- Agree with previous comments raised about lack of representation for Cannock, with its local voice being taken away when the Community Forums were abolished. It was noted that a request had been made recently for Beecroft Road car park to be resurfaced, but this was unlikely to be done as the site featured in the wider redevelopment proposals for the town centre.
- There was an urgency to addressing this matter, particularly as it was now over 10 years since the last review occurred. Businesses did not have the time wait for the outcome of a feasibility study as they needed help now. The District Council had representation across all the town centres, so if a fair policy had been applied then this matter would not be an issue.

The Environment and Climate Change Portfolio Leader, Councillor J.A.A. Newbury, gave his right of reply to the debate, raising the following points:

- The Cabinet report set out the key income issues that had to be accounted

for when considered the request from Rugeley Town Council, which if accepted, would result in lost income of circa £37,000 and also prevent the Council being able to claim against the Government's Income Guarantee Scheme. Furthermore, the purchase of new pay & display machines for the Rugeley based car parks, at a cost of £98,000, also had to be taken into consideration as these were purchased before the Town Council made its request.

- In respect of the Hednesford Town Council arrangement, this was as part of a legal agreement put in place a number of years ago and there was no desire to remove this arrangement from them. It was understood that a similar offer was to Rugeley Town Council at the same time but was declined.
- The long-term impact of the pandemic also needed to be factored in, as well as the expectation that the move to online shopping would be accelerated.
- Any decisions regarding parking provision across the District should not be rushed into and be evidence led based on the views of shoppers and traders.
- There was a need to undertake a thorough and holistic review of car parking, hence why a full review was planned for 2021 which would inform a revised car parking strategy for the Council.
- The Council wanted to work with parish and town councils to support economic recovery and didn't want to dismiss Rugeley Town Council's offer out of hand, hence why Cabinet made the decision it did.
- There was also a need to be mindful of the commitment to carbon neutrality, hence the provision of free car parking could be seen as an incentive to drive into town centres rather than using other means of transport.
- The Conservative Group's Alternative Budget as presented to Council 10 February made no mention of including the proposal being considered by the Committee in the budget for 2021/22.
- Members had raised concern about the work capacity of Officers, but it had to be noted that dealing with the request from Rugeley Town Council and the arrangements for this meeting had taken up a lot of Officers time when they were having to deal with many other issues at present.
- Cabinet knew this was a difficult time for the Council's finances, so it was expected a package of support measures would be needed for the District rather than one-off policies.
- The Committee was therefore asked to reject the proposal before it today and support the work already planned and ongoing.

Councillor C.D. Smith gave his right of reply to debate, raising the following points:

- He was not claiming the incentive scheme for refunds of car parking as an original idea but was fully supportive of it being taken forward.
- The current Administration of the Council had had twelve years pre-pandemic to look at this issue and had not done so.
- A motion presented to Council last year from the Conservative Group about reviewing car parking charges had been voted down at the time.
- By the time the work was done as proposed by the Cabinet, businesses closures and loss of business rates to the Council would far outweigh any losses in car parking income.

The original motion as moved by Councillor Smith and seconded by Councillor Thompson was then put to a vote.

**Resolved:**

That the Cabinet decision of 28 January 2021 (minute no. 67) in respect of Car Parking Charges in Rugeley **not** be referred to full Council.

A further vote was then taken to instead refer the matter back to Cabinet for reconsideration:

**Resolved:**

That the Cabinet decision of 28 January 2021 (minute no. 67) in respect of Car Parking Charges in Rugeley **not** be referred back to Cabinet for reconsideration.

Accordingly, the decision of the Cabinet meeting held on 28 January 2021 (minute no. 67 of the minutes of that meeting), stood as agreed by Cabinet and could now be implemented.

The meeting closed at 5:43 p.m.

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CHAIRMAN