

CANNOCK CHASE COUNCIL
MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
TUESDAY 23 NOVEMBER, 2010 AT 4.00 P.M.
IN THE CIVIC CENTRE, BEECROFT ROAD, CANNOCK

PART 1

PRESENT: Councillors

Kraujalis, J. T. (Chairman)
Dixon, D. I. (Vice-Chairman)

Ansell, Mrs. P.	Green, M.R.
Bennett, Mrs. D.J.	Mitchell. C.
Bernard, Mrs. A.F.	Rowley, J.
Bernard, J.D.	Thomas, D.
Davis, Mrs. M.A.	

Proposer of Call-In Councillor G. Adamson

By invitation: Mr. M. Brazier, Rugeley Town Traders Association
 Mrs. N. Chapman, Cannock Town Traders Association

 Mr. D. Hoare, Director of Service Improvement

 Councillor A. Williams, Environment Portfolio Leader
 Councillor N. Stanley, Leader of the Council
 Councillor Mrs. P. Williams, Town Centre Regeneration Portfolio Leader

15. Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors J. Beddows, R. Jones, and G.N. Molineux.

Mrs. S. Dunning, Cannock Town Traders Association had also submitted apologies.

16. Declarations of Interests of Members in Contracts and Other Matters and Restrictions on Voting by Members

None were declared.

17. Party Whip Declarations

There were no Party Whip Declarations received.

18. Call-in: Car Parking Charges During Christmas Period, 2010

Proposer of the call-in: Councillor G. Adamson; Seconders: Councillors Mrs. S. Cartwright; Mrs. M. Davis; D. Dixon; Mrs. C. Mitchell; and D. Thomas.

The Chairman invited the Proposer of the call-in to read the Motion and give a brief reason for the call-in.

Recommendation of Cabinet Subject to Call-in (Minute 63(A) of Meeting of 20 October, 2010):

That on the two Saturdays prior to Christmas, 2010, car parking charges be charged at the minimum ticket rate for the respective car park being used and that the ticket would cover the vehicle parking for the whole of that day.

Proposal

The Proposer was then invited to read out his Motion:

“Free car parking on Council car parks in Cannock and Rugeley on the two Saturdays prior to Christmas, 2010.”

Reason for Call-in

No consultation had taken place with Traders in Cannock and Rugeley Town Centres to assess their views on the effect of the decision on their trade at a time when trading conditions in Cannock and Rugeley are difficult.

The Proposer added that he had discussed the matter with the Head of Financial Management, and he believed that the cost of the proposal could be met from savings achieved as a result of the Council's recruitment freeze. He stressed that the proposal was not politically motivated, and he could appreciate why Cabinet had reached their decision; but he considered that a flat rate charge for parking would not encourage enough additional shoppers into the towns.

Questions to Invited Persons

The Proposer asked Mr. M. Brazier of Rugeley Town Traders' Association if he believed providing free parking on the two Saturdays prior to Christmas would increase footfall in the town centres with a resultant increase in trade. Mr. Brazier confirmed that he believed this to be the case, and he stated that a number of traders in Rugeley were struggling, including several in the Brewery Street Arcade which he managed.

Scrutiny Committee members asked Mr. Brazier if he had evidence that previous free parking periods increased footfall. Mr. Brazier responded that he believed it had, but that the situation would have been more effective if the free parking had been better advertised.

The Proposer then asked Mrs. N. Chapman of Cannock Town Traders' Association if she believed providing free parking on the two Saturdays prior to Christmas would increase footfall in the town centres with a resultant increase in trade. Mrs. Chapman confirmed that she believed it helped to incentivise people to shop in the town on those days, thereby

increasing footfall and trade.

The Proposer asked Mrs. Chapman if Cannock traders were struggling, and was the Christmas period critical to them. Mrs. Chapman confirmed that this was the case.

The Proposer asked Mrs. Chapman if she felt the Cabinet proposal would help to attract shoppers to the town. Mrs. Chapman replied that she considered it wasn't sufficient incentive as Cannock didn't have a sufficient number of shops to keep shoppers in the town for much more than an hour or so. However, offering free parking might at least attract people into the town in the first place, rather than them going elsewhere and spending nothing in the town.

Scrutiny Committee members asked Mrs. Chapman if free parking might not simply encourage some people to park on the station car parks and go to other centres. Mrs. Chapman agreed that it might, but considered that it would be a minority, while others would be incentivised into the town centres.

Response by the Environment Portfolio Holder

The Portfolio Holder advised Scrutiny Committee that Cabinet of 20 October, 2010, had received an Officer report recommending that, in light of the financial pressures facing the Council, there should be no reduction in car parking charges on the two Saturdays prior to Christmas, 2010. Cabinet had felt that this was too harsh and instead determined to effect a limited concession in accordance with what had been done the previous year, i.e. that parking charges be set at the minimum ticket rate for the respective car parks. Cabinet believed this to be in the best interests of the Council and local Council Tax payers, as there was no such thing as "free" parking, the cost of which would fall to be met by local Council Tax payers. The Portfolio Leader also noted that neither he nor the Portfolio Leader for Town Centre Regeneration had been approached by the Town Centres Traders Associations in this regard, though an approach had been made to the Town Centre Regeneration Portfolio Leader in respect of suspending charges for the launch of the Town Centre Lotteries and the Christmas Lights switch ons. Whilst it had not been possible to accommodate the former, monies had been identified to enable early cessation of charges for the Christmas Lights switch ons. The Portfolio Holder then invited the Leader of the Council to respond to the Motion.

Response by the Leader of the Council (as invited by the Portfolio Leader)

The Leader of the Council reiterated the points made by the Portfolio Holder in respect of having to find the cost of "free" parking (i.e. not charging for parking) from Council Tax payers, as provision had already been made in the 2010-11 budgets for collection of the revenue that would be lost. Furthermore, the Leader noted that "free" parking was actually iniquitous, as those who chose not to park in the town or who used buses instead were, in effect subsidising the cost of those who did. The Leader also made the point that one of the reasons that Cabinet had decided to make a minimum charge on the two Saturdays prior to Christmas, 2009, was because of traders' complaints that free parking was leading to parking spaces being used by workers who parked there all day for nothing, thereby reducing the turnover of spaces available for shoppers' use.

Questions From Portfolio Holder

The Portfolio holder enquired if Mr. Brazier was a resident of Rugeley, as the previous years pre-Christmas parking arrangements had been advertised in a publication that had been distributed to all households in Rugeley. Mr. Brazier acknowledged that he was not a resident, but that he had seen the publication in question. Nonetheless, he felt that the parking concession could have been better advertised.

The Portfolio Leader asked Mr. Brazier what would be the benefit to him of free parking when his Arcade already offered free parking. Mr. Brazier responded that he believed free parking on the Council's car parks would be of benefit to all traders, increasing footfall in all parts of the town. If people weren't time limited, he believed they would wander to all parts of the town.

Further Questions to Invited Persons from The Proposer (For Clarification)

The Proposer sought confirmation from the representatives of the town centre traders of the potential problems if "free" parking was not offered. The representatives confirmed that in their opinion suspending car parking charges would increase footfall and attract more shoppers to the towns, than having a flat rate charge on the days in question. However, they both stressed that whatever concession was granted, it should be well advertised in advance.

Further Questions to Invited Persons from Scrutiny (For Clarification)

Members enquired if free parking for late night shopping would help the town centre traders. Mr. Brazier replied that it would be of limited benefit in Rugeley as the shops did not tend to open late and parking was available on a supermarket car park. Mrs. Chapman advised that traders within the town and across the towns did not operate synchronously at that time.

Members also enquired if footfall was noticeably increased after 6.00pm or on Sundays when there was no charge for parking. Mr. Brazier reiterated that the shops did not tend to open late, and only a small number opened on Sundays, so it was not possible to tell. Mrs. Chapman confirmed the numbers were too small to be significant.

Summary From Portfolio Holder

The Portfolio Holder reiterated that there was no such thing as "free" parking, and the cost would fall to be met by local Council Tax payers. Cabinet's recommendation for parking charges to be set at the minimum ticket rate for the respective car parks on the two Saturdays prior to Christmas, 2010, was fair and reasonable, and there was no evidence to support the contention that not charging for parking would, in fact, increase footfall in the town centres on those days.

Proposal

The Proposer was then invited to read out his Motion, which was seconded:

"Free car parking on Council car parks in Cannock and Rugeley on the two Saturdays prior to Christmas, 2010."

The Cabinet members present then withdrew and the Scrutiny Committee debated the proposal.

Members sought clarification from the Monitoring Officer regarding whether the Committee's recommendation could be referred to full Council. The Monitoring Officer advised that the matter could only be referred to Council if the Cabinet's decision fell outside the Council's policy or budget framework, and confirmed that the matter was on the agenda for the Cabinet meeting of 25 November, 2010, where the Scrutiny Committee's recommendation would be reported back for Cabinet's consideration.

Councillor Mrs. A. Bernard proposed an amendment to the Motion, which was accepted by the Proposer, that:

In respect of Cannock Chase Council operated car parks:

1. On Saturday, 11 December, 2010, car parking charges be charged at the minimum ticket rate for the respective car park being used and that the ticket would cover the vehicle parking for the whole of that day;
2. On Saturday, 18 December, 2010, car parking charges be suspended.

RESOLVED:

To refer the following amended proposal back to Cabinet for reconsideration:

That, in respect of Cannock Chase Council operated car parks:

- (A) On Saturday, 11 December, 2010, car parking charges be charged at the minimum ticket rate for the respective car park being used and that the ticket would cover the vehicle parking for the whole of that day;
- (B) On Saturday, 18 December, 2010, car parking charges be suspended.

CHAIRMAN

The meeting closed at 5.45 p.m.