

BRECKLAND DISTRICT COUNCIL

Report of: Paul Hewett, Executive Member for Property, Projects and Procurement
Maxine O'Mahony, Chief Executive

To: Cabinet 15 July 2024

Author: Ralph Burton, Assistant Director of Property & Infrastructure

Subject: Car Parking Strategy

Purpose: To consider a change in the Council's current strategy regarding Council-owned car parks.

Recommendations:

Following a review of the Council's car parking strategy, the recommendations are as follows:

- To implement a change to the Council's car parking policy to a charging model.
- To delegate authority to the Deputy Leader or Executive Member and the Chief Executive to implement the required operating model and necessary changes to the Council's car parking orders to meet the policy change requirements.
- To add up to £32,000 to the capital budgets to undertake initial detailed design and technical preparation work.

Recommend to Council:

- To release the remaining required funds and amend the capital and revenue budgets to deliver the policy change outlined in the proforma B (Appendix C).

1.0 BACKGROUND

- 1.1 The Local Government Association report, *Revitalising Town Centres (2018)*, states, "*Local authorities are parking providers, and many manage on-street parking. Council leaders can help ensure that parking provision is considered in a joined-up way related to other responsibilities, including traffic management, strategic planning, and economic development.*"
- 1.2 As parking providers, local authorities can help with the challenge to reduce traffic congestion and easing parking demand through the management approach to both the on-street and off-street parking under their control. This can influence behaviour, for example, by reducing dependency on cars and encouraging alternative greener travel habits such as cycling and walking as ways to access town centres. This has specifically been experienced post-COVID-19, where walking and cycling to access town centres increased during the pandemic.
- 1.3 Parking strategies must respond to and support initiatives to changes in urban centres, advancing technologies and mobility trends. Societal and demographic change and technological innovation are transforming how people work, spend their leisure time, travel, and shop. Town Centres are changing, and retail-based businesses often face a challenging economic environment. This has led to the revitalisation of town centres as places for leisure and enjoyment.
- 1.4 Resident working patterns are also changing, with many having the option to work remotely. This has affected societal commuter patterns and the demand for office space, which relaxes the burden on business and commuter parking requirements in urban centres.

- 1.5 In this changing environment, parking is a fixed but finite resource. But with changes in travel habits, working patterns and locations, advancements in and adoption of new technology, and the changing purpose of high streets, local authorities must review their car parking strategies to continue to ensure they meet the requirements of their residents, businesses and places. This is particularly relevant where budget pressures necessitate making tough choices – to offer one service to one community group and cease to offer another service to another group. In that respect car parking provision should also be seen as a budgeted service competing for finite budget resources against other Council services.
- 1.6 The British Parking Association (BPA) is currently supporting a new Positive Parking Agenda campaign that has been instigated by its local authority members, which aims to ensure that the perception of parking is re-set. The BPA states that parking primarily improves access to services and the economic vitality and vibrancy of town centres and high streets. The BPA has also explored the influence of parking spaces and town centre prosperity, finding a link between parking quantity and footfall. The BPA has determined that the quality and availability of parking are more critical factors in attracting visitors and users of town centres rather than reasonable charges levied.

Council Operated Off-Street Parking

- 1.7 The Council recognises that its car parks play an important part in promoting town centres and assisting residents and businesses by providing a facility for parking and therefore footfall into the town centres. The Council also recognise that Council-provided car park provision is a significant part of a range of parking options available to shoppers and visitors – on street, private, and other owned parking facilities to name but a few. In relation to Council-owned car parks, the Council has approached its response to the changing nature of its town's high streets through its Future Breckland activity. This activity recognises the changes in Breckland's market town centres and provides strategic direction to support those changes.
- 1.8 The Council owns 30 off-street car parks with 2,197 car spaces available for public use.

Town	No. Car Parks	No. Car Parking Spaces
Attleborough	3	186
Dereham	4	650
Swaffham	6	417
Thetford	14	763
Watton	3	181
Total	30	2,197

Strategic Review

- 1.9 Currently, the significant ongoing maintenance and operating costs of the Council's car parking facilities (as per the above table) are funded through existing capital and revenue budgets. This means every household in the district, regardless of whether they own a car or use the car parks, pay for this service rather than the end-user, i.e., the driver of a car, parking in the car park. Breckland Council is one of only 10% of local authorities across the country that currently provides car parking free of charge to the end user, and the only authority with a significant car park provision in Norfolk that does not charge for parking provision.
- 1.10 Like most Councils, Breckland is facing budget pressures, which are forcing the continuous need to take a fresh look at how it continues to provide services for the best value. As part of this, a strategic review was undertaken to help the Council make an informed decision on whether there is a fairer and more affordable way to provide car parking services which are necessary to support our changing town centres, whilst at the same time protect our services for the more vulnerable in our community.
- 1.11 To undertake the strategic review, the Council updated surveys on the use of its car parks, given that the previous data in 2016 was too historical given the changes on the high street. The surveys provided information to demonstrate how the car parks are being used and a pattern of behaviour in the use of the car parks. The results indicated two main outcomes. Firstly, there is a high use in the

first hour, demonstrating that a high number of users visit the towns for a short period. Secondly, there was a high longer-term use with car parking spaces occupied for large periods of time. This would indicate the car parks are being used for long stay purposes such as residential parking and commuters. This stops those spaces being used for those wishing to use the town centre services.

- 1.12 Following the survey work, a feasibility study was commissioned (See Appendix B). This work used the survey data as well as national and local information to compare management options. The core objectives of the feasibility work were to investigate the fairest and most efficient way to manage the Council-owned car parks, investigate new options for cost recovery, investigate options to improve the availability of spaces to help increase the shopper experience and in turn the local economy.
- 1.13 The feasibility study was a technical piece of work that made recommendations on a business case basis. The feasibility study findings were:
- That many of the Council-owned car parks would benefit from increased churn to help support footfall to the town centres.
 - That an alternative funding model should be based on charging the end-user to reduce to cost burden on the other services the Council provides.
 - That reasonable tariffs should be introduced in line with the local comparisons and in consideration of the characteristics of each town.
 - That parking permit options should be considered.
 - Due to the above that there should be a change to the Council's car parking policy.

Charging Approach

- 1.14 The feasibility work, along with the survey, indicates that the district would benefit from deploying a car park charging model where the end-user is charged for using the parking space (by the hour) instead of the cost of the parking facilities being covered via the existing budget. This would shift the cost burden of car parking provision to the end user rather than every household in Breckland.
- 1.15 Following further detailed review and consideration of the feasibility work, should a charging model be deployed, the following are recommended as the outline principles for a charging scheme:
- All towns are to be included to ensure there is a district-wide approach.
 - Each town to have a tariff rate that reflects the size, offering and characteristics of that town.
 - A free parking concession period of one hour in one car park per town every day (and this period to be extended for a market day in each town should that be required).
 - A suitable permit system in relevant car parks (for residents and businesses).
 - The charging period is to be between 08:00 and 18:00, Monday to Saturday, with Sunday parking charged at a fixed rate (suitable to each town).
 - No evening charges (after 18.00).
 - The introduction of long and short-stay parking limitations on specific and appropriate car parks.
 - Charging to be applied to any electric vehicle charging spaces.
 - Charging to be applied to those that require an accessible parking space (disabled spaces) but that a free period of time be offered on these spaces to enable the user to have more time to exit the car park.
 - Provision of a small number of free parking days annually for each town to support local events.
- 1.16 The Council is only one car park operator in each town. In each of the options outlined below, residents and shoppers will continue to have the choice of where to park depending on their particular needs and circumstances. These options include in Town Council operated car parks, privately operated car parks or County Council provided on-street parking where available.

Enforcement Approach

- 1.17 Should the decision be taken to introduce car park charging, there are different approaches to enforcement. To maintain control but to ensure resilience in the delivery of the service and

economies of scale, it would be recommended to outsource the enforcement provision to specialist providers along with appropriate controls and assigned performance indicators. Other options, such as joint venture or in-house, have higher set-up and overhead costs and less resilience. Any service contract would be procured to ensure the best value.

- 1.18 An alternative approach is to introduce time-limited enforcement, with operational costs being covered by existing budget income over and above any penalty notice income. In Breckland, this was recently trialled and subsequently made permanent in specific car parks in Attleborough and Swaffham.
- 1.19 The feasibility work concluded that an enforcement-only approach would only increase the financial burden on the Council's budgets, rather than providing financially sustainable parking provision.

2.0 OPTIONS

2.1 Option 1: Change the parking policy to implement a new charging model district wide.

This option would involve changing the legal parking orders to a charging model using the approach outlined in the report, installing payment terminals and relevant signage in all the Council's car parks and entering into a contract with an enforcement service provider.

2.2 Option 2: Implement an enforcement-only model district wide.

This option would involve implementing further time-limited enforcement in all the council-owned car parks across the district and implementing long and short-stay limitations on a needs-basis to increase churn and change behaviour. It would also involve entering a contract with an enforcement service provider. The ongoing and increased overhead costs would be funded by the existing budgets, and there would be no relief on the budget.

2.3 Option 3: Ceasing to provide public car parking.

This option would involve disposing of the Council's property interest in the car parks in an appropriate method to allow another party to operate and manage the car parking. It could involve entering into an agreement to allow another party to operate and manage the car parking. In either option there is a higher risk of controlling the use of the property assets to continue to provide public car parking and continue to provide parking services that are best value.

2.4 Option 4: Do Nothing

With this option, the car parks would remain under the current strategy, which is a scheme with no enforcement (except for those sites in Swaffham and Attleborough where enforcement is already in place) and remain free to use by the end-user. The ongoing overhead costs would be funded by the existing budgets, and there would be no relief on the budget.

3.0 REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATION(S)

- 3.1 The Council must make changes to how it continues to provide car parking services to meet the changing needs of our towns and high streets.
- 3.2 The Council needs to maintain a balanced budget, and the introduction of a paid parking system – funded by those who benefit most from it is a fair way to achieve this. This also means that investment can continue in other vital Council activities.
- 3.3 By charging modest fees for car parking with concession periods included, the Council can not only protect the provision of car parking services, but this will also enable a regular turnover of parking spaces and therefore availability. This would enable increased footfall/trade for local businesses.

- 3.4 As per the evidence of the Council's recent enforcement trials and national evidence, the ability to park (to use the town centre) is more important than any charges levied. A charging model will enable this.
- 3.5 This approach aligns the Breckland area with all the other Council districts in Norfolk, except for one, as town centre car parking is almost universally paid for at the point of use.

4.0 EXPECTED BENEFITS

Changing the Council car parking policy to a charging model would provide the following expected benefits:

- Provides an efficiency saving and sustainably funded car parking provision.
- Protects budgetary resources within the Council to better deploy elsewhere for instance within the Council's vulnerability and wellbeing strategies which might otherwise be reduced or stop in their entirety.
- Increasing the availability of spaces in the district's car parks for all users.
- Protecting the provision of good quality car parking services.
- Increasing the churn rate for the district's car parks to increase footfall and town centre trade.
- Car parks will operate in a way that best supports their market town.
- Delivering a positive culture and behaviour change and helping promote sustainable transport.
- Bringing Breckland in line with the parking policies of its neighbouring local authorities.
- Enables the County Council to deliver on-street parking charging and enforcement more effectively.

5.0 IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Carbon Footprint / Environmental Issues

To implement the proposed policy change, it has been recommended that the Council adopt solar-powered paperless payment machines supported by a mobile app-based payment system. This will ensure that the delivery model's operational carbon footprint remains as low as possible.

5.2 Constitution & Legal

Local authorities manage public car parks (off-street parking) under the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984. This act covers a wide range of issues, including the regulation of vehicles, drivers, and pedestrians, rules regarding road safety, traffic management, and penalties for traffic violations. It provides the legal framework for ensuring safety and efficiency on the roads. Part IV of the Act provides the legal powers for local authorities to provide and manage off-street car parking.

The Breckland District Council (Off-Street Parking Places) Order 2014 ("the Parking Order") details the current terms and conditions of use of the council's off-street car parks.

The constitution (ref D3—Delegations to Cabinet—paragraph 3) provides for the policy change, which is outside the Policy Framework.

As detailed in the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984, local authorities are legally allowed to spend revenue generated from charging for parking on the following:

- To cover any deficit in the car parks fund in 4 years before the financial year that revenue was generated.
- For highway or road improvement projects carried out by the appropriate highway authority.
- For environmental improvement projects in the local authority's area.

Legislation requires local authorities that wish to implement or change off-street parking orders to undertake a four-week public consultation (see 5.9).

5.3 Contracts

Contracts will be required, and the appropriate procurement process conducted, to enter these contracts for the necessary capital equipment to deliver the policy change and management and enforcement service required to deliver this service.

5.4 Corporate Priorities

The recommendations in this report align with all the Council's corporate priorities.

5.5 Crime And Disorder

Adding new CCTV units to protect the new payment terminal assets will benefit from improving the anti-social behaviour in Breckland's car parks.

5.6 Equality And Diversity / Human Rights

A draft equality impact assessment has been produced and is available on request. This assessment will be further developed as part of the progression of the pre-implementation activity and legal change order work, which will include a four-week public consultation on the delivery mechanisms before any policy change is implemented.

Users who require an accessible parking space will be offered an additional free period at all Breckland's car parks and that the payment systems should comply with national equality standards.

5.7 Financial

The proposed charging model is designed to cover existing and new parking costs and repay the capital costs; it does not aim to generate a surplus. The Proforma B in Appendix C provides full details. The provision of a sustainable method of funding the provision of car parks will continue to ensure best value for the residents and businesses in Breckland.

5.8 Risk Management

Several risks have been assessed in relation to implementing the policy change set out in this report. These and future risks will be continually assessed and managed throughout the operating model's implementation and deployment.

Some of the key risks identified are:

- Risk for traffic management in the early stages of policy implementation.
- Risk of misunderstandings around free periods.
- Risk of income modelling not reflecting actual income levels.
- Risk that the tariff approach is misunderstood and deliberately misrepresented.
- Risk of failing to procure an enforcement operator.

5.9 Stakeholders / Consultation / Timescales

As part of the legal parking change order process, a four-week public consultation will take place on the implications of this decision through the requirement to consult under the Road Traffic Associations Act. Anyone can respond to the consultation related to the deployment of the operating model.

Should the recommendation be approved, it is expected that capital funding will be released in September 2024, public consultation will be undertaken in October/November 2024, followed by procurement and installation works in 2025, with charging to commence in October/November 2025.

5.10 Wards / Communities Affected

All town wards and communities in the Breckland district are affected.

5.11 Acronyms

BPA – British Parking Association

Background papers: -

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Director / Officer who will be attending the Meeting.

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Key Decision: Yes / ~~No~~

Exempt Decision: ~~Yes~~ / No

This report refers to a ~~Mandatory Service~~ / Discretionary Service.

Appendices attached to this report:

Appendix A – Car Parking Strategy

Appendix B – Consultant Feasibility Study – Main Report & Appendices

Appendix C – Proforma B