

NAME OF SCRUTINY COMMITTEE	COMMUNITIES
DATE OF MEETING	10 DECEMBER, 2013
TITLE	The Parking System in Gwynedd
AUTHOR	Councillor W. Gareth Roberts
CABINET MEMBER	Councillor W. Gareth Roberts
PURPOSE	To respond to questions raised by the Committee.

1. I was asked to respond to a series of questions by the Communities Scrutiny Committee in relation to parking matters. I understand Committee members' interest in this matter and I would like to thank you for the opportunity to respond to them at this Committee meeting.
2. Firstly, I would like to emphasise that I am currently not in a position to fully respond to all questions. The reason for this is that I have asked the Regulatory Department to undertake a review involving several matters which relate to parking. This work has been in the pipeline for some months and I am confident that it will now be completed within a few weeks. Once I have received all requested information, I intend to consider the findings and compile a report with recommendations to the attention of the Cabinet. My intention is to draw up proposals for the parking system which are suitable and appropriate for the towns, villages and communities of Gwynedd.
3. There can be no parking system that is ideal for everyone. Elements that appeal to some may be unacceptable to others. By establishing a new system in Gwynedd, my aim will be to try and have a system that meets the needs of communities and visitors to Gwynedd in the wider context of transport requirements, traffic and road safety. Of course, we cannot forget the critical financial context of local authorities when considering this matter.
4. We must accept that parking fees are never going to be popular. Given the choice, many would choose not to pay for parking. However, parking is an important tool in terms of traffic management and road safety in town centres and when used correctly, it is a very important mode of supporting and promoting the economy

on a local level, particularly in town centres. The important thing is to strike the right balance.

5. Many of us consider that paying for parking when we go on our holidays or on a shopping trip to a town outside our own areas is completely acceptable, but at the same time, we are not comfortable with paying for parking in our own. It is neither practical nor realistic to be to expect to get the best of both worlds.
6. It is likely that all members of the Scrutiny Committee are fully aware that the last time parking fees in Gwynedd were increased was back in April 2007. This was the first increase for about ten years. At the time, officers were strongly criticised by members for not pushing the idea of gradually increasing the parking fees over a period of time and that it had led to one substantial increase in 2007. At the time, clear guidance was provided from the Environment Scrutiny Committee that the fees were expected to be reviewed, and potentially increased on an annual basis, in order to avoid a similar situation.
7. Since 2007, the Regulatory Department has examined the fees and submitted information in relation to increasing the fees in accordance with the requirement of the regulations. For each year this had been done, the decision has been taken not to proceed with these increases, mainly due to the economic situation that has been in existence over this period. In addition, there is a need to bear in mind that Gwynedd fees, which were established in 2007, have been comparatively higher than other authorities over time. The information was considered in this context and it was decided to keep the fees as they were.
8. Two years ago, a review of the fees was undertaken by officers. Again, a decision was made in the context of the economic situation not to increase the fees, and to bridge the income deficit that arose due to the failure to increase fees for a period of two years. Hand in hand with this, it was agreed that a review of the fees structure should be undertaken. This review is part of a broader review that I have commissioned over the last few months.

Consistency of Fees

9. Prior to 2007, fee levels were there was no consistency in the level of the fees across the county. Fees and prices could vary between car parks within specific towns and there was a very broad variety from one end of the county to the other. At the time, it was decided to try and simplify the system and to have a structure that was much simpler.
10. The decision on the new structure was based on the type of centres that some of the Council's pay and display car parks served. Having considered all available information, it was decided that Bangor, as a sub-regional shopping centre, would be the only town that could be considered differently, and only during winter months. Therefore, parking fees are consistent throughout the whole County

between 1 March and 31 October. These fees remain at the same level throughout the year in Bangor but fees everywhere else in the county are slightly lower during November, December, January and February. I can confirm that a few questions have been raised by members regarding the justification of this difference however there was a firm logic behind the decision made.

Determining fees

11. Parking fees are determined based on the best information the Council has at the time. Obviously, the current fees level is an important consideration in this and considerations such as annual inflation and changes in VAT also influence this.
12. It should also be noted that fees are determined according to the status of a car park status and its location within a town or village. On this basis, car parks are designated as long stay, short stay or free car parks. There is a difference between prices that are charged in long stay car parks and short stay car parks if the driver wishes to park for a period of more than two hours. Usually, the short stay car parks are those that are close to town centres where turnover is important. In order to facilitate this, fees to park for longer periods are substantially higher in short stay car parks.
13. The determination of parking fees is also made in the context of the parking fees charged by other counties and the fees of private car parks. There is no consistency between the fees of public and private car parks across north Wales or even from county to county. However, over the last few years, and to a degree following changes to the arrangements in Gwynedd, several other Councils have adopted arrangements and fees similar to those of Gwynedd. Until recently, Gwynedd's fees have continued to be amongst the highest. It should also be borne in mind that the financial context local authorities are faced with means that prices are being increased in many counties in Wales for 2014.
14. The income derived from the Council's car parks is substantial. In 2012-13, income from car parks was £1.248m. However, the target income for the same period was £1.488m, which left the Service with a substantial financial deficit at the end of the year, mainly due to the inclement weather of summer 2012. In order to bridge this financial gap, the Service had to transfer funding from other budgets such as maintenance and improvement work and had to use funding from arrears received during the year. This had a considerable impact on the Department's ability to provide some services and to deliver improvement plans.
15. The Department's income target from pay and display car parks has increased in line with inflation nearly every year. Therefore, in order to meet the target, the fees should also increase by a percentage which is in line with inflation. Verbal information received from other authorities suggests that the situation has been similar in other authorities.

16. Of course, the weather is the greatest influence on parking income, and due to the inclement weather during summer 2012 the coastal car parks produced far less income than had been anticipated.
17. Even during a year with good weather such as summer 2013, the fees have only just reached the income target and this poses a significant risk to the Council and this risk will receive specific attention during my review of the Service.
18. The income raised from car parks is used for several other elements of providing Council services. It seems that the easiest way of looking at the situation is that the net income received centrally and that the money is then distributed to the various services as part of the Council's core budget. If the income was lower, in the current critical financial situation, more savings would have to be found, most probably through implementing cuts, in order to avoid an overspend. That would have an impact on the Council's ability to maintain some of those services. On the other hand, successfully increasing the income, if possible, would create an opportunity to reduce the need for cuts. My aim is to strike the correct balance in terms of the viability of town centres, to create an income and maintain services, rather than having to make further cuts and savings.

Reviewing the fees

19. The Department has a responsibility to review the fees annually and conduct detailed reviews of the fees every three years. Whilst this has been undertaken during the previous years, it was been decided not to increase the fees in the context of the economy's situation. The review I have commissioned is a detailed review and it will introduce new recommendations on determining parking fees in the future.
20. In my opinion, there is nothing to prevent us from reviewing the current fees. There is a complex and broad context to be set. As I have noted, I am currently addressing these issues and I will submit a report to the Cabinet on the structure of new fees in the coming months.

Christmas Parking

21. As the Committee Members are aware, as the Cabinet Member I am responsible for parking issues and every year I collaborate with the Cabinet Member for the Economy to seek to provide the parking scheme to support town centre businesses by providing free parking during the period leading up to Christmas. We have done this again this year and you probably saw the attention that was drawn to this in the local press and in Newyddion Gwynedd.
22. When drawing up the scheme this year, consideration was given to research work undertaken with local business in our towns and villages and an effort was made

- to adapt the scheme to reflect the findings of that work and to consider the observations received from residents, especially in relation to commuters misusing the system and working against the basic aim of establishing the scheme.
23. Consideration to incorporating the Christmas Parking scheme into the permanent arrangement forms part of the review I have commissioned.

Consultation

24. Information regarding the impact of parking arrangements on businesses and the viability of town centres in other areas has been collected and consideration will be given to this when I form my findings and report to the Cabinet. I am also working closely on the matter with the Cabinet Member for the Economy and the local information obtained by the Economy and Community Department is also very important for the review.

The Parking Review

25. Several discussions have been held on establishing the direction and purpose of the Gwynedd Parking Review. The questions of what exactly is the role of parking, and what impact the methods used to control parking in the county are having on the local economy have been central to the discussions.
26. It is worth noting that the decision to begin the work on the Review was motivated by financial reasons, as the level of fees and parking prices had been established since 2007, and therefore these had not increased to correspond with inflation or changes in VAT rates. The outcome of this is that it is virtually impossible to reach the income targets from pay and display car parks as noted in the annual budget. Generally, the income targets have been increasing with annual inflation.
27. Following the initial attention given after the increases in 2007, generally only a very small number of observations or complaints were received in relation to the level of the current fees. Some observations were received in relation to how 'fair' the parking fee levels were when comparing centres, for example Dolgellau and Caernarfon, and observations noting that Bangor City was not enjoying a reduction in fees during the winter (November – February). The Service is receiving more comments in relation to the methods of controlling pay and display sites e.g. suggest paying as you leave the car parks and the machinery's inability to offer change rather than the fee levels.
28. Based on the information we have, whilst nearly everyone would wish not to pay for parking, there is no substantial dissatisfaction in relation to the current fee levels.

29. The proposed framework would give specific attention to the main aspects that the Council wishes to see if it were decided to change parking control arrangements. Having established and prioritised the main objectives, I will then move on to draw up operational options to achieve these. For example, should priority be given to supporting sustainable transport, perhaps an increase in the parking fee income could contribute to offering a subsidy to buses in rural areas. If priority was given to issues involving marketing centres for the benefit of the local economy, the increase or part of it could be given as an annual financial contribution to the centres e.g. through the city/town/community councils to be spent on schemes or improvements that are a priority for them locally, such as repairing buildings or public places in town centres, Christmas lights, town centre officers etc. A system like this would mean that the amount of contribution would naturally depend on the income received during the previous year.
30. I have included a copy of a discussion paper on parking issues as Appendix A to this report. This was presented to me to encourage discussion during the review. It includes a number of suggestions involving setting a direction and we would be happy to receive any observations on its contents. I wish to draw Members' attention to paragraphs 31 to 39 in the Appendix which provides an example of how the status of car parks could be designated based on the mandatory area and land use zone. Committee Members' observations on this example in particular would be very useful.
31. I will, of course, be considering a vast number of options, and therefore I will be looking at all of them in great detail during the coming weeks. I welcome the Communities Scrutiny Committee's desire to contribute to the discussion and to offer suggestions so I can present practical options to meet these objectives.