

Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee – Call-In - 17 May 2016

Additional Information and Two Witness Statements

Graham Ebers, Director of Finance and Resources

Members asked for a contextual note on the financial challenges facing the Council over the next four years. Graham Ebers, Director of Finance and Resources provided the following briefing:

“The Council will be facing grant cuts of approximately £20m over the next 4 years and service cost pressures of up to £4m per annum, providing a cumulative challenge in the region of £36m which will have to be met through increases in income and/or reductions to the resources available for service delivery”.

Witness Statement - Chas Hockin, Woodley Photographic Club

Chas Hockin asked a question about the new car park charges at the Executive meeting on 31 March 2016. Mr Hockin was invited to attend the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee as a witness but was unable to do so. Mr Hockin has submitted the following written statement instead:

“If Wokingham Borough Council has to bring in increased car parking charges within the Borough, me and my colleagues in the Woodley Photographic Club – and I suspect other clubs – would prefer that the daily rate of charges is increased, rather than the evening and Sunday rate. This will have less impact on our activities, and will keep the club going”.

Witness Statement – Keith Malvern

History

Back in July last year, a front page article in the Daily Telegraph had the then “High Street Minister” urging Councils to allow shoppers to park for free and not to use parking fines as a way of generating income. So, naturally, Councils across the country decided to increase charges or levy charges on a 24/7 basis. Hence the suggestion of evening and Sunday charges.

When Wokingham BC did its Budget consultation in November/December, ideas to generate income included evening and Sunday charges. At the Budget consultation events various views were expressed (pro and con) but it was agreed that these would be considered further. Unfortunately, although the News Release about the Budget consultation was issued on 14 December, the link to the part that dealt with Environmental issues (including parking) wasn't in place until 20 January 2016.

Proposal

John Kaiser issued a press release to start the public consultation (due to run from 13 January to 5 February) in which he said that he knew that some people would be upset about it, but he said that they had done benchmarking and other authorities charged for

evening and Sunday parking. It could be said in passing that not all authorities charge at these times and some have free parking after 3pm on Saturdays – there are many variations.

If you are doing anything that is controversial it is always good to ensure that the obvious questions are answered. Questions such as:

- How much income will each part of any proposal (evening, Sundays and Shute End) generate in a year?
- What surveys have been done to establish how many people use the car parks at this time anyway?
- Are there other ways of raising this revenue, e.g. increasing charges per period, trying to create more spaces in existing car parks, reopening old car parks (e.g. the one adjacent to the old Wellington House), increasing the all-day charge at car parks close to the station so that it is closer to the daily rate of £7.50 that the station car park charges, restricting Saturday parking at Shute End to 2 hours so that it can truly be a shoppers car park, etc, etc.

Response

When I tried to clarify what benchmarking had been done I got a reply from Matt Davey (Head of Highways) which said: "...benchmarking was not to determine whether to charge or not as this principle had already been established". It is difficult to have a valid public consultation on an issue when the Head of Highways thinks that the principle of evening and Sunday charges had been established. Where did he get that idea from?

I asked a question at an Executive earlier this year, asking the relevant Executive Member "...how much more money does he want from us with his proposed car parking charges in the evening and Sunday?" On being told that it was £150k, I said that that is about £1 per person in Wokingham and handed over my pound. I wasn't expecting a huge public response of people donating a pound, but what I was hoping for was a chance for him to stop and think about what he was doing and what other ways he could get the revenue.

The consultation resulted in hundreds of comments raising a number of issues. All of the comments were dismissed in one of seven ways and no comments were considered worthy of investigation.

The comments and the decision relating to them were due to be reported to an Individual Executive Member Decision meeting to be held on 16 February. I intended to attend but 30 minutes before it was due to start I was contacted to tell me that the issue would not be taken as it was not within the competence of an IEMD meeting. It was decided that the issue would be discussed at the Executive on 31 March.

Shute End Car Park Sign

Before the Executive meeting someone decided (on Friday 11 March) to remove the sign advertising free parking on Saturdays at the Shute End car park. Who did that? Why did they do it? I have asked a number of people and nobody can tell me. Has someone tried to suppress that information? The best anyone could come up with was that it was to avoid confusion. What confusion? Can I ask both the Chief Executive and the current Leader of

the Council to say what they know and explain how something can happen and nobody can say who did it?

Executive – 31 March

When the parking proposals came back to the Executive on 31 March, the Executive Member for Planning and Highways said publicly (for the first time) that surveys on car park usage had taken place at the end of February - well after the consultation period.

The Leader of the Council (who also seems to be Leader of Woodley Town Council) suggested in answer to a question that parking ought to be “horses for courses” and attempted to propose that Woodley ought to have an extra 10p per period while the rest of the Borough will have evening and Sunday charges. At the start of the parking charges fiasco the justification was based on benchmarking with other authorities, but now the proposal is different between the towns.

At that meeting I asked a further question to ask why the Leader of the Council made the comment “It is with deep regret that the Council has been forced to make these proposals”. Make no mistake, nobody forced the Council to do this and nobody forced the Council to make such a hash of it.

Lessons

Six months on from when these proposals were first made, what lessons can be learnt?

- Ensure that all News Releases have links that work.
- When proposals are made on controversial issues ensure information is provided as to what alternatives have been considered and what research has been done.
- Ensure that officers know the status of the proposal. The principle of evening and Sunday charges has not yet been established.
- Don't discuss customer comments in such a cavalier way. Most organisations would be pleased to get such a large response, some of which could be considered.
- Know when the decision is going to be made.
- How can a politically incompetent act (such as removing the “Free Parking” sign at Shute End before a decision has been taken) be made without anyone knowing who did it and why they did it?

I could go on, and there are many other issues, but let's forget it for this year, and prepare properly for next year when the Wokingham Town Centre Regeneration and Civil Parking Enforcement will be further advanced.

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