

SEPTEMBER 2024 – REPORT FROM BRECKLAND DISTRICT COUNCIL

Cllr Robin Hunter-Clarke (Hermitage Ward)

Surgeries

During my campaign in the recent by-election I said I wanted to be contactable and make myself available to all constituents across the 8 parishes. I am therefore keen to hold a surgery so that residents can book an appointment to meet with me face-to-face to raise any local issues.

Please could you consider if you would like me to hold a surgery in your parish one Saturday perhaps and we can get something in the diary.

Car Parking in Breckland

I recently updated you on Breckland's proposal to introduce car parking charges across the district. Breckland have drawn up some frequently asked questions, which I thought you might find informative (see below). The consultation on the new carparking strategy is beginning in November. I strongly encourage all residents to engage in the consultation so that the new car parking model can work for all residents.

Frequently Asked Questions on Car Parking Charges

1) Why are you considering introducing charging?

The Council is putting forward this recommendation to ensure that council services valued by residents and businesses are not negatively impacted by the cost of public car parking provision. This action also aims to increase the churn of parking in town centre car parks to enable greater footfall to support businesses and ensure the car parks are primarily used to support the delivery of our thriving market towns. This activity follows on from the Council's successful enforcement trials in Attleborough and Swaffham.

2) Is this a money-making scheme?

The Council's budget, which the taxpayer funds, currently pays approximately £450,000 a year for your car parks, so this service has never been free. The Council has reached a point where it needs to consider whether to continue to fund car parking provision (a service that users expect to pay for at the point of use) or to jeopardise funding for vital services and important community projects. The tariffs have been designed at a minimal rate so that the money generated by charging for parking covers the operating cost of this service and any up-front enabling works.

3) Will this negatively impact the high street businesses?

Across Norfolk, market towns with public car parking charges are thriving. Parking charges will not negatively impact our high streets; instead, they will ensure parking turnover, or 'churn', that will bolster trade on our high streets, helping our market town businesses to thrive.

4) When will charging commence?

The new car parking management model is planned to commence later in 2025. However, the Council will be able to provide an exact implementation date once further planning and design work has been completed. In the coming months, there will be a four-week public consultation into the delivery mechanism for each car park.

5) Will residents and businesses have an opportunity to comment on these proposals?

Before implementation, there will be a four-week public consultation period on the new model's delivery mechanism. Residents and businesses will be invited to participate.

6) Will this encourage existing users to park on the street?

Having implemented an enforcement model in two of our market towns, the evidence gathered suggests that vehicle displacement is short-lived. We expect user behaviour to adapt to the new operating model after a short bedding-in period. The Council will also work with the County Council's highways department to monitor the impact of the expected short-term natural displacement of vehicles.

7) Why is it more expensive to park in some market towns than others?

As with all other local authorities, parking charges are calculated to reflect the size and offering of each town; our consultants, who are subject matter experts, have reviewed each of the Council's market towns against a pool of similar market towns across the county whilst also considering localised information to produce a fair and consistent tariff rate for each town.

8) Have you considered any free periods or concessions?

Yes, there will be one car park in each town that will have an hour free period every day. This will be extended to three hours on market days, and there will be concession days across each town to support public events.

9) Why can't all the Council's car parks have a free period?

Our extensive car park surveys, feasibility work, and financial assessment have driven the principles of a new operating model. On the suggested tariffs, there would not be enough revenue to cover the costs if every car park had a free period.

10) Why haven't you considered time-limited enforcement rather than charging

Over the last few years, we have worked with enforcement providers to deliver time-limited enforcement in some of the car parks in two of our market towns (Attleborough and Swaffham). Expanding this enforcement activity would indeed increase churn and greater availability of parking spaces; however, it would also significantly increase the Council's existing financial burden. Following an initial investment in enabling works, the income generated from parking charges will cover the costs of car park operations moving forward, meaning that this service is protected, sustainable and standing on its own two feet.

11) How will people pay for their parking?

A variety of accessible payment options will be available for car park users. These range from contactless payments on-site using modern, accessible, payment machines, to an easy-to-use smartphone app to pay for parking via smartphone, or to pay using cash via any 'Pay Point' outlet in the district.

Many car park users will be familiar with payment systems that require the user to pay up-front for a set period; an hour, two hours, three hours etc., we do not believe that this system is fair to our car park users, as many often return to their vehicles before their paid period has ended, without recourse to a refund for the unused portion. Our payment system, on smartphone app and using the contactless machines on-site, will be 'tap-in, tap-out' meaning that you will only pay for the time period spent using the car park. Current statistics show that 97% of adults own a debit card which can be used for this tap in and tap out system.

12) Why will some car parks be designated as short stay?

All towns will have long-stay provisions, and some sites will be designated short-stay to help manage churn. The time restrictions at these short-stay sites are based on evidence that they will improve churn and, therefore, footfall into the town centres, which will support trade. Research has shown that users prioritise finding a suitable parking space rather than paying for parking, and these stay restrictions will support this.

13) Have the Council considered a permit system?

As part of the next stage of this activity, detailed work will be undertaken to develop a permit system in a fair way that serves the needs of each town. This will be communicated to residents and businesses in due course.

14) Will there be any disruption in the car parks?

Installation work will be minimal, and disruption will be reduced to a bare minimum where possible. Small periods of disruption may be required at sites where improvement work is identified to benefit the customer experience, which will be communicated to its users.

15) Why is Watton included in the new charging model when it wasn't recommended for charging in the consultant's initial draft report?

The original consultant recommendation from Parking Matters was driven by two core aims; to generate income from Breckland's car parks to remove the cost burden from council taxpayers; and to introduce a system of managing car parking that will improve the availability of spaces across the district to support footfall on our high streets. Their recommendation included charging from the first minute. It did not include an hour of free parking, extended free periods on market days, free event day parking, extended disabled allowances, or a permit system for residents and town centre workers. Breckland Council pushed back on the initial recommendation with the central aim of shaping a fair solution that meets both objectives.

This fair approach is based on car park users paying for spaces when they use them, rather than Breckland Council taxpayers subsidising car parking. In this spirit of fairness, the new charging model will apply to all market towns.

16) Why has there been no consultation yet?

Current legislation on local authority parking provision requires public consultation when a decision has been made to change the approach to parking management. Breckland Council has now made that decision and a period of public consultation is planned to commence later in 2024.

Given the importance of public parking provision to our market towns, and Breckland Council's understanding of the financial pressures that many residents and businesses face across the district, it would be irresponsible for the council to seek public opinion on such a major issue, without having first developed a detailed solution to the problem. Now that Breckland's Cabinet has voted to move forward with a new parking model, we can move towards a period of consultation being honest and transparent with residents and businesses on the options and solutions available, ensuring that the parking system that we end up with in late 2025 truly meets the needs of everyone involved.