

EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY MINUTES

Committee: Overview and Scrutiny Committee **Date:** Tuesday, 9 January 2007

Place: Council Chamber, Civic Offices, High Street, Epping **Time:** 7.30 - 8.30 pm

Members Present: Councillors R Morgan (Chairman) Mrs J H Whitehouse (Vice-Chairman) M Colling, R D'Souza, Mrs H Harding, P House, G Mohindra, Mrs P Richardson and M Woollard

Other Councillors: Councillors K Angold-Stephens, K Chana, R Church, Mrs D Collins, R Frankel, A Green, Mrs A Grigg, A Lee, J Markham, P Spencer, D Stallan, C Whitbread, J M Whitehouse, K Wright, Mrs C Pond and Mrs A Cooper

Apologies: Councillors D Bateman and M Cohen

Officers Present: J Scott (Joint Chief Executive), S G Hill (Senior Democratic Services Officer), T Carne (Public Relations and Marketing Officer) and A Hendry (Democratic Services Officer)

By Invitation:

61. WEBCASTING INTRODUCTION

The Committee noted that the meeting would be webcast.

62. SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

There were no substitute Members for the meeting.

63. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were made pursuant to the Council's Code of Member Conduct.

64. FREE SATURDAY CAR PARKING - CALL IN

The Committee were asked to consider the call-in of a Cabinet decision of 13 November 2007 (C/067/2006-07) regarding free car parking proposals for Saturdays. It was noted that six Members had requested that the decision should be called in and that the Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee had determined that the request be determined by this extraordinary meeting of the Committee. The Committee had before them copies of the report submitted to the Cabinet on which the decision was based and of the written notification of the call-in and a covering report to the committee by the Head of Service responsible for the decision.

In accordance with the Overview and Scrutiny Procedure rules, the representative of the Councillors calling-in the decision (Councillor Mrs J Whitehouse, who vacated the Vice-Chairmanship of the meeting in order to present their case) outlined their

concerns, which were summarised in the call-in notification. She pointed out that they were not against the concept of free parking on a Saturday but were concerned about the manner in which the decision was taken. That being:

- (i) Financial – no account was taken of the ‘knock-on’ effects of the reduced use of the short stay car parks and on-street pay and display bays.
- (ii) No account had been taken of the potential effects on weekday parking charges, which are set to rise in the next financial year with a potential negative effect on town centres.
- (iii) It was unclear how the £75,000 loss to the Continuing Service Budget would be funded, whether by Council Tax rises, cuts to services, increases to fees and charges or some other method.
- (iv) That at this time of financial strain it pre-empts the budget making process.
- (v) Operational – the link between the level of car park charges and the vitality and viability of Epping Forest’s Centres has not been properly considered; therefore it was not clear that the Cabinet’s decision would have the intended effect.
- (vi) The criteria for review had not been established, meaning that the success of the scheme could not be properly measured.
- (vii) The effect on parking as a whole in the effected towns (especially in Loughton and Buckhurst Hill) had not been properly evaluated.
- (viii) Procedural – there had been insufficient consultation with town and parish councils and local ward members, meaning that some of the potential consequences of the decision had not been properly considered.

One of the councillors who had signed the call-in, Councillor K Wright added that the key issue here was support from Town Councils – there was no evidence that free parking would bring any benefits. It was unusual to spend the money without evidence; the money could be better spent elsewhere. Also the implications of the proposals need careful monitoring. He was pleased that the Cabinet had allocated £75,000 to support Town Councils, but they may need the money spent in other ways.

Councillor J Markham, another signature on the call-in added that he was not opposed to free parking but to the lack of consultation. How much would this cost in lost revenue. Other parking charges were increased and then put down again, this was muddled thinking. It would help if free car parking could be limited to two hours on a Saturday and be monitored. Are the Car Parks to be entirely free or only parts of them, this is still to be clarified.

Councillor P Spencer, another member who signed the call-in, added that he thought the traders did not think that their views had been taken into account, and that these free spaces were more likely to be used by the traders themselves.

The Portfolio Holder for Civil Engineering and Maintenance, Councillor A Green replied that they had not rushed into this policy; they had been consulting on their intention to provide free Saturday parking since May 2006. The estimated cost of free Parking would be £75,000 (due to loss of income). It was decided that the short end of charges should remain as is, to encourage shoppers. They would like to have free Parking charges in all Car Parks in the District but this was not possible. Town Centre partnerships had been asked for their views and ward councillors have been aware of this for some time. The Free Car Parking scheme in December was looked at and found that it produced no problems. As for introducing time limited free car parking, we would have to employ Traffic Wardens to enforce this, and this would increase the costs. This is a trial scheme and we will review this policy in time.

Councillor M Colling, who chaired the Task and Finish Panel that looked at this proposed policy remarked that it was discussed fully by the Panel and was unanimously passed. But they did ask for it to be monitored once it was up and running and to look out for abuses.

The meeting was then opened up for a general discussion on the call-in.

Councillor D'Souza agreed that this decision was not taken in haste and had been discussed for some time; also the budget had now been balanced. The regeneration of Town Centres had been discussed in full Council. It was right that every decision should be monitored. He noted that the residents of Waltham Abbey are happy with this.

Councillor House commented that although some discussion had been had, they were not as detailed as the one being had tonight. He recommended the review of the policy should concentrate on: 1) the effect on the traders and 2) misuse of the Car Parks.

Councillor Woollard was in favour of some form of free car parking but not necessarily on a Saturday and certainly not for Buckhurst Hill as it would not make a great deal of difference. There was poor consultation on this policy.

Councillor Jon Whitehouse said that having a slogan was not the same as having a policy. This was not thought through, the report does not state what the Town Council Partnerships said. In December all Car Parks were free, so it was not a good way to judge this policy. This Committee should recommend that Cabinet must put in a report where the money was to come from. Also any consultation should be reported back in Cabinet reports. They also need to know how it would be measured a success or not.

Councillor Angold-Stephens commented that they all agreed that the Council wanted to increase the vitality of High Streets, but free parking may not make any difference. He was concerned about increasing the charges during the week, the need to increase the diversity of the shops and need to know how the monitoring of the scheme would be done.

Councillor Markham agreed that the decision process was muddled and wanted to know how much the new free car park in Loughton, which has been free for some months has this loss of revenue been taken into account with the £75,000 costs.

Councillor Church said that he had canvassed residents last year about this and they thought it was a good idea.

Councillor Mrs Collins was very disappointed at the negative views expressed. This was put up as their policy last May. The Budget is now balanced as they have found the money. It was good for residents and good for traders.

Councillor Whitbread said it was a good package, as the local traders needed support. It was step in the right direction.

The lead member responsible for the call-in (Councillor Mrs J Whitehouse) and the Portfolio Holder (Councillor A Green) were then asked to sum up the debate.

Councillor Mrs Whitehouse said that this was a useful debate, she again stressed that this was not against free Car Parking, but the manner in which the decision was taken and the speed in which it was taken. There was no evidence that this would

help the Town Councils, and was not discussed in great depth by the Overview and Scrutiny Task and Finish Panel. She would like to know what had to be abandoned to balance the budget. Also what was to be the criteria for the proposed review?

Councillor Green replied that he took on board their comments on monitoring and the different ways this could be done. But this policy had been through not only the Council but also the Overview and Scrutiny process.

The call-in was then put to the vote.

RESOLVED:

1. That the Call-in regarding Cabinet decision C/067/2005-06 not be pursued and the decision be implemented with immediate effect.
2. That the Portfolio Holder, Councillor A Green be asked to report to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in March 2007 on the review procedures put into place.

CHAIRMAN