

NEATH PORT TALBOT COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

Cabinet

28th July 2021

Director of Environment and Regeneration
Nicola Pearce

Matter for Decision

Wards Affected: All Wards

Proposal to provide free town centre car parking for the month of August 2021

Purpose of Report

- 1 The Leader of Council requested advice from officers to explore the potential opportunity of providing free town centre car parking within Neath Port Talbot during the month of August 2021.
- 2 The advice contained within this report identifies the potential benefits, considerations and associated costs with this proposal.

Executive Summary

- 3 Officers have been asked for advice on the costs and benefits associated with the provision of free town centre car parking for the month of August 2021.
- 4 Town centres have seen significant impact and disruption as a result of Government restrictions imposed on social gatherings and on the operation of business premises. The Council has provided a range of support over the pandemic period including: administering financial support schemes; promoting 'Buy Local' to encourage local people to spend money in the local economy; provision of advice on the application of Covid restriction during lockdown and opening up phases. It is acknowledged that the proposal to introduce free car parking over a short period of time will demonstrate the commitment the council has to supporting our town centres through this difficult

time and also provide some limited assistance to those families who are experiencing financial hardship as a result of the pandemic. The proposal would see an estimated loss of income of approximately £86.5k in addition to the repayment of seasonal ticket income of £5,500. The overall cost will therefore be £92,000 which will not be recoverable from the Welsh Government LA Hardship Fund. Members must therefore consider whether the benefit to our town centres outweighs this financial cost.

Background

- 5 Since the pandemic first took hold and the country was subjected to a number of national lockdowns, our town centres have struggled to remain a destination for shoppers. Whilst this has been affected by the pandemic, it has also been exacerbated by the increased use of online shopping opportunities.
- 6 Following the reopening of non-essential retail in July 2020, this authority introduced a number of measures to make our town centres more attractive and safer places to visit. We introduced a 'Buy Local Campaign' focussing on the unique qualities of our independent traders. We also supported traders in implementing safe operating procedures, providing access to standard safety signage and implementing measures within the public realm to enable customers to queue safely outside retail premises without impeding pedestrian movements. These measures were also supported for the first few weeks with town centre rangers who provided advice and guidance to traders and the general public.
- 7 In addition to the above, the council provided free car parking within our town centres until the end of August 2020. Again this was intended to encourage increased visits into the town centres.
- 8 Officers have now been asked to provide advice on the costs and benefits of free parking provision within our town centres for the month of August 2021.
- 9 As stated above, it is clear to see that many traders within our town centres have experienced a decline in the number of customers which has in turn impacted upon the viability of their businesses, with many retailers closing down. This is not unique to Neath Port Talbot nor is it the case that only small independent retailers being impacted - the large national retail stores with long established

retailers including Debenhams and GAP are all closing stores across the country. Whilst the council cannot influence these commercial decisions, we can support our town centre retailers by making our town centres a more attractive destination. With this in mind we have submitted bids to the UK Government's 'Levelling Up Fund' to improve the public realm within our town centres and invest in commercial properties, which if successful, should deliver a positive impact. However, even if approved, the schemes would take time to deliver and consequently other short term measures should be explored to sustain our town centres.

- 10 Members will be aware that the council has been able to recover most lost income which are as a direct result of the pandemic. One such area where lost income has been experienced is within parking services. To date we have successfully argued that car parking income has dropped as a direct result of the pandemic, and this lost income has been recoverable from the Welsh Government Hardship fund. However the Welsh Government have clearly indicated that local decisions which affect income are not recoverable. As a consequence if the Council choose to provide free parking within the town centres, we would have to absorb those costs as they would not be recoverable.
- 11 In terms of calculating this cost, in August 2019 prior to the pandemic, town centre car parking and associated income was in the region of £86.5k during the month of August. As stated above, we have no comparable data for 2020 due to the impact of the Covid pandemic. Nevertheless from historic information available to us, we have calculated that car parking income and associated enforcement income, which would normally be achieved for the month of August amounts to £86.5k. As Members are aware, some members of the public hold permits for these car parks and it would be a reasonable expectation from those permit holders to be compensated for the free month. When a similar proposal was approved last year, arrangements were put in place to add an additional month to existing permits as opposed to providing a refund. The cost of adding this additional month is £5,500. If a local decision was taken to provide free town centre car parking during the month of August, we will not benefit from either direct car parking income or the recoverable difference. This proposal will therefore result in an overall loss of income of £92k.

- 12 Previous analyses of parking concessions for our town centres showed a limited impact on footfall, however, the pandemic creates unique challenges and we are unable to quantify what impact such a scheme might have. The provision of free car parking for a restricted period does however demonstrate to retailers, town centre visitors and the public, that the council has confidence in its town centres and is supporting our retailers with a range of local initiatives to reinforce the attractiveness of our town centres.
- 13 Members will therefore need to consider whether the loss of earned and recoverable income to the value of £92k will provide value for money and will sufficiently demonstrate to town centre retailers and the wider public, that the council is indeed focussed on supporting them through this difficult period of time.
- 14 We are aware that some of authorities are exploring local policies to support their communities during the summer. The City and County of Swansea are implementing their own local initiative to provide free bus transport to all Swansea residents travelling within the boundaries of Swansea from Friday to Monday for the month of August. Whilst this is an environmentally sustainable proposal to roll out, it requires cooperation from all public transport providers and the cost of implementing such a policy is currently unknown. Members should also note that there is insufficient time to deliver such a solution within Neath Port Talbot for the same time period.

Financial Impact

- 15 The combined loss of direct income and recoverable income for town centre car parking amounts to £92k. These costs would need to be covered from within the councils existing budget/reserve.

Equality Impact Assessment

- 16 A Screening Assessment has been undertaken to assist the Council in discharging its Public Sector Equality Duty under the Equality Act 2010. After completing the assessment it has been determined that this proposal does not require an Equalities Impact Assessment.
- 17 There are no equality impacts associated with this report.

Workforce Impact

18 There are no workforce impacts associated with this report.

Legal Impact

19 There are no legal impacts associated with this report

Risk Management

20 Apart from the financial risk which is covered above, there is also a risk that the council will be placed under greater pressure to maintain free car parking on a permanent basis which would be unaffordable in the longer term.

Consultation

21 There is no requirement under the Constitution for external consultation on this item.

Recommendation:

22 Members consider the advice contained within this report and determine whether they wish to implement free car parking within town centre car parks, throughout Neath Port Talbot, for the month of August 2021.

Reason for Proposed Decision(s)

23 To demonstrate the councils commitment to support our town centres.

Implementation of Decision

24 The decision is an urgent one for immediate implementation, subject to the consent of the relevant Scrutiny Chair (and is therefore not subject to the call-in procedure

List of Background Papers

25 None

Officer Contact

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