



## Report for Leader (Logistics portfolio)

**Decision Date:** 31 March 2021

**Reference number:** **LG03.21**

**Title:** Covid High Street Recovery - Parking Charges

**Relevant councillor(s):** Councillor David Martin

**Author and/or contact officer:** Julie Rushton (Interim Head of Off-Street Parking)

**Ward(s) affected:** All

### Recommendations:

1. **Suspend parking charges across Buckinghamshire Council owned/managed car parks located in town and village centres for a period of one month commencing 12 April 2021 to support High Street recovery.**

### Reason for decision:

The country has been in a third national lockdown since 5 January 2021. The Government has set out its roadmap to easing out of lockdown; for many high street shops this includes re-opening their doors on 12 April 2021

## 1. Content of report

### Background

- 1.1. On 25 March 2020, the Government announced it had agreed with all councils and the LGA to introduce free parking for key workers during the pandemic, allowing them to park for free in Council owned/managed car parks and On-Street pay and display bays. In addition, Councils were to set up local arrangements so key workers could be issued with a pass to display in their vehicle to show they qualified for free parking. Passes were available through NHS Trusts, local authorities, and the Royal Voluntary Service.
- 1.2. Buckinghamshire Council opted to not segregate free parking to certain user groups and instead decided to extend this to all customers. This enabled wider support, whilst also negating the inconvenience of key workers having to obtain a pass to park.
- 1.3. Free parking remained in place until 1 August 2020 when the Government eased lockdown restrictions. The Government also changed the flexibility around free parking for NHS and key workers, changing this from being mandatory on local Councils to provide free parking, to being optional. The emphasis at this time focused on resuming normal services as much as possible.

- 1.4. A second lockdown was imposed on 5 November 2020. This lasted just under a month with restrictions easing on 2 December 2020. Buckinghamshire Council has followed Government guidelines for free parking mandates; at this time no steer was provided and therefore the charges remained in place. This has remained the case until present day.

#### Present Day

- 1.5. A third national lockdown commenced on 4 January 2021. Similar to the second lockdown, parking charges have remained in place throughout.
- 1.6. During this period, there has been a greater increase in the roll out of vaccinations, both nationally and in Buckinghamshire. Lateral testing and track and trace is also in place
- 1.7. The current lockdown for many high street shops is due to ease on 12 April 2021 with them being able to re-open their doors at this time. Because of the above measures and subsequently the reduction in daily reported new cases of coronavirus, the current steer is that easing out of the third lockdown will be the road to freedom with many expecting it to be unlikely there will be a requirement for a fourth national lockdown.
- 1.8. To support the local economy, the Council has a major campaign planned for the re-opening of high streets in Buckinghamshire. This includes supporting businesses in practical ways like business grants and offering streamlining applications for pavement licencing to help extend outdoor trading. In addition, funding has been secured to help create a feel good factor around town and village centres with bright and cheery 'Welcome Back!' signage, as well as street bunting in town centre locations to add to the celebratory feel of Buckinghamshire. Town Centre 'tidy ups' and street events/entertainment will also be taking place.
- 1.9. To further support re-opening of the high streets it is recommended to suspend parking charges in Council village and town centre car parks and allow free parking from 12 April 2021 for a period of one month; thereby ending on 11 May 2021. This includes all Council owned/managed car parks with the exception of country parks. It is thought that this additional support will contribute to the campaign and help build confidence to encourage more people into the car parks, which in turn supports the high streets. In addition, by applying free parking to all car parks located in close proximity to the high street and not exclude those that are predominantly commuter car parks, it creates a good news story and positive experience for the customer. It also eliminates the possibility of a customer parking in a car park that isn't free and running the risk of being issued with a parking fine.
- 1.10. If the date of 12 April 2021, set by the Government for the re-opening of many shops is changed, it is recommended that the one-month free parking scheme commences on the new date the Government provides.
- 1.11. The Off Street Parking Places Order provides flexibility to temporarily suspend charges without the need to legally amend the order.
- 1.12. To inform residents, local businesses, and visitors, of free parking, information will be cascaded via social media channels, the Council's website, a press release, and notices displayed at the car parks. The end date for free parking will also be included on the notices for clarity on when the scheme ends and charges re-apply. In addition, the re-opening the high streets campaign will include posting video clips from businesses to help create a buzz.
- 1.13. To encourage customers into the car parks and reduce the level of on street parking, it is recommended that suspension of charges applies to car parks only, with on street charges remaining in place throughout.

- 1.14. All other parking restrictions for example, parking in a designated disabled parking bay without displaying a blue badge, or parking out of bay etc., are to remain in place.
- 1.15. Free parking will reduce the level of enforcement required in the car parks. To offset this and utilise officer time effectively, some of the enforcement officers will be deployed to the Country parks to assist in enforcement of these areas; consequently, enabling the on street enforcement officers to concentrate on highway restrictions and supporting the highway network.

## **2. Other options considered**

- 2.1 Consideration was given to recommending free parking for Town Centre high streets only. However, it is recognised that many villages also have high streets that are crucial for the stabilisation of the local economy and too, to support growth and development.
- 2.2 Consideration was also given to nominating only one or two car parks in each area. This would however encourage more cars and pedestrians into one area and could create parking pressures with insufficient space being available on a free car park, resulting in customers opting not to park and to drive away. It could also result in customers being issued with a parking fine if they are unable to find a space on a free car park, consequently parking in a chargeable car park and opting not to pay. This would impact negatively on the Council and dilute the positive experience we aim to promote.
- 2.3 A third consideration is to not suspend charges and to continue as per existing arrangements.

## **3. Legal and financial implications**

### Legal

- 3.1 There are no legal implications to suspending parking charges - the Off Street Parking Places Order includes a provision, which enables the Council not to collect charges; implementation is by way of signage at the designated locations

### Finance

- 3.2 The loss of income for a one-month free parking scheme is £749k. This is across all Council car parks.
- 3.3 The Government has introduced a comprehensive package of support to address spending pressures and in recognition of lost income. For parking fees and charges this equates to 75% of every pound lost. Where local authorities opt to introduce a free parking scheme, loss of income in this regard is not recoverable under the Government's funding package.

## **4. Corporate Implications**

- 4.1 Management of the car park estate and parking provision contributes to the Council's medium term aim of planning for a thriving and sustainable County, with vibrant towns and villages. Supporting suspension of charges to encourage customers back to the high streets as we ease out of the third lockdown aligns to those objectives.

## **5. Communication, engagement & further consultation**

- 5.1. Finance and Legal have been consulted and their comments have been incorporated into the report.

5.2. Communication regarding free parking will be incorporated into the 'Reopening of the High Street' campaign. Communication channels will be, press release, information on the Council's website/social media, and notices displayed at the car parks.

## **6. Next steps and review**

6.1. If suspension of charges is approved, the necessary action, including communication push as described above will be actioned.

## **7. Background papers**

7.1 None

## **8. Your questions and views (for key decisions)**

8.1 If you have any questions about the matters contained in this report please get in touch with the author of this report. If you have any views that you would like the cabinet member to consider please inform the democratic services team. This can be done by telephone [01296 382343] or email [democracy@buckinghamshire.gov.uk](mailto:democracy@buckinghamshire.gov.uk)