NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Overview and Scrutiny Committee
Task and Finish Group Report

PARKING

4 November & 9 December 2014

Cllr Ian Mantle (Chair)
Cllr Allison Ashley
Cllr John Bishop
Cllr Paul Clark
Cllr Steve Hemingway

1. BACKGROUND

1.1 This task and finish group sought to consider ways to improve the cost effectiveness and efficiency of the Council's parking service. The scope of the review is attached at Annex 1.

1.2 The group considered this topic on two separate evenings and its conclusions and recommendations are set out below.

1.3 The Task and Finish Group would like to thank Cllr Julian Cunningham, Portfolio Holder for Policy, Transport and Green Issues for his attendance and helpful contribution.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: The Council should review its policies to ensure adequate provision of parking for town centre residents. (para 3.1.11)

Recommendation 2. The Council should consider outsourcing the management and maintenance of its car parks, or sharing the costs with another authority, provided there is a good business case for doing so. (para 3.1.15)

Recommendation 3. The Council should consider acquiring land in order to provide new car parks when there is a need and a good business case for doing so. (para 3.3.5)

Recommendation 4: The Council should keep the problem of verge parking under review. (3.4.23)

Recommendation 5. The Council's Parking Strategy should contain a section on parking for rail commuters. (para 3.6.6)

Recommendation 6. The Council should review the opening hours of its car parks. (para 3.6.8)

Recommendation 7. In order to do so, the Council should gather sufficient data about the usage of car parks, particularly at times when there is no charging, so it can make an informed decision about opening hours. (para 3.6.8)

Recommendation 8. The Council should talk to its local MPs to see if they can facilitate a dialogue with Network Rail and the train operating companies about provision of more parking around stations in North Herts. (para 3.7.3)

Recommendation 9. The Council should review its policy on season tickets, including ways of boosting their sales. This could include better publicity; making sure the process of buying them is as straightforward as possible; using alternative outlets such as shops; and allowing season tickets to be transferable in some circumstances. (para 3.10.3)

3. SUMMARY OF EVIDENCE

3.1 NHDC's Parking Strategy

3.1.1 Louise Symes, Strategic Planning and Projects Manager, gave an overview of the Council's parking strategy. The strategy was prepared in 2009, and updated in 2012 as a result of the previous task and finish group on the implementation of the strategy. The strategy covers a 10 year period from 2009 - 2019 and provides a framework for parking across the district and its control. It covers operations and policy, that is, the delivery of services, managing car parks, enforcement, and back-office functions in terms of operations.

3.1.2 As well as mainstream parking issues, the strategy covers more specialised issues for example the increased demand for disabled badge holder parking bays in residential areas, as well as the demand for cycle parking in town centres and other key destinations especially around stations.

3.1.3 Louise advised that the availability of parking for any type of vehicle was an important factor in determining how people travel. It influences the vitality and viability of town centres and the attractiveness of residential areas. There is a balance to be struck between providing and restricting car parking within town centres and within residential streets. Louise advised that car ownership was expected to grow over the next 20 years alongside the growth from new housing in and adjacent to the district. The strategy needed to be flexible enough to respond to the demands of parking and at the same time try to influence car use.

3.1.4 The Council's town centre strategies promote greater pedestrian priority and seek to encourage less traffic. The strategy also seeks to reduce long stay parking in many residential areas in order to promote alternative models of such as car sharing. Car parking is one of the key elements in managing the highway and encouraging alternatives to the car. The overall aims of the parking strategy are:
- to reduce dependence on the car, particularly in town centres;
- to minimise the safety and congestion effects of on street parking;
- to help maintain the vitality town centres and discourage the out-of-town developments;
- to ensure that car parking provision and enforcement and are broadly self financing.

3.1.5 Louise said that the management of on-street and off-street parking fell into two broad categories. First the enforcement of on and off street parking, and second the back-office management which assisted the enforcement function as well as carrying out the day-to-day management and administration of parking such as season tickets, residents' permit applications, customer queries and managing the car park ticket machines The Council was responsible for the physical maintenance of car parks on a planned and reactive basis. The Council was also responsible for making traffic regulation orders (TROs), principally for controlled parking zones but also for other matters, in consultation with Hertfordshire County Council (HCC) and the police.

3.1.6 The Council's management had to cover on-street and off-street parking both in town centres and elsewhere. Changes to any one aspect of parking services as a result of changes to the strategy were likely to have implications for service as a whole. Louise said of the key questions was one of whether the Council had the resources to meet all of the aims of the strategy.

3.1.7   Louise explained that the Council had a rolling programme of town-wide parking reviews. The reviews often took a long time because of the need for consultation with all interested parties to make sure that any subsequent changes were well supported and well understood. When making TROs for new traffic restrictions, the Council always undertakes pre-consultation in order to avoid or minimise problems during the formal consultation process.

3.1.8   Members said that previous reviews didn't discuss the percentage of permits to be sold to commuters as opposed residents. Louise advised that this point had been addressed by an update to policy 26 of the strategy and could be considered, but would involve an amendment to the current TRO covering the relevant zone. No specific numbers of resident permits were given as controlled parking zones (CPZs) were specific to the areas covered and the number of permits allowed depended on the uptake and local circumstances.

Discussion

3.1.9   Louise confirmed the lorry parking was not included in the scope of the Hitchin town wide parking review. Members said the presence of heavy goods vehicles (HGVs) in Hitchin was a problem in terms of traffic flow, pollution and damage to parts of the highway. There was also a quality-of-life issue about parking such large vehicles in the middle of town overnight. Members noted that there was designated parking for HGVs at Woodside car park in Hitchin was already being used by some HGVs. Members queried whether publicity about this was effective enough and whether more could be done to promote the use of the dedicated HGV parking at Woodside car park. Members said the approach to parking of HGVs throughout the district (and its enforcement) was inconsistent.

3.1.10 Members said there were difficulties in parts of Hitchin where people lived in small terraced cottages and there was no dedicated parking provision. Nevertheless, the occupant still had parking needs. The group noted that some local providers like Waitrose had allowed residents to park in their car park which had been very helpful.

3.1.11 Members considered it was necessary to balance the Council's various objectives such as the commercial aspects of supporting the town centre, with the needs of residents by facilitating residential parking. Councillor Cunningham said the Council did produce a Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) for the parking aspects of residential developments. Members said each area's needs were different and needed different solutions. In Letchworth town centre for example there was a good deal more on-street parking that there was in Hitchin town centre.

Recommendation: The Council should review its policies to ensure adequate provision of parking for town centre residents.

3.1.12 Shortage of station parking was an ongoing problem in Hitchin - and in other parts of the district like Letchworth and Knebworth. Facilities were inadequate, but it was difficult to get Network Rail and/or the train operating companies to engage with local authorities over this important local issue. Louise said there had been some dialogue with Network Rail and some attempts to address this issue, but it was not easy to make progress. There was no incentive for train operators to look at long-term parking when their own franchises could often be quite short.

3.1.13 Members asked about the opening hours of the multi-storey car parks and whether they should be left open overnight. Steve Crowley explained that civil enforcement officers (CEOs) worked contracted hours, and the Council needed to be mindful how it deployed its resources. If the Council decided to change parking hours, it would need to look at how it deployed CEOs.

3.1.14 In terms of charging, members said there were four charging structures in Letchworth: the station; public car parks; the Heritage foundation car parks; and Morrisons. Members thought this should be better coordination and consistency about charging for car parking.

3.1.15 Members discussed whether the Council should operate or even own its own car parks, or whether it would be more cost effective to outsource the work and its associated costs to a private provider; or share the costs with another authority like East Hertfordshire District Council (East Herts). John Robinson, Strategic Director of Customer Services at NHDC said this was something which the Council will consider, provided there was a good business case for doing so.

Recommendation: The Council should consider outsourcing the management and maintenance of its car parks, or sharing the costs with another authority, provided there is a good business case for doing so.

3.2 Annual Enforcement Report

3.2.1 Steve Crowley, Contracts and Project Manager at NHDC, explained that local authorities engaged in parking enforcement were required to make an annual statistical return to the Department for Transport; and advised to produce an annual report on their activities.

3.2.2   The Council had adopted decriminalised parking enforcement (DPE) powers in January 2005. In respect of on-street parking enforcement, NHDC acts on behalf of Hertfordshire County Council (HCC, the highway authority) under the terms of an agency agreement between the two authorities. NHDC is responsible for the management and enforcement of its own off-street car parks.

3.2.3   Civil parking enforcement in North Herts is undertaken by a team consisting of a Parking Team Leader and eleven CEOs who are the successors to the familiar traffic wardens, deployed throughout the district and managed by a Parking Services Manager. NHDC does not use clamping and removal of vehicles as an enforcement tool, as it can be costly and often results in a obstructing vehicle remaining at an inappropriate location for longer than is necessary.

3.2.4   The primary enforcement tool in the case of contraventions is the threat of receiving a fine through the issue by CEOs of penalty charge notices (PCNs). Steve made clear that CEOs had no targets for issuing PCNs. Penalties were either £70 or £50 depending on the type of contravention. The number of PCNs issued is given in table 1 below.

Table 1: Enforcement Activity – On street and in Car Parks

Year	Total PCNs
2005/06	12801
2006/07	14494
2007/08	12775
2008/09	11895
2009/10	12181
2010/11	9952
2011/12	9673
2012/13	9071
2013/14	14,215

3.2.5   Members noted the variation in PCNs issued in recent years and heard that there had been staffing issues in the parking services team which had since been resolved. In 2011/12 the complement had been as low as 5 officers whereas last year the team had been fully staffed.

3.2.6   CEOs worked in shifts: in general 2-3 CEOs were deployed in Hitchin, 2 in Letchworth and Baldock, 1 in Royston and 1 elsewhere. Their routes varied. Many patrolled on foot, while some had cars depending on their deployment. The Council was open to members' suggestion that they have scooters to get around faster and easier, but this depended on whether this was appropriate for the area they had to patrol and what worked in practice.

3.2.7   Under statute, a 50% discount applies to a penalty charge paid within 14 days its date of issue. The majority of motorists who receive a PCN accepted their liability and make prompt payment. After 14 days the penalty charge reverted to its full value.

3.2.8   The Traffic Management Act 2004 sets out a number of statutory grounds on which a PCN may be challenged which, if established, require a local authority to cancel the motorist's charge. Alongside the statutory grounds, many motorists contact NHDC each year offering mitigating circumstances which they hope will lead to cancellation of the penalty charge on discretionary grounds. NHDC has adopted a set of enforcement guidelines to guide its staff in making enforcement decisions in a wide range of circumstances.

3.2.9   In 2012/13 a total of 2,042 (22.5%) PCNs issued by North Herts Council were cancelled upon receipt of a challenge. Members were surprised at the apparently high number of successful challenges. Steve explained this was rarely due to tickets being issued in error by CEOs or faulty administrative processes. Quite often motorists had valid tickets or permits but they had blown off dashboards or had forgotten to display them. In these circumstances the Council could – and often did – exercise its discretion in cancelling those tickets. The main reasons for the cancellations of PCNs during 2012/13 were:
- valid ticket or permit produced subsequently;
- blue badge holder;
- CEO error;
- Medical emergency.

3.2.10 If NHDC did not uphold an appeal, the vehicle's owner was entitled to appeal that decision to the independent Parking Adjudicator. 30 such appeals were made during 2012/13, (0.33%) and of these:

- 23% were not contested by the Council;
- 30% were allowed; and
- 47% were rejected.

3.2.11 If a motorist does not pay the penalty charge and/or is unsuccessful in an appeal, the PCN may be registered as a debt in the County Court and becomes a civil debt. 561 PCNs were registered as a debt in the County Court in 2012/13. Failure to pay this debt within the timescale specified will result in the passing of the debt to bailiffs. 507 cases were referred to the Council's bailiffs In 2012/13.

3.2.12 Another 2.6% of PCNs issued in 2012/13 were written off, usually because the motorist/owner cannot be traced – either because of an inadequate record at the DVLA or because the motorist/owner is no longer at the address they have registered with the DVLA.

3.2.13 Steve explained that CEOs took a good deal of photographic and written evidence when issuing PCNs. Cllr Cunningham said that NHDC sold over a million parking tickets and the numbers fined constituted a tiny proportion of the total.

Financial Aspects of Civil Parking Enforcement

3.2.14 The Road Traffic Act 1991, which brought in decriminalised parking enforcement of on-street parking, requires local authorities to seek to make their parking enforcement regime self-financing as soon as possible. Local authorities were not, however, allowed to design and run their enforcement regime to make a surplus. Any surplus that was generated was ring fenced to fund improvements in related areas such as passenger transport or car parks.

3.2.15 As more and more local authorities took on DPE powers, government recognised that for many, particularly smaller boroughs and district councils, achieving break-even would not be possible. Accordingly, the Traffic Management Act 2004 softened this requirement. From 1 April 2008 a local authority has been able to apply for DPE powers without demonstrating that it will break even, but on the understanding that any deficit would be met from within existing funding. The annual income from PCNs issued by North Herts Council is shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Annual income from PCNs issued by NHDC

Year	PCN Revenue
2006/07	£356,433
2007/08	£355,035
2008/09	£312,648
2009/10	£310,703
2010/11	£335,985
2011/12	£360,638
2012/13	£346,185

3.2.16 Steve said it was a misconception that NHDC used parking enforcement to generate income. In fact NHDC did not even cover the costs of its on-street enforcement activities. The overall surplus from parking was derived from off-street parking from pay and display parking in council owned car parks.

Recent and Future Developments

3.2.17 Steve said that parking services had made a number of changes to the way it conducted its business, with more changes likely in future, These changes made parking services more accessible and customer friendly.

3.2.18 Technological advances now make it possible for customers to access the parking service through an increasing number of channels. Motorists may now register a PCN challenge via e-mail and the internet. Furthermore NHDC's 'Pay by Phone' trial in its off-street car parks was successful and has been expanded.

3.2.19 In April 2012 North Herts replaced all its existing pay and display machines with new ones incorporating coin payments and - on selected machines - chip and pin payments, with the option of pay by phone still available. New machines have been located at the St Martins car park in Knebworth, the Twitchell car park in Baldock and on Market Hill in Royston. These new machines will also provide more detailed information on usage via wireless connectivity helping the Council manage its car parks more efficiently.

On-street Charging

3.2.20 In 2012 the Council introduced on-street charging in Market Hill, Royston to replace some off-street parking places that were lost as part of a town centre enhancement scheme at Fish Hill Square. The Parking Strategy identifies the need to consider the introduction of on-street charging in other locations in future years for the following reasons:
- To tackle non-compliance with on-street parking restrictions, especially in town centres, which can affect turnover of short stay spaces. Introducing on-street charging in some locations may help reduce non-compliance as well as make CEOs' tasks easier in identifying when vehicles arrived and how long they have parked for.
- To encourage the use of off-street parking. Off-street charges have increased over time which can encourage motorists to circulate in vehicles looking for free, on-street parking. On-street charging could minimise the impact of this activity on the town centre/pedestrian environment.
- Demand for rail station parking remains high so the Council will consider whether introduction of some limited on-street charging around stations can help relieve the pressure on station car parks.

3.2.21 The Council is also looking at the option of introducing charges in its off-street car parks on days and times of the week not currently charged. This reflects the need to generate income to pay for parking services and, in most cases, reflects the fact that on Sunday and bank holidays there is considerable use of car parks. Introduction of such an option would need to be in consultation with local town centre management to ensure the viability of the town centre.

3.2.22 The Council is also looking at different ways in which people can pay for off-street car parking. In Royston the Town Centre Manager has facilitated a subsidised pre-paid parking ticket by way of scratch cards. In Hitchin the Town Centre Manger has subsidised free parking after 3pm in several short stay car parks over the Christmas period. The Council is keen to explore how this may be rolled out to other towns and possibly to allow business to subsidise or sell pre-paid parking tickets in a similar way.

3.2.23 Members asked about the enforcement of parking restrictions around schools. Steve said it was not possible to deal with parking problems around every school. That said, if there were particular problems, NHDC would approach the school and discuss the problem. Some heads were proactive in dealing with the issue. It was also an area in which local councillors could have an important input.

3.3 Senior Management Group's (SMG's) Parking Review

3.3.1   John Robinson, Strategic Director of Customer Services, said that SMG had initiated a review of parking in the Council. Its remit was to look at all aspects Council's business, especially its financial circumstances including income generation and improving operations. The timetable for the review was that a Gateway review of this and other projects was due just before Christmas, which would give an opportunity for the task and finish group to have an input into the process.

3.3.2   The review would involve a number of NHDC's departments including Property Services, the Management Support Unit (MSU), the property management function; and would cover all aspects of parking in the Council. Parking enforcement in North Herts was carried out under an agency agreement with HCC. 18 people were employed in parking services, which had revenue expenditure of approximately £900,000, and capital expenditure of approximately £650,000.

3.3.3   The likely areas for the review would prioritise increasing Council income and decrease Council spending. Areas of focus will include:

- Commercialisation of off-street parking. The Council could profit from off-street parking from which it has a duty to get value for money for its investments. Some areas of North Herts have a demand for parking spaces, and the Council will look at pricing, the possibility of acquiring new car parks to generate more revenue (as NCP did successfully after World War II when it acquired bomb sites and turned them into car parks). The use of capital in such a way could provide benefits to the Council's revenue position.

- Property, including the capital of the Council tied up in property and its associated liabilities. The Lairage car park in Hitchin was closed for significant periods to treat steel corrosion which had affected the Council's income from the car park. Its layout was awkward, making it unattractive to some potential customers.

- Railway hubs will also be significant factor to take into account. The Council could consider acquiring land near railway hubs, operating car parks nearby. The rail companies seemed uninterested in solving parking problems in stations. The Council would need to be careful to minimise any future liabilities with any property it acquired.

- Further management efficiencies for example mobile deployment of CEOs on scooters. Steps have already been taken to allow CEOs to start work in areas they were patrolling, rather than having to be transported to them.

- The parking strategy - the review would ask how the strategy is couched, and whether it should be changed to accommodate commercial aspects of parking, and address the absence of a commercial parking strategy for the Council.

3.3.4   Members asked whether there was a possibility of sharing parking services. John Robinson explained that the Council already undertook some limited shared working with Stevenage Borough Council on repairs and maintenance. The Council was also looking at the possibility of sharing some office accommodation and further services as opportunities arose. It was likely, however, that any savings generated by shared services for parking alone would be limited, whereas the Council was looking at shared services with East Herts on waste and recycling of the order of £10 million per year.

3.3.5   Members queried whether it would be commercially viable to purchase land in order to produce a satisfactory yield from car parking, especially when compared to the returns available from residential developments which were much more profitable. John Robinson said this would be a difficult calculation for the Council to make due to the risk associated with forecasting demand for off-street parking and the returns lost from cash on deposit. That said, he considered investment costs would not need to be very high. It might be possible for the Council to buy land now hold it until the market recovered. Ultimately a decision would depend on the Council's whole asset portfolio.

Recommendation: the Council should consider acquiring land in order to provide new car parks when there is a need and a good business case for doing so.

3.3.6   Members said they were keen to work with any initiative to help increase parking near railway stations. The group heard that the Council opened a site in Royston in Lumen Road which could be used as a commuter car park and which could be funded from locality budgets.

3.3.7   John Robinson said rebuild costs of car parks were substantial. There had been a good deal of media activity generated by the Department for Communities and Local Government about town halls profiteering from car parking. There was no evidence that this was occurring in North Herts. However NHDC and other councils had a job in changing public perception about car parking.

3.4 Verge Parking and Traffic Regulation Orders

3.4.1   Brendan Sullivan, Scrutiny Officer at the Council said that one of the task and finish group's key questions was how desirable and feasible was it to introduce a district-wide ban on verge parking similar to the one in Stevenage?

3.4.2   Brendan said the size of the problem in North Herts varied: it was worse in parts of Letchworth and Hitchin, virtually non-existent in Royston. The problem in Letchworth was often around areas with old Council houses where houses had been built without garages or driveways. The underlying issue was that there was not enough parking in some areas, and in those circumstances it might well be sensible to park on verges.

3.4.3   A bye law had been introduced by HCC in 1955 which made it a finable offence to park on a verge in Letchworth. HCC believes the byelaw was no longer valid and NHDC could not enforce the bye law under delegated powers. In any case, trying to enforce restrictions on parking through byelaws was very long winded and time consuming as the offenders had to be prosecuted through a magistrate's court due to there are rules of evidence and other procedural matters. Furthermore any fines imposed were not payable to the Council.

3.4.4   About 10 years ago, there was an attempt to create new laybys in areas like Monklands and Hallmead in Letchworth. The verges were replaced with bays but the process was very expensive. Around that time North Herts Homes offered to put £1 million to tackle the problem of verge parking, but this was dependent on HCC preparing the engineering drawings and HCC said that they were "too busy" to do this. The money was therefore never allocated to this problem. Allied to this was the fact that North Hertfordshire Homes (NHH) wanted to spend the money on things which were more of a priority to them.

3.4.5   The Council's view was that enforcement powers should not be used to punish or criminalise people, especially when there are few realistic solutions. There was also a danger of displacing the problem elsewhere. Instead, the authorities and other local big players - NHDC, HCC and NHH - needed to work together to provide a solution. The possible solutions to this were either regulation or construction.

<u>Engineering Solutions</u>

3.4.6   The main engineering solutions were bollards, grasscrete or bays cut into the verge.

3.4.7   **Posts or bollards** could be used as a physical barrier to prevent vehicles from mounting the verge. They can be wood, concrete or recycled plastic. They can either be driven into the ground or set in concrete and are usually set 1.5 metres apart. The main advantage is that they are a relatively cheap, instant solution and do not require much Council staff time. The drawbacks are:
- that they can delay the contractors who cut the grass and increase costs as they have to manoeuvre around obstacles;
- they may require regular maintenance;
- the appearance of the street scene may also be compromised either because they may not be in keeping with the surroundings or simply by adding extra clutter;
- they may not be appropriate in some sites where emergency access could be required across a verge.

They could be a suitable option where vehicles are driving across verges to cut corners.

3.4.8   Some councils, including NHDC, have installed **grass-crete** to regularise parking areas. It has generally been used in residential areas where verges outside of homes are being parked on regularly. Grass-crete is made up of concrete blocks on a level surface which have gaps to allow grass to grow. Vehicles can then park on top without damaging the grass. This can be effective in some areas but where vehicles are constantly using the parking area the grass may have little chance to grow.

3.4.9   The main drawbacks are that although it protects the verge from damages, it does not really address the issue of vehicles parking on verges in the first place since it involves removing the verge and replacing it with a parking area, thus condoning the practice. And although grass-crete can allow grass to grow between the blocks, it will tend to change the natural appearance of an area if grass verges are removed to provide such parking areas. The cost varies depending on the size of the area and whether there are any services (such as gas, electricity or telephone) that may be affected.

Regulatory Solutions

3.4.10 In terms of regulations, the options were byelaws, TROs and possibly new ASB legislation.

3.4.11 **Byelaws** are problematic for a variety of reasons. In Letchworth, the byelaw is probably no longer extant and even if it is NHDC does not believe it can enforce it. Stevenage also has a local byelaw which makes verge parking in Stevenage an offence and offenders are liable to prosecution through the Magistrates court. The Byelaw was introduced at a time when the problem of vehicles parked on verges was a rarity, but the problem became so widespread that enforcement under the Byelaw through the Magistrates Courts was not practicable. Stevenage and many other Councils where verge parking is a problem have been using TROs to tackle verge parking where they have decided to use a regulatory and enforcement approach.

3.4.12 The procedure for enforcing the byelaws can be longwinded. As an example, in Eastleigh DC in Hampshire, if a vehicle is reported to be parked on a verge, a member of the Council's staff has to go to the location and observe the parked vehicle, depart, then return to the site a short time after to observe the vehicle again and take a photograph. Then they must produce a statement that would serve as evidence in any prosecution.

3.4.13 An enquiry is then made to the DVLA to identify the registered keeper of the vehicle, and the response often took several weeks to arrive. The Council then writes to the registered keeper of the vehicle to inform them that an offence has been committed, following which a summons is prepared and a member of staff would then need to attend court. Eastleigh DC sent out several advisory letters to offenders, but no prosecutions were taken forward.

3.4.14 It requires a considerable amount of staff time just to follow through one offence. There is the added problem of identifying the driver of the offending vehicle if they are not the registered owner. Although the Byelaw had a limited effect as a deterrent by means of the signs that are displayed at the selected sites, it is apparent that only a handful of offences could be pursued due to the level of staff time required.

3.4.15 The other main option is **Traffic Regulation Orders (TROs)**. TROs are legal instruments that enable the Highway Authority to regulate or prohibit the movement of traffic on the highway. They apply to the regulation of speed, weight, movement and parking of vehicles as well as regulating pedestrian movement. If drivers do not comply with these TROs, they are then guilty of an offence for which the courts may impose penalties such as fines, licence points or even disqualification.
The procedures, time and costs involved which can be considerable, especially if the council makes lots of TROs to cover lots of discrete areas. One cost effective way around this is to introduce a district or borough wide TRO, and only enforce in particular areas as necessary.

3.4.16 **Bedford Borough Council** has a borough-wide TRO to enforce verge parking restrictions through fixed penalty notices. Enforcement is flexible, and penalties are only imposed in areas with the support of ward councillors; if there are safety or damage issues; and/or an emergency services recommendation. Also, there must be alternative parking available so displaced parking doesn't create a problem elsewhere.

3.4.17 Once the Council has decided to introduce enforcement in those streets which have been designated for no verge / footway parking it takes certain steps:

- a leaflet is issued beforehand to all households in the selected street to advise of the unlawfulness of verge / footway parking and the Council's intention to introduce enforcement.
- The Council puts up signs to enable enforcement to take place
- The Borough Council will undertake enforcement by issuing fixed penalty notices

3.4.18 Motorists in certain parts of Bedford will see signs prohibiting parking on footways and verges; and then a little bit further down the road will see another sign telling them the restriction has ended. Enforcement is by means of a dedicated parking enforcement vehicle which has a camera on the roof.

3.4.19 Stevenage Borough Council have introduced a permanent Traffic Regulation Order which is now in place in the St. Nicholas, Martins Wood, Pin Green, Bedwell, Chells and Manor areas of the town. Civil Enforcement Officers enforce verge and footway parking and issue penalty charge notices for parking contraventions. Penalties are £70 reduced to £35 if paid within 14 days. The TRO has been so successful that it will soon be introduced in other areas.

3.4.20 Stevenage also undertakes physical verge protection in certain areas. Priority is given to dealing with verge parking adjacent to junctions where sightlines are being obstructed, where grassed areas are being used as a short cut between two roads and/or where the damage caused could pose safety hazards for users of the highway (e.g. deep rutting which could pose a hazard to pedestrians). If the request for verge protection does not satisfy the above criteria, the person making the request is encouraged to ask their local Councillor to consider funding the verge protection work.

3.4.21 There is also the possibility of using **new ASBO powers** under the Anti Social Behaviour Crime and Policing Act 2014 to enforce restrictions on verge parking.

3.4.22 Members said there were a number of localised examples of verges being damaged by vehicles. The problem was most acute in parts of Letchworth and Hitchin, with both cars and lorries being culpable in different areas. Underlying this issue was a lack of parking provision in certain areas which would not be easy or cheap to address. Members did not think it was appropriate to use ASB legislation to tackle verge parking. The group also noted the high cost in both money and staff time in using TROs to tackle the issue. They noted that posts had been put in at Windmill Hill in Hitchin, and grasscrete had been laid in some parts of the district.

3.4.23 Overall, complaints about verge parking were low, the problems quite localised and the costs of addressing them would be disproportionately high. The group agreed that the high cost of addressing this should not be a high priority for the Council.

Recommendation: The Council should keep the problem of verge parking under review.

3.5 Complaints

3.5.1   John Robinson said the number of complaints on parking matters set out in table 3 below was very low. Officers dealt with a lot of concerns and enquiries on the phone and were able to resolve the before they became complaints. Furthermore the complaint about a ticket was cancelled, it wasn't taken any further.

3.5.2   If a complaint was made about staff issues, managers would hear both sides of the story. Civil enforcement officers used pocketbooks to record incidents. Steve Crowley was confident that staff acted appropriately. Members asked whether the Council was not picking up complaints because it was not treating concerns and enquiries proactively. John Robinson said a lot of this sort of contact with the public was dealt with informally before it turned into a complaint.

3.5.3   He also noted that complaints and appeals were handled and recorded differently. 22.5% of tickets were cancelled for the reasons explained earlier. This was because many appeals had mitigating circumstances (such as tickets blowing off dashboards), and the council had the discretion to cancel tickets if it believed this was justified. Some mistakes did occur, but these were few in number. Civil enforcement officers undertook a refresher training course every other year on the Traffic Management Act and the rules covering lines and signs.

<u>Table 3: Parking Complaints received over last 12 months</u>

	Complaints Received	**Nature of Complaints**
Oct – Dec 2013	4	1 – Parking policy (loading bays) 2 – Staff behaviour (unclear if this is CEO) 1 – not detailed
Jan – Mar 2014	9	6 - Parking enforcement (inc CEO behaviour) 3 - Parking policy (charging, restrictions and permits)
Apr – Jun 2014	11	8 - CEO behaviour 1 – Parking policy (non eligibility for resident parking permit) 2 – unable to access data
Jul – Sept 2014	5	2 – Quality of service (unable to speak to parking Manager, online application process) 1 – CEO attitude 1 – Policy (introduction of enforcement in a particular area in Royston) 1 illegal parking of vans in Royston
TOTAL Oct 13 – Sept 14	**29**	**6 - Parking Policy** **2 - Staff Behaviour** **15 - Parking enforcement / CEO behaviour** **2 – Quality of service** **1 – Illegal parking of vans in Royston** **3 – Unable to extract original details**

3.6 Car park opening hours

3.6.1   Members said that the Letchworth multi-storey car park opening hours had been set in the 1970s, while that of the Lairage car park in was last set in the 1980s. It would be sensible to see whether the hours were still appropriate for today's needs in terms of both serving the community's needs and considering whether charges reflected demand.

3.6.2   Members said the Council should give consideration to the opening hours of the Letchworth multi-storey car park with particular regard to the possibility of it being used by station commuters. Also, access to the Letchworth multi-storey was also restricted as the Garden Square shopping centre closed relatively early. If the Council decided on any changes, particularly with rail commuters in mind, they would have to meet with the owners to discuss opening hours.

3.6.3   Members acknowledged that there were problems with the Letchworth multi-storey car park. It was not open long enough for station commuters, which meant that it couldn't be guaranteed that the car park would be open if they were delayed . Youngsters tended to run around car park in the evening which could make it feel unsafe. There would also be an additional security cost if the car park opened for longer.

3.6.4   The opening hours of the Hitchin multi-storey car park also needed to be reviewed. Habits of customers had changed, and the current opening hours of 7am until 7pm might no longer address these.

3.6.5   Shortage of station parking in Letchworth or Hitchin encouraged commuters to use on-street parking which could upset residents who lived near the station and were unable to find a place to park as a result. Other car parks near the station were short stay so did not offer a realistic alternative. Introducing a CPZ was not necessarily a good solution as it could have the effect of pushing everything out to a different area, and repeating problem all over again.

3.6.6   The group noted that rail commuter parking is not part of the Council's parking strategy. Having adequate parking was important for the quality of life in town centres. The group considered that the Council needed to have a strategic discussion about this issue with Network Rail and the train operating companies.

3.6.7   Members also discussed the possibility of non-resident permits being sold to commuters (see discussion below in section 3.10).

Recommendation: The Council's Parking Strategy should contain a section on parking for rail commuters.

3.6.8   Members thought it will be important for the Council to gather better data on the use of car parks as a first step to try to rationalise the use of some of its car parks. For example in Royston, parking was free from 3 o'clock, and there was no charging on Sundays. The Council didn't have data about who was using the car parks during these free periods and it would be difficult to do so without sending out someone to count. Members thought it would be beneficial for the Council to install counters in car parks as a first step to gathering better data. They noted that if car park opening hours changed, the Council would need to change the contracts of the CEOs to accommodate this.

Recommendation: The Council should review the opening hours of its car parks.

Recommendation: In order to do so, the Council should gather sufficient data about the usage of car parks, particularly at times when there is no charging, so it can make an informed decision about opening hours.

3.6.9   John Robinson said the Council had commissioned a consultant to look at available land and whether this was economic the Council to use it for car parking. If it was an economically viable proposition the Council would consider purchasing the land to use as car parks. Members said that Network Rail was reluctant to engage with local members on the issue. Most of the station car parks were surface car parks rather than multi-storeys, although there were some stations which did have multi-storey car park such as Hatfield, Luton and St Albans.

3.7 Safety and Security Aspects of Car Parks

3.7.1 The group considered that if opening hours were to be extended, it would be necessary for users to feel safe in a car park if they were going to use it. Letchworth multi-storey car park could be an off-putting place in the evenings. Some members of staff felt uncomfortable going to the car park at even 7 or 8pm; and there were kids gathering in the car park to skateboard and socialise. If commuters were going to use Letchworth multi-storey car park, the Council would have to improve their confidence in using it and their feelings of safety. John Robinson said that in fact there have been very few reported incidents in Letchworth multi-storey car park. Feelings of safety were subjective, and not necessarily easy to change even if the reality was different.

3.7.2   The group said that there were relatively few spaces near Letchworth train station. There are about 50 spaces at the station car park, plus another 30 in a second Station Car Park, which had been taken over by the contractor installing the lifts. Although the multi-storey car park was relatively near the station, commuters would need better access to the car park if they were going to use it for parking during the day. Members said that Letchworth has seen an increase in night-time activity, and people need somewhere to park. The situation was similar in Hitchin. This might be a good reason to open car parks overnight.

3.7.3   Members asked when the Council had last talked to Network Rail and the train operating companies. Louise said that Network Rail have been a consultee on the Local Plan. However there were issues of engagement by the trains operating companies as franchises were granted for limited periods of time, and companies were reluctant to commit funding for the longer term. Members suggested that it might be useful for the Council to talk to its local MPs about this issue.

Recommendation: The Council should talk to its local MPs to see if they can facilitate a dialogue with Network Rail and the train operating companies about provision of more parking around stations in North Herts.

3.8 Outsourced management of car parking

3.8.1   John Robinson said the LGB futures report contains some examples of outsourced car park management. NHDC had looked at the East Herts and Stevenage model very closely, but concluded that any savings gained as a result of moving to that model would likely be negligible. Car parking costs were mostly staff, so savings would depend on reducing a number of staff. Furthermore authorities were reluctant to release information on this aspect of car parking. Officers were open-minded but the sums involved at NHDC were small.

3.8.2   Members wondered whether an automatic number plate recognition (ANPR) system at car parks would save money. John Robinson said that ANPR would tend to make payments more accurate as people will only pay for the exact number of minutes or hours that they actually stayed in the car park. At the moment people often estimated how long they would stay and as a result sometimes paid more than they needed to. ANPR would also see a decrease in the number of PCNs issued.

3.8.3   Members wondered whether if income dropped it might be possible to increase the hourly rate charged. Another possibility might be profit-sharing arrangement. John Robinson said that the SMG review was considering how to maximise profits from car parking. Outsourcing might produce efficiencies, but it also might be more productive to continue with the existing car park management arrangements and to treat car parks as a community asset and charge at market rates. Overall car parking generated surplus of £700,000.

3.8.4   Steve Crowley said the current and interim parking managers came from the private sector which provided useful private sector experience. When NHDC operates its own car parks, it has control over the hours CEOs worked which was the main element of car parking cost. The Council could increase or decrease the number of CEOs or the hours they worked. If NHDC entered into a contract with an outside provider, this might not be possible as there may be less flexibility built into the contract.

3.8.5   Last year the council achieved a surplus from on-street parking for the first time after a number of years of significant deficits. Off-street parking generated a surplus of £700,000. Members pointed out that ANPR might likely decrease revenue and contracting out the service would likely decrease the number of CEOs. The CEOs would still be needed to enforce on-street and residential parking. Members concluded there were a lot of issues to consider in this area and the Council would need to keep it under regular review. They concluded that outsourcing would depend on a business case, which might change the light of new technologies and practices.

3.9 Parking in Royston

3.9.1   The Scrutiny Officer had invited BID managers/town centre managers to comment on parking Issues in their areas. The Royston Town Manager had responded.

3.9.2   He said Royston had there was sufficient off-street spaces (if not an over-capacity) in the town centre, and a shortage of on-street parking, unlike Letchworth which he said had about four times more on-street, limited period, free parking spaces than Royston. Generally there was sufficient residential parking outside the town centre. A better form of season ticket charging to make more use of the spare off-street spaces would greatly assist there. The vicinity of the station and the industrial estate had problems during the day due to the fact that there was insufficient parking for both of these car-intensive destinations.

3.9.3   In themselves, he said the parking charges were neither exorbitant nor unfair. The problem in Royston came when you examined what you got for your money beyond a piece of lined tarmac. Royston town centre has very few 'destination shops' which made it worthwhile spending a pound or two on parking. If someone was just nipping in for a paper or a sandwich, even 50p seems unnecessary! It was the opposite of a virtuous spiral – where the town's offer of a limited selection of shops accessed by 'costly' parking spaces loses customer to out-of-town alternatives resulting in a further reduction in the number of town centre traders.

3.9.4   He said the situation would be hard to address even with free parking. However, at least one obstacle would have been removed. He assumed that free parking would remove a significant amount of (or all) parking enforcement costs, If the only remaining cost was maintenance of the surfaces, he considered that the Royston First BID would look towards making a contribution (in return for removing the parking burden from the businesses).

3.9.5   As for enforcement, he said he received daily complaints from businesses and the parking public. He said the level of enforcement in Royston was entirely disproportionate. 400+ PCNs per month in Royston equated to £12,000+ per month being taken out of a local, fragile economy. It would be better if Royston had sufficient enforcement to keep everybody honest, perhaps a couple of random days per week rather than the current six.

3.9.6   Cllr Cunningham said he was happy to talk to representatives from Royston about operating parking systems differently as long as they realised the financial consequences for the Council of any changes and were able to address them.

3.10 Season tickets

3.10.1 John Robinson said it is possible to sell season tickets to businesses in Hitchin as permits for employees. Permits currently brought in about £240,000 which is a significant income stream. It was possible to park in the long stay car parks, that is the Lairage and Woodside car parks in Hitchin. He said the Hitchin Town Centre Initiative had shown interest in providing subsidised parking for town centre employees and the Council was also looking at increasing the number of permits available in the Lairage, with the possibility of the Hitchin BID subsidising parking spaces.

3.10.2 There were about 300 spaces in the Lairage car park and about a third of these were available as normally about 200 cars were parked in the Lairage during the day. Members considered that the Council might expand its season-ticket sales to local businesses (and others) and should consider publicising the scheme more effectively. It would also be worth checking the process of buying season-ticket was fit for purpose and customer friendly. It would be a good thing to encourage local businesses to use season-ticket permits as staff benefits.

3.10.3 That said, there were some issues of flexibility. In Knebworth, for example, charity shops had different volunteers working on different days and they could not use a single season-ticket because they were not transferable as the volunteers drove different cars. Members wondered whether there was a possibility of issuing a transferable season ticket.

Recommendation: The Council should review its policy on season tickets, including ways of boosting their sales. This could include better publicity; making sure the process of buying them is as straightforward as possible; using alternative outlets such as shops; and allowing season tickets to be transferable in some circumstances.

3.11 Pay On Exit

3.11.1 Members discussed whether a pay on exit system might address some of the problems that people had with having to estimate how long they should buy a ticket for. It was likely that some customers left the town centre earlier than very wanted to because they had only purchased a ticket for a certain amount of time and they had to get back to their car.

3.11.2 Officers said the difficulty with pay on exit was the extra costs of the behind-the-scenes work which was involved in making sure the barriers worked and having somebody on call in case they didn't. It is thought that enforcement revenue would drop significantly as fewer PCNs would be issued. NHDC would not want to end up in a worse financial position. The Council would need to see a convincing business case before it moved to pay on exit.

4. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The group would like to thank those who contributed to the review:

Councillor Julian Cunningham, Portfolio Holder Policy, Transport & Green Issues
John Robinson, Strategic Director of Customer Services, NHDC
Steve Crowley, Contracts and Project Manager, NHDC
Louise Symes, Strategic Planning and Projects Manager, NHDC
Geraint Burnell, Royston Town Manager
Brendan Sullivan, Scrutiny Officer, NHDC

North Hertfordshire District Council
Overview and Scrutiny Task and Finish Group

Parking Services

SCOPE (v1.1a)

Introduction

NHDC's parking functions span a number of Directorates and account for £1.98m income, £1.02m direct expenditure. Parking is an important issue that affects the majority of North Hertfordshire's residents and businesses and demand for parking in some areas is increasing and competition for parking spaces will intensify, especially as the district will be affected by future housing growth.   The Council's overall approach to parking is set out in a ten year strategy and action plan. The strategy covers all aspects of parking, including on street, off street (both charged for and free), town centres, residential areas, parking for blue badge holders and, in general, the management and enforcement of parking in the district.

The Council has an agreement with Hertfordshire County Council that permits it to initiate, implement and enforce waiting restrictions on the highway where these relate to the provision of parking. Waiting restrictions that are required for safety reasons remain the responsibility of the County Council to implement and for the District Council to enforce.

A Task & Finish Group on the implementation of North Herts Parking Strategy 2009-19 reported in May 2011 and a Senior Management Group project is currently scoping a number of key corporate projects including one concerned with parking. This includes but is not limited to:

- Parking Strategy
- Property Strategy
- Charging
- Customer contact management and automation
- Management: Property, Strategy, Income, Enforcement
- Management: Information/Performance Management
- HCC: Enforcement Agency Agreement, TROs etc

It is anticipated that individual elements of the SMG review will be selected to take forward during the course of the summer and it is hoped that the Task & Finish Group Work in this area will be used to help inform this work.

Terms of reference

To consider ways to improve the cost effectiveness and efficiency of the Council's parking service.

Expected Outcomes

Recommendations leading to improved cost effectiveness and efficiency to inform the development of proposals for consideration by Cabinet during the course of 2014/15.

Timeframe
Two evenings

Link with Council Priorities
Promoting Sustainable Growth
Working with our Communities
Living within our Means

Potential Witnesses and Community Engagement
Councillor Julian Cunningham, Portfolio Holder Policy, Transport & Green Issues
Strategic Director Customer Services
Contract & Projects Manager
Strategic Planning & Projects Manager
BID Representatives:
Head of Finance, Performance & Asset Management
MSU Manager
Essex County Council

Key Questions

Is the decriminalised parking enforcement regime in which NHDC enforces parking on behalf of Herts County Council fair and sustainable; and are there alternative models that should be considered?

The effectiveness of the enforcement function.

Charging methods and recovery

Would free or subsidised parking benefit the local economy?

How desirable and feasible is it to introduce a district-wide ban on verge parking similar to the one introduced in Stevenage?

Green Issues

Nothing obvious

Information documents

Parking Strategy 2009-2019
Task & Finish Group on Parking Strategy May 2011
Annual Enforcement Review