

Report of the Town Clerk

NCC Consultation on Car Parking in Berwick upon Tweed

Background

1. Northumberland County Council (NCC) commissioned a report on parking capacity in Berwick upon Tweed from AECOM. The report has now been supplied to the Town Council as part of a consultation with the Town Council being invited to respond by January 29th.
2. The history briefly, is that, up until 2013 parking was managed, in Berwick, by charges for on and off street parking. In 2013 the then administration at NCC decided to remove car parking charges county-wide, and provided an information pack in support of this change, which is a background document to this report.
3. That information pack from 2013 includes details of petitions produced in support of free parking in Berwick, one of which was started by a resident of South East Northumberland, an intervention that has to be understood in the context of the debate, at that time, about whether NCC should adopt a county wide strategy of charging for parking spaces, as opposed to the situation that prevailed then, where towns in the south east of the county enjoyed free parking whilst towns in rural Northumberland did not. As officers, we have no opinion on that debate, but would respectfully suggest that in future car parking policy might provide a good case study of the difficulties and risks involved in trying to apply county wide policies to a county as diverse and large as Northumberland.
4. The AECOM study is only a study of demand and capacity, and does not set out either a business case for the costs of changes to the provision of parking, or a roadmap of the process.
5. Neither does the AECOM study provide any evidence (e.g. High Street footfall or numbers of tourist visitors or retail sector growth) as to whether the previous policy change (in 2013) was a success, or about the impact of a change to the pricing of one mode of transport (private car use) to other modes of transport (such as bus use) and their viability. Your officers have requested bus riderage data from NCC but it is not currently available (at the time of writing).
6. The result is a certain difficulty for any council preparing a response. Does it wish to simply respond to the document as is, and look at incremental changes within the existing policy framework, or to use this report as one piece of evidence in a wider context, which must include evaluating whether free parking has been a success?
7. This report therefore is set out in two sections below; the consultation report is addressed first, and then the wider context. In order to enable a full response to the consultation, the consultation report is evaluated via a series of questions, with supporting text, addressing the various sections of the consultation report.

The Consultation Report

1. Was the brief reasonable?

The brief for the study which led to this report was to establish existing parking provision and demand, to establish future parking demand, and to make recommendations as to future parking strategy.

Significant constraints were placed upon the brief, both as to the definition of parking, the organizations to be approached and the time and type of surveys.

Members may wish to note that the brief states that local businesses should be consulted with regards to their current staff parking behaviours. No quantitative data is provided in the chapter headed 'Existing Parking Situation' concerning this - what numerical data is supplied is lost within the anecdotes provided. Members may wish to consider whether a quantitative study of the number of people working in Town Centre businesses, their modes of transport to work, and the number of parking spaces those businesses provide for their employees should have been undertaken. Similarly, there are no studies of, or data relating to, either the types of customers using car parks, or their experience of car parking in Berwick.

Question: Are elected members happy with the brief stated by NCC, and with the way in which the brief was executed?

2. Is the review of the Study Area accurate and fit for purpose?

In this regard the question is merely factual; does the review of the Study Area accurately set out the facts?

3. Is the Policy Review reasonable and fit for purpose?

The Policy Review section of the report refers only to NCC's Local Transport Plan, and the local plan adopted by Berwick BC in 1999. Is this an adequate review of the policy background, or sources of policy information about transport in Berwick?

4. The consultation

The consultation section of the report details that the consultees were:

NCC's Core Strategy Team

ARCH / the Northumberland Development Company

35 local businesses and schools

NCC's Parking Enforcement Team

Two local councillors, and

Berwick upon Tweed Town Council.

The consultation responses are presented as a series of vignettes, but not summarized or analyzed for themes or keywords.

Responses to the first draft of this report have raised the issue that residents of the Study Area were not consulted; neither were parking users, or providers of other modes of transport, such as buses, which might have been impacted by past or future changes. The questions that follow, therefore are:

- a. Were the right people consulted?
- b. Was the evidence collected reasonably?

5. Existing Parking Situation

This chapter explains how surveys of existing car parking usage were undertaken, and the results of those surveys. Areas surveyed included on street as well as car park usage.

The concluding summary of this section aggregates all car parking spaces (whatever their term) into one dataset, and compares this to peak demand, both as a raw figure and against a theoretical 85% maximum occupancy. This leads, on current demand and supply figures to a deficit of 57 car parking spaces at peak times.¹

- a. Are you content that the surveys were appropriate and provide sufficient evidence to make decisions?

6. Future Parking Situation

It is unhelpful that this chapter, primarily focussed on demand, is set apart from the policy section referred to above, and does not touch on possible impacts from either the policies referred to, or the wider economic environment. The government is committed to banning internal combustion powered vehicles by 2040, which is within the 25 year investment period for major infrastructure. This moves large areas of knowledge around predicted demand and its impacts into an uncertain area; it is possible that a response to the banning of internal combustion engines will be a like for like transition to electric vehicles, but it is just as likely (since we do not know enough about future trends) that the result will be a radically different solution.

Similarly, the report does not (and cannot, practically) take account of any increased demand for car parking around the station as a result of changes to service pattern of rail both north and southbound. The questions that logically follow therefore are:

- a. Does the review of the future parking situation take sufficient account of broader government transport and roads use policies, and
- b. Does the review of the future parking situation take sufficient account of the wider economic climate and trends?

7. Do the recommendations follow from the evidence?

Given the limitations of the evidence, and the restricted brief, is it possible to identify the basis on which the recommendations have been made? In particular, bearing in mind the Policy section, which sets out NCC's desire for modal shift (in the LTP) and the desire for Park and Ride facilities in the saved local plan, are the recommendations congruent with those policies?

8. Are the recommendations reasonable?

Five major sets of recommendations are set out, concerning additional car parking, park and ride, parking restrictions, street parking outside the central area and coach parking.

- a. Additional car parking: several sites are identified for potential car parking. Some of them have significant issues already, which we have outlined below.

¹ The report refers to TEMPRO - this is software produced by the Department for Transport to estimate journey numbers.

Site	Issues	Feasibility
Land east of Parade Car Park	Likely issues of impact on Heritage site	
Land at 76 Ravensdowne	Land has been developed	
Former Youth and Community Centre Site	Site has been earmarked for a VCS development	
Palace Street East garage	Previous planning permission for housing, status uncertain	
Land to east of Quayside Car Park	Access difficulties via Sandgate	
Land north of Castle Terrace	Cost of development / impact on green spaces	
Land northwest of railway station	Remote, hard to deliver in current situation but see below.	

Are these recommendations both reasonable and feasible?

b. Park and Ride

The report sets out the issues at 7.2.23. Park and Ride will not work unless there is a cost based incentive for individuals to use it, and / or a strong disincentive for individuals seeking long term car parking in the study area. Six sites are identified; once again there are issues with the availability of some of the sites, and clear issues as to how drivers would be encouraged to adopt park and ride. The issues of how park and ride can be managed to prevent displacement of visitor / worker parking into residential streets both within and outwith the study are not touched upon by the report. The question that needs to be answered is whether the report considers Park and Ride in the fullest and most complete context.

c. Parking Restrictions

The report proposes a simplification of parking restrictions, but no significant changes in allocation of spaces or times because of the existing lack of capacity; is this reasonable?

d. Street Parking

The report proposes a number of actions for NCC, such as increased enforcement, and the production of travel plans in association with large partner bodies such as schools. One recommendation, which has particular significance for the Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group, at 7.4.2, states that all future developments within the study area should be required to provide sufficient parking including visitor parking to avoid any overspill to surrounding streets. There is a lack of clarity within the report as to whether such a requirement is enforceable within planning law, and about the pathway by which this will be adopted by NCC Highways Development Management Team. Are the proposals for street parking reasonable, appropriate and deliverable?

e. Coach Parking

Recommendations are made within the report as to potential locations for coach parking. Members may wish to consider whether they are deliverable or desirable.

9. Are there alternative recommendations that have not been presented?

Members may wish to consider whether they would like to propose alternative solutions.

The wider context

1. Is the pathway to a solution clear?

There has been no shortage of reports on parking and traffic management solutions in Berwick upon Tweed, and many of them have been considered by your Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group. With regard to this consultation the lack of clarity on some central issues has led to a report that you may consider to be incapable of supporting an informed decision at this stage. The opinion of the Town Clerk is that the lack of clarity about the potential for:

- a. Demand management via charging,
- b. Modal shift via investment (e.g. rail / buses / intra town cycling), and
- c. Parking expansion versus park and ride makes it impossible for your officers to recommend that you further pursue any of the proposed solutions in isolation.

2. Does this report enable a deliverable future parking strategy?

Regrettably, the conclusion of your officers is that the report does not start from a strategic viewpoint, and thereafter does not enable a sufficiently broad understanding of the wider policy options around demand management and the future of surface car parking.

3. Has the Town Council consulted sufficiently on this topic?

The first draft of this report has been circulated to councillors and members of the Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group, and has been broadly welcomed by those consultees who have responded. There is a separate responsibility upon Northumberland County Council to consult as widely as possible on their parking study, and they have taken responsibility for this. Some of the feedback received from consultation on this report has focussed on perceived defects in the County Council's consultation process, or on their choices as to who should be consulted. This feedback touches upon the issues laid out in the section above on the consultation process, and that section has been amended to reflect this.

Our recommendations would therefore be

1. That there is, on this evidence, no reason to move from the existing policy framework which sets out the desirability of achieving modal shift, or providing park and ride facilities and a better intra town bus service.
2. That there is insufficient evidence as to the effectiveness of the intra town cycling network, and no reason not to further explore whether cycling, either via segregated cycleways, bike hire schemes or facilities for charging e-bikes, could take up some of the travel demand within Berwick.
3. That a clear decision is made about the desirability of managing demand via charging, and the use of the revenue to fund new investment and the maintenance issues outlined in the report.

4. The report raises but does not resolve the question of whether a side effect of the loss of revenue as a result of free car parking has been the lack of maintenance outlined in the report, and the failure to manage and develop car parks (like the Castlegate pedestrian issues) to modern standards. A clear parking maintenance strategy is required, along with a clear understanding of how such works will be funded.
5. That park and ride cannot sit in isolation from the issue of better bus transport within the town; the possibility that off peak park and ride travel should be joined up with town bus services should be explored.
6. That no long term capital investment be entered into without external funding and subsidy; the possibility that Berwick might invest in long term car parking arrangements just as private car ownership goes into decline is a high and appreciable risk.
7. That a further report is required to explore the issue of the provision of parking and charging points for hybrid or electric vehicles, and the associated issues around trying to deliver such services on sensitive sites adjacent to scheduled monuments or historic buildings, or in terraced streets where properties do not have off street parking.
8. That the issue of railway station parking be addressed in the medium term via the existing consultation on the future of the ECML, with Network Rail being asked to address the issue of trackside equipment on, and access to, the northwest brownfield site as part of any scheme to strengthen the power supply on the ECML between Newcastle and Edinburgh.