

Bolton Council

Report to:	Executive Cabinet Member Deputy Leader		
Date of meeting:	28 th June 2021		
Report of:	Director of Place	Report Number:	ECMDL/41063
Reporting Officer:	Paul Whittingham Assistant Director Economic Development and Regeneration	Telephone Number:	X6042
Contact Officer:	Michelle Hilton Principal Project Officer	Telephone Number:	X6128
Report title:	Town Centre Free Car Parking		
Not confidential			
This report does not contain information which warrants its consideration in the absence of the press or members of the public.			
Purpose:	The purpose of this report is to seek approval for the extension of the current Town Centre Free Parking initiative until at least the 18 th July 2021.		
Recommendations:	Executive Cabinet Member is recommended to: (i) Note the update in this report. (ii) Approve the extension of the Town Centre Free Parking scheme until 18 th July 2021.		
Decision:			
Background documents:			
Signed:			
	Leader/Executive Cabinet Member.	Monitoring Officer	
Date:			

Consultation with other officers			
Finance	Yes	14/06/21	Corinne Davoy-Wood
Legal	Yes	14/06/21	Michelle Harris
HR	No	Insert date	N/A
Procurement	No	Insert date	N/A

Climate Change	No	Insert date	N/A	
Equality Impact Assessment	Yes		N/A	
(a) Pre-consultation reports Is there a need to consult on the proposals?			No	
Vision outcomes Please identify the appropriate Vision outcome(s) that this report relates or contributes to by putting a cross in the relevant box.			1. Start Well	X
			2. Live Well	X
			3. Age Well	X
			4. Prosperous	X
			5. Clean and Green	X
			6. Strong and Distinctive	X
1. Start Well	Our children get the best possible start in life, so that they have every chance to succeed and be happy.			
2. Live Well	The health and wellbeing of our residents is improved, so that they can live healthy, fulfilling lives for longer.			
3. Age Well	Older people in Bolton stay healthier for longer and feel more connected with their communities.			
4. Prosperous	Businesses and investment are attracted to the borough, matching our workforce's skills with modern opportunities and employment.			
5. Clean and Green	Our environment is protected and improved so that more people enjoy it, care for it and are active in it.			
6. Strong and Distinctive	Stronger, cohesive, more confident communities in which people feel safe, welcome and connected.			

1. **INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND**

- 1.1 Free parking in Bolton town centre was first introduced in 2012 to encourage people into the town centre and support local businesses. As part of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, a new free parking initiative was established to provide an additional 2 hours free parking on weekdays at all NCP multistorey car parks. We also extended this offer to include all on street parking in the town centre and Ashburner Street (market). This was an extension to the offer of free parking at NCP multistorey car parks at weekends. This was initially set to end in mid-November 2020 but it was subsequently agreed to extend the offer until to June 20th 2021 in line with Stage 4 of the Covid roadmap being introduced.
- 1.2 At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the council allocated £1 million for COVID recovery and response from the Town Centre Strategy budget (£100m). £839,000 of this was allocated to free parking. This was based on 2019 car parking usage and used as a maximum benchmark for what might be needed to fund the free parking. By the time the free parking agreement is set to end there will be approximately £147,500 of this allocation remaining.
- 1.3 This report sets out a proposal for taking forward the current free parking initiative.

2. **ISSUES**

- 2.1 Bolton Council has provided free parking in the town centre for nearly 10 years and shown significant commitment to supporting town centre reopening following the pandemic. However, the £1m budget available for this activity is now almost gone and a large proportion of the funding has been spent on the free car parking initiative. This is limiting other opportunities encourage the public back to the town centres and support local businesses. The impact of the pandemic continues to be felt by all sectors and is likely to remain for a number of months.
- 2.2 Increasing pressures on Council budgets means that the continuation of the additional 2 hours free parking is not sustainable as there is no other budget available to cover the costs.

3. **MAIN BODY OF THE REPORT**

3.1 **Underspend**

- 3.1.1 The £839,000 allocation was based on 2019 car parking usage and covers both on-street parking and NCP multistorey car parks. The council pays a flat fee of £24,000 per month for the on-street parking. However, the council pays for the multistorey car parks based on their usage. Use of cars has been much lower this year than the 2019 benchmark due to lockdowns and the multistorey car parks were used less, lowering the cost to the council. Going forward, as the high street returns to normal and footfall increases, the use of the multistorey car parks will increase. This will increase the cost to the council if free car parking continues on the current basis.

3.2 **Surrounding Boroughs**

- 3.2.1 Many surrounding boroughs offered a similar free parking scheme during 2020 and early 2021 but these have since been revoked. Bury for example revoked theirs in September 2020. By providing free on-street parking only, between 18:00pm and 08:00am, Monday – Saturday and all-day Sunday, it would bring Bolton back in-line with other boroughs whilst still offering attractive parking options, especially for the hospitality sector.

3.3 ERDF Funding

- 3.3.1 Alongside the council's own £1 million allocation, the council was also successfully awarded funding under the Reopening High Streets Safely Fund (RHSSF), which is European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). In May 2020, the council was allocated £253,140 to help make temporary changes to the high street to ensure public safety, especially around social distancing. This was supplemented in April 2021 by a further £253,140 as part of the Welcome Back Fund. Both these areas of funding are subject to the meeting of strict criteria. Some of the key limitations are:
- Activity must be temporary and cannot be used to purchase assets.
 - Activity must take place on council or public land/premises.
 - Activity must be in relation to COVID recovery and encouraging people back to the high street, or the help with the medium-term impact of COVID on the high street.
 - Direct assistance, financial or otherwise, is not permitted.
- 3.3.2 In addition, any activities undertaken by the Council must be funded upfront, at risk, by the council with the council then claiming back expenditure on a quarterly basis, following successfully fulfilling all the criteria of the funding. Proposals have been submitted for use of the ERDF funding to fund initiatives such as the development of a borough wide mobile app to promote the borough as well as measures to support the hospitality sector such as total or partial road and pavement closures. These improvements will radically help the borough with marketing and beautification activities.
- 3.3.3 Just over £500k is available to Bolton to spend through the combined funds and the projects to date have been funded through the remaining budget from the council's £1 million allocation, including the £147.5k left over from the free parking allocation. The final claim for the Welcome Back Fund must be made by March 2022. It has not been possible to make a claim as yet as MHCLG has not yet issued the Grant Agreement. Until a claim is accepted and funding recovered (quarterly), there is a limited budget available to provide the front funding for any initiatives under the combined programme.
- 3.3.4 If the free car parking initiative is extended it should be noted this will have an implication on the ability to draw down RHSSF and Welcome Back funding. Recovered funds will be available to reallocate from March 2022, ready for financial year 2022-23, thus allowing the council to focus on other initiatives and address the needs of the time across the borough. Any ERDF funding not spent by March 2022 will be lost so it is important to focus on utilising this funding to its full potential.

4. OPTIONS

- 4.1 The present free parking agreement is set to end on June 20th 2021. The council must provide 14 days' notice for any changes to parking arrangements and therefore the current period will have to be extended. In addition to this, restrictions will remain in place from June 21st and step 4 of the Roadmap delayed due to rising Covid 19 rates.

The options to be considered are as follows:

- 1) Extend the free parking for a period of 4 week and cease the free parking scheme on Sunday 18th July.
 - 2) Extend the free parking for period of 6 weeks and cease the free parking scheme on Sunday 1st August.
- 4.2 Option 1 will provide the council some time to adequately communicate these changes. This communication must start no later than July 2nd. Due to the timing of the decision, preparations to issue the communications are underway and will be issued as soon as a decision is received. The 4-week extension is estimated to cost the council an additional £66,940 in total and this will be funded from the original £839k car parking allocation.

- 4.3 Option 2 provides the council more time to put in place the measures and takes the free parking to Sunday 1st August. This extension is expected to cost the council an additional £100,576 in total which will be funded from the original £839k allocation.
- 4.4 The council does not have the funding to extend the free parking initiative past 1st August, other than the on street free parking as outlined in 3.2.1. There is £152,367.55 remaining in the Covid recovery budget from the original £1M, which includes what is remaining from the free car parking allocation. As discussed above, this funding will be used to facilitate the use of the ERDF funding the council has been awarded. It is therefore recommended that Option 1 is approved.

5. **IMPACTS AND IMPLICATIONS:**

5.1 **Financial**

The continuation of the free parking initiative is not sustainable in the long term due to the amount of budget available and there is also a risk of losing the ERDF funding if initiatives are unable to be front funded using the remaining £152,367. This money will allow for borough wide improvements such as the mobile app to be facilitated and the Council will be reimbursed following successful sign off of claims by MHCLG.

5.2 **Legal**

There is a requirement to publish traffic regulation orders to advise the public of any changes to car parking charges, at least 14 days prior to the changes. This period of time and process has been built into the timescales for extending the free car parking initiative.

5.3 **HR**

None

5.4 **Climate Change**

Although providing free parking could be seen as encouraging cars into the town centre and therefore having a negative impact on the climate, it is a balance with supporting the local economy at a time when the public are nervous about using public transport. We actively promote alternative and more sustainable modes of transport alongside the free parking, such as walking and cycling and the safe use of public transport.

6. **EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT (EIA)**

6.1 Under the equality Act 2010 the Council must have due regard to:

- Eliminating unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and any other conduct prohibited by the Act.
- Advancing equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and people who do not share it; and
- Fostering good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and people who do not share it.

- 6.2 It is important to consider how the proposals contained within this report may impact positively or negatively on protected characteristics. It has been determined that due to the nature of the proposals being of a time limited nature it is not anticipated that the proposals within this report will have a differential impact on any of Bolton's diversity groups, including staff. A full EIA is therefore not required at this stage.

7. **CONSULTATION**

- 7.1 Not applicable.

8. **VISION 2030**

- 8.1 Within the Vision 2030 Strategy, the Council will strive to deliver services more efficiently, through service improvement, redesign, recommissioning and decommissioning, based on evidence of impact. The proposals within this report contribute to this strategic council aim.

9. **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 9.1. The Executive Cabinet Member is recommended to:
- (i) Note the update in this report.
 - (ii) Approve the extension of the Town Centre Free Parking scheme until 18th July 2021, then the scheme will cease due to funding ending.