

Car Parking Speech – February 2024

Thank you Chair for giving me the opportunity to speak to Cabinet today.

When I was elected as a Ward Councillor, I was determined to do all that I could to support the residents of Midsomer Norton. I was surprised and disappointed to hear that that the Council was considering introducing emission-based car parking charges at South Road Car Park. I worry about the impact this will have on residents and businesses and what steps we must take to mitigate this.

Though I strongly disapprove of introducing charges, as a Councillor, I know what a challenge the council is facing to fill a £24m shortfall, and what impact this would have on vital services which we all rely on as council taxpayers. I have three requests which I would like the Cabinet to consider.

Rather than just simply saying no to parking charges and campaigning on that basis, I wanted to understand what car users felt about the issue and explore if a compromise could be found.

Over the past couple of weeks, I've spoken to over 150 car park users on five separate occasions, plus visited local High Street businesses. There is a strong feeling that the availability of free parking is vital to the economy of the town. In fact, 95% people surveyed felt free parking was very important to Midsomer Norton. It's clear that no-one likes the idea of paying for car parking.

I asked people how often they visited Midsomer Norton, how long they parked for, and their purpose for visiting the town. Over 85% of participants were using the car park for shopping and leisure and stayed for a relatively short period – **up to 2 hours**. Around one in three people live locally and the rest travelled in from communities outside Midsomer Norton.

If parking charges must be introduced, would you consider the following three actions.

One: I am asking today for the first two hours parking to remain free, ensuring local businesses will continue to be supported by those shoppers who visit for up to two hours.

Four out of five people I interviewed felt this was a reasonable compromise.

I recognise that this could be reviewed as part of the TRO process.

Two: There was a real concern about what parking charges might mean to staff working in shops in the high street. Many of our retailers are small independent shops with one or two staff. I want to ensure that these businesses are protected. I urge the Cabinet to consider introducing a parking permit to support local business. It was done in Moorland Road in Bath when the Resident Parking Zones was introduced last year, and it is vital that business in Midsomer Norton have the opportunity for additional help.

Three: There was strong concern about emission-based charges as air pollution is not such an issue in Midsomer Norton as it is in Bath. Looking around the car park, I could see more older vehicles which would incur higher car parking charges. I strongly urge Cabinet to reconsider emission-based charges.

I understand the Cabinet must make some difficult decisions in this budget round, but I ask today for you to agree two-hour free parking, discard emission-based charges and work with local businesses to introduce a parking permit which will ensure they can continue to thrive on our High Street.