

February 2012

Parking and CPZs: Report for Lee Green Assembly

Background

Lee Green Assembly agreed at its meeting of 13 September to set up a working group to look at the issue of parking in the ward, and in particular controlled parking zones (CPZs). This followed a report back from Lewisham Council's then Director of Regeneration, Malcolm Smith, who proposed the formation of a Working Group, made up of residents from all parts of the ward, to look at what he described as the "most complex set of parking problems". He suggested that, aided by Council officers, it should be possible to produce a report with recommendations within four-six months.

The Working Group met four times – 26 October, 23 November and 15 December 2011, and 10 January 2012 – with Lesley Brooks and Bill Tarplett of the Council's Parking Services, supported by Ade Joseph of the Assemblies Team. We discussed a wide range of issues, including the financing of parking, current parking zones, consultation and implementation, operational hours and flexibility of the schemes, charging policies and comparisons with other boroughs.

Preamble

Lee Green – with two railway stations – is one of Lewisham's wards most susceptible to "creeping CPZism". The issue is so big that it has dominated many ward Assembly meetings – this, despite a strong commitment to funding priorities, notably regenerating a run-down shopping area, facilities for young people and enhancing the ward's green spaces. Overwhelmingly, residents have been concerned that fairness should have underpinned the schemes and have not been convinced that this has been the case.

Here is a summary of our findings, together with recommendations. Some of these will have borough-wide implications, some may be resolved within the ward... whatever, the exercise has been carried out in good faith and we hope and expect that it will be taken seriously by the Council.

The financing of parking

The Working Group found it extremely difficult to understand how costs were broken down, and while officers did their best to explain the workings, there was a sense that the way the accounts are prepared – at least for public consumption – was at best opaque. Annual income, takings by the contractor, and money accrued for re-investment – highway and road maintenance – were not clear.

In particular, the way in which since 2004 the implementation of the contract is based on prudential borrowing and the first call on revenue is to repay that borrowing, before any money goes towards equipment to sustain the contract or highway maintenance.

We also had information on improvements in the service such as online applications for permits and "virtual" permits removing the necessity for windscreen displays and, while we accepted these might result in savings, some of this should be reflected in savings to the customer. Also, the new systems would not help people without access to the internet.

We had income figures showing a reduction in demand for permits, but no information separating out income from the annual charge for a permit, income from visitor's permits and money accrued from fines. This information will be crucial in any Council review of whether it's meeting its income targets.

Recommendation

- 1) The Council should publish transparent accounts, with clear differentiation about costs and income for annual charges, visitor's permits and fines.
- 2) Service improvements, particularly those leading to savings, should be reflected in reduced charges to residents.

Charging policy

There was widespread concern that, while residents in the early CPZs had initially agreed to a £30 annual charge (which was then raised to £60) and other later ones to £60, the massive hike to £120 was not part of anyone agreeing to the CPZ, meaning that the decision was taken without consultation. Previous assurances that Lewisham's charges are average were found, on comparisons with other London boroughs, to lack validity. **Lewisham's annual charge is in the top six among London boroughs**, hardly reflective of its demographic and people's resulting ability to pay – Lewisham is the 31st most deprived borough in the country (10th in London), according to Government statistics of 2010.

Some other boroughs have a graduated scale of charges, increasing charges for second and third cars. This would seem a sensible policy.

The big increase in visitor's permits similarly also lacked consultation. Here, comparisons with other London boroughs indicate that **Lewisham charges for visitor's permits are the highest in London**. This seems particularly unfair on residents who have informal carers, and on non-car owners who also have to pay for visitor's permits, despite being unlikely to have voted for the CPZ. Some problems might be resolved by granting an initial "grace" period for visitors in which residents might pay less for an initial period.

Many local residents reported of rude treatment by staff issuing the permits at the Parking Shop in Rennell Street. This may well have added to their hostility to the charges for permits.

The most recent hike has produced a new form of abuse, with residents either unable or unwilling to pay, parking in neighbouring roads without a CPZ, thereby producing a further unfairness that pits residents in neighbouring roads against each other.

Recommendation

- 3) The Council needs to review its charges with a view to reducing the annual charge, and address this very real grievance.
- 4) The Council should look to reduce the cost of visitor's permits, the charges for which seem particularly inequitable on residents with informal carers and non-car owners. Or, there could be a "grace" period to mitigate the impact of the charge.
- 5) The Council should establish a scale of higher charges for owners of more than one car, with a reduction in the one-car charge being recompensed by increased charges for multi-car owners.

Current CPZs: Flexibility of schemes and operational hours

Most schemes are for the whole day, with some 9am-6pm, others 9am to 7pm, some weekdays only, others including Saturdays. Despite requests for a two-hour restriction from zones which suffer primarily from commuters, there has been great resistance by the Council in the past. This is really about money and income, not suitability.

The cost of policing such a scheme could be borne by creating different two-hour slots in adjoining zones, enabling parking officers to move from one zone to the next. There would be a staff saving to more than compensate for any loss of net income.

There was unanimous support for a shorter restriction – as practised borough-wide in Bromley and parts of Greenwich. This would still deter commuters, while enabling residents to accommodate visitors, services and tradespeople without excessive cost – and could mitigate the worst of the price hikes.

Recommendation

- 6) Zones in Lee Green ward should be consulted again on whether they wished to have a two-hour system, adopting different time slots in neighbouring zones in order to reduce the staffing costs for the contractor. This recommendation, more than any other, was seen as the most likely to meet residents' concerns about fairness. Furthermore, the two-hour zone would be possible to implement within one ward.

Consultation and implementation

The evidence is that residents are usually offered one option (all-day), based on officers' knowledge of "attractors". They often cite factors other than commuters, necessitating all-day parking – in Lee Green workers at Lewisham Hospital being cited. The only part of the ward in which this seemed to be valid was the College Park area. Residents' own experience was that few people living near the station were affected by anybody other than commuters.

The lack of choice was seen as a major denial of democracy. The questionnaires fail to provide sufficient information or choice, with a more complete questionnaire likely to lead to a different result. Little notice is taken of comments – which are not votes – and the evidence as scrutinised by the Working Group is that sufficient numbers of people asked for other options to warrant the need for greater choice.

To improve the sense of fairness and increase turnout, the Working Group believes local residents should be involved in drawing up the questionnaire and consideration should be given to the literature being delivered by volunteers, ensuring there was no bias. This would also reduce costs.

In a Council review of the Hither Green East CPZ, in which residents were sent questionnaires, there were 91 people who took the trouble to write in the "other comments" box. Of these, 97.9% wanted some kind of change, only 2.1% wanted it to stay as it was – 76% wanted to change the length (primarily two hours) and/or reduce charges. The review was before the latest increase to £120 per annum. As the questionnaire failed to include the two-hour option, this lack of choice undermined the validity of questionnaire.

The Council offered more than one option in Holme Lacey and Dallinger roads – but there was concern about the First Past the Post producing the "least bad" option. Consideration should be given to Alternative

Voting as it might produce a greater consensus. There were concerns about turnout, often pretty low, but the Group had no view about minimum turnout.

The Working Group also looked at the process – is it fair that zones are consulted, each successful ballot resulting in demand in the adjacent zone (“creeping CPZism”)? And whether it would be better to have a single zone for the whole ward? As conditions are different across the ward, it would be unfair to impose a CPZ for the whole ward as in some areas there have been majorities who are clearly opposed. However, should people living in such areas feel the impact of a new CPZ in an adjacent area, they should have the opportunity to be consulted again about having one in their area.

Recommendation

- 7) The consultation process should be reviewed, with questionnaires providing better information and ballots greater choice – greater clarity would lead to more informed choices. That review should be paid for from surplus revenue from the parking account.
- 8) Local residents should be involved in drawing up the questionnaires, and volunteers should be used to deliver the literature, ensuring that it is done without bias.
- 9) Consideration should be given to using the Alternative Voting system.

Local businesses and traders and local schools

Some CPZ zones encompass shopping areas, with shoppers getting free short-stay parking in a limited number of bays. This is the practice in Staplehurst Road next to Hither Green station and in front of the Manor Lane shops, and in Burnt Ash Hill near Lee station. This was seen as a good policy.

The Working Group looked at business permit charges, and comparisons with other London boroughs. Last year’s increase of 67% to £500 made **Lewisham’s business permits among the five most expensive**. This is really unfair in a borough like Lewisham with a relatively low-income population. It also hits small businesses hard at a time when Lewisham should be pursuing economic regeneration policies that encourage small businesses.

Local schools were seen as a problem, as they generate parking needs for staff and temporary ones for parents. There was insufficient information about how these might be accommodated. However, one suggestion that should be explored is negotiating special parking rates for staff at local car parks, run by supermarkets, etc.

Recommendation

- 10) The Council should reduce charges to smaller businesses as part of its economic regeneration strategy.
- 11) Work should be undertaken to establish how to overcome problems created by the parking needs generated by schools.

SUMMARY

Only the commuter-blighted, worst-affected areas vote for CPZs first time. Residents elsewhere only convert once the impact of a neighbouring CPZ translates into an increase in other people’s cars in their area. Charges across the board, as comparisons with the rest of London showed, have created a sense of

unfairness in a borough that is hardly among the wealthiest. Is this the best way of fostering community solidarity?

The massive price hikes have generated enormous ill-will, not least because they were taken without consultation. While we appreciate the Council faces difficult decisions in meeting the challenge of big cuts in their budget, we do feel decisions about charging need to be considered more carefully, and that the most recent hike was a step too far.

There is a strong consensus on the Working Group that the Council has a duty to residents to look for an accounting structure that would better serve its electorate, and we hope our work will be useful to other wards experiencing similar problems in the consultation over and implementation of Controlled Parking Zones in their areas.

In addition, we would like to thank the officers who provided comparative data that helped considerably in informing the discussions that helped to produce such a wide-ranging set of recommendations.

Finally, we believe that adopting these recommendations would help to alleviate the genuine sense of grievance arising out of the implementation of the CPZs and the subsequent increase in charges. In particular, making it possible for residents to vote for more flexible schemes including the two-hour option would, if agreed, also impact on the need for permits for visitors and tradespeople and would help to create a greater sense of fairness.