

FROM COUNCILLOR EDWARD TOWERS

Representation to Shropshire Council Economic and Environment Scrutiny Committee regarding the 'Call In' for the Parking Tariffs Operations and Development Proposals - February 2024

Background:

I am very concerned to hear of the unanimous cabinet decision taken in January to increase parking charges in the way that has been set out. They will have the effect of further eroding the economy of Wem. When they were introduced in 2018 our SC Car Parks were full on a regular basis and trade in the town was brisk. We found out then that we were being placed in Band 6 and not Band 7 (Free Parking) and were alarmed at this because we feared that although only a small charge was being made for 2 hours of parking during the hours of 8.00am until 6.00pm from Monday to Saturday (at that time), this would damage our town's fragile economy placed as we are between the larger towns of Whitchurch and Shrewsbury. Craven Arms and Broseley have very similar constituencies to ourselves and represented by similar sized Town Councils, but they were placed in Band 7. During the 1990's we were placed as a Tier 1 town for 'rural deprivation' and it was hoped that Shropshire Council would recognize this and so place us in Band 7 with its benefit of free parking. However, this 'one size fits all policy of making all Market Towns have parking charges' wasn't adjusted to take account of our particular location, small size and economic difficulties.

Wem's High Street and trading arrangements have really suffered from these car parking charges. Since their introduction we have seen a steady decline in our shops and services, just as we feared. Our Car Parks are now under-used. Shropshire Council clearly hasn't listened because there has been no communication with bodies such as the Town Council about these issues even when parking charges were reviewed a short while ago. Prices were increased by 200% and also went from a two hourly charging period to an hourly one. Now, although small in 'pence' terms it is proposed to have further increases of 50% and have half price charging for Sundays. The Co-Op is the only shop open on Sundays. The main people affected by the Sunday parking charges, are the congregations of our four town centre churches. These Church goers travel in by car because they either cannot walk far or have to travel across our large rural hinterland – as other churches and chapels nearer them have now closed. The local newspapers have already written an article highlighting Wem's problem of Sunday charging and headlined it **'Pay to Pray'!**

As a local member I am now receiving increasing representation from people living in the side streets around the town centre as they cannot always find places to park as these free spaces are being filled by shoppers/visitors trying to avoid paying the parking fees. Our shop workers are not paid a big wage as it is and of course they will try and fill such places to protect the money that they earn – not an uncommon problem across the county, but here all the more likely if there are increased parking fees in the main car parks. Having free car parking would help reduce this problem at a stroke. I have written to two officers pointing out these issues, back in December/January, prior to these proposals being seen by Cabinet but regrettably I have not received a reply! I would now urge the Economic and Environment Scrutiny Committee to request Shropshire Council look again at the very difficult economic situation that Wem is in.

Wem's carparks are small and therefore will not be contributing significantly to Shropshire Council's funds.

If Wem were given Band 7 free car parking status, this would greatly help the town compete with Whitchurch and Shrewsbury, which have a greater variety and number of retail outlets as well as 2-3 hours of free parking on offer.

Consequently, in summary I object to these proposals on the following grounds:

- They don't propose that Wem should be moved to be from Band 6 to Band 7 of the Car Parking strategy because of our economic vulnerability to nearby larger towns.
- Our weekend economy is now to be targeted for the first time causing yet more serious impact to our town.
- The increase in tariffs further harms our already fragile local economy reeling from the impositions we have already had since 2018. They are very likely to drive business away towards the larger towns.
- There has been no public consultation with businesses or residents to assess the possible implications of these recommendations. SC needs to know first-hand what these feelings are before announcing policy changes and is contrary to the Shropshire Plan proposals.
- Wem's Town Car Parks are not fully used and well below optimal occupancy level (ref Paragraph 7.40 in the Officers Report). Following price increases, already introduced, they are now much emptier than they were before charges were introduced. Where is the evidence for this assertion in the Proposal document?
- The price increase in our central car parks simply add to our side/residential street parking problems - so called displacement parking (see paragraph 7.25 of the Officers report)
- I question the amount that will be generated by these increases. Nowhere in the documentation is there an estimate of the extra income that will come from Wem and how this is to be used. It mustn't be used to fill other gaps in Shropshire Council's finances! (see Paragraph 7.26 of the Officers Report)
- In the report Climate Change is appraised, but we do not have very frequent bus services like that of our larger towns....or even to/from them, to save the use of the car. There has recently been a Scrutiny Committee Report in Shropshire on Rurality. These proposals do not seem to take account of some of the transport recommendations now being considered by Shropshire Council.

Conclusion:

In short, the proposals the Cabinet have agreed unanimously are not only problematic for other towns in Shropshire, but they are particularly harmful for the long-term future prospects of Wem as a township and likely driving business away towards larger towns, even out of County. I would ask for the Economic and Environment Committee's help in asking for:

1. Changes to the proposals for Wem along the lines suggested.
2. A reconsideration of the 'Parking Tariffs, Operations and Development' document that allows a public and business consultation to take place across the County prior to any new proposals being put forward.

Councillor Edward Towers – Shropshire Councillor for Wem, Wem Rural and Whixall