

Town Centre Car Parking Demand and Strategy

All towns need an element of parking to support the economy which will be for a mixture of shoppers and local workers. Being a commuter town, there is also a large demand for both car park season tickets as well as kerbside parking in non-restricted residential areas.

Car ownership is on the increase according to Department for Transport's latest statistics, as bus use reduces. The south East of England has 561 cars for every 1,000 people. RAC have said that over the last 20 years the rise in the number of cars on the road in Britain has been relentless, going from 21 million in 1995 to 31million in 2015.

In January 2016 it was reported that cars on England's roads increased by almost 600,000 in the year. The reasons are believed to be mainly the growing population and prosperity.

Whilst it is likely in the years ahead alternative methods of transport may be also be available, if these methods are not affordable or an attractive alternative to the motorcar, it is likely to take many years before car park space can reduce. In the meantime it's important that we meet car parking needs in the short to medium term or trade will suffer.

If car park provision standstill or reduced in the town centre then alternative methods of transport needs to be in place beforehand - methods that are both affordable and an attractive alternative to the motor car.

Park and Ride has been explored in the past and will be looked at again to try and reduce the amount of vehicles travelling into town, and no doubt as technology progresses, other modes of transport will be made available and some people might choose these alternative methods.

More cycling lanes would be welcomed by many and we already have parking racks for cycles both on-street and in our car parks, including in the extension to Crescent Road. However, it will take time to deliver a robust infrastructure for cyclists to make any significant difference in reducing congestion and the amount of car parking spaces needed, with cars and vans accounting for 98% of all transport modes according to DfT statistics.

Tunbridge Wells town centre car parks provide ¹2,866 public spaces. 1,188 are dedicated to season ticket holders and an average of 832 accommodates long stay occasional parkers. This leaves just 846 spaces for short stay visitor parking and with the recent closure of Union House this figure reduces more. Not so many for a town like Tunbridge Wells particularly when we look at the planned expansion of the town in the short to medium term. We have also had an enquiry from a local employer wanting to lease 100 dedicated spaces for their staff and customers. The availability of parking space for new potential employers in the town could determine whether or not the town is right for them.

¹ Excluding disabled spaces

Unemployment is very low in this town and many employers have to recruit from out of town which means many employees may have no alternative but to travel in by car.

The parking strategy outlined many changes to existing restrictions and new ones to deal with congestion, traffic flow, and air quality through alternative restriction and policy changes. These changes will displace some of those vehicles from outside people's homes to car parks, particularly the all day parkers, many of which will be outbound commuters. Overtime this is also likely to influence decisions on the necessity of a vehicle when living in a town centre and ultimately contribute to reduced car ownership.

To give you an example, with the introduction of an extension to residential zone C recently announced, this will displace approximately 300 vehicles parked outside people's homes. Many of these will be outbound commuters; some local workers, shoppers and residents. Some may choose alternative methods of transport, but we must also be able to provide adequate car park space for those who have no choice. And there are several other town centre residential zones that are being changed and extended over the next two years.

Additionally, the Parking Strategy, in its aims to reduce congestion, is also looking to restrict many of those unrestricted roads on the edge of town where cars park all day long and those roads that are prone to footway parking causing major damage to infrastructure, trip hazards and other safety issues for pedestrians. It will also be reviewing our residents permit policy with initiatives to reduce and discourage car ownership and on-street parking that contributes to congestion and poor traffic flow.

So with the current average occupancy levels of car parks at 74%, the inevitable displacement from forthcoming restriction changes and the new 96 additional spaces on Crescent Road, it is likely our car parks space will meet the short to medium term parking demand, but this will need to be kept under review.

Whilst the future will no doubt bring other transport options, I believe it will be a long time before we see a huge change from the car to alternative modes of transport that will make a quick or significant difference to congestion and car ownership,

Crescent Road is in need of urgent structural repair and refurbishment. It also needs larger bays for some wider vehicles. So the proposed extension not only provides an extra 96 spaces but will also be able to cater for those wider vehicles without the need to change existing infrastructure.

As we begin to encourage traffic to move from our streets to our car parks, car park space will be needed to be available to meet the demands of all day parking and short term parking. If alternative modes of transport come along in the future then they will no doubt ease this pressure and could, in the longer term, reduce the demand for parking both on-street and in car parks. The potential for transport mode changes will be kept under review.