

Better information, better decisions, better services

Setting charges for town centre car parks



A guide to demanding better information



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Setting charges for town centre car parks

Part 1 – The purpose of the guide



Do you need to make a decision about town centre car park charges?

This guide is ...

- one of a series produced by the Audit Commission alongside the national report *Is there something I should know?* More information on the study and supporting toolkit can be found at www.audit-commission.gov.uk

It is aimed at ...

- decision makers in councils: elected members, service directors and heads of service.

It will help you ...

- specify the information you need for decisions on agreeing charges for town centre car parks. Better information will help you make better decisions about the levels at which charges should be set for your council.

Positively charged, Audit Commission National Study 2008, provides more background, advice and support on maximising the benefits of local public services charges. A supporting tool on impact is also available.



Setting charges for town centre car parks

Part 2 – Demanding better information

- Objectives
- Impact of different options
- Costs and income
- Public opinion



The information that will help you

Clarity on your objectives

- Why is this an issue in your area?
- What are you hoping to achieve?
- What are your constraints?

The impact of the different options

- Who is using what services and when?
- What impact will changed charges have on service use?
- What are the projected impacts on other council objectives?

Costs and income

- What are the current levels of income generated?
- What impact will changed charges have on income?
- Does the level of income generation reflect local priorities?
- Will further cost pressures be faced in the future?

Understanding public opinion

- How acceptable are the proposals to the public?
- What impact will the options have on the public?

Why is this an issue and what are you trying to achieve?


Objectives	
Why is this an issue?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Traffic congested town centres?• A need to boost economic development in the area?• Poor disabled access in town centres?• A need to generate income to maintain service levels?
What are you trying to achieve?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Encourage town centre traffic reduction?• Generate economic growth in the retail sector?• Enable access for disabled vehicles?• Meet costs and raise money for other transport priorities?
What are the constraints?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Wider council strategic objectives.• Service plans.• Agreed charging policy framework.

The **impact** of the different options


Factors to consider	The data that will help	The analysis that is needed
Who is using the service and when?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data on car park use by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - location; - times of day; - days of the week; and - times of year. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analysis of usage compared with targets for use. • Analysis of the customers using car parks in town centres, broken down by age, gender and socio-economic group and reason for using car park (for example, shopper or commuter).
The impact of changed charges on service use and on other objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Historical data on the impact on service use when the council made changes to other local charging levels. • Impact and evaluation data from other, similar councils who have implemented changes to charging. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Forecasts of the likely impact of the charging options on user type and locations. • Analysis of the impact of changed car park charges in previous years. • Forecasts of impact of changes in charges on wider objectives, for example, to obtain data on trends in retail sales or traffic flows.

Hints and tips – The impact of different options

Bear in mind that ...

 Analysing data at different levels of aggregation can yield different insights:

- Car parking trends aggregated at a weekly, monthly or yearly level will show changes in the level of use over time.
- Trends aggregated at hourly or daily level will show changes in patterns of use.


 Data analysed over time can help explain changes. Comparing and cross-referencing data on car park use, economic activity and unemployment over the same time period could suggest reasons for the changing use patterns.


Understanding your **costs and income**

Factors to consider	The data that will help	The analysis that is needed
What are your current costs and income?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Total costs and total income generated. • Income data from similar councils. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analysis of income data to show cost and income broken down by location. • Analysis of cost and income over time, and by location.
The impact of changed charges on income	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Income data from similar councils who have made changes to charging levels. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Forecasts of the likely impact of the options on income, using forecasts for changes in car park use.
Does the level of income generation / subsidies reflect local priorities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The current level of subsidies. • Comparison of subsidies with similar councils, with similar community profiles. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analysis of whether income is making desired contribution to overall income of council. • Analysis of whether any subsidies can be linked to other council priorities (for example, reduced charges near sports centres to encourage healthy lifestyles).
Will further cost pressures be faced in the future?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data on the efficiencies that the council has planned to make. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Forecast of potential future cost pressures, including changes in town centre, the impact of new businesses or regeneration and pressures on transport management. • Analysis of impact of future pressures on income.

Hints and tips – Understanding costs and income

Bear in mind that ...

 Different factors affect trends in usage. Cold weather may increase usage of indoor car parks or those closest to shops. Analysis of the length of car park stays compared to weather conditions will tell you the impact of the cold weather on patterns of use.

 It is difficult to predict the future accurately but easy to test forecasts by:

- examining what developments are under way and planned;
- assessing car park usage trends and their causes;
- using knowledge of how charging has impacted on users in the past; and
- using check questions to test assumptions (for example, will tourists really be put off by paying a little more?).

What do the **public** think?

Factors to consider	The data that will help	The analysis that is needed
<p>How acceptable are the proposals to the public?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A breakdown of public views by demographic type, geographical area and type of housing. • Historical data on how the public reacted to other changes to charging made by the council in previous years. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analysis of complaints, enquiries and focus groups to understand the concerns locally. • Analysis of what happened after previous changes in charging levels.
<p>What impact will the proposals have on the public?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comparisons of satisfaction levels in similar councils, with similar community profiles, who have made similar changes to charging levels. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analysis and forecast of the impact that each option may have on public satisfaction levels. • Analysis of the views and the potential impact on others, for example, local retailers.

Hints and tips – Public opinion

Bear in mind that ...



Different comparisons will be necessary depending on your main objective. For example, comparing car park user data (number of cars / times / type of user) with traffic flow data and public transport data (frequency / time / user numbers) will help you understand whether increasing car park charges is likely to significantly contribute to resolving congestion problems.



Different sections of the community will have conflicting needs and objectives. Analysis of economic and demographic data and information from local businesses on spending trends and patterns will help to assess how the public, and local businesses, are likely to view changes to charging.

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Part 3 – Examples



Example – Combining insights to help reach a decision

A council has been reducing car park use. Their basic usage data is not telling them much about their service users. They decide to bring together a range of imperfect data to build up a picture of service users and their behaviour.

Time and location usage

The council decides to use this data as contextual information for trends over time and differences by car parks and their location.

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**Video surveys /
observational surveys**

The council carries out observational surveys of customer movements ('carrier bag counts') in car parks / other access routes. This helps build a picture about types of users.

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User focus groups

The council undertakes focus group with key users – shoppers, town centre staff, business users, commuters and tourists.

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**Anecdotal information
from town centre
businesses**

The council consults key local businesses and examines spend data to see the impact of parking changes. Some of this information shows impact 'roughly' by income levels.

Through understanding the real impact of the changes on local people and businesses, the council was able to take a sound approach to reviewing and setting car park charges.

Example – Initial analysis enables a council to focus further research on targeted areas

The council wants to reduce rush hour congestion in its town centre and sees increasing car parking charges as a way of doing this. The council researches the possible solutions.

Road user surveys

The council uses street surveys to gauge the profile of road users in rush hour and looks at their routes and destinations.

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Public transport options analysis

The council looks at what options are available. The analysis shows that little spare capacity currently exists on the public transport network in the times and places that users need.

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Analysis of car park users

Analysis of the short stay car parks shows that significant use of these is made in the rush hour. Information on the type of users suggests it is shoppers who make use of these even during rush hours.

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What happened elsewhere

Another council faced a similar problem, and increasing the charges for short stay car parks in the rush hour did change patterns of use.

The council decides to increase short stay charges during the rush hour to meet its objective to relieve congestion in the town centre during rush hour.