

Environmental Services and Climate Change Committee Meeting	
Meeting Date	12 November 2025
Report Title	A review of Council free car parks
EMT Lead	Emma Wiggins, Director and Regeneration and Neighbourhoods
Head of Service	Martyn Cassell, Head of Environment and Leisure
Lead Officer	Martyn Cassell, Head of Environment and Leisure
Classification	Open
Recommendations	1. This committee approves that charges should levied year-round at the following car parks, at the standard tariff rate, from 1 April 2026; a) Little Oyster, Minster on Sea b) Park Road, Queenborough c) Library car park, Queenborough d) Front Brents, Faversham e) Grafton Road, Sittingbourne f) Halfway road, Halfway 2. Officers to proceed to formal Off-Street Parking Order consultation for each of the above. 3. Removal of the 30-minute tariff for all car parks starting 1 April 2026.

1 Purpose of Report and Executive Summary

- 1.1 This report follows up a discussion at Economy and Property committee on the motion submitted at Full Council on 2 April 2025, about transferring free car parks in Sheppey to the relevant town and parish councils. After amendment (as set out in 2.4), the matter was to be referred to the relevant committee(s).
- 1.2 Economy and Property committee reviewed the Parking Policy and Property Asset Strategy and in order to consider best consideration legislation is adhered to, requires this committee to debate whether certain free car parks could generate income for the Council and therefore would not meet the criteria for transfer.
- 1.3 The Council Parking Policy sets out the Council's principles for the management of on and off-street parking across the Borough. The report also discusses the key elements of the Property Asset Strategy.

- 1.4 This report recommends that Members agree to add charges to a number of car parks across the Borough, that are currently free to use, in order to help the Council achieve a balanced budget for 2026-2027. This also would then allow consideration of transferring some car parks at Economy and Property Committee should Towns or Parishes be interested.

2 Background

- 2.1 The Council operates 57 car parks across the Borough. 29 are free to use (six in Sittingbourne, 6 in Faversham and 17 in Sheppey). 28 are pay and display car parks where fees are charged. 40 are managed by parking services and 17 are operated by the greenspaces team, based at recreation grounds, open spaces and country parks. Some are in key town centre locations, others are in rural and lower footfall areas.
- 2.2 The existing pay and display car parks are forecasted to bring in over £2.7m in revenue for the Council in 2025-26 financial year, which helps to cover the costs of operating them and provides funding for other crucial council services.
- 2.3 A motion was presented to Full Council on 2 April 2025 which stated;

It is proposed that Swale Borough Council offer the Little Oysters car park at the Leas Minster and Queenborough Library Car Park (Castle Connections) in Queenborough to the relevant Parish and Town Councils through the appropriate committee and council procedures. Parish and Town councils are best placed to decide what is in the best interests of the people of Sheppey for these car parks going forward. If this approach is successful for these car parks, then the Council should offer other free car parks to Parish or Town Councils or to local not for profit organisations. Council refers this issue to the relevant service committee for exploration and ultimately, decision. Following devolution, it is likely fewer councillors will be representing Sheppey, and a repeat of the proposal for charging at these two car parks will raise its head again and the outcome may not align with the wishes of the people of Sheppey. It is hoped that all members can support this motion

- 2.4 The Council debated the motion, and the final amended wording was;

Resolved:

(1) That Swale Borough Council offer its free car parks across the borough to the relevant Parish and Town Councils through the appropriate committee and council procedures and Council refers this issue to the relevant service committee for exploration and ultimately, decision.

2.5 Car parks have remained free over the years for a host of reasons - low usage, encouragement for residents to use off-street parking to free up crowded streets, and political preference/policy.

2.6 The Council's Parking Policy states that parking charges are set annually by Councillors as part of the fees and charges process of budget setting (Policy and Resources and Full Council).

'When considering the charges to levy each year, the Council will consider usage data, compare with other local authority pricing and nearby competition and balance against the increasing costs of operating and maintaining the car parks and of course the nearby areas e.g. street cleansing of the high streets.'

2.7 But it also states that;

'Time periods for the tariffs to be charged will be debated and agreed by the committee responsible for parking with any budget implications referred to Policy & Resources Committee.'

On that basis, it is assumed that where tariffs are not in place e.g. free car parks, the Environmental and Climate Change committee, which has the responsibility for off-street parking, will need to debate any implementation of charges.

2.8 On free car parks, the policy identifies;

We provide a number of free car parks which generally are in more remote locations and serve local residents and visitors where there may be a shortage of other on or off-street parking. These are consistently reviewed as user habits change. We may also consider using seasonal charges where a car park is well used at certain times and not at other times of the year

2.9 As the motion focussed on the transfer of the assets, this motion was sent initially to Economy and Property Committee for consideration. They resolved that;

That the matter on charging at free car parks be referred to the Environmental Services and Climate Change committee, to ensure best value principles are followed.

2.10 The Council's Property Asset Strategy makes it a priority that the Council retains land and property where it makes strategic or financial sense to do so. This should be:

- to deliver services in line with corporate priorities,
- to generate income,
- to provide a return on investment,
- to enable regeneration, or
- to provide social value.

- 2.11 Whilst the motion states that it is better for local organisations to make decisions on the car parks, this Council is required to consider best value for its assets. When disposing of assets (as would be the case in a transfer to a town or parish), the Council is subject to statutory requirements, in particular to the overriding duty, under section 123 of the Local Government Act 1972, to obtain the best consideration that can be reasonably obtained for a disposal. This duty is subject to certain exceptions that are set out in the General Disposal Consent (England) 2003. Within financial limits, this gives Councils wider powers to dispose of land and property at less than market value, where it could be demonstrated that they promote the economic, social and environmental well-being of the area.
- 2.12 The Council's medium term financial plan still predicts a funding gap for future years. Where a car park could generate an annual revenue income, the Council must consider that option. The Disposals Policy sets out criteria for determining the potential disposal of an asset, which include financial viability, and specifically within that, the potential for income generation.
- 2.13 Officers have been tasked with identifying additional income streams to help address the council's budget position and the introduction of charges for free car parks would help to meet that instruction.
- 2.14 Appendix I sets out some detail for each of the car parks. Some are listed as being feasible for charging, some are possible considerations and some are suggested as not suitable.
- 2.15 Two of the car parks on the list are found in key seafront locations (Little Oyster, Minster and Park Road, Queenborough). Most popular beach locations across the country have 'paid for' parking. Minster Leas has a long stretch of free on-street parking, but it often gets busy in peak periods. The Little oyster car park has approximately 30 spaces and is in a prime location, where it is believed that visitors would pay a premium to use.
- 2.16 Park Road in Queenborough has approximately 25 spaces and is a central location to access the seafront and the town centre. It used by those launching from the slipway and visitors to the boats at the all-tide landing, along with general use for those visiting local shops/restaurants. Most other town centres across the Borough have paid for car parks. The same goes for Library car park at Queenborough (known locally as Castle Connections). It also allows access to the shops and is often full, preventing users of the library from accessing it.
- 2.17 Halfway Road car park is a tarmac surface with approximately 40 spaces and serves local businesses in the area. Consideration should be given to charging at this location as it is a well-maintained facility, serving a busy area.
- 2.18 Grafton Road in Sittingbourne is a small off-street parking area very close to the high street. It does provide some dedicated disabled bays and is used for short trips to the high street. However high street parking bays offer the same service and so it is felt that this location is suitable for charging.

- 2.19 Front Brents in Faversham is a small, surfaced car park next to the creek. The car park will be used by boat users and customers of nearby pubs/restaurants along with a small number of local residents without off-street parking. Charging should be considered at this location, with the potential to offer resident parking permits to a limited number of local properties.
- 2.20 A couple of car parks on the list, service residential areas where on-street parking is difficult (Ospringle and Shortlands Road). Ospringle prevents cars parking on the busy A2 and Shortlands road assists in taking cars off the road in tight, terraced properties. As these support traffic flow, they are not considered sensible for general charging, with the potential to push cars back out onto the roads. However, other car parks across the Borough do offer resident parking permits for use of the car park, so Committee could consider implementing in these locations. These are lower cost than full car park season tickets and are generally offered to a limited number of properties in very close proximity to the car park.
- 2.21 None of the recreation ground, country parks or woodlands are proposed for charging at this point. They are not in locations that create issues with commuter or shopper parking and encourage active lifestyles. These however, need to be monitored over time for changing usage.
- 2.22 Any decisions taken on charging at these car parks would be subject to public consultation using the national Off-Street Parking Order legislation. A delegation is requested to allow officers to start this process immediately. If agreed tonight, these would be launched over the winter and reported back to the committee if major objections were received.
- 2.23 As the Parking Policy refers to time period decisions sitting with the service committee, Members are also asked to consider the 30-minute tariff that is currently in place across Short and Long Stay car parks. The tariff does not encourage residents to stay longer in the high streets. Removing the tariff would require users to pay for an hour tariff as a minimum. This could generate additional income for the Council. On an assumption that 80% of those who buy a 30-minute ticket would buy 1 hour, it would generate a projected additional £150,000 a year. Whilst shorter tariffs encourage higher turnover of cars, leaving the potential for greater income and greater availability for residents, none of Swale's car parks are perceived to be at full capacity across the day and therefore a shorter time tariff is not required.
- 2.24 Policy and Resources Committee will debate further tariff related matters when the Council's draft fees and charges for 2026-27 are presented in November. This includes consideration of the hourly rate amount and a possible review of evening charges. We are also reviewing the cost of 'all day' parking to make sure our tariffs are competitive with privately operated car parks. All of the changes to parking charges need to be considered alongside each other as part of the budget setting and fees and charges process and therefore the decisions of this committee are critical to achieving this.

3 Proposals

- 3.1 This committee approves that charges should be levied year-round at the following car parks, at the standard tariff rate, from 1 April 2026;
- a) Little Oyster, Minster on Sea
 - b) Park Road, Queenborough
 - c) Library car park, Queenborough
 - d) Front Brents, Faversham
 - e) Grafton Road, Sittingbourne
 - f) Halfway road, Halfway
- 3.2 Officers to proceed to formal Off-Street Parking Order consultation for each of the above.
- 3.3 Removal of the 30-minute tariff for all car parks from 1 April 2026.

4 Alternative Options Considered and Rejected

- 4.1 Do nothing and keep all free car parks as they are. This is not proposed as explained in the main report, that some would be suitable for charging and the Council is required to deliver a balanced budget for 2026-27.
- 4.2 Charge for a larger number of car parks – this is not recommended as the appendix shows the context and identifies some as not being suitable for charging – condition/location/purpose.
- 4.3 Not to remove the 30-minute parking tariff. We want visitors to stay longer in the high streets and this will further help the Council's budget.
- 4.4 To only remove the 30-minute tariff from long stay car parks. This will likely not generate additional income as users will simply move to short stay car parks.

5 Consultation Undertaken or Proposed

- 5.1 Formal consultation of changes will be undertaken by the Council under the Road Traffic Act 1991 and Traffic Management Act 2004. This includes an 8-week consultation period that is advertised in all of the affected car parks and adverts in the local newspapers. Depending on the level and type of objections received, results may need to be reported back to committee.

6 Implications

Issue	Implications
Corporate Plan	Community – Complete the Parking Policy Review Running the Council – maximising income
Financial, Resource and Property	Maintaining free car parks is a cost to the council that could be mitigated by transferring to town or parish councils or by the introduction of charges where possible. Introducing charges where appropriate would meet the member requirement to increase income opportunities to support the budget position. The draft budget proposal predicts an additional £35,000 per year would be generated at the car parks proposed. Removal of the 30-minute parking tariff is projected to bring in an additional £150,000 per annum. The one-off cost of installing payment machines in the locations would be covered by the Civil Enforcement Fund reserve.
Legal, Statutory and Procurement	Off-street parking is controlled through the Road Traffic Act 1991 and Traffic Management Act 2004. When disposing of assets, the Council is subject to statutory requirements, in particular to the overriding duty, under section 123 of the Local Government Act 1972, to obtain the best consideration that can be reasonably obtained for a disposal. This duty is subject to certain exceptions that are set out in the General Disposal Consent (England) 2003.
Crime and Disorder	Free car parks have fewer restrictions on them and vehicles can therefore be left abandoned. This costs the council through enforcement and removal. Charging at car parks may displace vehicles into unsuitable parking locations. This will need to be controlled using the powers available to the Council.
Environment and Climate/Ecological Emergency	There is an argument that in order to encourage fewer private journeys, favouring active travel and support the climate emergency, that no car parks should be free. However as discussed above, some car parks are there to support other functions such as on-street vehicle management.
Health and Wellbeing	Not applicable to this report

Safeguarding of Children, Young People and Vulnerable Adults	Not applicable to this report
Risk Management and Health and Safety	The Council needs income to enable the required repairs and maintenance to be made to our car parks. Free car parks are currently subsidised by pay and display car parks, however, receive less investment than them, with the minimum spent in order to meet basic health and safety standards.
Equality and Diversity	Undefined, free car parks may reduce access for disabled users. Blue badge holders benefit from free parking in our car parks.
Privacy and Data Protection	Not applicable to this report

7 Appendices

7.1 The following documents are to be published with this report and form part of the report:

- Appendix I: List of free car parks across the Borough.

8 Background Papers

8.1 [Full Council 2 April 2025](#)

8.2 A link to the [Council's Parking Policy](#).

8.3 Property Asset Strategy

8.4 6 March 2024 [Parking Policy Report and Minutes](#)