

ROTHERHAM BOROUGH COUNCIL – REPORT TO MEMBERS

1.	Meeting:	Cabinet Member and Advisers for Regeneration and Development
2.	Date:	Monday 7 th October, 2013
3.	Title:	Free Parking in Rotherham Town Centre on Saturdays in the run-up to Christmas
4.	Programme Area:	Environment and Development Services

5. Summary

This report seeks approval for the allocation of £24,000 from within Environment and Development Services Budgets to offer free parking in RMBC owned car-parks in Rotherham town centre on six Saturdays from 16th November to 21st December, 2013, inclusive.

6. Recommendations

6.1 Cabinet Member approves the proposal for free parking on Saturdays in RMBC car parks for period 16th November to 21st to December 2013 (inclusive) as detailed in this report.

7. Proposals and Details

The Christmas trading period is key in the retail sector in ensuring year-round profitability of the business; a poor Christmas trade can have a significant impact on the viability of the business. It is therefore recognised that initiatives to attract shoppers are particularly beneficial to retailers at this time.

In previous years, free parking incentives have been introduced in the Rotherham town centre as a means of driving footfall during the festive period and supporting town centre retailers. This has included offering free parking on Saturdays from the period between the Christmas lights switch-on event and Christmas Day.

One of the key recommendations in the Mary Portas High Street Review was that high streets and town centres should have the flexibility to introduce local parking initiatives to boost trade. This is particularly pertinent to Rotherham, given the proximity to Parkgate and Meadowhall both of which have a free parking offer and based on the impact that Portas Pilot funded initiatives have made in the town centre.

Rotherham has welcomed a recent upturn in footfall figures and a reduction in shop vacancy rates. This can to some extent be attributed to a number of projects and

initiatives aimed at regenerating the town centre, including the Business Vitality Grants Scheme, Shop Local, Public Realm Improvements, the Events and Entertainment Programme, Gallery Town and of course the return of Rotherham United to a stadium in the town. Free parking in the run-up to Christmas would complement these projects and initiatives and would provide a further incentive for shoppers to choose Rotherham.

This year a Christmas parking initiative would include six Saturdays in the period from 16th November to 21ST December 2013 inclusive. The loss of revenue for each Saturday is estimated at £4,000.

A marketing campaign would be implemented (cost covered within the existing festive marketing budget) and would include:

- Radio and Press Advertisements
- E-marketing (Facebook/ Twitter/ Rotherham town centre website)
- Weekly e-mails to database of 16,000 Shop Local cardholders/ RMBC employees
- Stickers and signage on parking meters and car-park entrances
- Inclusion in all Christmas events, markets and shopping publications
- Press releases and associated PR

It is also essential that all promotional materials include reference to the fact that the free parking is only available in RMBC car-parks and on-street bays (to avoid confusion with externally owned car-parks on Westgate and at Rotherham Interchange).

In addition all promotional material will include reference to the fact that 'Maximum Stay still applies' which identifies to the shopper that where a space is limited to, for example, a 2 hours stay, the maximum stay period of 2 hours must still be adhered to.

It is essential that any communication also refers to the fact that charges will apply on Saturday 28th December 2013 onwards and as such this will be factored into the campaign.

It is agreed that going forward a full evaluation (including feedback from businesses) will be undertaken in early 2014 with a view to assessing the impact of the incentive this year and a full options paper looking at the future allocation of funds to support parking incentives of this nature brought to the Cabinet Member in due course.

8. Finance

The total funding requested from the Environment and Development Services is budget is £24,000. £15,000 is to be drawn directly from the British Land contribution to town centre initiatives with the remaining £9,000 being managed within existing budgets.

9. Risks and Uncertainties

The cost of car parking is only one element in a complex mix of factors that determine the attractiveness of a town centre. Research from Springboard, a national consultancy which measures and reports on town centre performance, indicates that where adjustments have been made to parking charges such that charges are seen to be good value in relation to the strength of the retail offer, then footfall has increased. Anecdotal feedback from businesses in Rotherham has indicated that when parking initiatives have been in place trade has benefited and case studies from other towns in the UK suggest a similar trend. However there is no unequivocal empirical evidence that shows reducing car parking charges will increase the number of shoppers in a town. The strength and attractiveness of the retail offer, the physical and environmental appearance of the town, accessibility by all modes of transport and availability of car parking are equally important in determining footfall.

10. Policy and Performance Agenda Implications

This project will contribute to the following strategic priorities of the Community Strategy:

- Provide the support necessary to increase the number of successful businesses in Rotherham – both new start-ups and expansions of existing businesses, including social enterprises.

By providing free parking, the town centre is better able to compete against its nearest competitors during the crucial Christmas trading period. The project will contribute to the following priorities of the Rotherham Community Strategy:-

- Revitalise the Town Centre

11. Background Papers and Consultation

Mary Portas/ BIS High Street Review (Rotherham briefing paper)

In addition consultation with:

Rotherham town centre businesses (continual feedback following one-to-one visits made and via Rotherham Voice retailer forum attended).

Corporate Finance Team

Contact Name: Bernadette Rushton, Retail Investment Manager

Ext 54576 bernadette.rushton@rotherham.gov.uk