

NORTH ESSEX PARKING PARTNERSHIP JOINT COMMITTEE FOR ON-STREET PARKING

**22 June 2023 at 1.00pm
Grand Jury Room, Town Hall, High Street
Colchester CO1 1PJ.**

Members Present:

Councillor Mick Barry (Tendring District Council)
Councillor Tom Cunningham (Braintree District Council)
Councillor Goss (Colchester Borough Council)
Councillor Neil Hargreaves (Uttlesford District Council)
Councillor Kane (Epping Forest District Council)
Councillor Dan Land (Essex County Council)
Councillor Nicky Purse (Harlow District Council)

Substitutions:

There were no substitutions at the meeting.

Apologies:

No apologies recorded at the meeting.

Also Present:

Richard Block (Colchester City Council)
Jason Butcher (Parking Partnership)
Rory Doyle (Colchester City Council)
Jake England (Parking Partnership)
Jo Heynes (Essex County Council) [Attended remotely via Zoom]
Amelia Hoke (Epping Forest District Council)
Owen Howell (Colchester Borough Council)
Michael Kelly (Harlow District Council)
Angela Knight (Uttlesford District Council)
Hayley McGrath (Colchester City Council)
Andrew Nepean (Tendring District Council)
Samir Pandya (Braintree District Council)
Ian Taylor (Tendring District Council)
Richard Walker (Parking Partnership)
Danielle Wood (Parking Partnership)

145. Election of Chairman

RESOLVED that Councillor Dan Land be re-appointed Chairman of the Joint Committee until the next Annual Meeting of the Joint Committee.

146. Election of Deputy Chairman

RESOLVED that Councillor Sam Kane be re-appointed as Deputy Chairman of the Joint Committee until the next Annual Meeting of the Joint Committee.

147. Have Your Say

Mr Michael Palmer attended via Zoom and, with permission from the Chairman addressed the Joint Committee. Mr Palmer confirmed that he had only wished to speak if the issue with which he was concerned were to be raised by someone else. As this had not happened, Mr Palmer confirmed that he was content not to speak further.

148. Minutes

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 16 March 2023 be approved as an accurate record.

149. Urgent Items

The Chairman informed the Joint Committee that he had received an email from Councillor Guglielmi of Tendring District Council, regarding a current parking scheme being carried out in Lawford and requesting that there be an addition of Florence Gardens to the scheme. Richard Walker, Head of Parking, confirmed that he was aware of this request and that this was not a new scheme, but had had some amendment of its timings recently. The Head of Parking explained that the road for potential addition to the scheme was not an adopted highway, and so the permission of the land owner would be required. If Tendring District Council wished to then have the road covered by a scheme, it could then be brought to the North Essex Parking Partnership [NEPP] for consideration alongside other proposed traffic regulation orders.

150. Financial Report

Richard Walker, Head of Parking, introduced and explained the report, in context of the briefing on this subject that he had provided for the benefit of new members earlier in the day. The Partnership was in deficit for the first time in years, with problems including difficulties in recruitment to income-raising posts. Deployment issues were now resolved, so Parking Charge Notice [PCN] income was now closer to being at the level expected.

The salary budget was confirmed as now being on target, but full deployment had not been possible over recent months. Vacancy factor savings had usually been used to cover shortfalls in income, but pay increases had meant that this had not been possible.

A £500k budget outturn deficit had been predicted for 2022-23. With the use of around £337k from reserves, this had been amended to a £188k deficit, which would need to be recovered in the current financial year, after which the aim would be to rebuild the Partnership's reserves up to £400k. A hold had been put on recruitment to non-income-generating posts, which would increase transitional savings. Spending on maintenance of Traffic Regulation Orders [TROs] and their signage had been reduced. The NEPP would be able to implement the next set of new TROs this year, but maintenance of markings and signage for existing restrictions had reduced.

The Head of Parking explained that, if the NEPP ends a financial year carrying over a deficit to the next financial year, then a plan is formulated to rectify this and balance the budget. The current plan in operation, which had been laid out, would set the Partnership in good stead to get back on track financially. If the plan did not achieve a balanced budget by the end of this financial year, then each partner would be approached for an additional contribution to balance the budget. At the current situation, this would be £30k from each partner, but the Head of Parking was confident that this would be avoided by year end.

A Committee member highlighted that, in the minutes of the meeting held on 16 March, a member of the Committee had asked why full accounts had not been produced, and that there had been no indication that this had been done following that meeting. The Head of Parking was asked if they could be produced for the Joint Committee. The Committee member stated that the South Essex Parking Partnership [SEPP] published more information, albeit not a full balance sheet. More details were requested, including the NEPP's spending on its vehicle fleet. The Chairman informed the Joint Committee that work was being conducted to see how the financial data could be presented to aid understanding of the NEPP's accounts. The Head of Parking explained that Appendices E and F to the report were new, showing information in the same format as that used by the SEPP. A breakdown of accounting by local authority partner did not need to be shown, as all of the NEPP's partner authorities were in deficit, save for Braintree and Colchester. The surpluses generated in Colchester and Braintree had counteracted those deficits in the past. The Head of Parking gave assurances that he would ask the finance team at Colchester City Council [the lead authority] to provide a full revenue and spending balance sheet, including fixed assets and effects of depreciation, after a further conversation is had to confirm the details required by the Joint Committee.

A Committee member pointed out that it was difficult for new members of the Joint Committee to accept the finance report without first consulting with officers. A full balance sheet was critically important and the Committee member asked if it was possible to get full breakdowns by district, and whether the decision on this item

could be deferred to the Joint Committee's October meeting. The Chairman agreed that the intention was to present the financial information fully. An update was on all Joint Committee agendas, but a suggestion was made that perhaps more regular updates could be provided to Client Officers between meetings.

The Joint Committee discussed a discrepancy in the NEPP Agreement, which says a Deficit Reserve Fund of £400k should be maintained, but then later states that this level of Deficit Reserve Fund must be maintained. A member argued that the wording should be amended so that it is clear whether the Fund 'should' or 'must' be maintained.

The Head of Parking was asked whether all spending on TRO maintenance had ceased, and whether contributions could be made by partner authorities to pay for such maintenance work on the TROs in their areas. A Joint Committee member also asked whether, in the event of contributions being needed from the partners to resolve any NEPP budget deficit at year end, the Section 151 Officers of each partner authority would need to be notified. The Head of Parking admitted that the NEPP Agreement had not foreseen the development of a deficit by the NEPP. Appendix E and Appendix F of the NEPP Agreement were from two different sources, which had led to the language discrepancy mentioned [use of 'should' and 'must' interchangeably in regard to Deficit Reserve Fund]. It was agreed that the wording need to be looked at. Appendix E laid out the requirement of a plan to eliminate any outturn deficit. The current plan was expected to eliminate the deficit before year end, but NEPP partners would be told formally if the projected year outturn were to worsen and a deficit be likely to remain.

RESOLVED that the JOINT COMMITTEE notes the financial position and out-turn for 2022/23, and the work ongoing to keep the service on track and bring operations within budget in 2023/24.

151. Permits, Fees and Charges Report – implementation

The Chairman emphasised that this item was for the Joint Committee to approve an implementation timescale for the changes to pricing of permits, fees and charges which had previously been agreed by the Joint Committee at its meeting on 16 March 2023. Richard Walker, Head of Parking, explained the situation and that it had been a long time since permit prices had been increased. The plan was for an inflationary increase in year one, followed by years of price harmonisation across all of the local authority partners' respective areas. Year one was only a partial year, as even an immediate implementation decision would need to go through the call-in period and be advertised, and so would take time to come into effect. The table within the report showed an increase in income of £276k for year one, with higher income increases for the subsequent, full financial years. The per-unit increase in permit prices was not significant, but the large number of permits in use meant significant increases in income as a result of the new prices.

In response to questions as to whether a specific implementation date was needed, the Head of Parking explained that the Joint Committee, if approving the immediate implementation of price changes, could officially delegate to him the authority to implement the changes at the earliest possible opportunity.

The Joint Committee discussed how this decision would need to be advertised, asking whether there was a policy on how this was done, and whether it would make more sense to advertise online, rather than via traditional print media. The Head of Parking laid out the regulatory requirement that advertising be via newspapers in the local area, giving 21 days' notice, alongside on-street adverts. Any changes to this would require lobbying of central government. Government had conducted consultation on this to seek local authority views, with many councils recommending a change. Government opted to pursue a slightly different approach, involving electronic advertising.

A Joint Committee member asked if there would be a quarterly report on permit uptake, should the decision be implemented, and whether any examination had been conducted to identify potential alternatives which people may find, rather than continuing to pay for permits. It was also asked whether a drop in permit numbers was expected. The Head of Parking noted that areas could vote to remove parking permit schemes, but there were few alternatives available to them, due to the numbers of cars in use. Some authorities were looking to set rates based on the environmental sustainability of individual vehicles. Frequent update reports would be given, with more frequent meetings with all Client Officers, covering the operational plan and augmented by annual reporting on the NEPP website. The NEPP had won awards for the extent of its data reporting.

RESOLVED by the JOINT COMMITTEE to implement the Fees and Charges, decided at the last meeting, with immediate effect.

152. Annual Governance Review and Internal Audit

Hayley McGrath, Corporate Governance Manager at Colchester City Council, introduced her role regarding governance at the North Essex Parking Partnership [NEPP], which included reporting annually on internal audit, governance and risk. Owing to the small size of the NEPP, there was no formal requirement for Annual Governance Statements to be produced. A formal Statement is not produced, but an annual governance review is conducted. This looked primarily at the processes of Colchester City Council, as the lead authority, including its finance and accounting processes. No concerns had been raised at this review and the internal audit report had been included as an appendix. This report was sharable with the Governance and Audit Committees of each of the NEPP partners.

Three recommendations had been made, relating to review and republication of policies, budget updating, and PCN data. An overall 'Reasonable' assurance rating had been given by internal audit, which was a good rating. The process of conducting a governance review was laid out and partners were welcomed to raise any governance concerns with the Corporate Governance Manager.

The report was praised, and questions asked as to whether, if any transactions were to be carried out 'across' the ring-fencing around the NEPP accounts within the accounting of Colchester City Council, these transactions would be picked up by transaction testing. The Corporate Governance Manager explained that a test sample of transactions was examined in order to ensure correct accountancy practices were being carried out.

RESOLVED that the JOINT COMMITTEE notes the Annual Governance Review of the North Essex Parking Partnership [NEPP].

153. Annual Review of Risk Management Report

Hayley McGrath, Corporate Governance Manager at Colchester City Council, introduced the report and explained the approach to risk management at the North Essex Parking Partnership [NEPP], split into strategic risks shown in the Joint Committee's risk register, and operational risks which were managed by officers at the NEPP. Whilst operational risks were managed internally, strategic risks were 'owned' by the Joint Committee and officers set recommendations, but the Joint Committee decided on the register. A risk strategy was in place, as best practice, to show the NEPP's approach, and the Corporate Governance Manager explained the four changes recommended. These were to remove risk 1.22, to change 1.23 to reflect the risk to the NEPP which would occur should the Joint Committee not agree to implement fees and charges updates, and to add new risks 1.24 and 1.25, which dealt respectively with financial pressures from future pay increases and the risk of not breaking even.

The Joint Committee discussed the risk scoring process, which was shown as combining two metrics, of likelihood and severity, to give a score for each risk between 1 (at the lowest) and 25 (at the highest). Once the Joint Committee approves the Strategic Risk Register, any amendments are made, and the Register published.

The Joint Committee discussed the review dates set for each risk, and gave the view that risks 1.23 and 1.24 were of critical and imminent importance to address, and should be reviewed by the Joint Committee before the January 2024 date set. A new review date was requested, to allow these to be reviewed by the Joint Committee at its meeting in October 2023.

Answering questions, the Corporate Governance Manager explained that each of the partner organisations had the same principles of risk management, but differed in their approaches. The NEPP's risk management approach had evolved over years and sought to give assurances in an easily understood format. Any suggestions of ideas for changes to the process could be made by Joint Committee members.

RESOLVED that the JOINT COMMITTEE endorses the Risk Management Strategy for 2023/24, and agrees the Strategic Risk Register, subject to the amending of risks 1.23 and 1.24 to have review dates set for October 2023.

154. Obstructive Parking

Richard Walker, Head of Parking, informed the Joint Committee that there had been no developments on this subject. Representatives of the Department for Transport had attended the recent Parkex Tradeshow and reported that there had been no progress made. Around 250k comments received during consultation were being examined. The Head of Parking gave his view that it was unlikely that there was enough time remaining in the current Parliamentary session for progress to be made.

155. Forward Plan 2023-24

The Joint Committee considered the request from one member to look at changing the start time [1pm] for Joint Committee meetings. The member who made the request pointed out that daytime meetings posed difficulties for Joint Committee members who worked full time, who would find it easier to attend evening meetings. The Joint Committee discussed the request, with members sympathising with those who had difficulty attending meetings in the middle of the day, but the majority of members indicated that they wished to continue with meetings commencing at 1pm, noting problems that would be caused by evening meetings, including the need to travel during peak traffic times, and the difficulty faced by those who would need to travel some distance, particularly when returning home, potentially late in the evening.

The Chairman noted that this was an information-heavy committee, and emphasised the importance of members preparing fully. A Client Officer requested that Joint Committee agendas be provided at an earlier stage, to give participants more time to consider them before each meeting. Richard Walker, Head of Parking, and Owen Howell, Clerk to the Joint Committee explained the timescales regarding report preparation and provision for Joint Committee meetings, and the preceding meetings of Client Officers, giving assurance that agendas were provided at a timescale in line with the statutory deadline set in legislation, for publication to occur at least five working days before the meeting. The Clerk to the Joint Committee offered to, when possible, publish a day earlier, but cautioned that this would often not be possible, due to the work required to prepare and review draft reports.

A Client Officer asked when full accounts would be provided to the partner authorities and why there had been a delay in their provision. Richard Walker, Head of Parking, explained that the delay was due to the Parking Partnership waiting for a technical issue regarding recharges to be resolved. The Parking Partnership's accounts were associated with those of Colchester City Council and final accounts had yet to be received from the City Council's Finance Team.

RESOLVED that the Joint Committee notes and approves the North Essex Parking Partnership Forward Plan for 2023-24, and the scheduling of a review of Strategic Risks 1.23 and 1.24 for its meeting on 26 October 2023.