

Welshpool Town Council, The Vicarage Gardens, Welshpool, Powys, SY21 7DD
 Tel: 01938 553142 Email: office@welshpooltowncouncil.gov.uk

Document / Report #1040

Author	Richard Williams Town Clerk & Responsible Finance Officer
Title	Free Parking End of Trial Evaluation
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OFFICERS RECOMMENDATION

- 1. To note the findings of the 2026 Saturday parking trial and the evidence from visitors, businesses and town centre WiFi monitoring;**
- 2. To decide which option to adopt as set out in Section 15 of the report; and**
- 3. To request that officers, should the Council wish to continue the scheme, seek agreement with Powys County Council on arrangements to prevent unnecessary payments through parking machines and PayByPhone during any future free-parking periods.**

1. Purpose

1. To review the Saturday parking trial operated at Church St Car Park between April and September 2026, consider the evidence gathered during the trial and after and identify options for 2027/28 onwards.
2. The report also considers lessons from the operation of the scheme, including the voluntary "Pay What You Can" element, and whether alternative arrangements such as a reduced Saturday tariff should be explored with Powys County Council.

2. Background

1. Welshpool Town Council has previously considered the cost of parking as one of a number of factors affecting visits to Welshpool town centre.
2. During the Christmas period in 2025, the Council funded free parking at Church Street Car Park on four Saturdays. A subsequent survey of businesses received 12 responses and was generally positive. Ten respondents reported an increase in footfall and nine reported an increase in revenue. The feedback also referred to customers staying longer and visiting more businesses.
3. Following that pilot, the Council agreed to fund a longer trial during 2026.

4. The scheme operated at Church Street Car Park every Saturday from 4 April until 26 September 2026, a total of 26 Saturdays. Its stated purpose was to support local businesses, encourage additional visits to Welshpool and make it easier for visitors to spend time in the town.
5. The arrangement was promoted as “Pay What You Can Parking”. Parking itself was free, with visitors invited to make a voluntary contribution if they wished.
6. Church Street is owned and operated by Powys County Council (PCC). The Town Council therefore paid PCC to suspend the normal parking charge on the relevant Saturdays. PCC's normal tariff for Church Street and Berriew Street currently ranges from £1.50 for up to one hour to £5.00 for stays of more than four hours.

3. Cost of the Trial

1. The cost charged by PCC for the 26 Saturdays was £273.10 per day including VAT, together with an administration charge of £98.40. The total cost was therefore £7,199 including VAT, or approximately £5,999 net of recoverable VAT.
2. The Council's direct cost of the trial was therefore approximately £231 net per Saturday.

4. Visitor Survey

1. The Council carried out a visitor survey during the trial. A total of 89 responses were received, of whom 85 confirmed that they had used the Saturday parking scheme.
2. The results from those 85 users were strongly positive:
 1. 61 respondents (71.8%) said the scheme had definitely influenced their decision to visit Welshpool;
 2. a further 14 said it had influenced them somewhat, meaning 75 respondents (88.2%) considered that the scheme had influenced their visit to some degree;
 3. 80 respondents (94.1%) rated their experience positively or very positively;
 4. 81 respondents (95.3%) said they felt more relaxed about parking;
 5. 82 respondents (96.5%) wanted the scheme to continue.
3. There was also evidence that visitors were spending a reasonable amount of time in Welshpool. Of the 85 users, 30 stayed between two and four hours. 71 respondents (83.5%) stayed for at least one hour and 43 (50.6%) stayed for at least two hours.
4. The most commonly reported activities were shopping, reported by 65 respondents (76.5%), and visiting a café or restaurant, reported by 62 (72.9%). Other activities included using services such as banks, pharmacies and hairdressers, visiting the market, seeing friends or family, working and visiting local attractions.
5. Comments received through the survey included visitors saying that they had stayed longer, visited additional shops or cafés and felt less pressure to return to their vehicle because of the parking arrangements.
6. Some respondents also said that the availability of free parking had influenced their decision to choose Welshpool rather than another destination.
7. There were, however, comments about a lack of awareness of the scheme and some confusion about how the voluntary contribution worked. A recurring point was that the scheme needed to be promoted before visitors arrived in Welshpool rather than relying primarily on signs within the car park.

5. Business Feedback

1. A separate survey was issued to local businesses. Thirteen responses were received from a range of businesses, including retailers, hospitality businesses, estate agents and personal services.
2. Eleven of the thirteen businesses (84.6%) reported increased footfall during the trial. Five reported an increase of 25% or more, five reported an increase of between 10% and 25%, and one reported a smaller increase. Two businesses reported no change and none reported a decrease.
3. Eight businesses (61.5%) reported increased sales or revenue, while five reported no change. Four reported a significant increase, three a moderate increase and one a slight increase. None reported a reduction.
4. Ten businesses (76.9%) considered that customers were staying for longer. The same number rated the scheme as either somewhat or very beneficial to their business, while three were neutral. No respondent rated the scheme negatively. Twelve businesses reported hearing customers discuss the parking arrangements either occasionally or frequently.
5. Several respondents referred to customers being unaware that parking was free or finding the arrangements confusing. This was despite the Council undertaking paid social media advertising, installing roadside and car park signage and distributing promotional material through local businesses. Other comments highlighted customers visiting multiple shops, spending longer in the town and choosing Welshpool over out-of-town shopping locations offering free parking.
6. Overall, the business feedback indicates that the scheme was associated with increased activity for most responding businesses, although the financial benefit varied and was not experienced by every respondent. The relatively small number of responses should also be considered when interpreting the findings.

6. Town Centre Wi-Fi Data

1. The Council has also reviewed anonymised town-centre Wi-Fi monitoring data to provide an additional measure alongside the surveys. There were data gaps on two of the trial Saturdays and these dates have therefore been excluded from the year-on-year comparison.
2. For the remaining 24 comparable Saturdays, the data recorded 8,092 detected visits during the 2026 trial compared with 6,393 on the equivalent Saturdays in 2025. This represents an increase of approximately 26.6%.
3. The proportion of detected visits lasting more than one hour also increased, from approximately 36.6% in 2025 to 38.8% in 2026.

7. Pay What You Can

1. Although parking was free, visitors were invited to make a voluntary contribution towards the initiative.
2. At 20th October 2026, the Council had received £109.73 in parking donations. The voluntary contribution element therefore did not make a material contribution towards the cost of providing free parking.
3. Some respondents may have regarded money paid into PCC's machines or through the parking app as their contribution. Comments received through the survey also show that some visitors were unclear about how or where they could make a voluntary contribution, this is despite signage being available at both pay and display machines explaining the scheme.

8. Promotion of the Trial

1. The Council promoted the Saturday parking trial through a combination of digital advertising, physical signage and support from local businesses.
2. A paid social media advertising campaign targeted people aged 18 and over within approximately 70km of Welshpool. The Council spent £92.50 on the campaign, which generated 38,364 views and reached 15,170 individual viewers. The campaign reached audiences on both sides of the Wales–England border, with more viewers recorded in England than in Wales. This wider geographical reach was intentional, as one of the purposes of the scheme was to encourage people to choose Welshpool as a destination rather than only communicating the offer to people already within the town.
3. Physical signs were also installed on roads approaching the car park and within Church Street Car Park, including signs positioned alongside the payment machines. Local businesses supported the campaign by displaying signs in their shop windows explaining that Church Street Car Park was free on Saturdays.

9. Payments made to PCC

1. One of the main operational difficulties was that PCC's payment machines remained operational during the free Saturdays. Visitors were not required to purchase a ticket, but the machines remained available and PayByPhone also continued to accept payments.
2. The Town Council subsequently requested details of payments received by PCC on each of the 26 Saturdays. The information supplied confirms that payments continued throughout the trial. The total net parking revenue received during the trial was approximately £1,830. This is equivalent to around 30.5% of the £5,999 net payment made by the Town Council to suspend charges.
3. These payments were made despite the Town Council having already paid PCC to suspend the requirement for motorists to pay on those dates. This problem was also observed during the operation of the scheme and was reported publicly at the time.
4. The Town Council attempted to address this through additional signage, but it was not permitted to cover PCC's machines. The Council's own published information therefore had to explain that the machines remained in place but did not need to be used.
5. If the Council funds completely free parking again, it would be preferable to agree arrangements with PCC whereby the relevant payment machines and app payments are disabled for the period concerned, or the machines are clearly covered or otherwise marked as not requiring payment.

10. Overall Assessment

1. There are three main sources of evidence available to the Council: visitor feedback, business feedback and town-centre Wi-Fi data. None of these measures, individually or collectively, can prove that every increase in activity was caused by free parking.
2. However, the overall picture is positive. The visitor survey found that 88% of users considered the scheme to have influenced their decision to visit Welshpool and 95% felt more relaxed about parking.
3. More than four-fifths of surveyed users remained in Welshpool for at least an hour and just over half remained for two hours or more.
4. Business feedback was similarly positive, with eleven of the thirteen responding businesses (84.6%) reporting increased footfall, eight (61.5%) reporting increased sales or revenue and ten (76.9%) reporting that customers were staying for longer. No business reported a reduction in footfall or sales.

5. The Wi-Fi data independently recorded 26.6% more detected visits on the 24 comparable Saturdays than on the equivalent Saturdays in 2025, including a 17.1% increase in visits lasting between one and six hours.
6. Taken together, there is reasonable evidence that the trial was associated with increased town-centre activity and that the removal of parking charges influenced the behaviour of at least some visitors.
7. There is less evidence about the direct financial value generated for individual businesses. Although a majority of responding businesses reported increased sales, the extent of any additional spending cannot be reliably quantified, and the relatively small, self-selecting survey samples should be taken into account when considering the findings.

11. Lessons Learnt

1. The trial identified two main areas for improvement. Firstly, any future scheme should be promoted simply as free Saturday parking rather than “Pay What You Can”, given the limited voluntary contributions received and the confusion reported by some visitors.
2. Secondly, the arrangements within the car park need to reflect the offer being promoted. Any future agreement with PCC should seek to ensure that payment machines and PayByPhone are disabled or clearly marked to prevent unnecessary payments.
3. The Council should also continue promoting any future scheme through a combination of roadside signage, digital advertising and local businesses, building on the campaign undertaken during the trial.

12. Cost of Continuing Free Parking

1. PCC has provided updated prices for the suspension of charges. Church St has been quoted at £330.92 per day (incl VAT) and Berriew St has been quoted at £278.07 per day (incl VAT). The administration fee of £98.40 incl VAT also applies.
2. Based on the current quoted rates the following would cost:
 1. 26 Saturdays - Church Street - £7251.93
 2. 26 Saturdays - Berriew St - £6106.85
 3. 52 Saturdays - Church Street - £14,421.87
 4. 52 Saturdays - Berriew St - £12,131.70
3. The updated Church Street daily charge is approximately 21% higher than the £273.10 charged for the 2026 trial. The Council should also be aware that the rates applicable from April 2027 are not yet known.
4. For that reason, £16,000 has provisionally been included within the draft 2027/28 budget. This is a budget provision only and does not commit the Council to continuing the scheme or spending the full amount.

13. Which Car Park?

1. The 2026 trial operated entirely from Church Street and consequently the evidence gathered relates to that car park. Church Street therefore has the advantage of an established trial and known visitor experience.
2. Berriew Street is currently cheaper to suspend, with a quoted daily rate approximately £52.85 lower than Church Street. Over a full 52-Saturday year this would represent a saving of approximately £2,290 net at current prices.

3. If free parking is continued, the final choice of car park should therefore be made after comparing the cost and practical implications of both sites.

14. Value for Money

1. The net cost of the 2026 trial was approximately £5,999. This was paid for in the previous financial year using a underspend and therefore the cost to the precept was £0.
2. The evidence suggests that the scheme influenced visitor behaviour and coincided with increased town-centre activity.
3. However, it is not possible to place an exact monetary value on the economic benefit to Welshpool or to calculate a direct financial return on the Council's expenditure.
4. The Council therefore needs to consider value for money in terms of its wider objective of supporting the town centre rather than expecting a direct financial return to WTC.

15. Options

1. Option 1 - do not continue. No further Town Council funding would be provided and PCC's normal parking charges would apply.
2. Option 2 - Seasonal free Saturday parking. The Council could repeat the arrangement for 2026 and fund April to September which would be £7,252 at Church Street and £6,107 at Berriew St. The actual 2027/28 prices may differ hence the £16k buffer in the budget.
3. Option 3 - year-round free Saturday parking. The Council could fund free parking on all Saturdays throughout the financial year which would be £14,422 at Church Street and £12,132 at Berriew St. Again, these are indicative figures based on current charges hence the £16k buffer in the budget.

16. Links to Strategic Objectives and Interim Strategic Plan

1. The Saturday parking initiative supports the Council's Interim Strategic Plan by contributing to the wider objectives of supporting the local economy, encouraging visitors to Welshpool and improving the vitality and attractiveness of the town centre.

17. Resource & Legal Implications

1. There is currently no approved budget for the continuation of the scheme beyond the existing trial. A provisional sum of £16,000 has been included within the draft 2027/28 budget to allow the Council to consider a future town-centre parking initiative. Inclusion within the draft budget does not commit the Council to spending this amount and the final cost will depend upon the option subsequently agreed.
2. Based on current PCC charges, providing free parking for 52 Saturdays would cost approximately £14,422 net at Church Street Car Park or £12,132 net at Berriew Street Car Park, assuming one administration charge. PCC's charges for 2027/28 are not yet known and may change before any future scheme begins.
3. The Town Clerk has considered sections 57 and 60 of the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984 in relation to contributing towards off-street parking provision. The statutory basis for any further arrangement to subsidise the suspension of parking charges should be confirmed before a financial commitment is entered into. It may be that Section 137(1)(a) is the most appropriate power to use however this expenditure is capped each year.

18. Specific Implications

1. **Crime and Disorder** - N/A (Crime and Disorder Act 1998).

2. **Biodiversity** - the Council should recognise the potential environmental implications of encouraging additional car journeys and consider opportunities to promote sustainable travel alongside any future parking initiative (Environment (Wales) Act 2016).
3. **Well-being** - encouraging use of the town centre supports some well-being objectives (Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015).
4. **Risk Management** - The principal risks relate to the financial cost of continuing the scheme, uncertainty over its direct economic impact and the operational arrangements with Powys County Council. These can be managed through an agreed budget, clearly defined arrangements with PCC, improved communication of parking charges and ongoing monitoring of the scheme's effectiveness. Any future agreement should also address the operation of payment machines and PayByPhone to reduce the risk of motorists paying unnecessarily. The Council should consider these matters alongside the relevant financial, operational and reputational risks within its risk register.

19. Recommendation

1. To note the findings of the 2026 Saturday parking trial and the evidence from visitors, businesses and town centre WiFi monitoring;
2. To decide which option to adopt as set out in Section 15 of the report; and
3. To request that officers, should the Council wish to continue the scheme, seek agreement with Powys County Council on arrangements to prevent unnecessary payments through parking machines and PayByPhone during any future free-parking periods.

20. Decision

1. To resolve to adopt the recommendations as above.