Cyngor Tref Trallwng Welshpool Town Council

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1. Purpose

1. To present Full Council with the findings from the Christmas free-parking Saturdays, including business survey results, donation performance, and operational observations, and to consider whether to proceed with a 26-week 'Pay What You Can' Parking trial at Church Street Car Park from April to September 2026.

2. Background

1. The Council's Interim Corporate & Strategic Plan 2025–28 identifies town-centre vitality, accessibility, and economic regeneration as strategic priorities. Parking charges are frequently raised by residents and businesses as a barrier to visiting Welshpool, particularly on Saturdays.
2. To gather evidence, Church Street Car Park was made free on four Saturdays during the Christmas period (29 November, 6, 13 and 20 December 2025).
3. Church Street Car Park is owned and operated by Powys County Council. Powys will only permit full suspension of charges upon payment of a daily loss-of-income fee and does not allow alternative tariffs. Nothing may be attached to pay machines, although temporary signage adjacent to machines is permitted.
4. Powys County Council's 2023 Parking Review identified that Church Street Car Park has 230 spaces and an average Saturday peak occupancy of only 25% (around 54 vehicles). The highest recorded peak during 2022–23 was 77% (164 vehicles), demonstrating substantial unused capacity.
5. This places Church Street in the lowest-occupancy quartile of all paid car parks in Powys, indicating a strong opportunity to test whether reducing the parking barrier can stimulate town-centre activity without creating congestion.
6. Other town councils within Powys are actively exploring similar interventions. Newtown & Llanllwchaiarn Town Council has debated a six-month "Parking for a Pound" initiative (now undertaking further research), and Brecon Town Council currently funds free Saturday parking.

3. Christmas Free Parking – Operational Findings

1. Donations and Public Engagement

1. Total voluntary donations received across the four Saturdays amounted to £13.54 (approximately £3.38 per day).
2. Initial engagement was extremely limited when signage referred only to “Free Parking.”
3. When signage was changed to “Pay What You Can Parking,” there was a noticeable improvement in public interaction and contributions.

2. The Christmas trial therefore indicates that voluntary donations cannot realistically be relied upon to fund or materially offset the cost of any wider scheme, and should be viewed primarily as a public engagement and goodwill mechanism rather than a financial one.

4. Business Survey – Key Findings

1. To supplement observation, the Council undertook a targeted business survey in January 2026. Twelve town-centre businesses responded, representing a range of retail and hospitality uses.
2. Headline Results
    1. 10 of 12 businesses (83%) reported that free parking was beneficial or very beneficial.
    2. 7 businesses reported a significant increase in customers.
    3. 3 businesses reported a slight increase.
    4. 2 businesses reported no change.
    5. No businesses reported any negative impact.
3. Common themes identified
    1. More customers coming into town
    2. Customers staying longer
    3. Increased spend
    4. More new and repeat visitors
    5. A perception that the town felt busier and more vibrant
4. Representative comments included
    1. “People are willing to browse the street longer… genuinely making the high street more vibrant.”
    2. “Free parking allowed customers to park without worry and spend more time in our shop.”
    3. “It seemed that more people were actually walking around the town.”
    4. “Better promotion of free parking would improve impact.”
    5. “Please introduce this more often and lower the parking charges otherwise the high street will die.”
5. Overall conclusion from the survey
    1. The business survey provides clear qualitative evidence that the free-parking Saturdays had a positive economic and behavioural impact on the town centre, particularly in relation to footfall, dwell time and customer spending. This materially strengthens the case for considering a longer, more structured trial outside the Christmas period.

5. Proposal for Consideration

1. That Council considers whether to proceed with a 26-week 'Pay What You Can' Saturday Parking trial at Church Street Car Park from April to September 2026, in order to:
    1. test impact outside the Christmas trading period,
    2. properly monitor occupancy and footfall changes,
    3. assess business impacts over a sustained period, and
    4. determine whether such an intervention represents good value for money.
2. Indicative net cost to the Town Council (based on current Powys charges) would be approximately £5,999 (ex VAT) for the 26-week period.
3. Any voluntary donations should be treated as incidental only, but will offset the final cost.

6. Advice

1. The Christmas free-parking days have provided useful operational learning and clear qualitative economic evidence.
2. While donations were minimal, the business survey demonstrates a strong positive response, with over 80% of respondents reporting benefit and no negative responses recorded.
3. The combination of low baseline occupancy, strong trader support, and regional precedent supports the case for a summer trial to gather more robust quantitative data.
4. Any future scheme should be justified as a deliberate economic support intervention, not a cost-neutral initiative.
5. A longer trial outside the Christmas period would allow Council to assess true behavioural change, free from seasonal distortion.

7. Links to Strategic Objectives and Interim Strategic Plan

1. Strategic Aim - Enhance the town centre environment
2. Strategic Aim - Develop Welshpool as a destination

8. Resource & Legal Implications

1. The proposal can be supported from a legal aspect relying on the powers in Section 57(3) of the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984 or Section 137 of the Local Government Act 1972.
2. The maximum cost to the Council would be £5,999.08 and would be offset by donations. This translates into a annual Band D cost of £2.13 or 8p per the 26 weeks in operation.

9. Specific Implications

1. **Crime and Disorder** - the scheme would have a none or low impact on crime and disorder in the town (Crime and Disorder Act 1998).
2. **Biodiversity** - N/A (Environment (Wales) Act 2016).
3. **Well-being** - increased footfall would contribute to A Prosperous Wales and free parking reduces barriers for lower-income households contributing to A More Equal Wales (Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015).
4. **Risk Management** - the main risks involve lower than expected donations leaving a higher net cost to the Council; budget pressures and the perception of double taxation.

10. Decision

1. To note the findings of the business survey and Christmas Parking trial;

2. To consider the proposal and if approved:
    1. consider any implication on the 2026/27 budget to include provision for the project (by either new funding or transferred funding from other account codes);
    2. to remit the scheme to the Events & Planning Committee as they have responsibility for economic regeneration; and
    3. request a post-trial evaluation prior to any continuation of the scheme.