

Stevenage Borough Council Annual Parking Report 2020-21

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Why do we manage parking?

Since 2005, Stevenage Borough Council has had the power, in partnership with Hertfordshire County Council (the local Traffic Authority) to manage on street parking within the town. This means the council can make, and enforce, local parking rules.

Having these powers, the council is expected to use them and before taking them on we developed a Parking Strategy. The 2004 Parking Strategy identified ways that parking affects the community, and set out a range of ways that parking should be managed in future to support local and national policy aims.

Managing parking to support these aims benefits everyone who lives in, or visits, Stevenage. That could be by removing hazardous or obstructive parking so that the roads can be used safely and easily, by ensuring that customers are able to visit businesses, or by nudging people to consider using other modes of transport that are better for their health while reducing both traffic congestion and pollution.

Council parking enforcement also means that we can help deal with most illegal parking, freeing up the Police who would otherwise have to do so. The council can enforce against:

- breaking specific rules such as parking on double yellow lines or in an enforceable bus stop, parking for longer than is allowed or not paying when you are supposed to;
- parking that obstructs where the pavement has been lowered (or the road surface has been raised) to give access to a driveway or so that people can cross the road; and
- parking more than 50cm out from the kerb into the road (double parking).

The council doesn't set out to make money from parking, but is expected by the government to make its parking service self-funding so that it doesn't form a burden on council tax payers generally who after all may not even own a car. If the council makes more money from on-street parking fees and parking enforcement than it spends on managing parking, this either goes to offset any loss in past years or is used to fund specific things allowed by law such as transport or environmental improvements and building or maintaining parking facilities.

How do we manage parking?

Parking is largely managed by making rules about what drivers can and can't do, and upholding those rules through enforcement if they are broken. The council can only enforce through issuing Penalty Charge Notices ("parking tickets" or PCNs).

It should be remembered that most drivers don't seek to park illegally and may never receive a PCN. If they do, it is because based on what the Civil Enforcement Officer (CEO or "traffic warden") can see they believe that the vehicle has been parked in a way that breaks the rules. CEOs don't receive any sort of reward for issuing PCNs and one of the

service KPIs is avoiding CEO errors, with a target error rate of under 1% so if anything CEOs are incentivised not to issue PCNs unless they are certain that it is correct to do so.

Every year many tickets are correctly issued in this way, and when challenged by the driver correctly cancelled as they provide information or evidence that wasn't available to the CEO. The Parking Office at East Herts District Council considers all PCN challenges on the Stevenage Borough Council's behalf, so drivers are assured a fair and consistent hearing from a third party that has nothing to gain from their decision.

The rules that we make generally fall into two categories: preventing parking, and creating opportunities for it.

Preventing parking usually means placing yellow lines. That could be double yellow lines that apply all the time somewhere that parking would create a hazard or obstruction, or a single yellow line to address a problem that only happens at certain times such as parking pressure from commuters. It can also mean banning parking on the verge or pavement to protect the environment and so that pedestrians aren't hindered by parked cars.

Creating opportunities means making it easier for one user to stop, but often at the cost of someone else being able to park. For example we might have to make a bus stop enforceable so that buses can actually use it, meaning that cars that had been blocking it would have to be parked somewhere else. It can also mean setting conditions on parking, such as in the High Street where a time limit was introduced so that rather than being occupied all day by workers parking spaces would become available for customers to use, giving them the opportunity to support local businesses.

We also use charges to manage parking, where it is helpful to encourage turnover or steer long stay parking to other facilities while allowing some flexibility in how long drivers can park for. This is used in the town centre, where charges encourage drivers to park only as long as they need while allowing them to park all day if they must – but make it cheaper to use a car park for all day parking so that premium on-street space can be used for shorter visits. It is also used together with a three hour time limit to encourage turnover of parking near the hospital to maximise parking availability for visitors and outpatients.

When the council sets out to make new rules or to change existing ones, we consult the public to try to make sure that we get it right. This typically includes informal surveys as well as formal public consultation exercises, to understand who will be affected by any changes and how. It is rare for a change to please everyone, but great care is taken to ensure all points of view are considered. A final decision is then made by the Executive Member for Economy, Enterprise and Transport, the senior councillor who oversees our work together with the Ward Councillors who represent the area affected.

Most changes to parking rules are subject to a long and tightly controlled legal process, so that motorists are not penalised through hasty or unconsidered changes. Given the work involved the council can only carry out a few projects to change parking rules each year, and these are prioritised based on the nature and history of each request or concern together with the need to make best use of available resources. This means that we are

normally working on a mixture of large and small projects, in order to get them all done as quickly as possible – though it still typically takes at least nine months to complete even a simple change.

We keep records of all requests for changes to parking and reports of problems, so that when we have capacity to start a new project we can consider what the next priority should be.

The council also sometimes builds parking. In the past large sums have been spent on this, but it was found that where parking was built car ownership would increase in following years so the benefit of it being easier to find a parking space would often be relatively short lived. In recent years, changes to council funding have meant ever greater financial constraints and significant reductions in the budget available to build parking bays. In June 2019 the council declared a Climate Emergency and set a target for net-zero emissions by 2030, which makes it harder to justify building more parking as it both encourages car ownership and driving, and removes valuable if small areas of green space. Although it often seems an “obvious” or “easy” solution to those who want it, parking construction is now something that has to be the exception rather than the rule.

What have we done this year?

The 2020-21 financial year has been overshadowed by the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, which had significant impacts on parking management in Stevenage.

At the start of the year, parking bays near the hospital were made free and without time limit to help hospital staff get to work. Parking bays in the town centre were also made free so that people accessing essential shops could do so as easily as possible.

Enforcement activities were reduced to a minimum level of essential cover, to keep the roads safe and avoid problem parking becoming a burden on the Police. This meant that staff members were available for other duties, and were deployed to help the council’s response to the pandemic by preparing food parcels for vulnerable residents.

As restrictions were eased, enforcement was gradually stepped up to manage the problems that came with increasing amounts of traffic and more parking activity taking place. Payment for parking was reintroduced first in the town centre and then near the hospital, but requiring use of the Pay-by-Phone telephone payment service to minimise infection risk from use of pay-and-display. Hospital workers were offered dispensations to park without payment or time limit in paid parking bays near the hospital so that they would still be able to get to work as easily as possible, first until the end of December but when the country returned to lockdown this was extended to the end of March.

Most projects to update parking restrictions have been delayed by the pandemic, as widespread consultation exercises on new restrictions were felt likely to be considered insensitive by residents. Projects that had already been consulted on were also delayed by the need to redirect staff to other work, and practical impacts of the pandemic on the ability to implement changes.

Nevertheless, a number of projects were successfully progressed.

On-street electric car chargers

It had been hoped that we would install the town's first on-street electric car chargers in April or May. Problems created by the pandemic held this up, with delays in the preparation of electrical connections and supply chain issues. The chargers were successfully installed and began operating in September, and were officially launched in October, with free power being given away up to the end of the year to encourage use. By the end of the year, over 2,000 kWh had been supplied.

London Road regeneration changes

As part of the regeneration of the town centre, a length of London Road connected to Swingate outside the Leisure Centre has been reopened for public use. The newly reopened road has been provided with a goods vehicle loading bay to allow deliveries to the leisure centre, disabled parking bays to help blue badge holders to access the area, and waiting restrictions to prevent obstruction and ensure emergency access to the leisure centre.

Old Town Permit Parking Area

Parking by commuters in residential streets in the Old Town has long been a contentious issue, and following a survey in 2017 the Council agreed to investigate permit parking controls that would restrict parking to residents only.

In the 2019-20 financial year a further survey was undertaken to understand what streets should be included and what residents' preferences were. Formal proposals were prepared based on the findings of this survey, putting forward a permit parking area covering those streets with was a high response rate and where responses were in favour of having permits, and consulted on in January-February 2020.

Going into the 2020-21 financial year, consultation responses were reported to councillors who directed that alterations be made to the proposals to address concerns that had been raised. Those affected by the changes were given the chance to make representations about them over the summer, and after considering the replies that were received councillors decided that the permit parking area should go ahead.

The Old Town Permit Parking Area was implemented at the beginning of December.

The Grange double yellow lines

In response to concerns from both the Thomas Alleyne Academy and local residents, we investigated measures to deal with hazardous and obstructive parking in The Grange. Informal survey work during the summer found a near-unanimous view that double yellow lines would be the best solution to this. Consultation was undertaken in the autumn, and its findings reported back to councillors over the winter. They confirmed that the controls should go ahead, but because of lockdown the implementation was only completed early in the next financial year, on 12 April.

Broadwater

Following the introduction in 2019 of parking restrictions across the Broadwater area (Longmeadow and Roebuck Wards), a number of adjustments were found to be needed either to add restrictions where they had been omitted or to remove small areas of restrictions that had unforeseen consequences.

A formal consultation on these alterations had been planned for May 2020, but was postponed due to the pandemic. Some additional locations were then identified, with informal survey work being conducted over the summer after lockdown restrictions had eased. After the findings had been shared with councillors, unfortunately it was not until January 2021 that the project could be fully discussed at a Co-operative Neighbourhood Management meeting and additional minor amendments agreed to be included in the plans for public consultation. As the country then returned to lockdown, the consultation was postponed until the next financial year and this project is continuing to be progressed in 2021-22.

Stevenage Parking Strategy 2021-2031

The existing Parking Strategy is over fifteen years old. *Future Town, Future Transport*, the council's transport strategy adopted in 2019 set out that a new parking strategy should be prepared.

A new strategy was drafted in 2020-21 based on parent policies and best practice in line with the requirements set out in *Future Town, Future Transport*, and input sought from stakeholders. The public were to be consulted on it in 2021-22, however this has subsequently been deprioritised by councillors.

Parking bay construction

No parking bay construction was carried out in this year. Engineers have worked on proposals to add to the parking provision on Corey's Mill Lane to help people be able to get to the hospital, and it is hoped that works will follow to complete this project in the coming year.

Do we make money from parking?

Contrary to what a lot of people believe, the council doesn't profit from parking enforcement. On average from 2010 to 2020 parking enforcement cost the council around £365,000 a year while generating under £270,000 in penalty charges, and that is before other costs of parking management such as maintaining the traffic signs and road markings is considered.

It is only because charges for parking are used to help manage demand that in some recent years on-street parking management has been self-funding. However, in 2020-21 the effects of the coronavirus pandemic meant that the service again operated at a significant loss.

The total revenue cost of on-street parking management shown in the council's records for 2020-21 was £534,130. The bulk of this comprises payments to East Herts District Council for providing enforcement patrols and administering penalty charges issued including consideration of any challenges or appeals. The second largest sum was internal staff costs within the council, followed by the cost of maintaining the traffic signs and road markings needed for parking enforcement. Other costs included buying materials such as special papers to allow parking permits to be printed, monitoring and maintenance costs for pay and display machines and electric car chargers, and internal recharges within the council such as postage costs.

Although capital spending on parking management projects was significantly reduced in 2020-21, it still totalled £40,643. This was made up of £12,019 on introducing on-street electric car chargers, £16,750 on introducing parking permits to streets in the Old Town and £11,604 on other projects to change parking rules.

The majority of the council's income from on street parking management this year was from penalty charges, at £227,621. Payments for on-street parking totalled £91,506, a dramatic decrease, not including £22,756 received from the sale of residents' parking permits and visitor vouchers. A further £8,150 was received in other payments such as fees for suspending parking bays and charges for bar markings across driveways. £8,191 was received in developer contributions towards making changes due to the impact of developments. A credit of £2,719 was also applied to the parking account to correct an overpayment the preceding year. The total income received was £360,943 resulting in a revenue deficit of £173,187. Once capital is also taken into account, the deficit was £213,650.

While levels of parking activity in 2021-22 and beyond remain hard to predict, it is anticipated that the account will break even again in 2021-22 and initially any surplus will go to repay this deficit so that the cost of parking enforcement falls to motorists who benefit from the service rather than local tax payers in general.

How many people get tickets and what happens next?

In 2020-21, a total of 7,781 PCNs were issued on behalf of the council. 5,046 of these were higher-level penalty charge notices for more serious contraventions such as parking on the zigzags at a pedestrian crossing. 2,735 were lower-level penalty charge notices for less serious contraventions such as parking in a bay for longer than is allowed.

Though most drivers who receive a PCN pay it, often quite quickly as there is a discounted rate for prompt payment, many take up the option to challenge it. That could be because they think the enforcement officer has got it wrong, or because they feel they deserve the benefit of the doubt, or any other reason. As soon as a challenge is received the case is put on hold, and the challenge is considered by one of the Parking Office team at East Herts District Council. As has been mentioned, there is nothing for them to gain or lose from their decision, and drivers are assured a fair and consistent hearing. If a driver is unsuccessful in challenging their PCN, the process allows them to appeal to the independent adjudicator, the Traffic Penalty Tribunal (TPT), for a final decision. Very few

cases from Stevenage go to the TPT each year, and the council's decision is usually found to be correct. If it is not, both we and the Parking Office learn from this to improve how enforcement is carried out and decisions are made.

In 2020-21, 5,116 PCNs were paid, of which 4,150 received a 50% discount for prompt payment within 14 days. 2,046 PCNs were challenged or appealed, as a result of which 1,424 were cancelled. A further 607 PCNs were written off for other reasons such as mistakes made by enforcement officers or being unable to trace the driver. Naturally some PCNs issued in the previous year would only have been paid, challenged or cancelled in 2020-21, and some PCNs issued in 2020-21 will only be paid, challenged or cancelled in the following year.

Stevenage Borough Council doesn't immobilise or remove vehicles as part of its parking enforcement regime.

Table 1: PCN Statistics

Financial Year	PCNs issued			PCNs paid		PCNs challenged or appealed	PCNs cancelled	
	Total	Higher rate	Lower rate	Total	At a discount		after a challenge or appeal	for other reasons
2016-17	10,981	6,479	4,502	7,677	6,580	2,645	2,207	
2017-18	10,823	6,813	4,640	7,454	6001	3,009	2,460	
2018-19	10,929	6,793	4,136	6,968	5,758	2,557	1,779	
2019-20	13,327	9,010	4,317	8,852	7,237	3,003	3,182	
2020-21	7,781	5,046	2,735	5,116	4,150	2,046	1,424	607

Chart 1: PCN statistics

