**Coastal car parking charges**

As we are all only too well aware, the Covid-19 pandemic has taken it’s toll on many individuals, groups and organisations and the government itself is racking up a huge bill in it’s efforts to help those affected.

On a smaller scale of course, local authorities have all been heavily hit over the past few months, which is continuing and with no end in sight. Here in Fareham, the Council’s revenues have sharply declined due to for example, a £100,000 p.m. hit to car parking revenues, the closure of 2 leisure centres, assistance given to those who rent both commercial and domestic property from the Council, even before factoring in the increased costs associated with continuing with many key functions throughout the crisis.

The Council’s Executive on Monday 7 September were presented with an emergency budget, a unique event here in Fareham. This said that as we probably all know, either revenues would need to be increased or services cut in order to balance the budget. In order to make in-roads into this shortfall, options such as reducing the frequency of domestic bin emptying or allowing the grass to grow longer in public open spaces would need to be considered, but actions such as these are really ones that no one would wish to contemplate.

A swinging double figure Council tax increase would be required but this would of course hit everyone in the Borough even the most financially vulnerable. In any event, for any proposed increase over 4%, the Council would first need to hold a Borough wide referendum asking whether residents would be prepared to endorse such an increase.

The Council then had to look at alternative revenue raising options, one of which is charging for coastal parking across Swanwick, the Meon Shore, Warsash, Hillhead and Portchester car parks. It is not justification, but Fareham remains the only local authority from Kent to Cornwall that does not levy any coastal car parking charges and many may probably expect that when they visit a coastal area, they are expected to pay to park?

This is not an option that sits at all comfortably with either of we Warsash ward councillors; we were unhappy with the proposal and sought alternative more palatable options without success (although it’s probably also fair to say that other difficult decisions will need to be made going forward).

It was of course really important that any charging would seek to minimise the impact on those who use the Shore Road and Passage Lane car parks; short stay visitors (for exercise and dog walking) and long stay and multi-day visitors (largely sailors). A great concern to us and many others was the temptation, should the pricing not be pitched correctly, for drivers to park on local roads so avoiding charging. Hamble seem to have got it about right where their 2 pay car parks serve 2 sailing clubs, 3 pubs, cafes and shops and to our East, both Lee and Stokes Bay levy charges similar to those that Fareham are proposing.

The Executive did decide that they had no option but to press ahead with the proposal, with a recommended charging period of 10am – 6pm and a £1 per hour charge to a maximum daily charge of £6 for a 24 hour period. They also wish to introduce an annual pass that will help those regular and long stay visitors, at a cost of £80. Using this a daily visit would work out at 22p per day.

The Executive also decided to impose a parking limit at the Warsash Road (opposite the Co-op) car park (perhaps 2 hours), to address the constant complaint that the car park is always full. This car park will remain free.

What happens next? For car parking arrangements to change, the Council needs to apply a Traffic Regulation order (TRO) for each of our 3 car parks, which will detail the proposal and give a 6 week period of consultation allowing the public or organisations to comment. The result of these consultations will then go before the Executive Member who will decide whether either the TRO be applied or amendments should be made, which will be further consulted on.

This really is an issue that we are both deeply unhappy with, but regrettably the overarching demands on ensuring that the Council balance their budget prevailed.