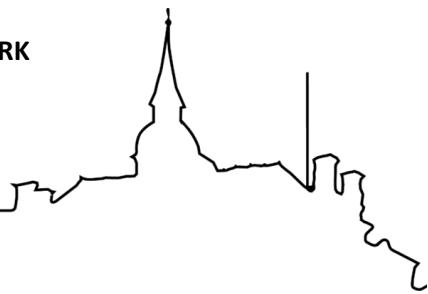




TOWCESTER TOWN COUNCIL

TOWN HALL
86 Watling Street East
Towcester
NN12 6BS

INTERIM TOWN CLERK
Deborah Jewell



To Cllr Mark Arnall, Leader of West Northamptonshire Council

12 January 2026

Dear Cllr Arnall,

Proposed Car Parking Charges for Towcester Town Centre

Towcester Town Council objects in the strongest terms to parking charges being proposed for WNC car parks in Towcester. We are also concerned at your failure to consult the town council and local businesses in advance of your draft budget proposal.

At your recent Cabinet Meeting, the main justification offered was that introducing parking charges would be equitable, given that charges are already in place in Northampton. This argument totally fails to recognise the role of the small market town. It also fails to recognise that visitors to Northampton have much better access to public transport than Towcester. Northampton also offers theatres, cinema, the county museum, and a selection of large stores. This argument about equal treatment also importantly fails to understand that Towcester residents already pay to park in Northampton just in the same way as do residents of Northampton. At the same time, Northampton residents who visit Towcester can park free as do Towcester residents.

Our primary concerns are that charging for car parks in Towcester would have an immediate and seriously detrimental effect on the future vitality and viability of our town centre, who's local economy is already extremely fragile. Free parking helps Towcester in some way to compete with Northampton and Milton Keynes who have flagship stores and much better public transport, and with out-of-town shops with free parking.

To quote from the current adopted West Northamptonshire Local Plan,

"The council recognises the traditional high street is under pressure from changes in shopping habits and the presence of online retailers. The council will plan accordingly to support their viability and vitality to ensure the town centres are attractive, well-designed and well-managed."

The local plan also recognises that Towcester and Brackley are Rural Service Centres. They serve a wide, rural, area which has precious little public transport, so the car is the main mode of transport. WNC owned car parks need to be treated appropriately, in order to encourage people to come into the town centre. Town centres are already under pressure from out-of-town destinations and the WNC Economic Development team have been working to try and increase footfall and attract investment.

Towcester doesn't have large anchor stores or supermarkets in the town centre that draw people in for a main destination shop and then generate secondary footfall. Introducing parking charges removes that spontaneity and disproportionately affects a town like Towcester compared with larger centres such as Northampton, where visits are typically longer and more planned.

That means ease of access and convenient parking are critical. Small independent businesses rely on the availability of free parking to attract visitors, people who want to shop locally, eat locally and enjoy the rural environment that small towns have to offer. These small businesses operate on very tight margins, so any additional charge for car parking could make many of the businesses in the town unviable.

Residents and those from Towcester's hinterland of nearby villages, who rely on our local services, including shops, will be deterred from visiting. However, they can't rely on public transport. Those employed in local shops and services, particularly those on the minimum wage, will lose out significantly, given that long stay parking is currently free. It is no coincidence that out-of-town shopping centres, like the Bell Plantation on the edge of Towcester, have ample free parking and are thriving.

Some motorists will inevitably choose to avoid paying, increasing the number of vehicles parking on nearby streets and pavements, adding to an existing problem. Your proposals would almost certainly result in Waitrose, an anchor store, imposing charges and imposing a time limit on their car park, as they did when charges were imposed in Buckingham.

Your proposals counteract Towcester's Improvement Scheme by National Highways that aims to make the town centre more attractive and increase footfall. Equally, your proposals would have an adverse impact on the public's access to Towcester Watermeadows, a key recreation area, which includes a weekly Park Run.

Local charities who rely on volunteers to run charity shops and other services will be hit, with volunteers being penalised for giving their time freely. This also raises an accessibility issue. Many residents, visitors and traders rely on car access due to age, mobility limitations, caring responsibilities — such as looking after children, elderly relatives or disabled family members — or neurodivergence. Parking charges risk indirectly excluding those people from participating in town-centre life.

Churches tell us they are very concerned about the impact on not only on church services, but also weddings, funerals and on their many community activity groups. Tove Valley Baptist Fellowship who run a key community building in our town, are very concerned that charging for parking will mean their car park adjacent to the Tove Long Stay CP would be affected, with motorists using their car park meant for their uses. The town council's Sawpit Centre car park would also suffer. A costly barrier or other measures would need to be put in place, adding another direct cost to Towcester residents. The Towcester Mill Brewery car park would be similarly affected, as would Go Floor It, who have a few parking spaces for customers on Watling Street.

Given our many concerns, we urge you to reconsider your plans. Many residents in our community, including nearby villages have joined us in raising their concerns as has our Member of Parliament.

Given the significant impact of your proposal to impose parking charges we invite you to attend a public evening meeting in Towcester, on a date of your choosing but in advance of you finalising your budget. This will be your opportunity to explain how your proposals will benefit our town's economy and social life. Ahead of this meeting, it would be helpful to have a copy of the assessment of your proposal, including an economic and social impact assessment, including on vulnerable individuals and groups.

In summary, car parking charges which kick in immediately on arrival will permanently damage our fragile rural economy. WNC need to live up to the words in the local plan, and that means keeping the car parking in Towcester free of charge.

Thank you for considering our objections and we look forward to hearing from you.

On behalf of Towcester Town Council