

Comrie parking public meeting – Monday 16 September, 2024

Panellists:

- Pete Wishart, MP for Perth and Kinross-shire
- Jim Fairlie, MSP for Perthshire South and Kinross-shire
- Stewart Donaldson, Perth and Kinross Councillor for Strathearn
- Andrew Scobie, Comrie Community Council Chair

Intro:

Since July, our offices have been inundated with correspondence from Comrie residents with regards to the recent enforcement of on-street parking restrictions in the village. These constituents have highlighted a range of issues that the enforcement has caused for them personally, as well as local businesses, visitors and community life more broadly.

In response, we held a public meeting to hear the concerns of residents, as well as to discuss potential solutions. The meeting was very well attended, by about 50 people from all ages and backgrounds. Residents had a chance to share their experience and views, and the panel heard a large number of personal testimonies. This provided a good understanding of the feelings of the community, and the sheer scale of the impact this issue is having across the village.



Background:

The main issue relates to the limited waiting parking restrictions and the waiting and loading restrictions on the trunk road through Comrie.

It is understood that these restrictions have been in place since 2011, but due to the lines and signage becoming illegible, they have long been unenforceable. It has consequently become custom for residents with no alternative options to park on the street. Many of the impacted residents moved to Comrie after the signage became illegible, and thus were unaware the restrictions ever existed. Locals cannot remember there ever having been such rigorous enforcement.

Signage has recently been replaced/repainted, which has enabled enforcement to recommence.

It is understood that the limited waiting restriction is intended to serve the purpose of creating a turnover of vehicles, which is thought to assist businesses in areas where pay and display does not exist, however, many businesses have voiced the contrary, saying this has led to a downturn in business.

The central section of Drummond Street limits parking to 1 hour between 8am and 6pm from April to October, and 2 hours between 8am and 6pm November to March. Further out on Drummond Street, Dunira Street, Bridge Street and Dundas Street, this restriction is limited to 2 hours between 8am-6pm April to October, and there are no limits on how long you can stay between November and March.

The recent enforcement of 72-hour restriction in the adjacent car park has also been raised, albeit to a lesser extent.

Meeting discussion:

The overwhelming sense from attendees at the meeting was that the restrictions have had an all-round negative impact for residents, tourists, businessowners and community life.

Whilst the logic behind limited-time parking may be valid for some communities, attendees at the meeting were united in the view that it does not serve Comrie well. Because the trunk road goes through the heart of the village, many passersby stop in Comrie, perhaps for lunch and a browse, before continuing elsewhere, and this is a major source of income for local businessowners.

Residents believe that these restrictions encourage visitors to bypass Comrie and opt to stop elsewhere due to lack of observable parking that would allow them to spend sufficient time in the village. We heard one testimony where a businessowner has noticed such a downturn in trade since the enforcement of the restrictions that they have been forced to start ordering less stock. Other testimonies included:

- A school bus driver who said he cannot park whilst waiting for school gates to open. The school bus runs twice a day, and he has to wait on yellow lines and drive on if sees wardens.
- An on-call firefighter who said he can no longer park outside his house, which is delaying his response time to get to the station in an emergency.
- A cleaning businessowner has lived across from the White Church for 17 years. Her staff clean the other businesses in the village but cannot do this in under an hour. They have to keep leaving the job to move their cars as the wardens are almost always there. The business is no longer cost effective as the employer has to pay her staff more hours to do the same work due to the constant interruptions of moving cars as wardens circle their vehicles.
- Nightshift workers who are losing sleep during the day due to having to move their cars when the wardens arrive.
- People who work from home who are being interrupted from their jobs when the wardens arrive.

At the end of the meeting, the question was asked whether anybody in the audience felt that these restrictions were beneficial to the village - nobody responded. The wardens' activity has been recorded, revealing enforcement seven days a week, sometimes four times a day. Residents said it feels malicious and is bordering on harassment.

Many residents have received numerous parking tickets since the enforcement began, which is causing strain on households, particularly in these financially challenging times.

Residents also complained about the lack of consultation over the restrictions being re-enforced. Whilst they were technically always there, most residents did not know about them, and so much time has passed since they were last enforced that they feel PKC should have consulted with them first, rather than re-impose them seemingly out of the blue. It is believed that these restrictions may have had the support of the community at the time they were introduced, but feelings and circumstances have evidently changed significantly.

A big part of the problem voiced was the lack of alternative parking spaces in the village. It is understood that the construction vehicles for the Comrie Flood Defence Scheme will soon take over the Fields of Refuge car park, which will only exacerbate the problem.

Residents also questioned why these restrictions are in place in Comrie but not places like Methven, which has the same trunk road going through it.

Such is the anxiety this has caused that a 'residents watch chat' has been formed to alert each other as to when the parking wardens have arrived in their area.

All the points raised were concerning, but perhaps the most alarming was in relation to the impact on the spirit of the community. Comrie is renowned for having a strong sense of community, which is part of the attraction that has led many residents to choose to live there. It is a tranquil, rural village where the community is close-knit, and where everyone looks out for one another. However, residents state that this spirit has been tainted because of the restrictions.

On the surface, it may seem difficult to accept that parking restrictions can have such a fundamental impact, however, several residents stated that the enforcement of the restrictions has created an underlying anxiousness and stress in the village. Some residents are now directing hostility towards some local businesses who are believed to have initiated this situation.

All attendees who spoke said that there were no issues prior to these restrictions being enforced, and they therefore question why they are necessary. Residents believe that this is simply a money-making exercise by PKC, as detailed by the first written testimony below. Residents state they are hardworking, taxpaying, members of society, and they did not need this imposition when they managed fine for years without it. It is clear these restrictions and enforcements have created a negative impression of PKC, which they feel is working against them and disrupting their day-to-day life without proper justification.

Written testimonies:

In addition to attendees at the meeting, we have received a large volume of written correspondence, both in advance of and following the meeting. Below are some excerpts:

- 1) *"I have just had a message from my neighbour directly to advise me that I have a parking ticket on my car.
"This is a ridiculous situation and I am unable to do my job without distraction and frustration at the nonsense going on outside. Here I am messaging you instead of concentrating on how we maximize the Electricity Network as we try to connect new assets to meet clean power 2030 and Net zero targets set by your government.
"I am trying to bring up 2 teenage children to do well, work hard, and ensure they have a bright, tax paying future. I pay high council tax, road tax and I'm in the upper band income tax, I do not expect to be hunted in these tricky times by a sneaky local council trying to find unjust money from its constituents."*

- 2) *"I can assure you that as a collective, **local residents on the street are... completely incensed.** There is a feeling of persecution amongst us, that PKC have taken an arbitrary decision to reinstate signage, and are now vigorously enforcing regulations that for years they simply chose not to, because it was inconvenient. **To now be having tickets issued by wardens who are, at literally the same time, flaunting the regulations, is beyond a joke.** There is a feeling that, as a department, you are rubbing our noses in it."*
- 3) *"The new enforcement of the 72-hour restriction in the car park is causing misery. What is the restriction for ? When we're asked to use our cars less to reduce emissions ? Conflict over parking spaces does not help cordial relations with neighbours."*
- 4) *"The newly enforced parking restrictions have negatively impacted me both before and after having my baby. I am unable to leave my car across the street from my home without the risk of a ticket, forcing me to park in one of two car parks, when space are available. This led to an unnecessarily long and difficult process to get to my vehicle when I went into labor and additionally, an arduous walk to my home when returning from the hospital. Now that I have a newborn, I am forced to carry him and his things a great distance to St Kessog's or School Road Car Parks every time I travel with him. It is not an option for me to move the car closer to my home in preparation to load up as I can obviously not leave my child unattended."*

These are just a few of the dozens of enquiries we have received.

Potential solutions:

Various potential solutions were suggested; the main one being to remove the restrictions altogether, with residents saying that the village was able to live in harmony without them, so they are evidently not required.

Others included:

- Clear signage for car parking spaces to show to passersby where they can park. Currently there is just a P sign at the actual entrance to public car parks.
- Create more spaces by the school. There are a few spaces beside the school, but these are used by school staff all day. There could be 5 or 6 more spaces there. Again, improved signage would help.
- On the street, delineate spaces with white paint, as has been done in Auchterarder.
- Clearly mark the parking bays at the Field of Refuge Car Park, although this may be of little use in the short-term if this car park will soon be closed due to the flood scheme construction.
- Moving the disabled space in the car park just 1metre sideways, which would restore one currently useless half- parking space. Or remove the disabled space if it is redundant.
- Remove the 72-hour restriction in the car park.

Traffic order amendment:

It was noted that an email from P. Adams at PKC stated the following:

"Enforcement has been undertaken at the request of local businesses complaining about all day parking by residents and the lack of spaces for their customers.

"The waiting restrictions can be reviewed then amended or removed depending on how the Ward Councillors and Community Council wish us to proceed."

This was reassuring to residents. However, it is understood that the community council have now made this request, which was rejected on the basis that no elected members have yet vocalised their support.

We acknowledge that this will likely need to come from local councillors, but nonetheless, please take this letter as our formal support for the restrictions to be reviewed and amended in line with the community's wishes.

Summary and requested action:

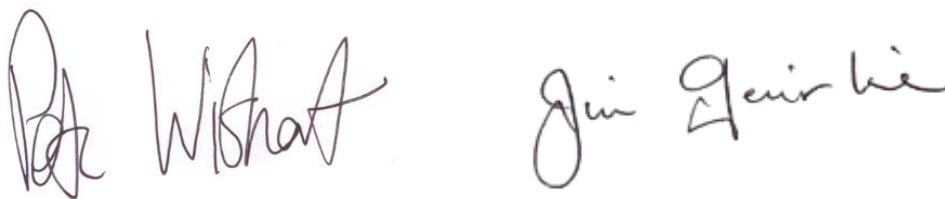
It is hoped that this correspondence will help to give an understanding of the scale of the impact being felt by the Comrie community as a direct result of this issue.

We recognise that we are not decision makers at PKC. On that basis, and since a range of potential solutions were proposed at the meeting, we do not feel it would be appropriate to advise what specific changes should be made as part of a long-term solution. However, it is abundantly clear that the current situation is untenable, and that immediate action is required to alleviate the negative impact these enforcements are having. We therefore request the following:

1. Direct, proactive engagement from PKC traffic officials with local councillors and the community council to discuss potential remedies.
2. An immediate halt to enforcement whilst a longer-term solution is established. This is in line with requests already made to PKC directly by the Community Council.
3. The waiving of parking fines that have already been issued to residents, as a gesture of goodwill.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

The image shows two handwritten signatures in black ink. The signature on the left is 'Pete Wishart' and the signature on the right is 'Jim Fairlie'.

Pete Wishart MP & Jim Fairlie MSP