

Just Another Car Park, or a Double Devolution Linchpin?

Ask a Local Authority Parking Manager “What is the primary reason for having well managed car parks?”, and you will likely be met with “They facilitate good traffic management”.

Ask a Commercial Car Park Operator the same question, and you will likely be advised “In order to provide customer parking, and to maximise revenue”.

Ask a real car park user, and you are likely to be presented with a plethora of different reasons, some of which are so uniquely weird and wonderful in nature that nobody could ever have guessed. Reasons such as, “So I can collect my favourite Oggy (pasty) from Butchers next door me ‘ansum”, or “So I can collect my giant house rabbit from the groomers dreckly (sometime in the future)”.

The simple fact is that nobody is wrong, and everybody is right (although trying to get everyone to agree is part of what makes a life working in Parking so varied and interesting), and it is for this reason that I wanted to highlight just how, and why, car parks are increasingly becoming the linchpin in the intricate workings of Double Devolution agreements.

So, what is **Double Devolution**? To understand this, we must first understand what Devolution is, and how it fits into the current political landscape.

The LGA website describes **Devolution** as:

¹In England, devolution is the transfer of powers and funding from national to local government. It is important because it ensures that decisions are made closer to the local people, communities and businesses they affect.

Devolution will provide greater freedoms and flexibilities at a local level, meaning councils can work more effectively to improve public services for their area.

The result will be more effective, better targeted public services, greater growth and stronger partnerships between public, private and community leaders in local areas.

Without devolution, decisions will continue to be made in Westminster, removed from communities that they affect.

The LGA explains **Double Devolution** as:

²Local town and parish councils are uniquely placed to work with local authorities to deliver ‘onward’ or ‘double’ devolution (the process where devolution happens twice – first from national to regional and then from regional to local). As government policy on devolution becomes reality, many principal local authorities are already working with smaller councils to deliver double devolution.

So, how does this affect places like Cornwall?

Cornwall (like many other more rural Counties) has such a deeply enshrined sense of place and community, and this feeling of belonging is so powerful that many Cornish people believe Cornwall to be an individual Nation!

Cornwall Council is the second largest Unitary Authority in the UK by population. In 2007, the Government confirmed that Cornwall would move to unitary status. This was enacted by statutory instrument as part of the 2009 structural changes to local government in England. The changes took

¹ [Devolution explained | Local Government Association](#)

² [Engagement guidance around double devolution 3.pdf \(local.gov.uk\)](#)

effect on 1 April 2009. On that date the six districts and Cornwall County Council were replaced by **Cornwall Council**.

Cornwall Council were the first rural Authority to agree a Devolution Deal with Government in July 2015, and it is for this reason that Cornwall Council are committed to the principles of Localism and Devolution, the purpose of which is to help sustain locally led service delivery.

We work to enable and empower local Town and Parish councils and community groups to play an active role in local decision making, and through devolution, we are able to provide greater opportunities to communities to have more say and influence over their local area.

“So, all of this is lovely, but what role do car parks play in in the whole Double Devolution jigsaw?”, I hear you say. Well, let me give a genuine example of Double Devolution in action.

St. Austell is a market town which is located within the St. Austell and Mevagissey Community Network area, consisting of a number of Cornwall Council Electoral divisions. Within the St. Austell and Mevagissey Electoral divisions, there are actually eight Town and Parish Councils (subject to their own governance and electoral processes), one of which is St. Austell Town Council. “Hopefully, you are still with me”?

A few years ago, St. Austell Town Council approached Cornwall Council (as the Unitary Authority) with a Double Devolution package request, that would lead to certain services being delivered at a more local level. This included services such as parks and gardens maintenance, verge management, graveyards and library grounds maintenance.

All of these services cost money, and whilst St. Austell Town Council were able to potentially apply a precept to their residents' Council Tax bills (following consultation in relation to them taking on these services), a funding gap was still present. After all, the Town Council would need to be able to employ additional resource, buy vehicles and equipment, and create new workspaces if this devolution agreement was going to work.

This is where the local car park became the linchpin in making this Double Devolution package work.

It was clear that devolution of non-parking related assets and services to the Town Council, in order to be operated at a more local level, was going to generate cost savings for the Unitary Authority. But, in order for this to stack up financially for the Town Council, it was clear that an ongoing revenue stream was going to be required, in order to mitigate these additional costs, and herein lies the solution, which was to transfer the local car park to the Town Council.

Now, depending on which of the aforementioned stakeholders you ask (Parking Manager / Commercial Manager / Car Park User), each will have their own views of whether this arrangement has been a success, and please believe me when I say that Double Devolution does not come without its challenges for both the Unitary and Town / Parish Authorities. However, with Cornwall at the forefront of devolution outside of larger metropolitan areas, I thought it may be useful to share some of the pros and cons, in case other Councils are considering doing the same:

Pros	Cons
<p>Parking and Environmental Services can be delivered at a more local level, enabling the local communities who use the devolved assets to have a greater say in what happens, and how they should be operated.</p>	<p>Parking charges are set by the Unitary Authority in order to mitigate against traffic management issues that may arise through charges being too low, or too high.</p> <p>A Town or Parish Council may not have regard for this issue when setting their own charges, which has the potential to impact on traffic management within the area of the car park.</p>
<p>Parking Charges can be set at a local level, within an Off-Street Parking Place Order (PPO) that is separated from the wider Unitary Authority PPO.</p> <p>It may be easier for the Town or Parish Councils to better target consultation exercises in relation to any potential PPO changes, in order for those most affected to be able to feedback.</p>	<p>Town and Parish Council's generally have little knowledge in terms of the legal governance required in order to make PPOs, leading to initial / ongoing support being required from the Unitary Authority in relation to the making of new orders. If the Unitary Authority is also the Highway Authority, they may object if proposed charges impact on traffic management.</p>
<p>Car Park operating infrastructure, such as pay and display machines, tickets, cash collections, card payment facilities, and pay by phone services can be handled / procured separately to the larger value contracts required by the Unitary Authority, leading to potential cost savings in terms of operation of services.</p>	<p>Town and Parish Council generally have little knowledge of the operational challenges involved with parking operations, meaning that the Unitary Authority will need to fully brief, train, and potentially be on hand to provide advice and guidance for a period after handover.</p>
<p>Local events arranged within a car park, such as farmers markets or concerts, can be facilitated much easier at a local level during quieter operational periods, perhaps when there is not such a need to effectively manage parking through charging.</p>	<p>Less regard for the impacts that such events may have on traffic management in the vicinity, may lead to roads becoming congested, poorer air quality, and reductions in road safety.</p>
<p>Towns or Parishes may choose to alter the operation of a car parks, perhaps to facilitate permit parking for the benefit of their local residents. Permit schemes can be managed at a local level, without the need to invest in expensive back-office systems that may be required by a larger Authority.</p>	<p>Towns or Parishes may not understand the negative impact of reducing the number of spaces that turnover more frequently, such as fewer visitors to local shops or services, or greater levels of congestion on the highway network.</p>
<p>Car parks operated by local communities lead to a reduction in the carbon footprint of the Unitary Authority, through reduced travel times and greenhouse gas emissions, relating to car park maintenance, cash collections, and enforcement provision. These services are often delivered from further afield, leading to staff having to travel considerable distances to deliver services.</p>	<p>May lead to a reduction in the necessary workforce of the Unitary Authority, resulting in potential job losses. Although TUPE (Transfer of undertakings – Protection of Employment) may apply.</p>
<p>Surplus income derived from the car parks can be utilised for the purposes of a highway / road / environmental improvement projects in the local authority's area. This is often more difficult where any potential surplus is often utilised to help maintain strategic highway networks, rather than local facilities.</p>	<p>The Unitary Authorities' highway maintenance budget may be negatively affected, through surplus income reduction, resulting from the devolution of the car parking asset.</p>

What the future may look like.

As recently as October 2021, the UK Parliament website reported that “Clive Betts, Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, said “Michael Gove, as the new Secretary of State, should seize the opportunity to vigorously drive forward devolution across England and help boost the provision of public services in cities and regions.” A report entitled ³**Progress on devolution in England** calls on devolution to be extended not only to combined authorities but local government more widely, and to both rural and urban areas.

The political composition of each Local Authority, whether a large metropolitan or a tiny parish council, may well dictate whether devolved powers are placed at the very heart of its core priorities to its citizens. However, it is clear from recent reports that the current Government continues to appear keen to empower Town and Parish Councils to deliver services more locally.

Cornwall Council are currently in discussion with around fifteen Town and Parish Councils, and community groups, about the potential devolution of car parks, in order for these (and other environmental services) to be managed at a more local level, for the benefit of local residents and communities.

If you were to ask any of those local people (or any of the politicians in Whitehall) what makes delivery of these services possible, I am pretty sure none of them would say “a car park”, and no matter what your initial view may have been around the necessity to have well managed car parks, you’d be forgiven for not knowing how vital they may be in the context of Double Devolution success.

The fifteen car parks mentioned above contribute around £1M of net revenue to the Council’s highways maintenance budget and represent around 1000 parking spaces that are currently in the control of the Highway Authority.

There are clear, tangible, benefits being realised by both residents and visitors in places like Cornwall, through Double Devolution, which is enabling local people to have a greater say in how services are managed in their areas. However, we know that public transport providers are still reeling from the effects of the pandemic, and that the public are still currently favouring private vehicle travel, in order to reduce the risk of contracting Covid 19. Therefore, parking for private vehicles is still vitally important. This is particularly true in Counties like Cornwall, where its rural hinterlands are often not as well supported by good public transport links.

It is therefore my opinion that as the Highway Authority, Cornwall Council (and any other Local Authority thinking of devolving car parks) must very carefully consider the vital role that some car parks play in supporting good traffic management in an area, before deciding whether to prioritise their devolution aspirations. After all, the transfer of a car park to an organisation other than the Highway Authority could lead to the same residents and visitors being unable to access goods and services, if good traffic management is no longer at the heart of its operation; consequently, the risk of obstruction and congestion issues on the highway increase without the opportunity to control any mitigating measures.

I hope that this short narrative around Double Devolution has been both informative, and maybe even a little thought-provoking, and would be happy to share my knowledge, concerns, and experiences with any BPA members who may find it useful. Please feel free to contact me if you would like to have a chat.

³ [Progress on devolution in England - Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee - House of Commons \(parliament.uk\)](https://www.parliament.uk/commons/debate/house-of-commons/2021-10-27/progress-on-devolution-in-england)