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1. Background

Carplus has been assisting the development and delivery of Transport for London's Car Club Strategy (2008) for nearly four years. Part of our role is to provide advice and best practice to both London boroughs and Car Club Operators to help ensure that Car Clubs continue to expand across London. Detailed best practice recommendations are included at the end of this note.

Carplus is very concerned about significant increases in the cost of Car Club permits over the past year, with several boroughs having implemented increases above the rate of inflation. In response to several queries from individual boroughs and Car Club Operators about differences in approach to Car Club parking permit charges and conditions across London, Carplus undertook a survey in September/October 2011. This requested information on Car Club parking permit policies and was sent to all boroughs. A copy of the survey is included as an appendix to this note.

The Car Club sector is currently at an early stage of development across London and Operators are using a low cost model to encourage uptake of the service. High permit charges will affect the financial viability of operations in some boroughs and may result in Operators choosing not to provide services in some more marginal areas. In preparing the survey we were aware that factors other than price were also important. If the permit pricing is at a reasonable level it is recognition by officers and elected members of the contribution that Car Clubs and their members make towards reducing parking pressure. If permit prices are linked to the VED band (vehicle emissions), there is an opportunity to encourage wider use of low emission vehicles in the Car Club fleet. Similarly, if Car Club permits offer some flexibility, for example when dedicated bays are blocked by illegal parking, this will also help to encourage residents to use Car Club vehicles more often.

2. Survey Results

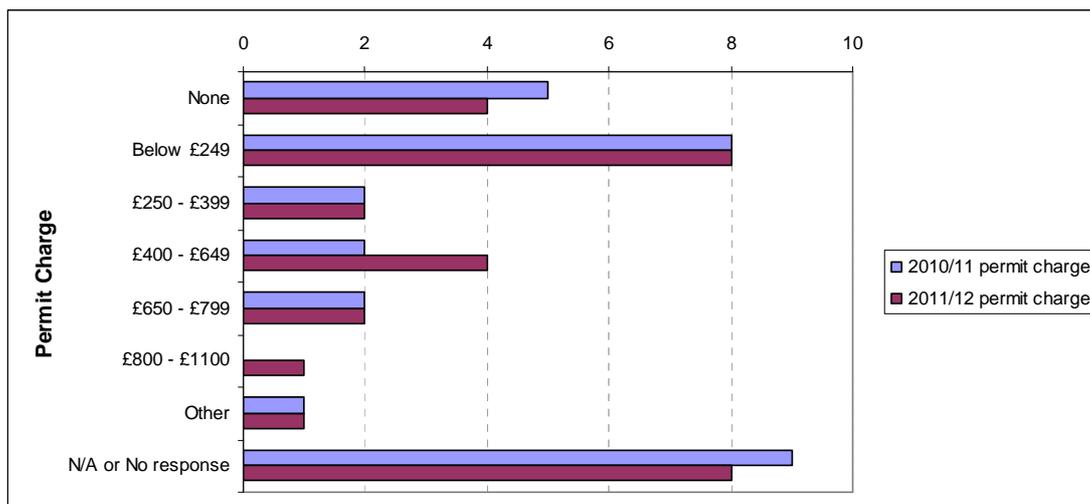
Fifteen boroughs responded to the parking permit survey out of a total of 31 London boroughs where Car Clubs currently operate. The survey results are summarised below.

Permit charges 2010-2012

The first three survey questions asked boroughs about current and future permit charges. The majority of boroughs make a charge for parking permits and the survey results illustrate that the amount charged varies significantly between no charge and £1,100 per year.

The majority of boroughs have decided to keep permit charges the same for 2011/12, with a minority of boroughs planning to significantly increase permit charges. The majority of boroughs in 2010/11 charge below £249 a year for permits but in 2011/12 there will be an increase in the number of boroughs charging between £400 - £649 and more than £800 for permits. Figure 1 summarises these results.

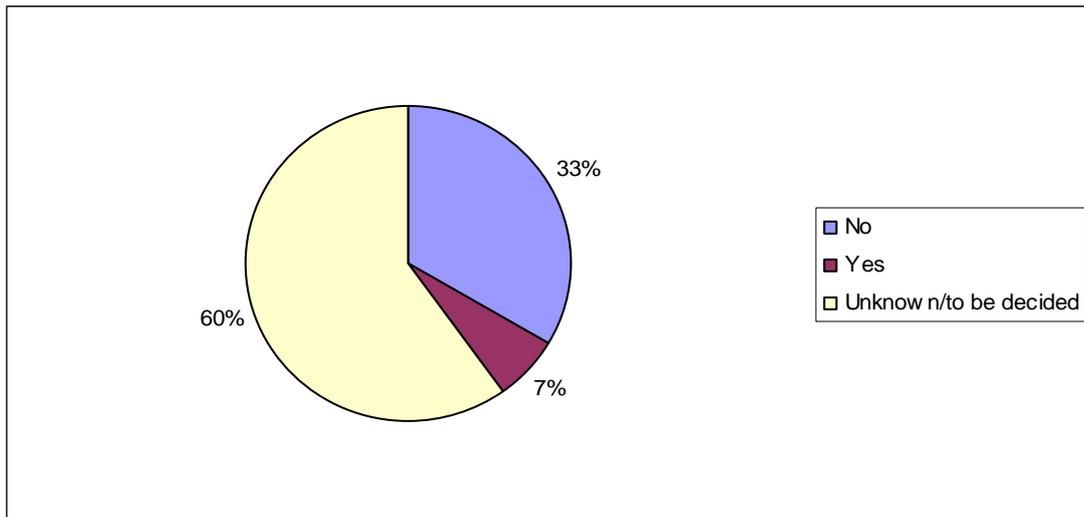
Figure 1 – Car Club permit charges 2010/11 and 2011/12*



*NB – One borough has introduced a two tiered pricing system in 2011/12 so this has been counted as two responses.

The majority of boroughs have not yet decided on permit charges for 2012/2013; however it is encouraging that 33% of boroughs that responded have decided not to increase charges. Figure 2 summarises these results.

Figure 2 – Proposed changes to permit charges for 2012/13

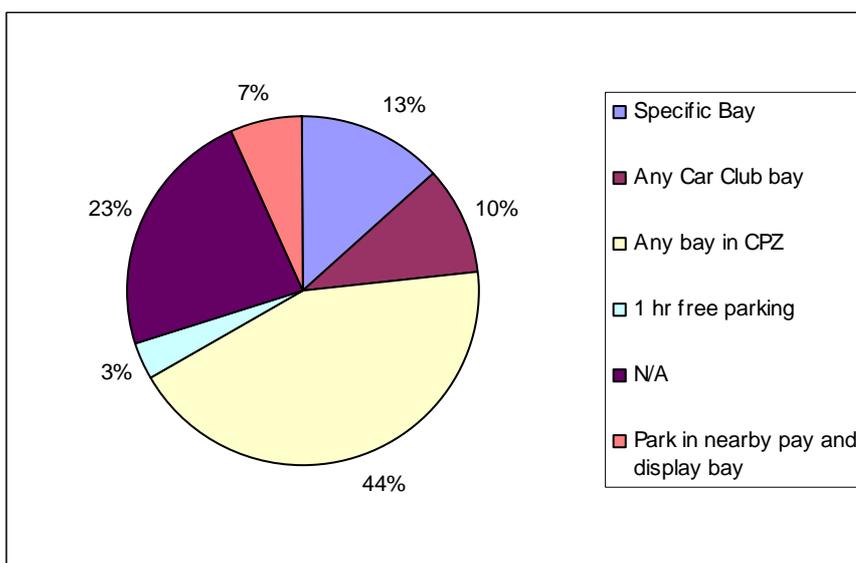


Permit validity and entitlements

The validity and entitlements of Car Club permits vary depending on the borough. The majority of permits are specific to an individual Car Club bay (37%), with a smaller proportion being specific to a specific vehicle or Car Club operator.

The majority of permits enable the holder to park in any Car Club bay or any bay within the “home” CPZ or specified zone. However, 13% of boroughs operate permits that are specific to the individual bay. Allowing Car Club members to park in any resident’s bay during their booking would encourage more Car Club usage as it would bring the benefits in line with private car ownership. Figure 3 summarises the parking restrictions of Car Club permits.

Figure 3 – Parking facilities that the Car Club permit holder is entitled to



Action if a bay is blocked

The majority of boroughs that responded to this survey had a clear procedure set out in the case of a Car Club bay being blocked by an illegally parked vehicle or unavailable due to temporary/permanent works, however Carplus are concerned that some boroughs have not yet developed a coordinated response to Car Club bays that are occupied by another vehicle. It is essential that all boroughs adopt a coordinated approach to Car Club bays that are occupied by other vehicles as illegal parking can increase costs and cause operational problems for Car Club Operators.

There are several examples of good practice that have emerged from this survey, particularly the approach taken by London Borough of Southwark to providing options for Car Club vehicles to park in other residents bays which allows Car Club members to park nearer their homes when required. Clearly this only operates effectively if all enforcement officers are fully aware of the policy.

It is clear from informal feedback received from both Operators and boroughs that the key to smooth operations is to ensure that a clear enforcement policy is in place for tackling unauthorised vehicles parked in Car Club bays. These policies often recommend that if a Car Club vehicle is unable to park in the allocated bay, that it should park in the nearest available space. In many cases enforcement action will not be taken against the Operator providing that the vehicle is moved back to its allocated space as soon as possible.

3. Additional comments

Some boroughs operate a system of permits which are interchangeable between Car Club vehicles. Boroughs may wish to consider the administrative advantages of this approach which would enable Operators to interchange vehicles when required, without any administrative delay. This will help to ensure that the number of vehicles available to Members remains constant and to encourage Car Club usage by making the experience as easy as possible.

It is extremely concerning that many boroughs are starting to bring Car Club permits in line with business permit pricing. Car Clubs make use of the permits in a different way to business vehicles, with Car Club vehicles always returning to their allocated bay. Aligning Car Club permit pricing with business permits also fails to recognise the contribution that Car Club users make to reducing CO2 emissions, local air quality improvements and reducing congestion and local parking pressures. It is also worth considering the impact that cost increases will have on Car Club prices and operation. If prices increase, this will force Operators to be more selective about the boroughs where they choose to operate and will limit growth of Car Club operations.

4. Carplus Good Practice Recommendations

As a result of the survey results received from boroughs, there are several good practice recommendations that we would like to make to both London boroughs and Car Club Operators.

1. In setting permit prices for Car Clubs, we would urge boroughs to consider whether these reflect the contribution that Car Clubs make to wider objectives including reducing CO2 emissions, local air quality improvements and reducing congestion and local parking pressures. We would encourage Car Clubs to be included in local air quality management plans and CO2 reduction strategies.
2. When decisions are being made about Car Club permit charges, all relevant officers should be actively involved in the decision making process.
3. Boroughs may wish to consider the administrative advantages of making Car Club parking permits interchangeable between Car Club vehicles. This would enable Operators to interchange vehicles when required, without any administrative delay.
4. In setting permit charges we are aware of advantages of neighbouring boroughs adopting similar prices. However, there is potential for an escalation of charges to generate revenue. This could have the unintended effect of reducing service levels and smaller fleet sizes in areas of low utilisation and deterring membership if Operators are forced to increase prices.
5. Consultation with Car Club Operators on proposed permit price increases should occur before the price rise is finalised.
6. Permit prices for Car Club vehicles could be linked to vehicle emissions and / or fuel types. This would provide a further incentive to Car Club Operators to continue investing in low emission vehicles and further help TfL to achieve their emissions targets. Permit prices could also include recognition of the carbon involved in the manufacture of each vehicle as this is likely to become part of any emission calculation in the future.
7. Each borough should have a course of action identified in case a Car Club bay has been blocked by another vehicle. This procedure should aim to resolve any parking issues as soon as possible and to ensure that the Car Club Operator is not charged for use of an alternative bay in the interim.
8. A flexible approach is recommended when dealing with Car Club vehicles parked elsewhere when a bay is blocked. There should be a clear process in place that is simple for members and Operators alike which enables them to find free safe parking if the designated bay is occupied (for example use of another residents parking bay). Car Club bookings are frequent and therefore we recommend that there should be no requirement on the Operator in this circumstance to come and put the car back in its designated bay. The next user of the car will then return the vehicle to its correct bay at the end of their booking.
9. We would encourage boroughs to consider whether allowing Car Club vehicles to park in any residents bays might help Car Club members to park nearer their homes when required, with the vehicles returned to their allocated bay at the end of each booking. This approach would bring the benefits of Car Club permits in line with resident's permits and would better reflect the way in which Car Club vehicles are used by residents. This approach would also help to recognise the contribution that Car Club members are making to reducing parking pressure.

Kate Gifford (Final version November 2011)