



## **Submission to Assembly Regional Development Committee on Off Street Car Parking Bill (Functions of Councils)**

### **Introduction**

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The Northern Ireland Independent Retail Trade Association (NIIRTA) welcomes the opportunity to give evidence to the above Bill.

NIIRTA is the representative business organisation for the independent retail and wholesale sector in Northern Ireland. Our 1500 members include independent retailers of all kinds, wholesalers, suppliers to the sector and affiliated Chambers of Commerce and Traders' Associations.

We are committed to a vision of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Town Centres, which are centres of retail and hospitality excellence. Affordable and accessible car parking for shoppers and consumers is an absolutely essential element in modern and vibrant Town Centres.

Earlier this year NIIRTA produced a detailed Eighty Point Programme for Local Government entitled **Local First**. The report sets out a number of policy priorities for the new eleven Super Councils in relation to car parking, which we include with this submission.

NIIRTA, along with our colleagues in local Chambers of Commerce, led the successful campaign to prevent the introduction of on-street car parking charges (first 1-2 hours free). We also successfully lobbied for the DRD Minister to introduce the Five Hours for £1 discount scheme in off-street car parking locations and for the freezing of car park charges.

NIIRTA also successfully negotiated with NCP for a Christmas and New Year discount scheme for Montgomery Street car park in Belfast City Centre. NCP Montgomery Street was the most expensive car park in Northern Ireland.

Getting the private sector car park owners to introduce a Christmas and New Year discount scheme remains a top priority for this year.

## **Local Government Reform**

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We believe that the proposed new system encompassing eleven Councils with enhanced powers, provides a real opportunity to make a difference for local communities, the economy and town centres.

They can be the change makers.

It is about refreshing local government to permit a greater freedom for citizens, expressing and fulfilling their ambitions for their local communities.

The reform of government to date has been very much about process. We believe now the focus needs to move towards policy development and external consultation, so the newly elected Councillors will hit the ground running when power is formally devolved to them in 2015.

What are they going to do with these new powers to help create employment, regenerate town centres, revamp car parking and create a fair planning system, which supports local business?

New Community Planning powers will be key in integrating all the various streams of public life. Councils will work with their local businesses, communities and statutory bodies and agencies to promote the well-being of their area and improve the quality of life of its citizens.

## **Town Centre Car Parking**

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- NIIRTA is content for the current Bill to complete its passage without amendment. If the new eleven Councils are to take the lead in regenerating town centres then it is absolutely essential that they have powers over their off street car parking.
- We are aware of concerns raised about the possibility of Local Councils selling off their off-street car parks. Generally speaking unless there is a sound economic reason, which is beneficial to a local town centre, NIIRTA would be opposed to such sales.
- NIIRTA would also support Blue Badge disabled drivers be given free car parking in off-street car parks.
- In our discussions with Shadow Council Chief Executives, concerns have been raised that revenue from car parks will fund future maintenance but that the revenue surplus is being top sliced by DFP before transfer leaving Councils to foot the bill for future maintenance.
- DRD money received from monitoring rounds to resurface off-street car parking needs to be available to Councils.

## **Other Key Points on Car Parking from NIIRTA Programme for Local Government**

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- NIIRTA calls upon the DRD to devolve on-street car parking to Councils by 2020 to give Councils more responsibility to develop the potential of their town centres.
- Councils should give discounts on their off-street car park charges in key times such Christmas and festivals.
- Free first one hour on-street car parking in the thirty towns should continue and DRD should consult and give serious consideration to offering the same schemes to city centres in Belfast, Newry and Lisburn.
- Existing large out-of-town superstores with free car parking should pay a rate surcharge for this competitive advantage, which will be redirected into maintaining town centre car parks and keeping their charges low.
- Councils to work with DRD for the introduction of a 'timed disc' system for delivery and service vehicles.
- Responsibility for local roads should be devolved to Councils by 2020, giving them a wider role in improving infrastructure.

**Glyn Roberts**  
**NIIRTA Chief Executive**  
**245 Upper Newtownards Road**  
**Belfast BT4 3JF**

**Tel: 028 90220004**

**Email: [glyn.roberts@niirta.com](mailto:glyn.roberts@niirta.com)**