



UNISON Aberdeen Universities Branch

**Response to the RGU
Parking Permit Charge Restructure Proposal**

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Whilst the suggestion of increasing parking charges to make people think twice and use alternative forms of transport may appear at a glance to be reasonable, it is an indiscriminate means of forcing those people who do have some options to think again, whilst trapping those who have no options to pay significantly higher costs at a time when all staff at the University have had year after year of below inflation pay rises.

This proposal would create **massive increases in travel costs** for staff who are already working to a tight budget and for which there is **no alternative lower cost option**. It is essentially a punitive tax on staff, many of whom have no way to avoid having to pay it.

It is neither “reasonable” nor “appropriate” (the two requirements of measures taken to comply with our planning permission) to apply this across the board with no thought to the personal circumstances of staff members.

The University should be trying to **reduce the cost** of travel to the campus, to help staff and students gain access to the University, to encourage recruitment and to assist in our social agenda to ensure that we are not discriminating against people on the lowest incomes, or who are juggling commitments to support children and family members. Instead this proposal does exactly the opposite and increases costs, whilst failing to force any change for the categories of staff who are already using the only means of transport available to them.

This report sets out UNISON’s detailed response to the consultation on the proposed permit price restructure after consultation with our members and other staff.

2. CONSULTATION PROCESS

UNISON would like to reiterate our disappointment that consultation on the matter of parking permit charges did not occur within the normal framework of the Joint Negotiating Group, which is the proper forum for such changes to be raised and discussed. As indicated in our email of 4th April there had been over a year within which these proposals could have been brought forward. Nevertheless we accept the extension granted after we raised these concerns, which permitted us to consult with members of staff on the proposals.

UNISON held consultation meetings with interested staff, and also asked for feedback via email and online survey on the proposals. This document summarises that feedback and the opinion of the UNISON Branch Steward's Committee at RGU based on that feedback and UNISON policies.

3. UNIVERSITY PROPOSAL

As provided to us in the document "Proposal for Permit Restructure – Unions Mar 2014 – Version 2", the university's proposal can be summarised as:

- An **increase** to most car park charges of approximately **41%**
- A **reduction** in car share parking charges of approximately **41%**
- An annual review, with an intention intimated at the original union consultation meeting of 31st March, to continue the phased increase of car park charges until they are comparable to bus pas prices, currently in excess of £600pa.

The driving force behind this has been stated as being the university transport strategy and the targets set by the local authority planning regulations.

4. TARGETS

UNISON notes that the specific targets required by the most recent planning permission for the riverside East site¹, require us to attempt to reduce the number of staff lone car drivers travelling to Garthdee to 50%, which will be monitored through the Annual Travel Surveys. The previous agreement and targets from 2000 have now expired.

The most recent travel survey² showed a figure of 56% lone car drivers, which is a little above the current target.

It should be noted however that there does not appear to be any direct financial implication of not meeting the targets under the new agreement, which was not the case previously. In the new planning agreement, RGU is required to take all "**reasonable measures and actions**". It is important that the word *reasonable* is noted in this context.

¹ McGrigors LLP, *Minute of Agreement between Aberdeen City Council and The Robert Gordon University*, 2010

² RGU, *Travel Survey Report 2013.pdf*, 2014

In addition, failure to meet the obligations requires RGU to *“liaise with the Council with a view to agreeing and introduce **appropriate** measures to **try** and achieve such targets”*. Again it is important to note the word *appropriate* and *try* in this context.

It is UNISON’s opinion therefore that the proposed measures are excessive in the context of the planning obligations on the University, and far exceed what might be considered “reasonable and appropriate”.

5. REPORTING METHODOLOGY

The statistics with regard to lone car use are derived from the annual travel survey. This survey however is a general poll sent out to all staff. There is no control over the returns or the sample selection – which is essentially self-selection by the participants – and this means that the result does not take into account any self-selection bias or make any specific efforts to ensure that the sample participating is truly representative.

Whilst we accept that the survey may have some use as a tool to indicate trends over the years, to use it as a means by which to argue about small percentage differences between the sample return and a specific target percentage appears to be flawed. To then use the same flawed difference to force through changes of this nature is inappropriate.

6. APPROPRIATENESS OF YEAR 1 INCREASE

The current year one increase proposal of over 41%, is a huge increase in cost. When compared to inflation at the moment, and this year’s pay award it is vastly overinflated.

Even taking into account the several years where the University applied no increase, in order to remedy that and bring it back in line with inflationary increases would only require a maximum of a 15-20% increase in price.

It is UNISON’s view that this massive first year increase is not appropriate given the current financial climate - something the University should be only too well aware of given the recent discussions during national negotiations regarding the affordability of annual staff pay awards.

7. APPROPRIATENESS OF BUS FARES AS TARGET PRICE

Aberdeen has particularly high bus prices – significantly higher than cities such as Glasgow and Edinburgh. In the current tough economic climate, members of staff have to make hard economic choices in order to travel to work and support themselves and their families.

Bus fares are outside of the control of RGU and in the hands of a single service provider, without any competition for most city routes (and specifically routes to the Garthdee campus). If RGU sets a potential target of matching bus fares which are outside the control of the University we are **artificially raising the cost** of a transport alternative for staff and making it significantly more expensive for many staff to get to work. We will have effectively tied ourselves to the prices set by an incumbent bus company who has no local competition.

It should also be noted that the RGU parking permit is not the only cost of car travel. The most recent report by the AA on UK motoring costs, put the running costs of a small vehicle doing relatively low mileage at over £3,760 per year³. These significant costs associated with running a car, including MOT/Tax, fuel and maintenance mean that equalising the parking permit price to bus travel would actually make the cost of car transport **far higher** than alternative public transport – and indeed it is already significantly higher.

8. UNIVERSITY MASTERPLAN AND CAMPUS LOCATION

The University itself has made the decision to move all of the current campus outside of the city centre, to a location which makes it significantly more difficult for many staff to travel to the campus using a single method of public transport.

Unless you actually live within the city centre itself, for most staff you will now need to use at least two buses to travel to the campus, when previously many may only have needed one.

In our survey of staff members, this has a significant impact on the time required to commute to and from work. Often increasing the time by an hour or more, given the additional delays encountered when having to change buses and wait for a connection.

For some staff this factor alone makes it **simply impossible to achieve** travel by public transport. They have family or carer commitments which do not allow them the luxury of extending their daily commute both earlier into the morning and later into the evening.

As such these members of staff rely on the ability to drive to work in order to be able to work at all, and at the same time manage their personal commitments.

9. USING PERMIT PRICES AS A DISINCENTIVE TO LONE CAR USE

By significantly increasing the cost of parking permit prices the University is creating for many staff an **unavoidable additional financial burden**.

As there are no cheaper alternatives to travel for many, the effect of this policy is simply to add an additional tax onto staff member's salaries. Many of the staff members most likely to be affected by this are the most vulnerable and unable to afford any alternative mode of travel, and who may already be travelling by vehicle as it is the only way for them to actually afford to come to work.

Many other staff simply do not have the option of public transport at all. Some live outside the city because it is not affordable for them to live within Aberdeen, or work at times when public transport does not run and as such public transport may be very limited or not available.

³ The AA, *Motoring Costs 2014 (Petrol)*,

This policy is “stick with no carrot”, indiscriminately punishing people who have no other option but to use a vehicle for their commute, whilst offering **no possible alternative** which would allow them to maintain costs and travel time at a reasonable level.

For many therefore they will be forced to continue to use their vehicle at the increased permit cost imposed by the University, or face the alternative of simply being “priced out” of working at the University at all.

This policy singularly fails in its objective to promote alternative forms of transport for these categories of staff which are either simply not available to them or not viable alternatives, whilst forcing everyone to pay a hugely inflated price for the privilege of coming to work.

10. EFFECT ON RECRUITMENT

There have been recent articles in the local press which have shown the difficulties the public sector has in recruiting to Aberdeen because of the hugely inflated housing costs and high cost of living.

Some teaching staff within the city are already being paid an additional payment to help them relocate to Aberdeen.

UNISON is concerned that, rather than attempting to ease the financial burden of working for the University, this policy will actually increase it, and could act as a disincentive for both staff and students given the difficulties involved in commuting to the campus.

This is in line with the **opinion expressed by RGU** last year whilst in consultation with the council over increased parking charges in the Garthdee controlled parking zone.

In the report EPI/12/280, the council noted the following response from RGU:

“...they [RGU] considered the alternative option for even higher charges (option 2) would have a detrimental effect on both students and staff. Currently the complaints from both are that buses can’t keep to the timetable due to the problems on the bus corridor. Bus fares and parking charges are too high to the point that they may have difficulty in attracting both students and staff, particularly from overseas.”⁴

11. CAR SHARING PRICE REDUCTION

UNISON is pleased to see that the option for car sharing is being given a reduction in permit price. Whilst we applaud and support this effort, nevertheless this remains a “niche” option which is only suitable for a relatively small proportion of staff.

Staff opting for this will usually need to have no other personal commitments (which removes the option for many staff who use a vehicle to meet their family commitments), and will also have to share with people who have closely synchronised working hours. Given the University’s flexibility in allowing departments to manage working hours to suit the

⁴ Aberdeen City Council, *Proposed revisions to on street parking charges for Forresterhill and Garthdee, (EPI/12/280)*, Jan 2013

needs of the business and their staff, this is often very difficult to achieve for those wishing to car share, and therefore makes the option impossible for many.

The scheme is also unfair to staff who share with non-car users. They are not lone car users as they bring in colleagues, however they are not entitled to a reduced price permit.

12. COMPARISON WITH OTHER ORGANISATIONS

UNISON is aware that other companies within the Aberdeen area, and in particular large oil and gas engineering firms do not charge at all for car parking for their staff. Some of these firms have large car parks available to them, and yet the council appears to run a different policy with regard to these companies.

In addition many of these companies actually run bus transport for employees, and have minibuses available to pick up and return staff members – at **no cost** to the staff.

UNISON surveyed other universities within Scotland, and most of the responses had car parking charges either below (in some case free), or at a similar level to our current charges. Only one who responded had significantly higher charges to our existing level, and that was a city centre university with very limited car parking available and excellent public transport links (only 200 yards away from a main bus station). Other universities run a tiered system based on grade, which ensures that the lowest paid members of staff are not unfairly penalised by having to pay a significant proportion of their salary.

Only one other university responded to say that they had moved to put their prices into line with commercial car parking rates, and this policy had very quickly been reversed due to the hugely negative effect this had on industrial relations.

13. SALARY SACRIFICE OPTION

Ordinarily UNISON would of course favour salary sacrifice options being given to staff, however, providing a salary sacrifice option for staff for parking permits, whilst simultaneously trying to disincentivise lone car use by applying huge increases to the costs of permits seems to be at odds. Giving with one hand to take away with the other does not benefit anyone.

It is also noted that whilst SPARG members currently have a higher permit charge, the fact that it is likely they are higher rate tax payers, also means that the discount they will receive under salary sacrifice is larger than ordinary staff through the salary sacrifice scheme, providing a discount to them of approximately 41%.

14. INFLEXIBLE PERMIT CATEGORIES

The current permit categories do not take into account staff members who only require parking for periods of time during the year. Facilities Services staff, including cleaners and janitorial staff will often work shift work, which has two effects:

1. It will often place them at work at times when there is no public transport service between Garthdee and their home at all.
2. As they work shifts, they may only need a parking space for a few hours a day every few weeks when their shift pattern overlaps with daily permit periods.

These staff have no option but to purchase a full annual pass at the moment. If the parking permit is also increased these categories of staff will be paying hugely inflated permit prices, with no alternative, when they are the staff members who require only a tiny proportion of the purchased parking time, and who are least able to afford it.

These staff are amongst the lowest paid categories of staff within the university and it is clearly unfair to penalise them financially for a) using the **only mode of transport** available to them at the hours they work, and b) forcing them to pay a **full annual permit**, even though they only need to park during permit periods for a few hours a month.

We would suggest that regardless of the intention to increase prices, the current system itself is already unbalanced and unfair to these staff members and an alternative permit with no charge or a significantly reduced price should be introduced to cover them, and would therefore strongly oppose any increase to car park charges for this group of staff.

15. BUSINESS USER PERMITS

UNISON already disputes the fact that staff members using their vehicles for the benefit of the University should be forced to pay for the privilege of bringing their vehicle to work. In previous discussions on this matter, the University has pointed out that no staff are **required** to use their vehicle for work purposes.

Whilst this may be true, it is clearly ridiculous to suggest that if every member of staff who currently uses their vehicle for the benefit of the University were to stop doing so, that normal operational activities of the University would be unaffected. On that basis, it is clear to us that the University derives a real and tangible benefit through the goodwill of staff working with their own vehicles to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the University's business. As such UNISON restates our opposition to the fact that *real* business users have to pay the full price for permits in the first place, and would strongly oppose the intended significant increases.

16. ADDITIONAL INCOME "WINDFALL"

The introduction of significantly higher parking prices will gain the university a significant additional income, as a direct tax on its employees. The first year increases alone would provide additional income of approximately £50k, which if replicated across the five years proposed would lead to £250k per year additional income – straight from the pockets of employees.

Although UNISON has asked the question as to what this additional income would be used for, we have not yet been provided with an answer.

17. ALTERNATIVES TO LARGE PERMIT INCREASES

FLEXIBLE PERMIT SYSTEM

The current system of permits is inflexible, which discourages the use of alternative forms of transport. At the moment, you can either buy a full parking permit for the year, or not. For some staff therefore, who require the car to meet some of their personal or work commitments, they are then forced to purchase a full permit for the year.

This means that those staff - having paid the full permit price - no longer have any incentive to use alternative modes of transport on days when they could. They've already purchased parking for every day.

UNISON believes therefore that a more flexible daily/weekly pass system should operate in parallel with the annual permit. This would mean that staff who could use the bus/cycle, car share etc for some days may do so, whilst only paying for car parking on the days when they need to use it – thereby reducing costs for them, and encouraging them to use alternative modes of transport on the days that they are able. This would reduce the number of lone car journeys, at the same time as **reducing costs** for staff.

SUBSIDISED BUS PASSES

UNISON believes that incentives work better than punishments – particularly when the punishment is unavoidable which leads to anger and distress and the subsequent low morale and staff dissatisfaction.

UNISON would prefer to see the University provide subsidised bus travel passes, which would encourage people to use public transport, whilst at the same time reducing the costs to staff and making it a more attractive option. UNISON would support a modest inflationary increase to car park permit prices, and notes the fact that the subsidy currently paid to support the Garthdee CPZ (currently about £20k per year) is ceasing this year. Given that the cost of running the car parking, is now and has been for the past few years in credit⁵ there would be a surplus available which the University could use to subsidise staff bus passes.

Even taking only the Garthdee CPZ charge and repurposing it would permit either a reduction of £100 on 200 passes, or £50 on 400 passes. In addition, the provision of a number of “free” one month bus passes each year for staff who may want to trial bus transport could be considered.

This would be a significantly better option, both in terms of reducing the costs of public transport and encouraging all staff who can to make use of the buses, and also in terms of the staff relations, where once again the University would be seen to be helping staff to **reduce their costs** as opposed to being the instigator of a massive price increase.

⁵ RGU, *Transport Operational Costs 2001-2013.xls*

FURTHER INFORMATION AND ADVERTISING

UNISON believes that more could be done to highlight the true costs of car travel, including the breakdown of costs associated with maintenance, petrol etc., and compare that to the cost of bus travel. Sometimes people will not truly appreciate how much their car journey is costing them each day, and highlighting the real costs of doing so, when added to the existing permit price would go some way to allow people to make a **true comparison** with the cost of alternative modes of transport such as buses.

POLICY ON WORKING FROM HOME

There may be some instances where working from home is a useful and acceptable alternative to commuting, and UNISON would encourage further investigation into how a more general University policy could be framed which would allow us to make a reduction in travel to Garthdee, allowing departments the option of doing so where this is achievable.

18. CONCLUSION

UNISON does not believe that the proposal is acceptable in its current form. It is punitive. It would indiscriminately affect staff members many of whom would have no option to allow them to avoid the significantly higher costs involved in commuting.

It would be bad for morale, recruitment and retention, and would set the University up as the instigator of a policy that forces staff members to pay much more *back to the University* simply for working at the campus.

Whilst the policy may have a small effect in making people consider their transport options, for the most part people will be forced to continue to pay the higher charges or look for work elsewhere (particularly in the case of those on low incomes). The policy therefore will fail to achieve its stated aim, whilst at the same time acting as an unavoidable tax on many.

UNISON would be prepared to recommend to members a year one increase to bring the current permit price in line with inflation, and would accept the notion of continued annual adjustments at or below the level of inflation or the annual pay award, whichever is lower, after discussion with the campus trade unions. That, in addition to implementing the suggested alternatives in section 17, with subsequent annual monitoring would be acceptable and reasonable, and would not only be accepted by staff but would be seen in a positive light, as it would show that the University is making real efforts to help staff to reduce costs, whilst also making the required reasonable changes to reduce lone car usage.

19. APPENDIX

UNISON asked for feedback from members and other staff during the consultation process. This appendix sets out a **small** sample of the feedback received:

It would be easier to understand the high cost of a permit, if the campus was situated in the centre of town - where there are numerous travelling options/alternatives (train, walk, various bus routes converging at the centre). Parking in prime city centre spaces should be at a premium, but out at Garthdee the travelling options are very limited, and for many, taking their car to work is the only option.

Due to staggered working hours in my department, car share is not possible for me.

Possible suggestion ? a dedicated free/subsidised environmental friendly mini bus/bus for staff, picking up from the city centre at regular intervals? Promotional opportunity?

Also, I already have to pay the Aberdeen Council for a permit to park at home.

I have school run/pick up to do. Did consider sharing but due to timings could not do it. It is wrong that we have to pay to park at work anyway.

Increasing the parking charge under the "green" banner and trying to force employees to come to work via bus (for example) is grossly unfair. I would like to know if any of the board or senior management team have shares in any of the local public transport services (eg, First Bus) as there seems no other logical reason for such a large increase in parking charges.

With the poor pay-rises received recently, this will hit the lowest paid staff members the hardest. It is CHEAPER to come to work by car than by bus with the current system, and in some cases taking the bus instead of the car is entirely impractical.

Where will the extra money go? Do the senior staff feel that it is right that employees should directly fund their employer? It seems like RGU are introducing an extra "tax" on anyone who chooses to work for them.

RGU CHOSE to move from their city centre location to Garthdee. This means now for many that walking is no longer a viable option, and where people may have been able to get one bus to work, they now need two. Staff should NOT be made to pay for this decision and indeed anyone who now has to travel further to work should in my opinion be subsidised by RGU.

Have the senior staff considered the effects on staff morale, disposable income and (because of the extra financial stress) mental health this may pose? Some staff members may find that it is no longer financially viable to work for RGU, some may even find this would affect their ability to meet payments for their mortgage and other monthly bills.

I am a lone car user because I have to drop off/pick up my daughter at her Grandparents on my way to/from work. I can't look alternative forms of transport because this would be impossible with a 8 month old.

I have family commitments before and after work that means I do not come straight to work or go straight home afterwards I therefore need to drive to work and car share would not be suitable due to the aforementioned reason and that I only work part time
I do not live on a bus route.

Its not just £213 for car users, we also have petrol to pay for on top of the car parking charge. There is also the cost of depreciation to your vehicle, wear and tear, extra mileage etc. I think in real terms it does cost significantly more than the initial £213.

If coming from the south of Aberdeen RGU could possibly reduce the amount of time the cars need to be on the road for (reduce co2 emissions etc). If RGU could use some of the land they own on the other side of the River Dee to create a parking area and a foot bridge, staff/students could walk the last leg of their journey. This could help alleviate the traffic congestion substantially (from the lengthy queues at the first roundabout coming into the city from the south side, & subsequently over the bridge and all the way up the hill to the Garthdee site).

I use my car due to the hours I work. This being 9.30am to 2.30pm. If I catch a bus I have the choice of approx 7.00am (then I arrive too early) or 9.00am (arrive late). There is the Kingswells Park & Ride but it would take me 1/2hr to get there by which time I would be almost into Aberdeen. There is nobody I can car share with who does the same hours I do in my department as I am still based in the town. Most staff are now in Garthdee. It seems to me to be a no win situation. I have suggested that a Park & Ride scheme from Inverurie, Kintore or Blackburn (A96) might be more suitable. I believe the take up of the Park & Ride scheme from Kingswell is negligible. I share with another member of staff but they don't have a car so I currently pay (and have done so for the last 4 years) the full lone driver amount.

There is no adequate bus or train service that would allow me to get to work in time. The commute would be over two hours each way. The rural bus service in Aberdeenshire has been cut in the last five years and is also very expensive.

Part of the reasons for RGU's success as a university is due to the impact of the oil and gas industry on the city. However the university needs to acknowledge that this also causes problems for staff as well as benefits. In terms of cost and availability housing is amongst the most expensive in the country. Many staff continue to live in Glasgow, Edinburgh and Dundee because they cannot find suitable housing here. Many of us live outside Aberdeen because we simply cannot afford to buy or rent in the city and are having to move further out as housing prices in the shire also increase.

Working at the art school requires that I carry large sheets of paper and equipment on a regular basis. To compare the cost of parking to the bus pass is unfair on a number of counts.

For those of us who can't switch to public transport we simply have to continue to pay, bear in mind we are also paying for petrol too. First bus's fares in the city are twice as expensive here as in Edinburgh.

The car parking is only for several months of the year, not evenings and not weekends, so by rights it would only be a proportion of the yearly bus pass, working out about a third of the amount.

The university chose to move to a green belt site, meaning that staff often need to take two buses, one into town and one out to Garthdee, why are staff being penalised for this?

The university needs to look at other options, not simply penalise those who have no other alternative. Also there are probably a lot of staff currently sharing their journeys that are not acknowledged in the figures. i.e why not survey car users about their journeys, so that the figures show staff sharing with people working outwith the university, staff taking children to nursery, dropping off partners and sharing with non car owners. I think this would possibly lower the figure to below 50%.

I use the bus when I can as I have a senior citizen bus pass and therefore it is cheaper than using the car and also helps the environment. However it can take me between 2 and 2 and a half hours in the rush hour to travel approx 25 miles which is a nonsense. I can wait about 20 minutes for a bus here and then have to wait another 20-30 minutes for a Stagecoach bus in Aberdeen and then have a 15 minute walk at the other end - this is not

particularly convenient. The cost of the parking permit is irrelevant to my decision about using the car or not - convenience and time saving are important in the decision too. I use the car when I need to have access to it at night and therefore would continue to apply for a parking permit even if the price went up. Living outside the city buses at night are not frequent - often only hourly and the car becomes more of a necessity.

I have 3 children - 2 at RGU nursery and 1 of primary school age. My partner and I both work for RGU but have to take separate cars to work in order for one of us to drop our children at nursery before coming to work and for one of us to be at home with our older child until time for school. We live in Portlethen so public transport is not easily available to get us in to work either with children or quickly. I don't think putting up the car park costs is really fair - I can see no alternative for us at the moment - car sharing with small children is not really practical. Maybe if there were park and ride facilities from Portlethen that would help but timings may be an issue for parents who have school age children.

I drive to work due to the fact the bus service takes far too long. My drive each way takes around 15 minutes. The last time I had to take the bus it took in excess of 90 minutes each way and two buses required with a change in town. If public transport was quicker/easier, I would have no issue in taking the bus to work.

To travel by bus would mean taking two buses, one into the city centre and one out to Garthdee. Approx journey time would be 45 minutes: i would have to leave home at 7.30 to get to work on time, with the same journey back at night, and as i work till 5.30 i would not be home until 7pm. Frankly, like a lot of other people i wouldn't bother and would look for alternative employment.

I would like to see the alleged planning restriction challenged - i know of noone else who works in industry, at BP, Shell, Nexen or many other companies who have to pay for their workplace parking.

The campus is difficult to get to, and is poorly served by First Bus, whatever they may say.

This proposal is outrageous and will undoubtedly have a negative effect on staff morale, retention and recruitment.

This is absolute nonsense and 100% against. It will still mean the same number of cars using the car park (ie. not effecting any green issue) as people HAVE to get to work. The only difference is that we pay more. This car park is essential for people outwith Aberdeen and those in areas where the buses don't cover. I have a baby who will be using RGU Cresh, I cant walk 2 miles with her every morning, the car is the only viable solution. I also have to go offsite for business.

I tried cycling. Its simply near suicide down that road outside Garthdee and over the bridge of dee. Build a bridge across the river for people/bikes, then I'd consider cycling.

(This is a small selection of over ten pages of comments and feedback.)