

Introduction

Bath and North East Somerset Council is currently preparing a partial update to its Local Plan (LPPU), which precedes the preparation of a new Local Plan which will commence in mid-2021. The Local Plan sets out a strategy to guide future development, site allocations and district-wide development management policies.

Within Midsomer Norton the strategy is to focus on the retail core at the southern end of the High Street. Following an update to the retail need and the ongoing interest in the town centre for further food retail, the current retail allocation at South Road Car Park is being reviewed as part of the LPPU Process. As part of this, there is a need to consider the need for public parking to be retained, and whether there has been any change of circumstances or new information which may affect previous conclusions.

Those policies contained within the B&NES Local Plan need to be supported by a range of evidence. Consequently, the implications of any decision to retain or delete the South Road car park site allocation for food retail needs to be assessed. It should be noted that the allocation Policy SSV2 includes a requirement to “*continue to offer sufficient public car parking for the town centre through the provision of parking spaces on site or off site in locations well related and easily accessible to the town centre.*” Furthermore, the Draft Somer Valley Transport Strategy recommends that there should be no reduction in public car parking capacity within the town. In order to assess the current parking capacity within Midsomer Norton a number of on and off street parking surveys were undertaken. This report assesses the current demand for parking in the South Road car park and makes recommendations for future management approaches.

South Road Car Park is located within Midsomer Norton town centre, south of the main High Street (two minute walk from the car park itself) with access/egress points from South Road.

South Road Car Park is operated by Bath and North East Somerset Council, currently providing 258 spaces (241 marked bays, 8 motorcycle bays, 6 disabled bays and 3 parent and child bays) for public use free of charge, with no restrictions on length of stay.

The surveys were carried out via a beat system with enumerators recording the number and limited registration details of vehicles parking within Midsomer Norton both on and off street at regular periods throughout the day. In addition to occupancy, this enabled duration of stay to be recorded, which constitutes new information as duration of stay was not recorded by the 2015 surveys. The areas which were covered by the parking survey can be seen in red in Figure 1 below and were carried out both on a weekday (Friday 26th April 2019) and weekend (Saturday 27th April 2019) between the hours of 7am and 7pm.

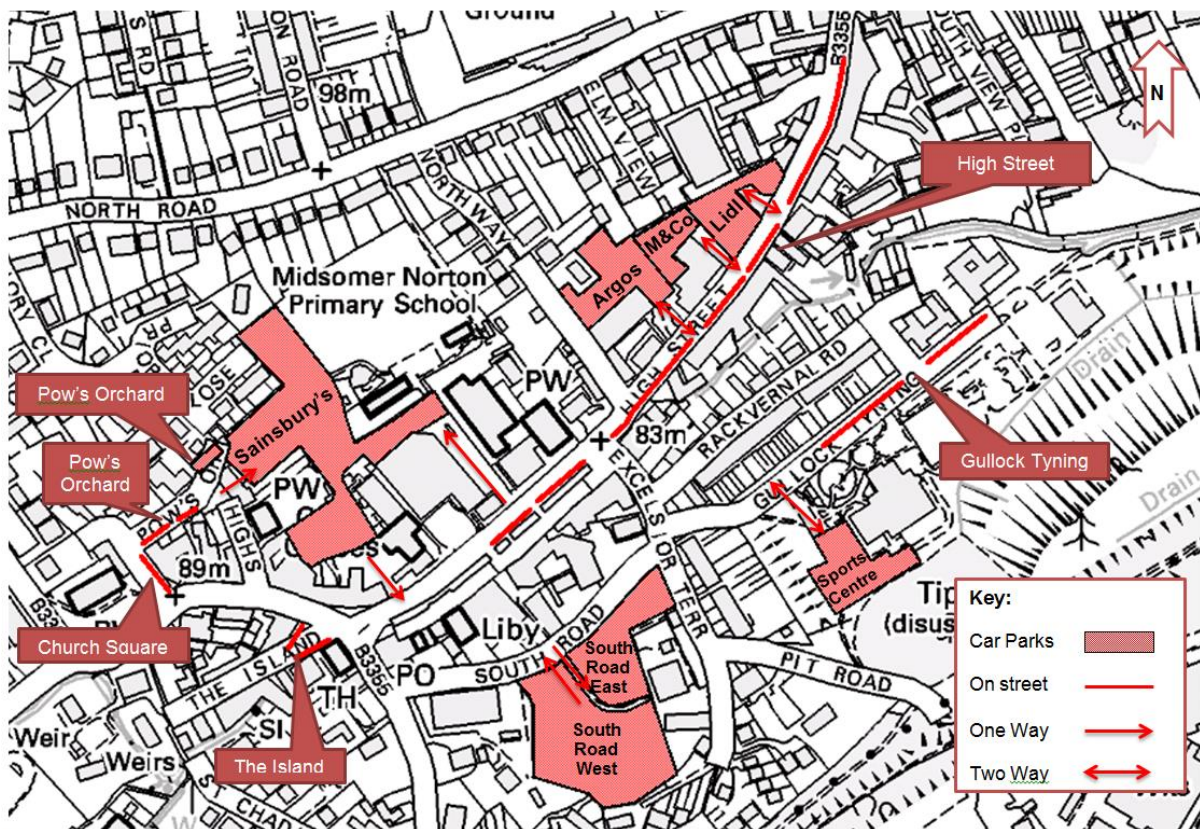


Figure 1 – Parking Survey Locations

Figure 1 also shows alternative parking resources available in Midsomer Norton Town Centre. On-street parking on the High Street and at The Island is restricted to a maximum stay of one hour and 30 minutes respectively. Other on-street parking is unrestricted. Private retailers offer parking but include time limitations on its use with the aim of catering primarily for their customers. Powys Orchard and the Sports Centre are the only other public off-street parking areas in Midsomer Norton. These are significantly smaller than South Road Car Park, offering c.75 additional spaces.

These other locations are outside of the scope of this Technical Note, but they are relevant to how the usage and function of the South Road Car Park is considered.

Survey Results

As can be seen from the Figure 1 South Road car park was split into two separate sections for the survey in order to allow the beat surveys to be conducted at the required intervals. However, for the purposes of this report the results of the car parking survey have been combined for South Road car park.

This report sets out the pattern of arrivals and departures before looking at the overall level of occupancy that was recorded during the surveys. The report also details the duration of stay for those parking in South Road car park.

Figures 2 and 3 below show the arrivals and departures for South Road car park both for a weekday and on a Saturday.

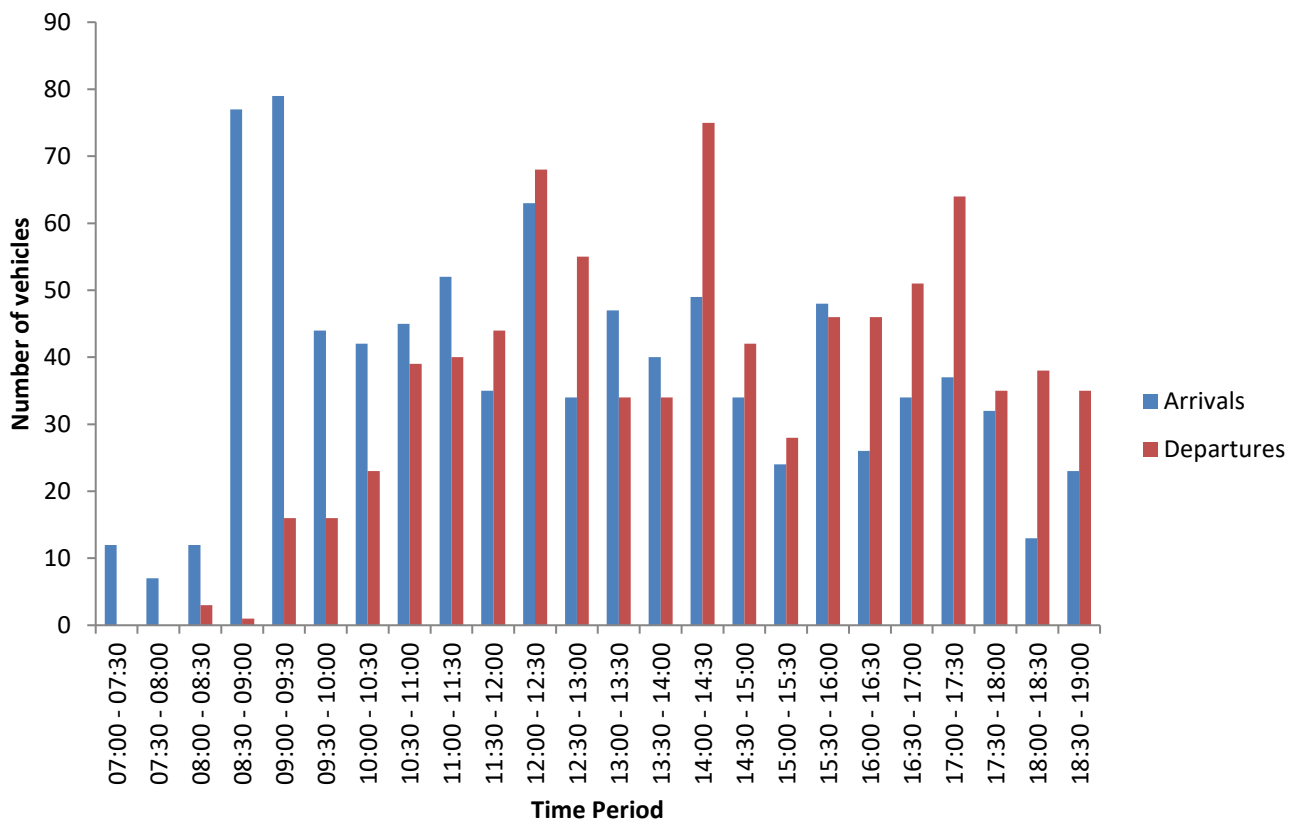


Figure 2 – South Road Car Park – arrivals and departures (Friday 26/04/2019 07:00 - 19:00)

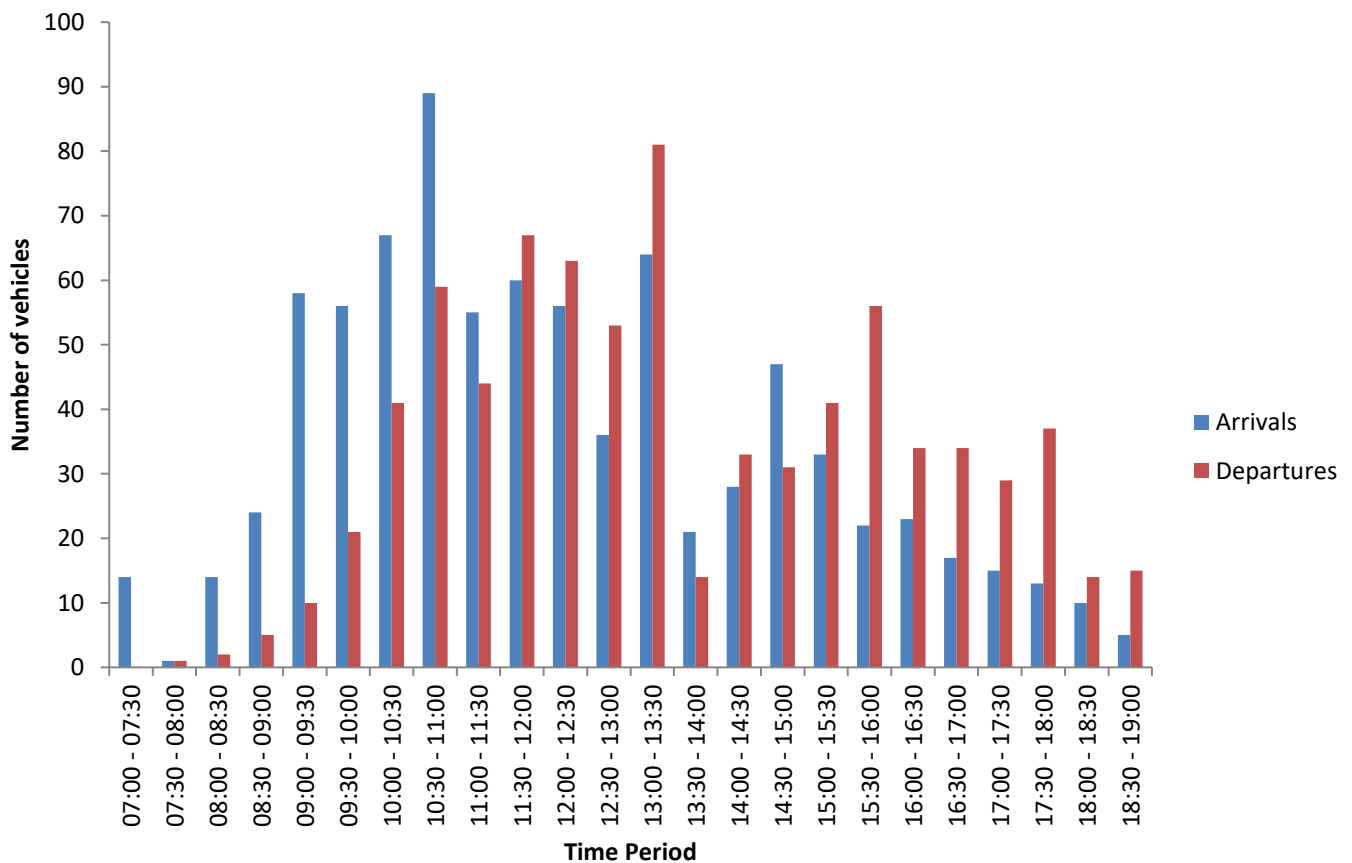


Figure 3 – South Road Car Park – arrivals and departures (Saturday 27/04/2019 07:00 - 19:00)

Figures 2 and 3 above show the numbers of those arriving and departing South Road car park during the course of the survey. As would be expected the peak level of arrivals on the Friday occurs between 08:30 and 09:30 suggesting that the car park is used by some commuters working in the town during the weekdays. This is investigated further in terms of duration of stay later in this report. Of the total arrivals recorded during the

Friday survey, 17% arrived during this time. In total there were 909 vehicles recorded entering the car park during the weekday survey.

On Saturday, the entry flow is higher later in the morning, peaking between 10:30 and 11:00 with 89 vehicles, equivalent to 11% of the total arrivals arriving during this time. In total there were 828 vehicles recorded entering the car park during the weekend survey.

Figures 4 and 5 below display the percentage occupancy for both the Friday and Saturday surveys at South Road car park.

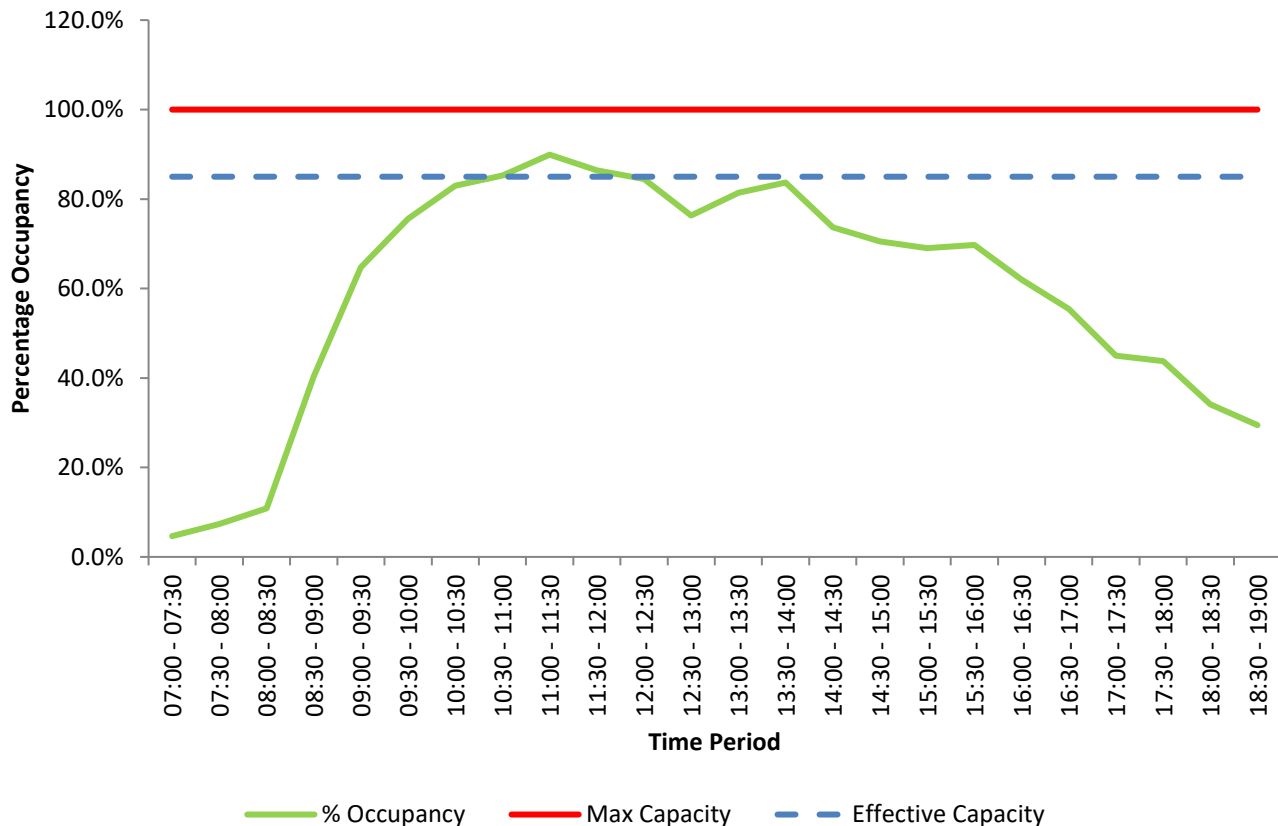


Figure 4 - South Road car park percentage occupancy (Friday 26/04/2019 07:00 - 19:00)

The results of the weekday parking survey for South Road car park indicate that parking occupancy peaked at 90% occupied between 11:00 and 11:30. This is equivalent to 232 of the overall spaces being used out a total of 258 available spaces. The data shows that the car park operates at over 80% capacity between 10:00 and 14:00, albeit with a slight dip between 12:30 and 13:00. Spare capacity increases from 14:00, with occupancy remaining above 50% until 17:00.

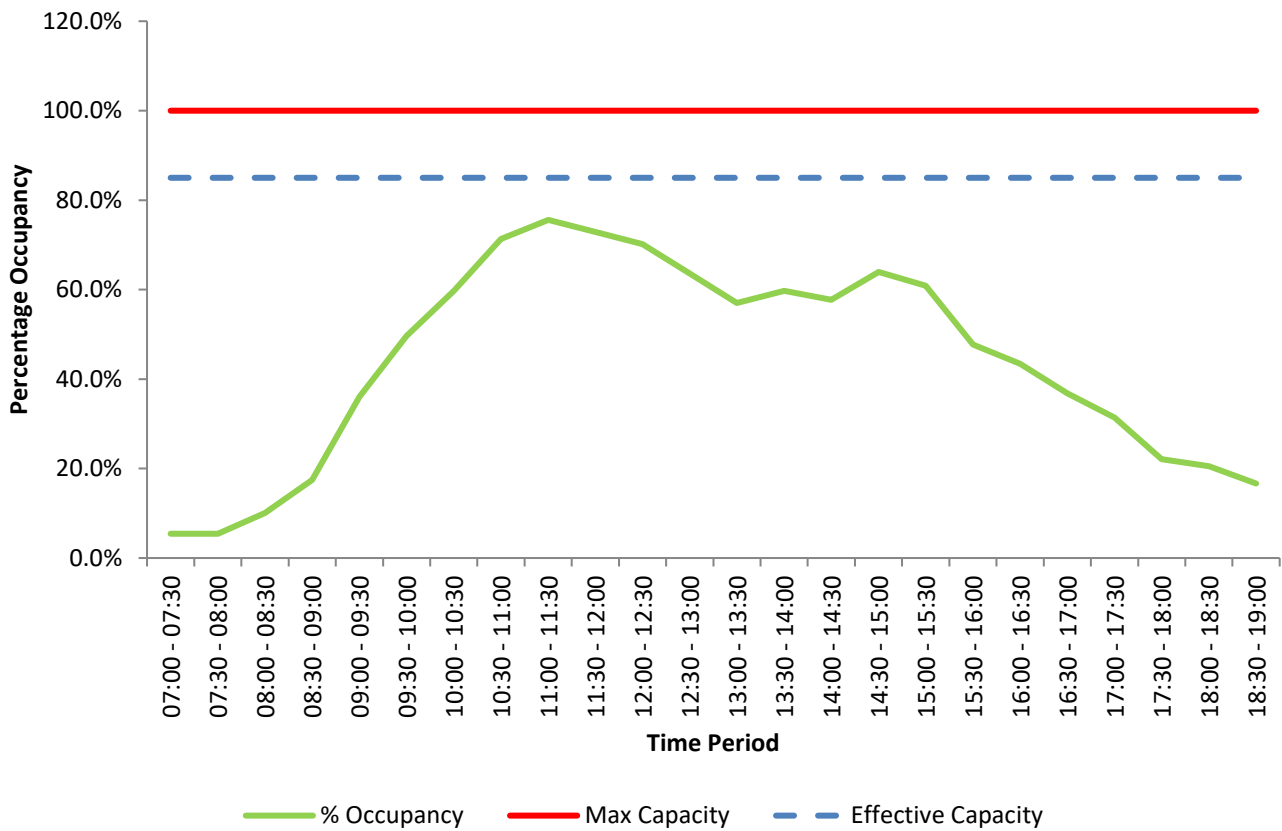
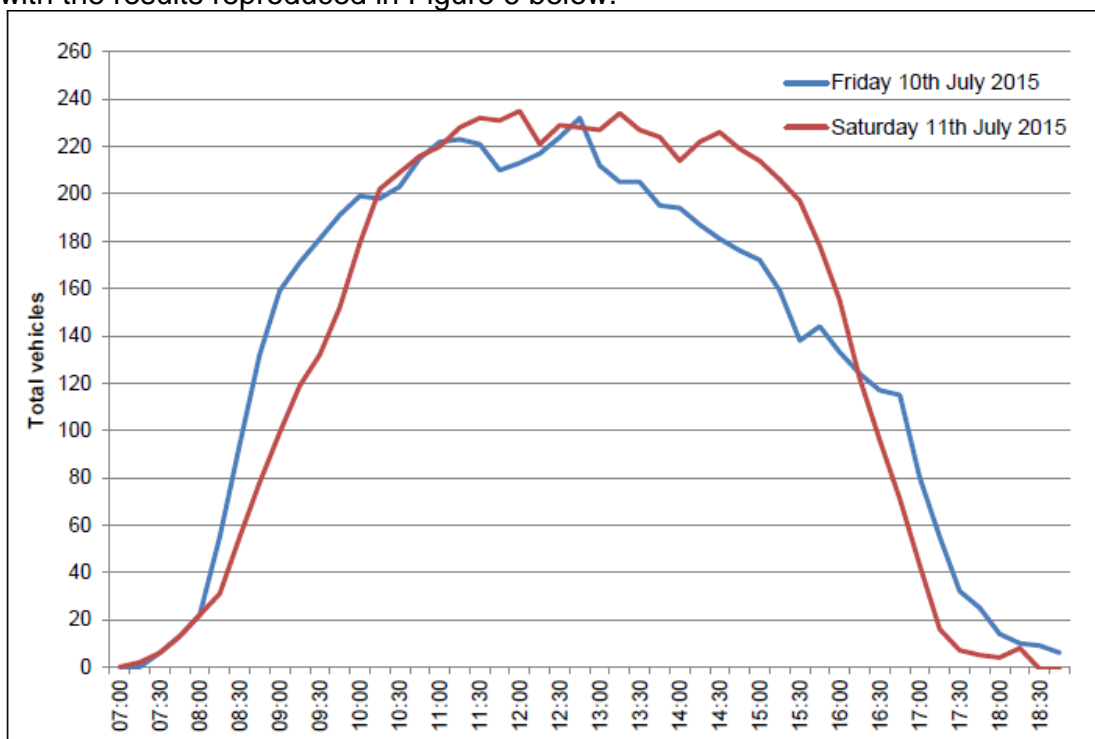


Figure 5 - South Road car park percentage occupancy (Saturday 27/04/2019 07:00 - 19:00)

The level of parking occupancy in South Road car park is lower on the weekend with a peak occupancy of 76% occurring again between 11:00 and 11:30. Occupancy is above 70% between 10:30 and 12:30, and is c.50% or above between 09:30 and 16:00.

A comparable survey was undertaken in 2015, albeit this did not record duration of stay, with the results reproduced in Figure 6 below.



Source: Entry/exit counts provided by B&NES

Figure 6 - South Road car park percentage occupancy (2015 data, reproduced directly from Mott Macdonald report)

The results of the 2015 survey are comparable with the 2019 survey in that both indicate a high peak level of occupancy. Friday peak occupancy is at c.90% in both 2015 and 2019. Whilst the scales on the graphs differ, suggesting different levels of PM occupancy, the level of occupancy across the day is comparable for the Friday data set in 2015 and 2019. Comparing these two surveys provides validity to the conclusions drawn from the 2019 Friday survey data.

Saturday peak occupancy is marginally higher in 2015 than 2019. Additionally, the Saturday occupancy peak in 2015 was maintained for a significantly longer proportion of the day, with parking levels above 200 spaces between approximately 10:30 and 15:30. A further Saturday survey was undertaken on 29th August 2015. The results of that survey should be treated with caution as it is reported that there had been significant roadworks in preceding weeks. Those results were comparable with the 2019 survey, which showed a peak occupancy of c.75% at 11:30, dropping over the following hours. This suggests that there may be variability between Saturdays, but that there is a reasonable degree of demand for parking which can approach capacity. Figures 7 and 8 below display the length or duration of stay for those parking in South Road car park both during the weekday and weekend survey. The data shows the duration that each car occupied a parking space between 07:00 and 19:00. For cars remaining in the car park at 19:00, this was recorded as the cut off time for their duration of stay, i.e. a car parked between 18:00 and 22:00 is recorded as a one hour stay. A review of the data suggests that this may have artificially skewed the results towards 0-2 hour stays, but that this is unlikely to have sufficient effect to affect the conclusions drawn. Furthermore, the time period of concern for B&NES is 07:00-19:00, and therefore it is duration of parking within this time period which is important to the study, rather than duration per vehicle.

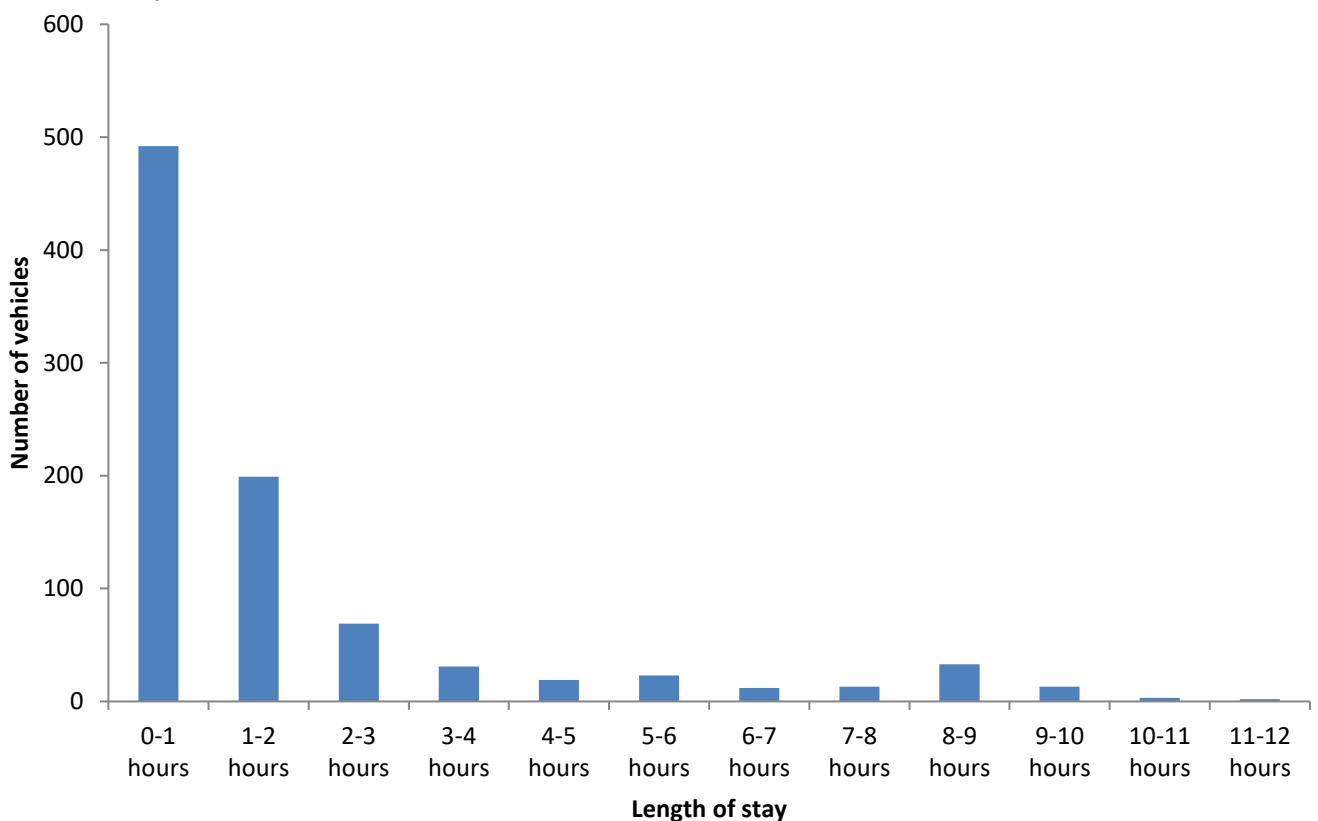


Figure 7 - South Road Car Park Duration of stay (Friday 26/04/2019 07:00 - 19:00)

Figure 6 above shows that the majority of those parking in South Road car park on a Friday stay for an hour or less. Of those 909 vehicles recorded during the survey 492 vehicles stayed for an hour or less. This is equivalent to 54% of all those vehicles recorded during the survey.

The next largest number is those parking between 1 and 2 hours which equate to 22% of those using the car park. Combined, the number of those using the car park that stayed for two hours or less is 76%.

The survey appears to suggest that the number of commuters parking in South Road car park is limited with only 33 individuals parking between 8 and 9 hours, and only 76 people parking for 6 or more hours. This suggests that the high flow of arrivals in the 08:30-09:30 period includes a significant number of non-commuters.

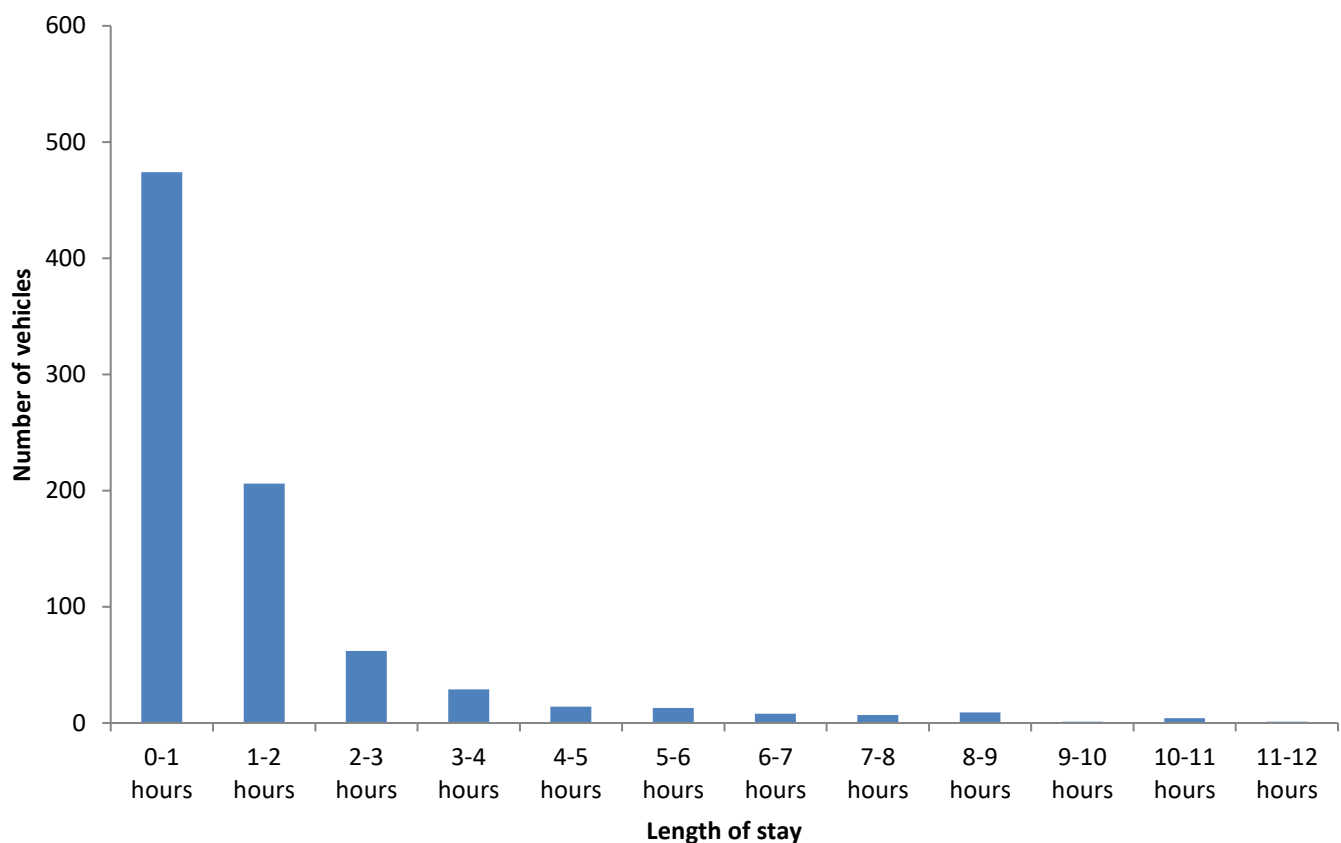


Figure 8 - South Road Car Park Duration of stay (Saturday 27/04/2019 07:00 - 19:00)

The results of the weekend survey show a similar pattern in terms of duration of stay with the majority of those using the car park staying for an hour or less. 474 vehicles, of a total of 828, stayed for an hour or less which is equivalent to 57% of those recorded.

Data Conclusions

These surveys, and comparison with historical data, suggest a number of conclusions which can be drawn regarding the use of the South Road Car Park.

Practical efficient capacity of a car park is considered to be approximately 85% occupation, accounting for turnover and visibility of spaces. On a Friday, the car park can be considered to be at practical capacity for a short period of time in the middle of the day with limited available spaces. However, as the car park occupancy does not approach 100%, this suggests that capacity is not exceeded, which may result in

haphazard parking outside of marked bays, or people using other car parks. There are greater levels of spare capacity before 10:00 and after 14:00. These findings are relatively consistent with historic data.

2019 data shows Saturday occupancy levels to be lower than Friday, peaking at 76% late morning, and with significant levels of spare capacity before 10:30 and after 12:30. However, care should be taken with this data as comparison with older surveys suggests some variability between Saturdays.

The vast majority of people using the South Road Car Park on both days stayed for less than an hour, and over three quarters of people stayed for less than two hours. The data suggests a relatively small number of people using the car park for commuting on a Friday. Some of those staying for longer durations on a Saturday may also be working in the town centre.

Current Policy Position

The importance of the availability of parking in Midsomer Norton Town Centre, and the role that the South Road Car Park plays in securing this, is well-established in transport and planning policy. The Placemaking Plan (2017) re-iterates that Midsomer Norton town centre is the principal centre in the Somer Valley, and will be retained as such. The centre serves a rural hinterland, and it is recognised that driving is the only viable option for many visitors to the town centre.

Accessible parking is listed as a key asset of Midsomer Norton, whilst strong competition from nearby market towns in surrounding districts, lack of medium and large sized shopping units, dominance of parking, poor pedestrian links, busy roads and a lack of public space, are listed as risks.

The Placemaking Principles in SV2 include to *“Enable more intensive use of the South Road Car Park providing the opportunity to accommodate a modern food store. Any development here should retain public car parking for the town centre.”* At the time of making the allocation, there was an assumption that a reasonable proportion of car park users were commuters or long stay. Therefore the potential to manage spaces differently on this site and across the wider area may have presented an opportunity to reduce parking levels and deliver a foodstore. New data on duration of stay shows that this is not the case, and that the vast majority of users stay only for a short period of time.

This is continued into Policy SSV2 for the South Road Car Park which includes *“Continue to offer sufficient public car parking for the town centre through the provision of parking spaces on site or off site in locations well related and easily accessible to the town centre.”* This clearly supports addressing some of the risks and retaining the asset of accessible parking.

This approach has translated into B&NES Transport Policy Team’s approach to parking in the Somer Valley, as detailed in the Draft Somer Valley Transport Strategy (2017), and the B&NES Parking Strategy (2018). In each of these documents, the retention of current levels of parking in the Somer Valley has been taken as a set principle.

However, this needs to be balanced and reviewed in terms of whether it is up-to-date and consistent with other policy approaches. Notably, B&NES Council declared a Climate and Ecological Emergency in 2019 with a target to achieve carbon neutrality by 2030. To do this, we need to reduce the mileage driven by each person by an average of 25%, and transition the vehicle fleet to 76%/14%/10%, Electric/Hybrid/Internal

Combustion Engine (ICE) respectively. In short, we need to significantly reduce unnecessary car usage and support people in moving to Ultra-Low Emissions Vehicles (ULEV). Parking policy, availability and infrastructure can play a key role in achieving this.

Approaches to Parking Management

The aims of maintaining access to the town centre to support both its viability and the needs of its catchment, and addressing our obligations under the Climate and Ecological Emergency are not mutually exclusive. However, the current availability of unrestricted free parking is likely to be resulting in some people choosing to drive despite having reasonable alternative options. This does not align with our sustainable approach to transport and carbon.

The majority of Midsomer Norton is located within 2km of the High Street, which suggests a reasonable residential catchment which can walk, or cycle, to the town centre, although it is noted that there are other barriers to active travel in addition to distance. It is likely that some people choose to drive rather than walk due to the availability of free parking, and the convenience it offers. There are bus routes connecting the town centre with other parts of the town and Somer Valley, although it is noted that service frequencies and journey times are not favourable in comparison with private car usage.

It is therefore appropriate for B&NES to investigate alternatives to unrestricted free parking which maintain access for those that need to drive, discourage unnecessary car usage, and support other improvements which would benefit local people and the town of Midsomer Norton.

At present, there is insufficient information available to determine a detailed approach to parking for the South Road car park, and other car parks in the Somer Valley. This will need a wider study looking at the area as a whole, interdependencies, and relative draw of different centres both within and just outside the Somer Valley. This study will then be used to inform the new Local Plan.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The data shows that there is limited spare parking capacity in Midsomer Norton at peak times, with a moderate level of spare parking available at other times. The vast majority of users of the car park are primarily short stay visitors to the town centre, which emphasises the need to retain the current resource for town centre vitality and viability reasons.

It is important to retain the ability for people to drive to, and park in, Midsomer Norton to protect the viability of the town centre, particularly as it serves a rural hinterland. However, the current approach of providing unconstrained free parking is likely to be encouraging car usage from people with alternative travel options. This is counter to the aims of the Climate Emergency declaration and requires investigation (which will be undertaken to support the new Local Plan).

At this stage, it is considered that the risks of simply reducing parking levels are too great to be able to implement with confidence. Reducing the levels of free parking would align with the CE but would, in isolation, risk the accessibility for the rural hinterland, and thus it could potentially reduce the viability of the town centre.

This Note sets out that B&NES Transport considers that the principle of providing unconstrained free parking at the South Road Car Park in Midsomer Norton does not align well with the Climate Emergency declaration, and that alternative approaches should be investigated which balance the whole range of policy and planning requirements.

However, at present, the position is also that any development of the South Road Car Park site would need to re-provide current levels of town-centre parking, in addition to that required to support the development itself. In identifying the level of parking required for any development itself, avoiding over or under-provision, analysis presented by a developer will need to consider factors such as whether trips generated are “New” to the network, and/or linked with other town centre uses, and temporal demand profiles.