



**Blue Badge Parking Focus Groups topline report for Epsom
and Ewell Borough Council**

Overview

- Two focus groups took place at the Ebbisham Centre on Thursday 27th May.
- 16 people took part. Most were of retirement age. There were no young people present
- Participants were a mix of disabled people and drivers/carers for disabled people.
- All of those attending had, or were representing someone who had, a disability which impaired their mobility.
- Discussion was based upon four points agreed with the Council and designed to prompt and allow flexible discussion:
 1. Do you understand the changes to parking for Blue Badge holders?
 2. What actions could the Council take to make parking easier for Blue Badge holders?
 3. How could the Council improve facilities in its car parks for Blue Badge holders?
 4. Can you think of any benefits to yourself and the community as a whole that these changes will make?

Findings and recommendations

Initially most participants were keen to express their views on the principle of introducing charges. For the most part participants responded well to the discussion points but were always keen to stray back to the issue of the charges.

There was confusion among all participants about the 'what, why, where, when and how' details of the changes especially regarding the Ashley Centre: "*Can someone tell me what's happening at the Ashley Centre?* Response: "*I don't think anybody knows*".

Most had gleaned their information from a mix of sources: the local media (which appeared to be the main source "*All I've gleaned I've read from the papers*"), friends and the survey distributed by the Council.

However it was the issue of the free hour which caused the most confusion. None of the participants appeared to understand exactly how it would work across all car parks: "*Is it the first hour or the second hour that you get free?*"

Recommendation: Constant, clear and consistent information from reliable and trusted sources, managed by the Council.

On the whole the additional hour seemed to be welcomed although most couldn't understand why the free hour wasn't awarded first.

Recommendation: Most participants seemed to visit for an average of two hours. Is there a cost/benefit advantage to awarding the free hour first?

There was a lot of negativity in both groups about any changes with most presuming that it would generally make parking harder , not easier, for them: *"It'll probably get worse"*.

Most of the respondents seemed concerned that they wouldn't receive any additional help from the parking attendants when the changes become effective.

Recommendation: A more pro-active, 'can I help' approach by frontline staff.

Both groups felt strongly that any changes proposed to make parking easier for disabled people should be trialled by someone with a disability first. Other suggested that able-bodied officers could also experience shopping in a wheelchair so they could see a disabled person's perspective: *"Able-bodied people should not be allowed to make these sort of decisions without consulting disabled people"*.

Recommendation: Involving some disabled users in the planning stages would help to secure buy-in from the wider group.

The groups unanimously failed to see any benefit of the 30 minute bays on yellow lines either for themselves (as a driver) or for a passenger as a driver/carer for a disabled person.

"It's ridiculous" , "Absolutely mad" , "It's crazy, crazy"

Recommendation: Reconsider this proposal

Both groups felt very strongly that a pre-paid oyster type of card would be a great benefit. Some even felt that it would help to off-set the 'pain' of the charges.

"Could we not have something like an Epsom and Ewell Oyster Card? ...then that would save finding the money and fiddling about".

Recommendation: Explore and consider the options for an Oyster Card style scheme.

On the whole, participants felt that the siting rather than the number of bays (with the exception of the Ashley Centre where more bays would be appreciated) was key. The siting of any pay and display machines would also be key.

The first group in particular was also keen to see more action taken on Blue Badge fraud, echoed by some in the second group

One suggestion garnered a lot of support from the others in the group. This was to create free disabled parking bays in the area which is currently used by the market opposite Marks and Spencer, on non-market days.

Some participants were very sceptical that improvements were going to be made:

"If they (improvements) were done right who's going to say no to a fee? I wish I could believe that these changes will happen" .

Recommendation: Use PR wins such as creating free or flat rate disabled bays in the market place; taking visible action against fraudulent parking to garner positive publicity.

On the whole, both groups were unable or reluctant to concede that there could be some benefits resulting from the changes. The main barriers appeared to be the current strength of feeling against the principle of charging and scepticism that meaningful improvements would be made.

Recommendation: Identify some champions for the changes.