



revelation
communications

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

Introduction

Following the decision by Epsom and Ewell Borough Council to introduce parking charges for Blue Badge holders from July (subject to a traffic order), the Council wanted to hear the views of Blue Badge holders on the implementation of the charges and the impact of any changes made to the Council's car parks.

Two focus groups took place on Thursday 27th May consisting of a random selection of Blue Badge holders who had responded to an invitation to join the focus groups via a survey distributed earlier in the month.

The focus groups took place in the Ebbisham Centre-easily accessible for participants as it is centrally located within Epsom Town Centre, has nearby parking and facilities for disabled people.

Each focus group ran for 90 minutes. The first group consisted of eight participants and the second of eight participants. Nine were disabled Blue Badge holders and seven attended to represent the views of a Blue Badge holder. The participants were mainly older people of retirement age and there were no young people. All of those attending had, or were representing someone who had, a disability which impaired their mobility. Some had additional disabilities such as deafness or a speech impairment. Some took advantage of the Centre's hearing loop facility. All were able to participate fully.

At the beginning of each session it was explained to the participants that the focus group was not intended for the discussion of whether the introduction of the charges should take place, but that their views were being sought about the implementation of the charges and the impact of any changes made to the Council's car parks. Each session was recorded and to ensure that participants could speak freely, all the comments included in this report are anonymous.

Most of the participants use the Ashley Centre car park and the comments and observations in this report reflect this.

A set of discussion points was agreed with the Council: As a rigid, long list of questions would obviously be unworkable and inappropriate for a focus group it was agreed that a topic guide would be better as it is flexible enough to prompt and allow freer discussion.

The questions were:

- Do you understand the changes to parking for Blue Badge holders? (This question was posed as there seemed to be some confusion in the survey responses about some aspects of the changes such as how the extra hour would work) .
- What actions could the Council take to make parking easier for Blue Badge holders? (Most of the qualitative responses to the survey seemed to ignore this and focus on the charging aspect).
- How could the Council improve facilities in its car parks for Blue Badge holders? (As money is limited this enabled people to expand on their preferences for improvements).
- Can you think of any benefits to yourself and the community as a whole that these changes will make? (There was a lot of qualitative feedback in the survey about the negative impacts of the changes but respondents were unable to focus on any benefits).

Findings

Initially most participants were keen to express their views on the principle of introducing charges. Apart from two participants (one in each group), all were aggrieved by the introduction of the charges and felt strongly that disabled people should not be asked to pay for parking. The first group seemed more moderate and malleable in their viewpoints whilst the second, on the whole, appeared more entrenched. For the most part participants responded well to the discussion points but were always keen to stray back to the issue of the charges. Although some participants expressed frustration that the focus groups had not been arranged to discuss the principle of the introducing charges, (*"I think it would have been nice to have been consulted first, not after the news broke"*), the process of participating in a formal group, led by an independent mediator appeared to have a cathartic effect. The atmosphere was calm and orderly throughout, participants were polite and respectful and everyone left smiling.

Do you understand the changes to parking for Blue Badge holders?

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"*.

"These changes don't make sense. I can't understand them "

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. No-one appeared to be in full grasp of the facts *"I haven't been*

told anything, just that we're going to be charged" : why the charges are being introduced "If they've got £88,000 to spend on the car parks well, why don't they just use that so we don't have to pay?", when they are being introduced and whether there will be a consistency across the car parks.

Even the current system caused some confusion, for example whether Blue Badge holders can park in a regular bay if there are no disabled bays available:

"You can park anywhere if you pay but you can't display your Blue Badge".

Response: *"Yes, you can. We have".*

Response: *"As long as you pay...I thought you had to pay to park in an ordinary space or is that the Ashley Centre?"*

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, although some seemed to have understood how the concept would work in the pay and display car parks.

"Is it the first hour or the second hour that you get free?"

"Do we have to pay if you get a free hour and we're less than hour. I'm not really sure".

"Do you have to anticipate the extra hour in the length of time you're shopping or whatever?"

Response: *"You've got to anticipate how long you're going to be in the ordinary (pay and display car parks) and knock an hour off and pay for that much and display your badge. So I understand it".*

"Can you pay on your way out of the Ashley Centre? Can you say, well I've been here for three hours but I've only got to pay for two?"

Response: *"The machine's not going to allow you to do that! You've actually got to go down with your ticket. The problem is you're not going to know how long you're going to be there. It's going to be awkward".*

"How are they going to know if you're a disabled person?"

Response: *"Yes, it's confusing".*

"Am I expected to go (and pay) at the beginning or after I've finished when I've got a trolley load of shopping...It's not clear what they're saying. They haven't explained it".

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

"We find it a bit odd that they've added the free hour on afterwards. Surely you should get the first hour free?"

Response: *"It's a sop, the free hour"*.

"Sometimes I have to go home, so I would have paid for the first hour and I wouldn't get any benefit of the free hour?"

What actions could the Council take to make parking easier for Blue Badge holders?

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".

"Oh, it'll get more complicated".

"It's going to be an extremely messy and taxing method of operating".

"It is going to be much more difficult than it is at the moment".

Most of the respondents seemed concerned that they wouldn't receive any additional help from the parking attendants when the changes become effective. While some in the second group seemed to find the attendants obstructive and were concerned that this would worsen: *"I think it will get worse because of the people operating it. They really are quite stubborn"*, others worried that there would no longer be anybody there to assist them: *"The office won't deal any longer with Blue Badge holders"* and *"We'll have to go in like everybody else and get a ticket and then after that, well I just don't know"*.

"If I understand it right, the attendant will not be involved with Blue Badges (holders) anymore".

Response: *"They need to make that clear"*.

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 as well as asking disabled people their views on any changes, able-bodied officers could also experience shopping in a wheelchair so they could see a disabled person's perspective (literally and metaphorically perhaps).

"The Council has suggested putting in more bays by the theatre. Well that's no good to any of us with shopping. You've got to go down these ramps with the shopping. Then having emptied it into your car you've got to take it back up to the trolley park. I just feel that this is an example of the thinking that's gone into this scheme...they're (Council officers) not really disabled".

Response: *"If you're disabled then that scenario doesn't make sense. It's the same with the half hour parking in the upper high street. You're sitting there and you're thinking: this person obviously has not got a clue what being disabled means and it sounds like they've not had a single disabled person in the room when they've been discussing this, when they've been putting it together. And that's pretty horrific really, so it's a waste of time in a way"*.

"The problem is the people who are making these decisions are not disabled...we stick new people at our place in a wheelchair...and then they're realising..they'll (Council officers) get one hell of a shock and then they'll suddenly think 'we can't just stick a bay in there'. Make them realise what it's like".

Response: *"Make them go into Marks and Spencers and 'Smiths..and then back to their car and see how long it takes them, just to weave your way around people".*

"Able-bodied people should not be allowed to make these sort of decisions without consulting disabled people".

Response: *"Unless you actually sit in a wheelchair or push a wheelchair you don't know what problems are".*

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. They were concerned that other drivers would accuse them of causing an obstruction, that they may have to exit the vehicle into a flow of traffic and/or their passenger would have to exit directly onto a busy pavement. Those who are drivers for a disabled person would not use the bays to drop off their passenger as the disabled person always has to be accompanied.

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

"Parking on the road isn't always appropriate for the person. You have to get out into traffic...across the pavement and into a shop...people walking all around you (she) would be distressed by that. It could be an issue".

"Half an hour would be absolutely nothing to me. By the time you've got there it would be time to get back".

"If you did park on a line you'd have buses hooting you, everybody advising you to move. It's (30 minute parking bay) not on".

"Get a scooter out, a wheelchair out, assemble it. Bang. It's (the time) gone".

How could the Council improve facilities in its car parks for Blue Badge holders?

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

"If they said we're going to give you a perfect car park and then charge you, well that's acceptable maybe, but that's not going to happen. It won't happen".

"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".

"More disabled bays in the Ashley Centre? It is not going to happen".

"I'd love to see more spaces but I don't think you're going to get very far asking for them".

"The problem is, is that they're going to have to change all the parking meters. Are they going to do that? No, not a hope in hell!"

Others were concerned that the wrong types of improvements would be made.

"What they're suggesting is more lines, more signage. It doesn't work".

"The Council has suggested putting in more bays by the theatre. Well that's no good to any of us with shopping".

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".

"If we have to pay...then I would want to pay upfront so I haven't got to fiddle about with my purse"

"They say they're going to spend £77,000 (sic) . On all the car parks in the Borough. That's nothing. That's paint essentially. But if they provided Oyster cards or easier parking for a small sum...that would be considered."

"The answer is an Oyster Card".

But again there was confusion as to how this proposal would work in practice:

"How would it work? Would you pay upfront? Or would you get a ticket and then use it (an Oyster Card) to pay?"

"If you put £10 on, would there be a limit as to how long that £10 would last? Would they say 'that's only going to be on there for a month' or would it be on there until you used it?"

And there were different views as to what would be considered a reasonable amount to pay:

"They should give you a pass for the year which would give you unlimited parking within the Borough and you may have to pay a fiver or whatever for it".

"Up to £20 for a year".

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 *"The Ashley Centre is shocking", "not enough, not enough"*) was key. The siting of any pay and display machines would also be key.

"By the time I've trailed all the way over to the ticket machine and back, to be honest with you, that's my walking time".

"It's A to B that's a killer. You could end up walking much further than most people because of where the spaces are. You just need an awful lot more spaces with the access (to shops). It's the access and the distance that are the problems".

"They've got three by the walkway (Town Hall car park) and then they've actually got some quite a way further back. I must admit I got quite cross when they put those ones in".

"Nearer to...where you're going to go for the shops" .

"The bays need to be near the machines or near where you're going to the shops".

"They shouldn't put any spaces on the third floor. You've got to keep waiting, waiting for the lift".

"The so-called ground floor of the Ashley Centre. Better access, better facilities. Another machine at that level rather than going across the exit to the machine on the other side " .

The first group in particular was also keen to see more action taken on Blue Badge fraud, echoed by some in the second group. Not only would that help to prevent able-bodied people from filling disabled bays but it was also felt that it could be a revenue generator. There was concern among the group that if Blue Badge holders are no longer required to prove their identity in the Ashley Centre then abuse of the disabled bays would rise.

"I find a lot of people park in disabled bays that shouldn't be there...that would be a revenue generator..they wouldn't have to do it (check) all the time, just every now and again. Sainsbury's have patrols on bikes giving on the spot fines of £60 to people and they make a fortune...it's so successful they're actually extending it".

"They've got people going round anyway, all they (the Council) have to do is give them powers to whack a ticket on".

"If they checked all the fraud they would make more money".

"We're all concerned about other people using our bays".

There was also a plea from some of the participants for clearer and more consistent information conveniently placed for disabled drivers.

"There should be information...a display where disabled bays are".

"There should be something very clear. Disabled parking is free...or whatever...".

"It should be standardised".

Response: *"It should be but it isn't".*

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 said they would consider paying a flat fee for the convenience of parking here – say £1 for three hours.

"You know the market place? There was talk of that being made available for disabled parking when it wasn't in use as a market. To me quite often it's just an empty space. I just wonder why that can't be marked out as disabled spaces?"

Response: *"That's a good idea".*

"If it could be converted then I'd be very happy about that".

"For what we're talking about today it would make quite a big difference".

Can you think of any benefits to yourself and the community as a whole that these changes will make?

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. Only one commented that charging disabled people to park could be seen as more equitable by others in the community:

"I try to stand in the middle of all this. There are lots of unemployed, of elderly people in the Borough who have to pay for parking. People on lower incomes. In context, in terms of paying for an hour or two hours of parking there are lots of other people who probably struggle. It's an important point to make".

However some admitted that they were happy to pay elsewhere because they felt that the facilities were better.

"We go to the St.Nicholas Centre in Sutton. Brilliant. Bays everywhere. It's £1 all day on a Sunday. We pay the pound because it saves mucking about. We don't mind because it's so easy. It's easy to get a wheelchair out, the bays are right where you want to be".

Others commented that people didn't have a right to complain about the facilities if they weren't paying for them:

"It's like having a TV licence. If you pay for a TV licence then you have a right to shout your mouth off".

"You can't complain about it (facilities for disabled people) if you're not paying for it".

Recommendations

Communication is an issue with major information gaps about the what, why, when, where and how of the changes. Rumours and misinformation (for example reporting about the Lincoln case following which many participants wrongly thought parking charges had been completely overturned) are currently filling the vacuum. **Constant, clear and consistent information** from reliable and trusted sources, managed by the Council, will be key.

There's a credibility issue around the introduction of any improvements with some deeply sceptical that these will come to fruition. **Positive, prompt and visible publicity** will help to counter this. There are already some quick PR wins:

- Create a **permanent parking space for the Queen Elizabeth Foundation's** 16 seater minibus (even if it's not centrally located) and consult to see what fee what be applicable. If charges are implemented then feasibly other disabled groups/residential homes may choose to use this method of transport as well.
- Consider **concessions** during off-peak periods for example free parking in the evenings or all day on a Sunday.
- Investigate the possibility of creating **free or flat fee disabled parking bays in the market area** on non-market days.
- Take visible **action against fraudulent parking**.
- Calculate the **average cost of parking** for a disabled person so that charges can be seen in context.
- Identify some **champions** for the changes.

There was a mixed response to participants' experiences with frontline staff and also some concern that parking attendants would be unable to help disabled people once the changes are implemented. A more **positive, pro-active, 'can I help' approach by frontline staff** especially during the first few months would help to change opinions and dispel fears.

Practicality. Many participants felt that any proposals for parking improvements should not be implemented without consulting with disabled users. **Involving some disabled users in the planning stages** would help to secure buy-in from the wider group, would gain some positive publicity and would ensure that the improvements really will benefit users.

There was a great deal of support for a pre-paid **Oyster Card** with Richmond cited as a successful scheme (although parking for Blue Badge holders is free). While there were many problems identified with the lay-out and useability of the Ashley Centre, the

participants were unanimously agreed that this type of system would help to make the Ashley Centre more accessible.

Reconsider the proposal to introduce **30 minute parking bays** on yellow lines (or include it as part of a trial of proposed improvements tested by disabled people). No-one could identify a benefit to this proposal.

The **free hour** is appreciated but most felt it should apply first. Most participants seem to park for an average of two hours. Is there a cost/benefit advantage in awarding the free hour first?

Addendum

Two participants were unable to attend the focus groups. They asked that the following comments were noted:

The one additional free hour is not adequate as it sometimes takes 20mins to half hour to queue and find a parking space. And as a wheelchair user by the time you get the mobility trolley/wheelchair out, the hour is almost used up. The suggestion is to either have more than one hour free or as currently it says free hours on the Blue Badge card, to start charging after these free hours are up.

Opposed to the charges because of the difficulty experienced getting around, walks slowly with a frame and it takes longer to do things. It is not about the money, but the time. The extra hour free is very good. Can something be done about the lifts in the Ashley Centre - maybe have a priority for disabled people, can we make the car spaces near the doors and make the machines near the doors too. And a card to pay in advance and then access easily all car parks.