

# Aldershot Centre for Health Carpark

Report on the challenges and problems faced by  
carpark users



**citizens  
advice**

**Rushmoor**

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# Introduction

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Citizens Advice Rushmoor has seen a significant increase in the number of clients coming forward complaining about receiving unfair parking tickets from Smart Parking, the company who provides the ticket machines at the Aldershot Centre for Health (ACFH) car park. During 2017, a number of clients approached Citizens Advice requiring help in dealing with parking fines from Smart Parking, as they either disagreed with the fine or were struggling to pay it. This is in addition to staff and volunteers identifying problems with the same system, and local coverage of similar issues.

Smart Parking has been running the ACFH car park since 2014. They ran a traditional pay and display system until August 2016, but then changed to the vehicle registration system that is now in operation. The vehicle registration system operates using a camera, which records when cars enter the car park; it then commences charging as soon as the car enters the area, rather than from when the ticket is purchased. This has led to many clients complaining about getting unfair parking tickets, which Smart Parking refuses to rescind.

This investigation aims to look at:

- How clearly the car park displays the parking regulations and guidance
- Where the confusion may be stemming from
- How accessible and easy to use the payment methods are

This will help an improved understanding of the increased problems with parking tickets from ACFH car park.



# Investigation

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For the investigation, we focused on

- observing the car park layout
- how busy it was
- the location of the pay and display machines
- the location of the parking signs
- how well the parking regulations and instructions are clarified.

The focus was on

- how easy and accessible it is to use the car park ticket machines correctly and
- how understandable and noticeable the instructions were on how to use the machines
- using the information on the car park regulations as a guide.

We also recorded any potential problems these factors may cause and how it could lead to a parking ticket. The past records of cases that involve parking tickets from ACFH were also researched to see if there were any similarities between the observations of the car park and the clients' experiences of using it. Other cases of people complaining of unfair practices from other car parks ran by Smart Parking throughout the UK have also been researched in order to establish whether public confusion relating to this company's systems is widespread.

## Previous cases

There have been a number of recent cases of clients approaching us having received parking fines from this car park in the past year. These cases have identified a range of issues with the payment system which include:

- the duration policy
- the appeal procedure
- confusion over the vehicle registration system

Other factors, such as the blue badge regulations or the registration input procedure, have also resulted in people receiving parking fines.

The following are brief descriptions of some of the cases involving local clients receiving fines from ACFH car park, as well as what issues they identify.

**Client A** obtained a ticket from the parking machine and left the car park long before the ticket expired. Luckily, he kept the ticket. He received a penalty ticket saying that he had parked without payment. He then e-mailed a copy of the ticket but received another penalty charge: each time the amount had increased. Again, he sent a photograph of his parking ticket from the machine with his registration number. There was again no response. The appeal procedure is through Popla, which is an independent appeals service which deals with parking appeals that involve private land, so he contacted them. They upheld Smart Parking penalty and advised client to pay the fine.

He continued to send photos of his receipt of payment for parking and eventually Popla agreed that he did have proof of payment but as they had already upheld the Smart Parking fine, he could not take any action as they couldn't reverse their decision of upholding the fine.

This case suggests that there is an issue with the appeal procedure, which seems to be inefficient at dealing with genuine mistakes from Smart Parking. There also seems to be confusion regarding Smart Parking's number plate recognition system which is now used to determine how long someone should be charged for – i.e. begins to charge people when they enter the car park rather than when they buy the ticket. It seems many people are being confused by this new system and not knowing when they are beginning to be charged.

**Client B** received a parking fine for £60 from Smart parking after parking at ACFH. She had paid £1.20 for a ticket but by mistake put in her postcode instead of the vehicle registration number. She was Polish so English was not her first language.

This case suggests that the instructions on the parking signs about the need for registration numbers and other information may not be clear or big enough for people who struggle to see or to understand English. It also highlights the same issue with Smart Parking's number plate recognition system as with Client A.

**Client C** saw that the sign stated that there is 15 minutes free parking. He did not have change so he tried to use the app advertised to buy a ticket just to be safe but it did not have the relevant parking location available. Therefore, he did not buy a ticket but he did not stay over 15 minutes. He received a PCN claiming that he has not registered his number plate. He appealed to the company but the appeal was rejected.

Again, this case highlights the issues with the appeal service, which seems to reject most cases immediately despite customers having a valid claim, as well identifying issues with the payment app. Again this issue may have also been caused by confusion the surrounding the number plate recognition system since the client

may have believed that the 15 minutes free parking started when he actually parked, not when he entered the car park.

**Client D** received a parking ticket and the PCN on his windshield stated that if paid within 14 days the fee would be reduced as he would pay £40 rather than the full fee. He made out a cheque to the company, it was cashed, and he enclosed the parking ticket inside the envelope, hence he did not have a copy of the ticket. He received a letter from Smart Parking asking for £60 within 14 days before the fee rises to £100. He did not understand how this came about given that he paid. He attempted to contact Smart Parking by phone but had no success, as the process was all automated and no one was present to talk to.

Like the other cases, the evidence is that Smart Parking's appeal process and customer service is poor and is unable to deal with customers who receive unwarranted fines. Since there is a time limit on the fine until it increases, this puts stress on clients and may force them to just give up and pay the fine.

**Client E** parked his car in the car park displaying his Blue Badge. He received a penalty notice for 'overstayed paid time'. He refused to pay it because he was only in the health centre for 45 minutes and having registered with ACFH as a Blue Badge holder he had been told he could park there for as long as was needed. He received a letter from DRP (Debt Recovery Plus Ltd) saying that he would now have to pay £160.

This case highlights another issue with the lack of clarity of the parking regulations, this time with the policy involving blue badge holders. The policy is for blue badge holders to contact a member of staff at the organisation being visited to confirm the blue badge in order to be exempt from time limits; otherwise normal rates apply. There are signs around the car park instructing blue badge holders to report to reception but they are easily missed: although the instruction is repeated on the sign next to the payment machine, this information is small.

**Client F** has sight problems and so needed help when reading the instructions on how to pay for a ticket at the health centre as the wording is very small and indistinct. The client also has back problems and so struggled to bend down to read the instructions and input his registration. As a result he was unable to purchase a valid ticket and so received a fine.

This could be considered as an act of discrimination against those with sight issues and those who have back problems, since they simply are unable to use the ticket machines. As a health centre, the likelihood of individuals with physical disabilities, sensory impairments, mental health problems or other vulnerabilities using the facility is very high.

# Possible causes

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From the observations and examples above relating to the ACFH car park, multiple possible causes can be drawn as to why so many problems are stemming from the systems in place, highlighted by the number of parking tickets issued and the level of confusion regarding the reasons for the tickets.

Some possible causes may include:

- Delays in doctors' appointments which results in people staying longer than anticipated.
- Unclear signage including
  - pay and display signs
  - unclear instructions for prices
  - required registration number notices
  - parking regulations for blue badge holders
- Faulty payment app that may not work, preventing some people from paying.
- Poor appeal process and customer service that either does not respond to callers or seemingly rejects appeals without proper consideration.
- Confusing policies regarding fine charges and when people begin to be charged that are not made completely clear.
- Lack of awareness that the duration of the stay is calculated from the point of entry to the point of exit rather than when the ticket was purchased.
- Physical disabilities, mental health issues and anxiety for those using the health facility, affecting the ability to focus on the detail of the requirements



# A National Issue?

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This confusion surrounding the policies and regulations of Smart Parking seems to be a wider spread issue rather than just confined to the ACFH. This is particularly true of Smart Parking's policy of duration from entry/exit, as well as the practical difficulties for some people in entering their registration number.

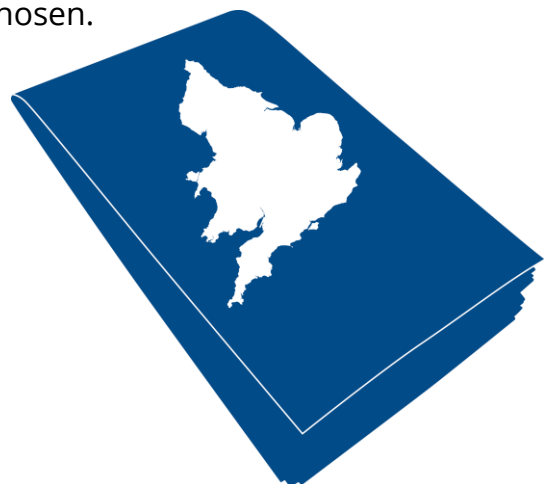
There have been cases around the UK when a simple misunderstanding or mistake resulted in a fine, such as when someone from East Renfrewshire put in the number of zero rather than the letter "o" when entering registration numbers. Smart Parking claimed that this invalidated the ticket and so a fine was implemented.

In another case someone paid for two hours parking and returned to his car before the ticket expired. However, after entering the car park it had taken him 15 minutes to find a space and then he had to queue for the ticket. Cameras film drivers entering and exiting, and Smart Parking says those minutes are chargeable and that his ticket was therefore not valid. A woman from Burton was fined for staying 2 seconds over the time limit as she was unaware that she was being charged whilst attempting to find a space.

Therefore, it seems that the confusion surrounding the parking regulations that is present in the cases at the ACFH is a national issue affecting not just the local area. Confusion is compounded by the fact that the ticket machines calculate the required parking time from the moment payment is made, so there is no indication on the ticket that they have been charged for the time already spent in the car park. Motorists assume that they have until the time stamped on the ticket, when they might have already unwittingly used up 10 minutes of their paid time finding a space. In order to use the system accurately, drivers are supposed to calculate how much time they want, including the time already spent inside the car park, which means they have to check the time they crossed the threshold and pay for an additional hour if it takes them over the tariff chosen.

The lack of clarity and visibility in the print used for the signage to explain the policy raises serious questions about Smart Parking's intentions and practices.

Solutions?



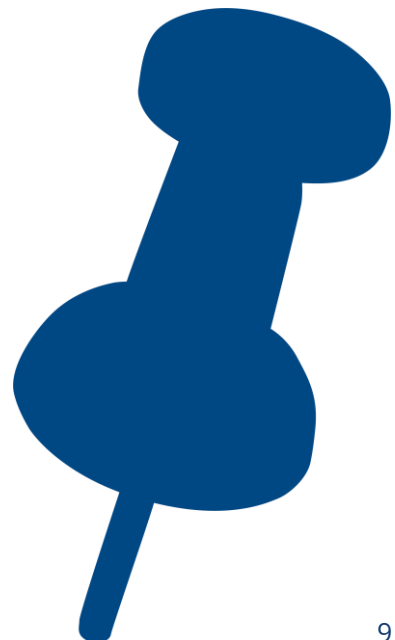


# Recommendations

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From the findings, the following recommendations are clear:

- Ensure information is as clear as possible regarding Smart Parking's regulation.
- Recognise that by the nature of the facility, the system should take into account the fact that users are likely to have a range of vulnerabilities relating to their health. The system should therefore be designed around the needs of vulnerable people.
- In particular, draw attention to the duration policy in charging from entry rather than when they buy the ticket (this appears to be the biggest source of confusion and the most common reason for parking fines).
- Give clear advice that the full car registration is entered correctly (including alpha/numeric guidelines) when buying a ticket.
- Some cautionary information about difficulties with the app and advice to bring sufficient change to pay cash would avoid some problems.
- Ask ACFH for improved signage in waiting areas to let people know they need to put more time on their parking if there are appointment delays.
- An additional solution is to recommend that people ask a member of staff at ACFH if they are unsure about any of the parking regulations - e.g. in the case of blue badges.
- An information leaflet to inform people about the parking regulations at ACFH would help raise awareness of the above.
- Overall, the above would help ensure people pay for enough time, and avoid them having to go through the appeal process.



# Bibliography

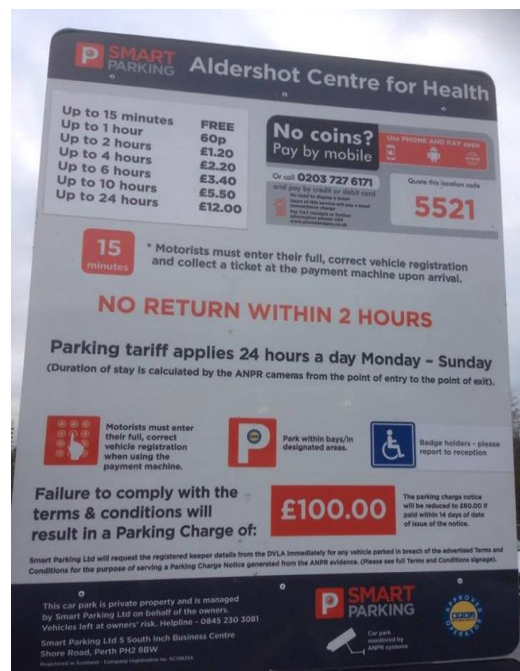
<https://www.theguardian.com/money/2017/jul/10/smart-parking-driver-complaints-fines-car-parks>

<https://www.burtonmail.co.uk/news/burton-news/burton-woman-hit-100-parking-989375>

# Photos



Parking notice at the entrance of the car park.



Parking payment instruction sign found near each pay machine



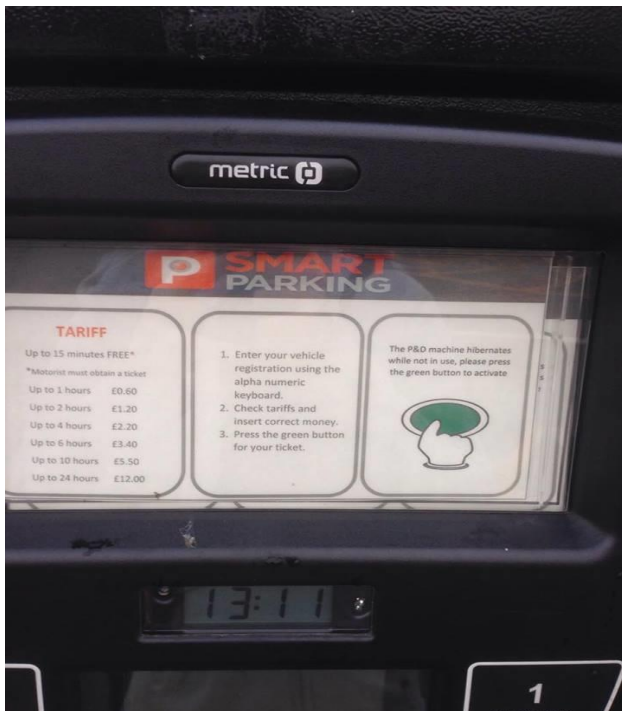
Sign instructing blue badge holders to report to reception. These can be found near the disabled parking spaces



Parking regulations sign found under the payment instruction sign near each pay machine



Pay machine of which several can be found in the carpark



Instructions on the pay machine indicating the prices and the guidelines on inputting vehicle registrations



Sign indicating the start of the staff only section of the car park. Only 1 can be found the entrance of the staff car park

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