

Aldershot Centre for Health – Parking Charge Notices

What brought this issue to the fore were the highly questionable activities of the private-parking operator at Tices Meadow, Aldershot Park Ward, after the sale of the garage-block sites. That all blew up three months ago when residents there started getting Parking charge notices (PCNs).

Faced with the difficulties caused by private-parking operators across the borough as sales of these sites went on, I launched an online survey on 10 February 2018 (*Appendix 1 – Survey form*).

The online survey obtained some 273 responses containing many hundreds of descriptions of unfairness, abuse and bullying of residents by private-parking operators.

As it turned out, over half the responses related to Aldershot Centre for Health (ACH). I am therefore focussing this first report on ACH.

Day in, day out, patients, particularly elderly and disabled, are being caught out simply because the system is badly designed.

Allegedly, it is a pay-and-display car park, which requires people to put in their vehicle number and pay for a ticket for the time they intend to park. However, the time charged is based on Automated Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) before the driver enters the car park and then as the driver exits at the junction with Hospital Hill. No allowance is made for the time to find a parking space, park and get a ticket, on the way in, or for the time taken to exit onto Hospital Hill, which is particularly difficult at present because of the roadworks at the junction there.

Data analysis

I analysed 273 responses to the five open-ended questions that gave the respondents the opportunity to give their views on different aspects of the systems and how private-parking companies treated them.

Appendix 2 – ACH Data comprises 436 comments in response to Questions 7 to 11.

Question 7. Please would you give your reasons as to why the parking charge notice was not justified – 129 comments.

There were many different reasons for visitors to ACH feeling aggrieved about getting PCNs.

Foremost of these was that, when the ticket machines are broken or the mobile phone system for paying does not work properly, the visitor gets a PCN because the ANPR system records the visit time and no vehicle registration number (VRN) has been entered on a ticket machine.

“I tried to pay by mobile phone, but it didn't go through properly. I was late for an appointment as it took me 20 mins to find a parking space and I had a baby and a toddler with me so didn't notice the message on my phone until a few hours later. I fought it all the way to POPLA and won.”

“I bought a ticket but, when printed, the number plate had not fully printed on the ticket. There was a parking man in the car park and I spoke with him he said would be fine as I had paid and displayed my ticket. However, over 3 weeks later, a parking charge came through the door. I still had my ticket in the car, so I appealed with company. However, they declined the appeal, so I appealed with POPLA and won. My parking charge was cancelled.”

Another very common grievance was that GPs often overrun and so appointments are not at the times arranged, and, as a result, the patients go beyond the time they have paid for when they arrived. Often, the patients are unaware that it is possible to top up with an extra payment in that situation, because there are no clear signs about that. Also, even when they are aware that they have gone beyond the time paid for, they are reluctant to leave the waiting area in case their appointment is called while they are topping up the time paid for.

“I also put 15mins free on as I was on time for appointment and as you only get a 10min appointment with the GP this should have sufficed but, as the GP was running late, and I was on my own, I couldn't exactly walk out to buy another ticket – scared that I would miss my appointment. The whole system is a joke and if you are going to put a paying system in just to have the luxury of visiting the doctor then maybe a ‘pay-as-you-exit’ car park would be more workable?”

“My son had a speech therapy session. I paid for the hour's parking as the session was only 45 mins, but it over ran slightly over and I was charged for a parking fine. even though it wasn't my fault and the therapist said it was hers...”

It is also relatively common for visitors to receive a PCN even when they have a valid ticket, but they must still go through the appeal process.

“I had paid for the valid parking ticket, but I received a penalty letter with £60 from Smart Parking, which I had to pay.”

“I displayed a valid ticket, but they said they could not see it.”

Separate from the car park, there is a drop-off area outside the entrance to the ACH and a significant number of visitors are caught pausing there for a short period of time because their visit is captured by the ANPR system and they have not obtained a ticket for 15 minutes free parking – even though they have not gone into the car park.

“Parked in drop-off point for 13 minutes as husband was picking me up and son needed a wee. No signs around drop-off point indicating the need for a ticket for the free 15 minutes. In fact, no signs regarding parking at all around drop-off point.”

“My partner dropped me off at the health centre then came back for me, but, because he was shown coming in at the end of the road and then leaving again later once he had picked me up, they fined us.”

Visitors need to enter their VRN using small keypads at the ticket machines, and for some – elderly with poor eyesight or disabled with limited mobility to see the letters clearly – entering the correct VRN proves problematic and they make errors – so they automatically get a PCN – even when they have purchased a ticket for the correct time.

Appendix 3 – ACH Case of Vernon Maure sets out the correspondence with Smart Parking in one such case, about which Mr Maure feels so aggrieved that he has sent it to Leo Doherty MP and me to draw attention to how unfair it is.

“We had to take my son to his appointment and in a mad rush. My husband got one of the letters the wrong way round and, despite having paid enough for our ticket, we still had to pay a fine! There was another occasion where we received a fine despite just getting there as the person wrote a ticket.”

“On behalf of my father. He has terminal cancer and onset of dementia, as well as very poor mobility. He's 75. On the first occasion, he went to get a ticket for the free 15 minutes, the ticket machine was out of order. He then had to ascertain where the other machine was, tried to remember his registration – it was the new system by then. By the time he got there and back to put the ticket in his car he was given the fine.”

Traffic delays are not allowed for – both in the car park in finding a space or in a queue waiting to exit the car park, or at the traffic lights waiting to drive onto Hospital Hill – as the ANPR system simply records the total time on the ACH site as being eligible to be charged for.

“We left the car park in Aldershot Centre for Health within the hour we paid for, but, at the time, the main road was being reconfigured and had 4-way traffic lights on. It took us almost 25 mins to just get back on to the main road and the ANPR camera is situated on the entrance of the site so didn't clock us leaving until half-an-hour after the ticket had expired. The company is a joke.”

“The parking charge notice showed the picture of my car entering and exiting the car park. Due to traffic and reasons, like loading and unloading babies and their prams, I might have overstayed by 5 to 10 minutes (I had paid for an hour's charge) As per the picture, I had overstayed by half an hour. It took me more than 10–15 minutes to find a space and, while trying to leave, due to traffic, it took me more than 10 minutes to reach the exit. Besides, the charge is very high and hence I believe it's unfair and unjust. I appealed but got rejected and I paid £60 out of fear that if further appeal got rejected I would have to pay £100. I felt robbed.”

The “15 minutes FREE” is seen readily from a distance, so visitors often interpret that as meaning that, if they are parked for no more than 15 minutes, they do not need to fear a PCN.

Unfortunately, there are several ways that they can be caught out:

- the small print says that, even if the visitor is having 15 minutes free, they still need to enter their VRN and place a ticket on display;
- the time is not 15 minutes parking but is taken as 15 minutes from the time the ANPR system records entry until the ANPR system records exit.

“Free within 15 minutes stayed 11 minutes. Didn’t realise I still needed a ticket as just saw 15 minutes free.”

“There for 10 minutes. Supposedly free for 15. They had photographic evidence of time but issued ticket because I hadn’t entered my number into the machine.”

Although Blue Badge holders are a minority of visitors, their disability can mean that they find it particularly difficult to navigate their way through the ACH system, and they are getting PCNs because, for example, they have limited mobility or poor vision, as they can take longer to do what the non-disabled do within the time paid for.

“I was parked in disabled bay but make a very slight mistake in giving my reg in at the desk.”

“Disabled badge must be on display at all times. To allow free parking, it says ‘Please take blue badge to reception’. You can’t leave your badge in the car and reception at the same time.”

Question 8. Please would you set out any complaint about signage, notices or road markings used by a private parking company? – 81 comments.

Again, there were many different reasons for complaining about signage, notices or road markings.

By far the most frequent complaint was about the signage being unclear.

“Signage is not that clear. I didn’t realise that the Registration number was required. Put my money in without entering a reg no and got a ticket. For some reason, I decided to read signs, realised I hadn’t put my reg no in, but still got a ticket, and then checked ticket to realise it was someone else’s reg no, and that it was probably done by the confused older gentleman using the machine before me.”

“Signage is not clear enough to warn the drivers. I would rather recommend a barrier with ticket machine just like usual car parking.”

“Signs too small, no road markings, very poor notices, if any.”

“Not enough clear signage. Hardly visible. Should be payment when you leave, as appointments always late.”

Also, a common complaint was difficulty in using the VRN keypad.

“The parking system at Aldershot Centre for Health is abysmal. There have been problems since it was changed to an ANPR camera system and new machines installed. If you type in your registration number wrongly even by one digit you will get a ticket. The machines do not comply with the Equality Act as the buttons are too small, lighting is not good enough to see the letters and numbers on the buttons clearly on the lower level, sometimes unavoidable to find a space and one must bend over to type your registration in, which, for someone like me with back problems, can add to my severe pain and discomfort.

I also live with anxiety at the best of times and whilst attending appointments and am always anxious about overrunning and ending up with a parking ticket.

Please, for pity's sake, get rid of this awful system and replace it with a system that is accessible and permits payment on the way out instead of the way in. This is not fair or appropriate.”

Many complaints were about the confusing nature of the conditions under which the ACH car park operates.

“Aldershot Centre for Health parking conditions are very confusing for patients.”

“The car park is confusing because it is pay and display but is being checked by camera with car registration recorded. They are just trying to catch personnel to charge them heavily. If it is checked by camera it shouldn't be pay and display. It would be better if the car park was barrier controlled.”

“It only says you need to have a ticket on the ticket machine. If the first 15 mins are free, why do you need a ticket? It wastes time. They have image coming and going and the time stamps.

Also, the timing is from the cameras near the traffic lights – if they clock you coming in and you struggle to find a parking space, then you have no hope. The camera should be IN the entrance to the car park, not the road leading up to it.

My husband waited in the car for me one day, we stopped but didn't park in the car park, he never left the vehicle. I was slightly longer than anticipated because they were running behind, and we got a ticket for that too. It's totally wrong.”

“It is a very confusing operation for even the brightest people but those I feel sorry for are older people, as it is not clear what information you need to put in and, if you do it wrong, you still get a parking ticket, but it is not recorded. It also lets you have a ticket if you have misspelt your registration number, but then send you a penalty charge notice you for it.”

Many complainants blamed the absence of any signs warning that parking time is measured by the ANPR system as the vehicle enters the ACH site.

“The signs do not specify that your time starts as you drive on to the site.”

“They don't make it clear that you are charged via the camera seeing you come in and out.... especially as you have to print and display a ticket.”

“Only mentioned CCTV in tiny print on a board full of thousands of words that no one has time to read.”

Further, the signs about the “15 minutes FREE” came in for criticism.

“The requirement to get a ticket was further down the sign ‘15 minutes FREE’, which is at the top. so most people stop reading once that is seen.”

“Highlight (in the same way the 15 minutes FREE is highlighted) about having to enter details AND remove the 15 minutes FREE – as this is misleading.”

Question 9. Please would you set out any complaint about the process for appealing against a parking charge notice? – 77 comments.

When people who had received PCNs attempted to appeal, they found several barriers in the process.

Most frequently mentioned was the impression that Smart Parking automatically rejected their appeals without considering any of the circumstances that the appellants were drawing to their attention.

“They reject everything, from the research I have done. They do not take any complaints or reasons on board.”

“They NEVER think about situations that may trigger the penalty and any reason why it shouldn’t be paid. They don’t use any leeway and just treat it as black and white. Once you appeal to them, it’ll get refused, but then you have to take it up with another external company to try and sort it out. We ended up having a debt collector contact us and even THEY thought the fine for the free parking was ludicrous.”

“Process does work because they pretty much reject any excuse and they know you will not risk paying the high fine.”

One major barrier was the difficulty that appellants had in getting Smart Parking to engage in the appeals process.

“Tried to appeal through Smart Parking’s website as it suggested. I made 4 attempts, but, after entering all the details each time, it said ‘could not be processed and to try again in 24 hrs’. I then resorted to appealing in writing.”

“The website kept crashing when I was trying to upload photo evidence of my ticket, and there is no auto response to say they have received your appeal. I had to email separately to chase them up.”

The long delays in Smart Parking replying to the appeal meant that the time to pay the reduced charge had passed, so appellants were then chased for the full £100 set out in the PCN.

“It’s not a fair grievance process. It should be independent, not in-house – you are told if you go to the next stage you can’t pay the £60 and appeal, so you have to risk paying £100 even though you send the evidence that you paid as far as you were aware and checked with the Smart Parking duty officer on site.”

“If your appeal is rejected and you wish to further the appeal then you would have to pay the full amount if your further appeal gets rejected and is not within time period for discounted charge. This I believe is unfair because further appeal takes a long time.”

Generally, appellants found Smart Parking were unhelpful over appeals.

“They were most unhelpful and incredibly difficult to get hold of.”

“They are not interested in your dispute as they say it is clear that you have agreed to a contract with them.”

Question 10. Please would you set out any complaint about letters warning you about what will happen if you do not pay a parking charge notice? – 68 comments.

Some two-thirds of complainants reported finding these letters threatening to varying degrees.

“Just informing me that the charge would increase if I lost my case – money I didn't have after dad's funeral! I was only there to take my mum, as I'm her carer, to her diabetic appointment.”

“We got no correspondence until we were threatened with court action. We never actually received any letters until the bailiffs sent one threatening court action. We tried to say this and dispute, but we were met with deaf ears.”

“I found the letter quite threatening and intimidating in its wording.”

“Designed to scare the hell out of you - especially vulnerable or elderly patients. They almost give you an ultimatum...if you don't pay now and your appeal isn't upheld, it will cost you so much more.”

“They get doubled. I now have bailiffs constantly knocking my door. I'm in severe debt because I can't park my son's Motability car in disabled bay whilst waiting for Blue Badge. He doesn't even walk. I have to carry him. It's discrimination.”

Question 11. Please would you set out any other comments about the way that a private parking company has treated you? – 81 comments.

About a quarter of comments indicated that Smart Parking were unconcerned about the people with whom they were dealing.

“Totally not bothered to deal with fact that I had purchased a ticket and returned in time, even asked them to check their close circuit tv to prove it was my car.”

“Disgracefully. Bullied. Harassed. No empathy whatsoever. Disgusting way to run a business.”

“Unprofessional. Rude. Unco-operative. Lack of communication or resolutions.”

“Operatives have no powers of discretion and are not permitted to consider extenuating circumstances.”

“Harassing and taking advantage of people at a vulnerable time, when they are visiting hospital. This is bad for patients and bad for the reputation of Aldershot.”

About another quarter of comments indicated that Smart Parking were only interested in the money they could make from PCNs.

This tallies with a report in *The Observer* (10 July 2017): “Smart Parking, owned by the Australian group Car Parking Technologies, revealed earlier this year that 75% of its revenue comes from parking breach charges and that the number of notices doubled over the 12 months following the roll out of number plate recognition technology.”

“I just think they are out to make as much money as possible and hope that people won't appeal.”

“Just a money-making racket. Every ticket issued should have independent oversight.”

“They don't care - they just want money.”

“Is a money-making company rather than a service company.”

“It's all about making as much money as possible - there is no grey area for them.”

Summary

The system that Smart Parking are operating at ACH is very complex and completely unfit for purpose.

All the evidence from this survey is that it exploits patients' need to use the car park on the ACH site if they drive or are driven to see their doctors, nurses or other health professionals. Frequently, patients

cannot cope with such a complex system, for a variety of reasons, such as age, frailty, disability, sight, anxiety, and learning difficulties.

There seems a total disconnect between vision of the Clinical Commissioning Group locally – “The best possible health and well-being for the people” – and the apparent purpose of Smart Parking in using the complex car-parking system at ACH to maximise revenues from not only ticket income but also PCNs.

Recommendation

That Rushmoor Borough Council carries out scrutiny with a view to calling in the CCG and NHS Property Services to discuss this evidence, to persuade them discontinue the current car-parking system at ACH immediately and to operate a new system that puts the needs of patients first and foremost.

Councillor Alex Crawford JP

1 March 2018