

My Telegraph article on parking and driving to towns

I often see people wrestling with the latest technology in Council car parks. It is not just the elderly or the technology challenged. Quite often the newer systems do not work, or require several attempts to find the way to unlock their iron grip over whether you can get in or out of the park. My constituents keep me informed of their daily struggles and their car park paying nightmares.

Locally some have recently experienced the hospital car park where the number plate recognition to let you out when you have paid does not always work. They had to put in an employee standing by the exit ready to check you had paid and then to manually override the exit barrier control. Another complainant told me she drove to a car park, tried several times to pay without success and so left the car park frustrated to find somewhere else that would take her money. She was then fined for being too long in the first car park without paying! The last station car park I used required me to pay before travelling. It refused to accept my credit card contactless, it refused to accept it with the number typed in, yet the card paid readily for other items before and after these bruising rejections. Fortunately that car park had a cash option which did work.

Many Councils are pursuing an anti road vehicle strategy. If you manage to negotiate the mushrooming sets of traffic lights, the complex junctions, the restricted lanes, the changing hours of regulated uses, the road closures, the neighbourhood limitations, the incessant changes of speed limit, the cycle and bus lanes and the widened kerbs and pavements you may end up in a car park out to thwart you at journey's end. Visiting a cathedral city recently I was directed out to a car park which said it catered for longer term stays, only to find a queue of people wrestling with the technology to pay. In the sunshine it was difficult to make out the messages on an unhelpful and often malfunctioning touch screen. A visitor will stay longer and spend more in a town if the parking arrangements are friendly and sensibly priced. If car parks in town centres are geared to under two hours of parking people will not have the time both to go to the shops and buy a meal.

Councils just do not want to accept many of us have good reasons to take to the car or van. You cannot do your weekly shop going to the store by train as you could not carry and stow all the items you bought. The car boot does the job well. An electrician, plumber, builder or other service provider to your home needs to arrive by van with the tools and materials in the back. Given the deliberate delays and congestion Councils create on our streets they book fewer engagements to allow for the increased journey time. They are worse off, prices go up and more people are frustrated. If you want to take a family in for a meal or the cinema the car may be the only realistic option, particularly at weekends or evenings with reduced public transport.

The ultras in parties of the left who condemn the road vehicle seem to forget that the food they eat is taken to the shops by large lorry, and delivered to homes by van. They forget that the power they turn on and the water in their tap is maintained by engineers who need vehicle access to

installations. When they do get to the local shops they forget that without the trade of people who go there by car the shops would fold for insufficient business. We see too many declining shopping streets and centres in our towns, the casualties of too few customers. Stopping people going there on impulse and preventing easy and cheap or free parking is part of the reason for the shuttered properties and the decline of prosperity. So many Councils seem to think they need to charge us a fortune for us to park on Council owned land, land we paid for as taxpayers in the first place! Instead of wanting to serve the public ,plenty of left wing Councils want to fleece us.

So what is the answer? Keep it simple. I usually welcome new technology. Mobile phones and internet communication have enhanced our lives . I see the advantages of the sat nav over a map book. Not all new technology however is better if it is unduly complex and slows you down. Touch screens are difficult in sunshine where a button to press would solve the problem. Putting cash or card into a simple parking ticket machine works well. Paying by cash or card on exit against a record stating the time of your arrival works well. Making you download an app, entering your index number and then relying on vehicle identification technology greatly increases the chances of something going wrong as well as slowing you down. It is clearly dearer and more complex technology to install. Councils should change their mentality on car parks . Instead of seeing them as big sources of revenue and opportunities to make our lives worse they should be a service we need in order to support and encourage flourishing town centres. Paying should be easy and include a cash option.