

Time to listen to some advice

University of Birmingham research into parking enforcement highlights room for improvement, reports **Deniz Huseyin**



Councils must do more to improve public perceptions of parking attendants

Parking regimes appear to be maturing, with a growing number facing up to their flaws and striving to improve the service they offer. Now the industry has its very own oracle — a major study that sets out a fresh approach to enforcement. The study, by University of Birmingham, says that a chief priority for parking authorities must be to win greater public acceptance. The 90-page report, funded by National Car Parks, offers guidelines on how to make parking enforcement fairer and better run. It also calls for regimes to be integrated within street management operations. The six-month research was carried out by the university's School of Public Policy, led by authors Professor John Raine, Eileen Dunstan and Theresa Alexandra Parry.

Winning public and political support

Having learned uncomfortable lessons from experience, some councils have already begun improving the consistency and reasonableness of their operations, the Birmingham University study team found.

Their study focused on six "good practice" authorities: Manchester, Winchester, Hammersmith & Fulham; Cambridge, Weymouth & Portland and Sunderland. Some 25 parking managers were also interviewed, and the team also received insights from a group of eminent parking thinkers (see panel below).

The authors noted that some aspects of parking enforcement already command widespread support, such as protecting assigned parking bays and minimising the risk of accidents around schools. Councils should include local residents, traders and other businesses in the review of parking policies, say the authors. "Businesses in Cambridge, for example, have been generally pleased with the impact of parking enforcement policies in their city, albeit after initial reservations," says the report. Cambridge carried out "careful consultations" on decriminalised parking, which reassured local businesses that their needs and viewpoints would be taken into account. This, says the report, "made all the difference in creating a generally positive climate within which decriminalised parking enforcement was launched".

Manchester has also worked to build bridges, setting up a team of three parking liaison officers. The team has successfully adopted a hands-on approach to addressing any parking issues brought to them by the public, says the report.

Councils should strive to gain the backing of their own elected members, says the report. In Hammersmith and Fulham, for example, members were enthusiastic about decriminalised parking because they were persuaded it would address problems of congestion, the study found. "They were also content to support the enforcement regime on the basis that it would be 'cost neutral' — it would not risk bringing the council into disrepute for profiting from parking tickets."

Better links with the media are also vital, says the report. Cambridge and Weymouth & Portland are cited as carrying out extensive publicity ahead of the launch of decriminalised schemes — leafleting all households, holding public meetings and exhibitions, and working hard to win support from the local press. The report praises both authorities for issuing special warning notices to illegally parked cars rather than penalty charge notices (PCNs) during the first three weeks of their schemes.

Other councils chose to keep a low profile in the hope of avoiding flak from the press. Hammersmith & Fulham, for example, attempted to keep out of the pages of the *Evening Standard*, one of the fiercest critics of parking enforcement

A steering group of parking supremos worked with Birmingham's research team

Study backed by parking's top thinkers

University of Birmingham research into decriminalisation focused on six parking authorities and also carried out in-depth interviews with some 25 parking managers in England and Wales.

The six-month study was backed by a steering group made up of some of the most eminent figures in the parking world.

The group included: Ade Adebajo (head of business & operational services, Croydon council); Robert Buchanan (performance specialist, the

Audit Commission); Kevin Delaney (head of traffic & road safety, RAC Foundation for Motoring); Gary Griffiths (head of parking services, Islington council); Ian Kavanagh (director of on-street Operations, NCP); Nick Lester (director of transport, environment & planning, Association of London Government); Tony Sedgwick (director of research, NCP); Caroline Sheppard (chief parking adjudicator for England & Wales); and Andy Vaughan (head of street management, Manchester City Council). □



Croydon's Ade Adebajo



Islington's Gary Griffiths

Deniz Huseyin

in the capital.

However, the authors argue it is better to take a proactive approach to media and public relations. Councils should provide "as much information as possible, explaining enforcement policies and practices and highlighting the beneficial impacts", as well as including extensive details on their websites.

Working in partnerships

Another key assertion is that parking enforcement should be linked to other traffic management operations. Sunderland, for instance, has sought to relate parking enforcement to transport issues such as ensuring that buses reach their stops on time.

Parking enforcement will ultimately be subsumed within streetscene management, predicts the report. It says that a new breed of "multi-functional" street warden will emerge, reporting issues of litter, fouling, fly-tipping, graffiti, vandalism, crime, as well as illegal parking and reporting damaged signs and lines. The role of parking attendant, as defined in the Traffic Management Act 1991, may well become "a thing of the past", suggest the authors.

They point to the setting up of a single team of street wardens in Manchester — The Red Team — made up of existing groups of parking attendants, street environmental management teams and street crime wardens. "Other towns and cities are following suit," the authors observe. "The time for the multi-functional street warden appears to have come and will soon, it seems, be the norm. This, we suggest, should generally be good for the image and reputation of parking enforcement."

New style contracts

A new generation of contracts are now focusing on quality rather than PCN targets, such as the British Parking Association's model contract, the study found. Cambridge and Sunderland both have new style contracts designed to encourage "correct ticketing" where the contractor gets paid for every correctly issued ticket and penalised for each erroneous one.

Manchester, meanwhile, is looking to its contractor NCP to meet a range of key performance indicators, involving quarterly reviews. The criteria includes: a widespread and equitable enforcement; meeting response times for complaints; proportion of parking attendants who successfully complete a special training programme; proportion of appeals allowed by the adjudicator; and the number of PCNs cancelled due to error by parking attendants. The study praises Manchester's use of a "mystery shopper" to monitor performance. The council records how long it takes for one of its illegally parked unmarked vehicles to be spotted by an attendant.

Getting appeals right

Martin Wood, London's chief parking adjudicator, told researchers that enforcement should not be seen as simply issuing tickets, clamping and removal of vehicles but a range of other responses including issuing warnings and requesting that a vehicle moves on.

Back office staff should also be given the skills to exercise discretion, the authors believe. They should be given a clear set of procedures in the office to aid decision-making, which would help them to "avoid the tendency simply to endorse liability for the penalty charge just because the ticket happened to have been legally issued (as seems the practice in some councils)".

The authors suggest that parking departments might consider hiring more staff with experience of customer service work. The report also proposes that the preparation for an appeal should be carried out by a member of staff not previously involved in the case "so they can read the file and consider the evidence in much the



Professor John Raine led the study

same way as the adjudicator".

Tackling appeals is a task better suited to the council's legal department rather than a member of the parking team, suggest the authors. This would not only bring a "legal mind" to the evidence, but would "underline the council's commitment to objectivity in the matter — which is often brought into question by determined appellants".

Using the legal services department could perhaps also "go some way to addressing an on-going problem of misunderstanding about, and disrespect for, the role of independent adjudication that pervades many parking departments".

The study found that parking departments often expressed a "careless criticism of adjudicators' decisions", which would neither be made nor tolerated "in relation to another judicial context such as the magistrates' courts (where challenges to parking enforcement actions have traditionally been heard)".

Enforcement is not about revenue

The authors express a dim view of councils who use parking enforcement to raise revenue.

"Quality enforcement work is least likely to be achieved if the council or its contractor is under significant financial pressure to generate revenues," say the authors. They assess that the pressure to issue PCNs, particularly in parts of London, "are most likely to lead to unscrupulous practices at the front-line and unreasonableness in the back offices".

Though council members are keen to avoid a reputation for over-zealous parking operations, they are often influenced by a desire to keep council tax increases to a minimum or to generate money for other spending priorities, the study found. "This creates or supports the conditions in which unreasonableness in parking enforcement flourishes — through agreeing excessively tight financial terms with contractors, and declining to support growth in staffing to match growth in workloads".

Councils would be wrong to presume that a high quality parking enforcement regime can be run cheaply or with the aim of raising a "significant income generation stream", say the authors. In line with a climate of greater fairness and proportionality, councils should consider allowing attendants an element of discretion. They note that Manchester now gives parking attendants some discretion over when to issue a ticket. All those interviewed in the research agreed that giving attendants discretion depended on them being competent and able to make good judgements. If this is lacking there is the danger of inconsistency and even corruption, say the authors.

The importance of training

But before this can happen, councils will have to attract and retain a better calibre of parking attendant, the authors acknowledge, with rigorous aptitude testing used to help find the right staff. The authors call for "more exacting" training for parking attendants. This would play a part in helping attendants deal with aggression from some members of the public, they say. Besides the initial training given to attendants, there is a growing trend towards subsequent training, the report notes. The authors were especially impressed by modules that involved workbooks with self-tests, designed to encourage attendants to think about the issues rather than just passively listen to lectures in the classroom. ▶

Councils should make sure that TROs are updated

Following the right signs



'Full reviews of signs and lines are essential'

Councils planning to decriminalise parking enforcement should put in the time and effort to ensure a proper review of signs and lines, states a new report on parking

enforcement by University of Birmingham's School of Public Policy. The report notes that Weymouth & Portland took almost a year on the task and amended many of its traffic

regulation orders (TROs) that had become seriously out of date.

The process, which needs the involvement of the council's legal services department and involves placement of advertisements in newspapers, is vital to the quality of enforcement work, the report says.

Authorities are also advised to set up electronic databases of TROs, it adds. "Parking staff will certainly be better equipped to undertake enforcement work efficiently and effectively if they have ready access to the TROs at their computer screens and can make immediate checks when dealing with representations."

It is also important, says the report, that local people are fully involved in the review of TROs. □