

# Churches furious at plans to introduce Sunday parking charges

Posted: Mon, 11th Mar 2013

Church leaders in Carmarthenshire have reacted angrily to local authority plans to scrap free Sunday parking.

Carmarthenshire council says it is facing cuts to its funding and needs to raise money to balance its books and keep front line services running. The Council estimates it can raise £56,000 to put towards keeping services running by introducing the charge.

Canon Michael Lloyd Rees, Vicar of Betws and Ammanford, said: "There needs to be a bit of respect given to the community who use the facilities. Why should people be penalised for going to church?"

Reverend Leigh Richardson, Vicar of St. Peter's Church in Carmarthen, described the proposed charges as a "tax on community church." "Going to church is a freedom people in this country have enjoyed for centuries. Being charged to go to church is a tax on religion and it happens nowhere else in the world," he fumed.

The church will be meeting with Carmarthenshire Council officials to discuss the plans on March 26.

When faced with similar opposition from local Churches in 2011, councillors in Woking, Surrey, opted to allow worshippers to park free while charging everyone else. The National Secular Society has argued that such arrangements could be unlawful under the Equality Act.

Stephen Evans, campaigns manager at the National Secular Society, said: "Few people welcome parking charges, but if they are deemed necessary to fund front line services, they should be applied fairly, and without special exemptions for religious communities, as we've seen elsewhere in the country.

"The principle of equal treatment is very important, and arrangements that privilege Christians above other users of public car parks should not go unchallenged. Worshippers in church are no more deserving of special treatment than other citizens – so there is no legitimate reason why other taxpayers should subsidise churchgoing in this way."

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