

Reaction to Woking parking challenge reveals national implications

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By Terry Sanderson

There has been some interesting reaction to our [challenge to Woking Borough Council's policy](#) of providing free parking for worshippers in the town.

The *Kentish Gazette*, for instance, revealed that there is also subsidised parking for worshippers:

Churchgoers in Canterbury, Herne Bay and Whitstable, and Quakers in Faversham, can buy a £30-a-year worshippers' permit, which allows them free parking in the nearest car park to their church during services," The paper reported.

Canterbury City Council has offered worshippers' permits since 2001, with 250 people currently signed up. Permit holders must gain a minister's signature in support of their application.

Spokesman Rob Davies said: "We review the range of permits we offer and their cost each year, and the worshippers' permit will be looked at again in the autumn as part of the annual parking review. We are aware of the test case in Woking and will follow what happens."

Canterbury Cathedral spokesman Lisa Emanuel says it will not comment until the outcome of the case, only choosing to say: "We are grateful for the support that we receive from Canterbury City Council."

The *Kentish Gazette* then followed this up with an editorial, which reads as follows:

Cheap parking is not a divine right

Churches across Canterbury and Faversham will be keeping a close eye on the campaign to overturn special parking permits for worshippers.

The National Secular Society's (NSS) claim against Woking Borough Council to get rid of the 'pray and display' scheme could have major consequences for our churchgoers.

Last month, the Church of England said attendances at services was stabilising after years of decline - although in Canterbury they have decreased.

Could losing the perk of subsidised parking sound the death knell for city churches, with congregations opting not to pay the weekend charges in the same way shoppers do for time in the city?

One point the NSS does make, which is hard to argue against, is the thousands and thousands of pounds in lost revenue councils are foregoing to run the worshippers' scheme.

Whether you are religious or not, surely it is plain to see any income the council can generate is crucial at a time when the economy is flat lining and the shoots of recovery are not forthcoming.

Maybe this case could lead to a watershed in Canterbury where worshippers lose the divine right to cheap parking and the prayers for more money in the council coffers are answered.

Meanwhile, the *Yorkshire Evening Post*, carried a letter from Mr Michael Sargood of Meanwood. It reads:

In the past few weeks I have had the misfortune of attending services at Leeds Cathedral with my well-intending partner. On both occasions, the congregation has been encouraged to sign petitions.

The first was in opposition to the proposed removal of a whopping £800,000 of entirely discretionary funding by the Leeds council taxpayer to ship children the length and breadth of the city so that they can attend a faith school of their parents' preference, when they have perfectly good non-faith schools on their doorstep. This represents a staggering five per cent of Leeds's entire home-to-school transport budget and could pay for over 25 much-needed teachers.

As such funding is not available to accommodate other parental preferences – such as sending their child to a sports college or a school with academy status or the proposed change would simply level the playing field for non-believers.

The second petition was in opposition to the introduction of Sunday parking fees in Leeds. Again, where Sunday parking fees have been introduced in other parts of the country in recent months, notably in Woking, the local churches have been successful in securing exemption for their congregations. This, despite the fact that Sunday shoppers pump money into the economy while worshippers merely take a free biscuit and sip of wine and promptly leave. Surely, everyone should pay or no-one should.

Why must these wealthy institutions – which claim to stand for fairness – constantly plead for special treatment and dispensations? And more importantly, why do we so often pander to them?

This pleading has been all too clearly exemplified at a national level too, with churches making aggressive demands for exemption from teaching about gay marriage in their schools and exemption from equality laws in their recruitment, notably of female clergy.

I hope that our councillors have the courage to resist pressure from these self-interested private members clubs and that taxpayers are not asked to subsidise others' faith.

Meanwhile, churchgoers in Edinburgh are also [lobbying for concessions](#).

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Terry Sanderson is the former president of the National Secular Society. The views expressed in our blogs are those of the author and may not necessarily represent the views of the NSS. You can follow Terry on Twitter [@TerrySanderson4](#)

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