

## **RESPONSE TO MID SUSSEX DISTRICT COUNCIL CONSULTATION**

### **Notice of proposals (off street parking places)**

### **Order 2006 (amendment no. 1) 2024**

### **Objections from the East Grinstead Business Association**

**22 July 2024**

The East Grinstead Business Association (EGBA) has over 100 businesses and organisations from East Grinstead and the surrounding area in membership, representing over 1,000 employees and many more suppliers and customers of those members. Non-member businesses also look to the EGBA to provide a voice. Many of our businesses are based in the town centre and rely on convenient, off-road public parking for their staff, customers and suppliers. These include hospitality businesses (pubs, restaurants and hotels), retailers, gyms and providers of a range of professional services. The new charges will, for example, discourage the after-work gym users and push back hospitality start times to after 8pm.

**Extending the charging hours as outlined in the Order risks severely impacting business owners and their customers by imposing another deterrent to those wishing to use local services – many of these business owners are already struggling to remain solvent.**

In the current climate and where retail units and others in East Grinstead are closing at an alarming rate, this proposal represents ‘the final straw’ – actively discouraging people from visiting (and spending money in) our town and enjoying all it has to offer. The viability and vitality of any local community also relies on the cultural and social landscape. The proposed charging into evenings and Sundays/Bank Holidays will impact residents and visitors using local theatre and entertainment venues (such as Chequer Mead, Atrium), not only for performances but for classes and educational/ social clubs, church-goers, as well as the many hundreds of people from East Grinstead and beyond who support town events such as the May Fair, the Big Reveal, car and bus days and East Court Live, attend Remembrance Day commemorations – to name but a few. Many of these events depend on volunteers who give freely of their time and should not have to pay additional costs to do so. The proposals would discourage visitors and tourists who may go elsewhere to spend their leisure time (and money). We regularly hear that parking charges are actively ‘avoided’, however reasonable the authorities may think they are. We hear about ‘free parking’ in Forest Row and Oxted – two popular social hubs.

#### **The evidence base**

EGBA calls into question the validity of the evidence used by MSDC which underpinned these extended charging proposals and the so-called ‘high-level set of evidence-based recommendations for future investment in the car park estate’. The vast bulk of evidence gathered and analysed by the external consultants was done prior to Covid times. The updates were unsatisfactory and should have involved a completely new piece of work. The contention that businesses were consulted in East Grinstead is simply not true based on what our members tell us. We are all aware of the many challenges that businesses faced during and since then – not least with rising energy bills and the cost-of-living crisis on top of the effects of the pandemic. We also contend that the local councillors did not agree the changes.

The 2020 ‘strategy’ – the result of a document produced in 2019 (itself an update) – was based on old data and was focused on differential pricing, not on extended

times. In fact the strategy was no more than a potential direction of travel. It did not ask for firm decisions and should have included proper consultation.

In addition, you have chosen not to take into account the local petition which collected 5,200 names, citing the constitution of the council as the reason. Based on the lack of an up-to-date, evidence-based approach we strongly dispute the reasons for not respecting the views of the businesses and people of East Grinstead.

The point made about the cost of running car parks being equitably met by all users may be a valid one, but we believe evening and Sunday/Bank Holiday users are more likely to be discretionary users – choosing to visit and spend time in the town – so may equally choose to go elsewhere.

In short, we do not see any evidence that supports the introduction of these charges.

### **Revenue and funding**

While we fully appreciate the pressures that local councils are currently experiencing, we firmly believe that the priority must be to do whatever is necessary to promote a sustainable town centre – with thriving businesses and community activities. We do not believe that extending charges to those who are most likely to help achieve this, is the right way forward.

We hope that these views will be taken into account in the Council's decision-making process, and remain at your disposal for further discussion if required.

East Grinstead Business Association

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