

DVLA and Private Parking Companies

Sarah Wollaston Chair, Health Committee

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries, and it is a real pleasure to follow my hon. Friend Mr Rees-Mogg and the compelling points he made. I thank my neighbour, my hon. Friend Kevin Foster, for securing the debate. In the short time left, I will touch on unreasonable practices and appeals and make a few further points following on from my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset.

There are highly unreasonable practices going on. We have heard many Members give examples. In my area, Premier Parking Solutions, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay referred, has a particular problem with its machines, which is affecting many individuals, particularly when number plate recognition is used in combination with a requirement to enter the vehicle's number plate manually. In many cases, the machines do not record the first number of that registration plate.

The issue is that, because number plate recognition is being used, individuals do not receive a notification until about 10 days to two weeks later, by which time most reasonable people, having parked legally and paid the correct amount, will have discarded the clutter from their windscreen—I do not take much joy in tidying my car, so that would not affect me. Even if individuals have retained their ticket and can clearly prove that there has been an honest error, they find their appeals are not being upheld.

The other problem we have is the disincentive to appeal, because those who appeal have to pay a higher charge if their appeal fails—and fail it will. I have a series of clear cases from individuals who can demonstrate—I suggest to the Minister it is beyond any reasonable doubt—that they have legally parked, fully paid the correct amount and left within the required time, but who are still being hit. If they carry through the appeal process, they find they get nowhere. If they then refuse to pay, they are hit with a series of harassing letters and ultimately receive letters from debt recovery agents, which has an impact on their credit rating. That practice is wholly unacceptable, and intervention from Members of Parliament does not make any difference, either.

I am afraid that our constituents are being caught, and that has consequences. I will read from part of a letter from one of my constituents, which sums up the problem:

"I am an honest lady in my late 60s and I have never had an experience like this before. I live in rented accommodation on a limited income—I am not financially secure. It will cause me hardship to pay this fine when I fully believed I was doing everything legally and correctly."

The letters go on. Another pensioner wrote to me:

"I am a pensioner and all this angst really upsets me...I will do as everyone else has done and pay the £60 within the allotted time and try to forget it—but I have to say the injustice really riles me."

That is the injustice to which my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset referred. He is right that the role of Government is to stand up to help those who are powerless against such practices.

It is not just pensionersâ€”I hear this from across a spectrum of individualsâ€”but we should ensure that particularly those who may have difficulty in entering details via these machines have their interests protected. I agree with hon. Members who have said that at the root of the problem lies the DVLA and its complicity in the process. Will the Minister use every power he has to ensure that it takes its role and responsibility seriously? It has a responsibility to ensure that such practices are not allowed to continue. I hope that in responding he will inform all Members here, and constituents following the debate closely, what the Government will do to ensure that justice is done for all our constituents.

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