

Discussion Paper for Consumer Forum meeting on 17 July 2014

Signs in private car parks

Issue

The entrance signs and main terms-and-conditions signs required by the BPA code must be in place by 1 October 2015 at all BPA-member car parks (BPA code, appendix F).

The code says much about the terms and conditions being 'plain and intelligible' and highly legible. However, the code does not say how 'plain and intelligible' and 'legible' are to be judged. It is left to the companies to decide. Since it is generally in the companies' interests to maximize the number of contraventions, it is in their interests to interpret these code statements in a way that is advantageous to themselves. There are effectively no standards for T&C signs. 'Watchdog' on 11 June showed how small and inconspicuous some signs can be.

Ministers have the power to impose rules on signage if they feel motorists are at risk of being scammed.

Problems for vulnerable motorists

Foreign tourists, people under stress (eg, parking with children, using car parks at hospitals) and people whose reading and scanning abilities are adequate for driving but below average are particularly at risk if signage is unclear. How many people are prepared to stand in the rain having, say, locked their little children in the car while they read a long-winded and semiliterate signboard that could run to 700 words of legalistic text?

A constant difficulty with ANPR is that perfection is required when, for example, recording your own arrival time at a car park, gauging your likely period of stay, computing your actual period of stay (and thus the payment you must make at the end of it), and putting your registration number into the pay machine. Judging from the incredulity that penalized motorists express on the various consumer websites, many of them seem to hold the naïve belief that 'nearly right' is good enough. Though 95% may be a great result in a maths test, it is a complete fail in the parking world. Anything less than perfection is a contravention and a £60–100 penalty. And perfection is practically impossible when signs are ambiguous.

Meanwhile, of course, the companies' own failures to comply with codes of practice and their KADOE contracts with the DVLA are routinely ignored as this is such a one-sided and largely unregulated field.

Action

I will support this paper in the meeting by asking members to briefly consider some signs on paper.

I then propose we consider whether it would be a good idea to mount a proper study of signage in private car parks with a view to the minister imposing a meaningful clarity and legibility regime.

Martin Cutts

Independent Representative on the DVLA Consumer Forum on Private Parking