

28 September 2009

Rochdale Metropolitan Borough Council:

"Free After Three"

Summary of policy/project

Introduced in June 2009, "Free After Three" allows shoppers in Rochdale and Middleton to be able to park for free in the town centre if they arrive after three on weekdays and Saturdays. The move is aimed at helping local retailers hit by the recession.

Description

For the last two years, Rochdale Metropolitan Borough Council (RMBC) has frozen the increase in car parking charges across the borough. It is now cheaper than their neighbours in Oldham and Bury. Due to the severity of the economic downturn, the Council felt that further action was needed to support their local businesses within their town centre.

The "Free After Three" initiative has seen thousands of people take advantage of the offer since its launch. The offer applies to all council-owned pay and display car parks plus on-street parking meters in Rochdale and Middleton and the pay-on-exit bus station car park in Rochdale.

What problems does the policy/project solve?

The Council has taken this initiative to help businesses out during the recession and they are already getting positive feedback from some retailers who say their trade's picked up after three o'clock.

What were the difficulties of implementation?

Councillor Greg Couzens, Cabinet Member for Finance on Rochdale Council, said that some people did not fully understand the scheme. So RMBC are looking at making the signs and information on the machines

even more clearer. He also pointed out that obtaining all party support was difficult.

What is the cost of implementation?

Costs of implementation have been estimated to be £130,000.

What is the evidence of success?

So far, the "Free After Three" Parking scheme has been a success. There has been a significant increase in footfall in the Town Centre. The figures clearly indicate a substantial increase in shoppers visiting Rochdale Town Centre.

A comparison of footfall between the dates of 25 May (before Free After Three) and 22 June showed an increase from 2200 shoppers after three to 7,100: "Footfall is up 3.5% on the year (that's about 550 additional customers during a three week period after 3pm). Average basket is up 3.6% on the year. "We have also seen a small increase in units per transaction".

Would this work in other Councils?

No reason why it shouldn't.

What advice would you give any Councils wishing to adopt this idea?

To implement it as soon as possible.

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Other Comments

The Council has revealed that the scheme may soon be extended to free parking on Saturday's, he said: "I am pleased to announce that we are looking at the possibility of free parking all day on Saturdays." Challenged as to why the scheme could not be free parking all day every day he said the cost of £1million would be too much, he also cited the damage that would be done to the private sector car park owners, particularly the town's two shopping centres, Rochdale Exchange and The Wheatsheaf Centre, who told the council they rely on the income from their car parks and could not afford the loss of revenue any reduction would bring.

For more information

For more information on this scheme please contact Cllr. Gregory Couzens, Cabinet Member for Finance. E-mail gregory.couzens@rochdale.gov.uk or phone 01706 633220.

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