

Parking Problems Biggest Turn-off for London Drivers

The cost and the hassle of parking is more of a reason to stay away from central London than the congestion charge, according to research by The AA Motoring Trust. Seven out of ten of motorists say that parking problems are the biggest turn-off when it comes to taking the car into the capital. Traffic jams deter 57 per cent of drivers, but less than half (45 per cent) are put off by the 5 congestion charge, which is a year old on Tuesday (17 February).

The AA Trust study of 300 motorists living in towns near the M25 also shows that more than 70 per cent believe that the charging zone should not be extended, with more than half strongly opposed to the idea. Opinion of the current scheme remains just as evenly divided as it was before it was introduced: 41 per cent of drivers questioned support it and 40 per cent are still opposed to it.

Paul Watters, head of roads and transport at The AA Motoring Trust, says: The charge was designed to keep cars out of central London. To a certain extent it has done that, with traffic in the payment zone down by 16 per cent since it was introduced. But with many drivers citing parking and jams as the main reason they don't drive into the capital, the charge is less of a deterrent than Transport for London thought it would be.

Drivers are also rightly concerned about proposals to extend the charge to other areas. The existing scheme may have cut congestion, but there have been other problems, such as clogged phone lines, fines sent out in error and hassles in trying to register trips.

There is a gaping hole in the schemes finances, too, because of cost over-runs and flawed measurement of traffic patterns. Net revenue, at 68 million, will be only about a third of what it was supposed to be. This means less money to spend on transport improvements: there are already reports of cuts to transport programmes.

The AA Trust survey, which covered drivers in Chelmsford, Guildford, St Albans, Bromley, Kingston, Romford, Harrow, Watford, Slough and Dartford, also shows that most drivers living in the commuter belt are unfamiliar with the workings of the scheme.

More than 70 per cent of those questioned admit they know only a little or nothing about it, with 38 per cent not knowing how to pay, and 36 per cent unaware of the time by which the 5 must be paid in order to avoid getting fined.

Paul Watters says: Drivers living in these areas may not regularly commute into central London, but are likely to make occasional trips in, perhaps to take someone to hospital, to go to the theatre or to pick up a visitor from Waterloo station.

The AA Trust urges TfL to step up its publicity, so that drivers who are unfamiliar with the charging scheme can know what they are supposed to do. It is clear that many are in the dark about key aspects, increasing their chances of being fined. Penalties should only be levied on wilful offenders. With a shortfall in projected income, TfL seems to be out to make money by penalising unfamiliar users who infringe through lack of knowledge.

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NOTE TO EDITORS

Drivers are invited to tell The AA Motoring Trust their views on congestion charging by emailing trust@theAA.com