

HCC Parking survey – A Critique

A Introduction – the attributes of a ‘good’ survey.

- 1) What is a survey supposed to do? It attempts to obtain the views of a group of people or businesses all of whom are too numerous to be interviewed. This is done by means of a survey of a smaller sub-group which should be seen as far as possible to represent accurately and comprehensively the views of the larger group.
- 2) The survey must distinguish between questions and answers of fact and opinion.
- 3) There should be no hidden or overt bias in a question towards any answer.
- 4) There must be no hidden costs or impediments to the answers to questions, e.g ‘would you like more car parking?’ The answer is most always ‘yes’ but then the questioner should go on to ask what would you be prepared to sacrifice if this were to be achieved - loss of important and protected natural habitat, loss of business, loss of footfall, loss of property, increased costs such as higher business rates or council tax, etc. Then the original question should be put again and the revised answers recorded.
- 5) Do not ask questions to which the answers are most likely to be impossible to achieve – e.g. ‘Would you like to be able to have a reserved and fully protected parking place at all times outside your shop/office/ house on the High Street’.
- 6) The survey should be randomised – i.e. there should be no ‘selection’ of ‘likely’ or ‘co-operative’ respondents. It should in this sense be a ‘blind’ survey. Ask the next person who comes along, whoever they might seem to be.
- 7) Do not ask technical questions or questions the answers to which the interviewee would almost certainly have no adequate knowledge and therefore would give unsafe answers.
- 8) If asking questions of opinion, make sure that these are not used as factual answers.
- 9) As far as possible, when asking factual questions, make sure the interviewee is in a position to answer factually and not guess or fabricate an answer or express a hidden or overt opinion.
- 10) Do not ask interviewees questions about the opinion of others.
- 11) The management and administration of the questionnaire must be seen to be fair and in all respects above suspicion that there is no bias towards any particular objective. Interviewees must be able to respond to the questions without difficulty and all the answers from all the interviewees must be recorded accurately and without exception.

B Why is a survey of parking alone dangerous and potentially misleading?

- 1) People do not go anywhere simply to park their car. They go to places to shop, visit friends, eat out, go for a walk etc and if they drive and cannot go by any other means they have to park somewhere. Parking is a means to an end, to achieve a mission, it is part of the infrastructure or amenities of a place; no-one parks their vehicle without having a reason for doing so.
- 2) This means that asking questions about parking without considering what the amenities of the place are and whether an increase or decrease in parking or charging, would have any effect on the amenities of the place would be a meaningless exercise.
- 3) To put it simply, Stockbridge could have a very large car park with charges and fines for overstaying but far fewer shops, businesses and other amenities but when that would be put to interviewees, their views about the number and type of parking might be very different had they not been told.

- 4) Car parking is not the only element that contributes to the economy of Stockbridge. The variety of shops, the number of restaurants, the pharmacy, the surgery, the school, the volume and speed of passing traffic and its accessibility etc. these are all important. Parking is but one element that enables all the others to function, but there are interdependencies.
- 5) The price of parking and whether there would be fines for overstaying are important elements, and they cannot be judged good or bad except by carefully examining the impact they might have on all the other elements.
- 6) It is essential that monetary values about parking charges and fines are readily available to interviewees – how long can one stay parked, how much will it cost and what level of fines will be imposed for overstaying? Without this knowledge, any assessment of or opinions about paid parking are largely meaningless.
- 7) It is necessary in setting out a questionnaire about parking to refer interviewees to their ‘mission’ – why they are here and what they intend doing. It is important then try to find out whether the interviewee would respond to a different set of regimes to the present system of parking and how the other the amenities might be affected by changes to such matters as charging and fines.

C So how does the HCC parking survey score on these tests?

- 1) There is no attempt to find out how far visitor interviewees have travelled to get to Stockbridge and whether they are from local villages or from much further eg: day trippers.
- 2) There is no differentiation between permanent working people and those such as builders who are here for only a short number of days or weeks. These often come in a substantial number of vehicles but are not representative of ordinary working people.
- 3) For residents there is no attempt to find out why they are here in the High Street or for how long.
- 4) There is no attempt to find out how many residents with cars do not have off-street parking. Those who do may well leave their cars out on the High Street during both the day and night.
- 5) Residents with cars use them for different purposes at different time of the day and rarely the same every day so may be away from Stockbridge for different times during any day, week or month. The use of cars is random and cannot be predicted with any certainty.
- 6) There is no mention of fines for overstaying; only ‘fair’ charges, and there is no mention of how charging and fining would be administered.
- 7) Q7 asks if the interviewee ever drives to the High Street and Q8 if so where do you park? The answer can only be ‘Every time is different depending on where I want to go and whether there is parking available.
- 8) Q9 asks how long do residents stay? The answer can only be that it depends on what the resident wants to do on any particular day and every day can and usually is different from other days.
- 9) Q10 asks whether there is ‘enough’ parking in Stockbridge. That is not a valid question to ask expecting a fact- based answer. Anyone coming to the High St wants to park outside wherever they want to visit and for as long as it takes. Each individual will respond with his or her opinion which will vary as a result of recent experience.
- 10) But what is ‘enough’? There is no information given as to how ‘more’ might be provided and at what cost. Does ‘enough’ mean to allow anyone to park right outside their desired shop/restaurant/pub etc., or enough to make sure that the economy of the town is in good shape and there are no signs of decline, or enough that the residential values keep rising steadily? Three quite different answers to a very generalised and largely meaningless question.

- 11) Individuals' opinions are not the basis for policy making; rigorous research into the interdependencies that make up the structure of life and the economy are required before any such judgement can be made with any real validity.
- 12) Q14 does not specify restaurants, pubs or such amenities as dentist surgery etc.
- 13) Q15 is a somewhat loaded question in the sense that finding parking very difficult is the first alternative experience put to the visitor. The question could better have been put simply and neutrally as 'How did you find parking?'
- 14) Q22 asks the business community whether there is 'enough' parking and the comments made about the question earlier apply equally to businesses.
- 15) Q23 is flawed; it does not put prices or costs to the alternatives, thus making any response largely meaningless. For example, how would 'convenient parking close to shops and amenities' be made better than it is now? Would paid parking and fines for overstaying achieve this and what would be the costs and levels of fines to achieve this outcome? It would be almost certainly wrong to assume that there would be no means of enforcing the length of stay and fines are the usual means of achieving this.
- 16) Q23 What is the definition of 'fairly'? Fair to whom, the County Highways? The visitor? And above all else, what would today's monetary values be of such 'fair' pricing? Why not tell the interviewee instead of using a word designed quite clearly and disingenuously to allay fears and induce a 'soft' answer? It's the money, not the fairness that counts.
- 17) As for 'protected parking for residents' what does this mean? Reserved spaces which are protected so that no one else could use the spaces? That would be impossible to deliver and should never have been included as a realistic alternative.
- 18) Q24 asks for the first half of the post code 'for mapping purposes'. The first half of all business's post codes is of course 'SO20' and is therefore useless for mapping anything except a rather large swathe of Hampshire.

D General comments on the survey

- 1) Many residents and businesses were not given the survey and many residents did not see interviewers anywhere.
- 2) Many of the questions require more information especially about the cost of the issue being put to the interviewee and without these costs, the interviewee has no idea of the real issues behind the seemingly somewhat innocent questions.
- 3) There is no information about how the survey has been carried out in a random and representative manner and without this, there can be no confidence in the outcome or use of the survey.
- 4) The survey asks questions about which the interviewee will have little or no expert or informed knowledge, such as those questions which directly or indirectly depend upon knowledge of the economy of the town.
- 5) There is no distinction made between factual answers and those which are matters of opinion, and this is a dangerous mixture which can lead to unsafe conclusions.
- 6) Many residents were not given questionnaire sheets through their letter boxes as was believed to have been the intention. The community does not know therefore how many people or businesses have been given these documents. That is a serious deficiency since it seems likely, for example, that a whole street was not given the documents. How was this process decided; on what grounds

and how can it possibly be regarded as a representative sample of the residential or business community in this state?

- 7) Who chose the sample and on what criteria? Was it done deliberately or by a lack of adequate planning? Unless that can be made clear and unambiguous the survey should be abandoned on the grounds that it cannot be seen as having any degree of technical integrity, transparency or credibility.
- 8) Households that have only one computer cannot send in responses from more than one member of the household. This is a serious deficiency, especially as some members of a household may well have different answers to questions from those of their co-occupiers. It, again, skews the responses in an unsatisfactory manner.
- 9) Finally, there has been great difficulty experienced, particularly by the elderly members of the community, in sending their responses to the authors of the survey. Elderly people often do not have up-to-date knowledge or use of computer technology, and cannot send their forms in the manner required. This skews the sample towards the younger and more computer literate, but the age profile of this town is itself skewed towards the elderly. That in itself renders any conclusions suspect and unreliable.

CONCLUSION

The survey should not be used for any decision-making purposes by the County not only because it has serious flaws but because it would not be accepted by the community as a reliable basis for any such changes to the parking regime of the town. It should be abandoned and, if necessary, entirely and comprehensively restructured, managed and administered in an acceptable and reliable form.

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