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Car bays plan U-turn-a victory for people power

IT IS a new year and there is some good news to usher in 2016. People power and public outrage have forced Milton Keynes Council to reverse what was possibly the craziest delegated decision it has ever taken. The decision on December 1, by cabinet member Cllr Matt Clifton, was to create 235 additional parking bays in Central Milton Keynes by reducing the width of 5,402 bays to 2.3 metres from the recommended 2.4 metres. And all this at a cost of £1,277 per bay or a total of just over £300,000.

The decision was 'called in' by Stantonbury ward Cllr Alex Walker and by Central Milton Keynes Town Council. Around 1,500 people signed a petition on www.change.org. Local media campaigned too. Now the council has capitulated and withdrawn the decision.

Interestingly, current standard sizes for car bays are based on car sizes that are at least 30-40 years out of date. In the meantime cars have got larger. The cur-

rent VW Polo is larger in every dimension than the first VW Golf, its supposedly 'bigger' brother. Today's Ford Mondeo is now almost two metres wide; its predecessor the Cortina was only 1.588 metres in width. It has grown by 17 per cent and it is not alone. Cars in the EU have become 130mm wider on average since 2001.

I also need to mention that people have got larger too. In recent years, as any trip to a supermarket's frozen chips cabinet will confirm, they have expanded by an enormous extent. A side effect of the obesity epidemic is that car doors need to be opened wider. If bays had been reduced to 2.3 metres wide, not only the morbidly obese but also parents with children in child seats, pregnant women and those less flexible and able-bodied would be forced to stay away. I wonder what that would do to sales at thecentre:mk and intu Milton Keynes?

So was this mad decision for extra revenue? You bet. Milton Keynes Council raked in £9 million in car park-

ing 'profits' after costs in 2014/15 - only three other cities outside London bringing in more. The surplus has increased by £3 million in just five years, according to the RAC Foundation.

Car parking surplus for Milton Keynes in the last financial year was ring-fenced to help pay for the running of street parking, subsidised bus routes and community transport. So with that huge parking-profit windfall, would they need yet more for those purposes or is it being used elsewhere?

Apparently, moving forward with the bay-narrowing proposals under a delegated decision would also have triggered an increase in the charge for employee permits by way of a reduction in the Central Milton Keynes employee discount. Opposition councillors had previously voted down the increase, which depended on 1,000 extra spaces being found for employee-permit parking.

The current employee discount is 50pc on the purple bay rate, which was raised this year by 25pc from 40p to 50p per

hour. The cabinet had proposed an increase for employee permits of 5pc of the 50p total every year for five years bringing employees from 50pc to 75pc of the normal fee over an assumed eight-hour working day.

As employees can only park in purple bays and not the premium red, the council created some new designations. 560 premium (red) spaces have been changed to red and black. 328 standard (purple) spaces are now red/black. These are now full price premium bays for casual parkers - up from 50p to £2 per hour - but purple-priced for permit holders. Taking into account the recent general price hike, even discounted employees would face an increase of 87pc over four years, well above the rate of inflation and a worrying sign of outrageous profiteering.

The final trick the cabinet used to try to find the additional 1,000 employee parking bays was to create the additional 235 bays obtained by repainting width lines. However despite the council's U-

turn on this and having been knocked back this year on their increase to employees, I have learned that they now intend to impose two years' worth of their 5pc annual increases with one 10pc (of 50p) increase in April this year.

Surely this is both underhand and unacceptable. Since they have lost the battle over ridiculously narrow parking bays, perhaps they should accept their failure to find 1,000 employee parking spaces and act honourably.

At least the car bay width proposal has been withdrawn and parking space sizes will remain as they are, in general 2.4-2.5 metres wide. Yet, even at these sizes, they seem barely adequate. If only they were as wide as those marvellous, generous bays at Costco. But we are where we are and I suppose we should rejoice.

In the meantime I wonder how we can stop the council coming up with yet more truly mad money-grabbing ideas going forward. It is a new year, and I take this opportunity to wish you all the best in it. Happy parking. Cheerio.

Differing cultural tastes present new outlets for organisations, says marketing expert Dr Andrew Lindridge.

EXACTLY what constitutes 'culture' has been discussed for as long as man has existed. Yet culture is increasingly becoming a paramount issue for organisations globally, nationally and locally. Let us first define culture as the shared art, beliefs, customs, knowledge, law, morals and values belonging to a group of people. So why has culture become so important?

Internationally, the emergence of China as a key market for many prestigious European brands reflects wider global socio-economic, cultural and political changes. Indeed, your next Audi, BMW, Jaguar or Mercedes car is more likely to be designed with Chinese cultural tastes in mind just as much as those of than those of European consumers.

Western societies are witnessing changing demographics. Europe's increasing demand for skilled labour from outside the European Union and the current refugee crisis are merely reflections of wider population changes that present both problems and opportunities for organisations. For example, to what extent do ethnic minorities' consumer tastes reflect those of their host nation?

The 2011 census shows that 26.1 per cent of Milton Keynes' population of

Celebrate diversity and the commercial opportunity it brings

248,821 people belong to ethnic minority groups; that is 64,887 potential consumers. What makes Milton Keynes unusual is the greater percentage of ethnic minorities compared to other parts of the UK.

Our culture gives us a sense of identity. We often experience this when we travel abroad and observe how things differ. If you were born and bred in the UK your behaviours and values are indicative of being British. It follows, therefore, that if culture affects and determines our sense of identity and our behaviours, the products we consume demonstrate our cultural conformity.

British clothing brands reflect British cultural tastes: understated, classic, verging on conservative. German brands reflect cultural values of efficiency and reliability, Italian brands reflect those of passion and

design flair.

Organisations should recognise what cultural values they embody. The Jaguar car brand or Burberry clothing brand's subtlety emphasises their sense of British understatement. No need for Italian design flair here, British understatement will do fine.

Recognise that your consumers are purchasing products to reinforce their own cultural identity. A British consumer may purchase a Jaguar car out of patriotism as much as identifying with the brand's design subtlety. Consumers purchase products that represent how they want to be seen. Consumers from other countries also want to identify with your brand's national cultural values, which brings us back to the example of China and Western car design.

Nobody is saying Western car brands are suddenly changing their

designs to suit Chinese cultural tastes - such a decision would not only upset Chinese car buyers but also many others. However, organisations should incorporate differing cultural tastes to suit local cultural needs. Jaguar cars sold in China use top grade leather (it represents British cultural tastes, apparently) but come with extended wheel bases, creating extra room for the owner to sit in the back while the chauffeur drives.

It is all about showing one's wealth to others; a Chinese cultural value.

Just because a consumer comes from an ethnic minority group does not mean their cultural tastes and what they consume will differ. In the 2011 census 71pc of Bangladeshis and 63pc of Pakistanis considered themselves purely British (the remainder linked their British identity to their ethnic category). So organisations need to be more subtle and less assumptive.

In marketing to ethnic minorities, organisations should focus on celebrating ethnic and cultural differences. Tesco celebrates every religious festival reflective of its wide consumer base. Be it Christmas, Diwali, Hanukkah, Ramadan or Vaisakhi, Tesco will have a promotion to accom-



pany it. These promotions do not attempt to categorise their ethnic consumers by degrees of cultural affiliation but merely acknowledge that cultural differences exist. It is up to the consumer to recognise they are being communicated to, a recognition that tends to be positively received.

Organisations should welcome cultural difference not only from the commercial opportunities it presents but also because it brings humanity a step closer to seeing each other for what we are... a group of people who share common interests and goals.

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