

## Southampton Parking Charges Spark Outcry from Local Businesses

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The decision to scrap free parking in Southampton's Bitterne suburb has ignited fierce opposition, with local traders warning that the new charges are stifling community spirit and threatening the survival of small businesses. A petition, backed by over 2,300 signatures, was presented to Southampton City Council on Wednesday, 16 July, demanding the reinstatement of free parking to protect the area's economic and social vitality.

The council's move in April to eliminate two hours of free parking in 17 car parks across Bitterne, Portswood, Shirley, and Woolston has drawn sharp criticism. The local authority claims the charges will generate an additional £560,000 annually, but independent traders argue the cost is far greater to the community. Kerry Allen, owner of Card Gallery, launched the petition at the urging of frustrated customers. "The drop in footfall was immediate and has only worsened," she said in a recent interview. "My weekly takings barely cover overheads, and I'm genuinely worried about losing my business." She attributed the decline directly to drivers refusing to pay the new fees.

Mary Stokes, a 30-year veteran of Dahlers Jewellers, echoed these concerns, stating, "The cost of parking is killing the community spirit." She highlighted the ripple effect on churches, cafes, shops, and community groups, all struggling to cope with reduced visitors. The petition reflects a broader sentiment that the council's decision overlooks the needs of local stakeholders.

Cllr Simon Letts, the Labour cabinet member for finance and resources, acknowledged Bitterne's unique situation, noting that the council controls all parking spaces in the area, unlike other district centres with free supermarket car parks. He committed to visiting Bitterne to hear residents' concerns, with a review of the charges planned for September. However, opposition councillors have slammed the Labour-led council for ignoring overwhelming public opposition, pointing to a consultation where 98 per cent of respondents opposed the charges.

Conservative councillor Sarah Powell-Vaughan expressed doubt that smaller businesses could survive until the September review, warning of potential closures. Her colleague, Cllr Alex Houghton, lambasted the council's dismissal of clear evidence, stating, "These were predictable concerns, clearly articulated in the consultation, yet this council chose to ignore them. Why are you so blind to the facts?" Liberal Democrat leader Cllr Richard Blackman added that the council failed to properly assess the economic and social impact, urging better engagement with businesses and community groups as key indicators of local conditions.

In response, Labour's deputy leader and transport cabinet member, Cllr Christie Lambert, claimed council data showed "steady" footfall in Bitterne since the charges were introduced, suggesting other economic factors were at play. She pointed to a broader decline in trade across district centres since 2022. However, Conservative group leader Cllr Peter Baillie

rejected this, warning, “By September, many businesses may already be closed. When your takings can’t cover your bills, you’ve got a serious problem.”

Labour council leader Cllr Alex Winning insisted the council must listen to businesses, pledging to make it a “listening organisation.” Yet, with the review months away, traders fear the damage may already be irreversible. The petition underscores a growing divide between the council’s fiscal priorities and the community’s plea to preserve Bitterne’s economic heartbeat.