

Small print on entrance signs suddenly gets 615 per cent bigger

[21 Jan 2013] The small print on a private-parking sign at the centre of a court case won by Martin Cutts of Plain Language Commission is no longer small at all.

Excel Parking Services Ltd, the multi-million pound company that operates the Peel Centre car park in Stockport, insisted during a court case in September 2011 that its crucial words 'Pay and display' on signs at the car-park entrances were perfectly legible for any motorist to read – at just 13mm (0.5in) high.

The judge disagreed and booted out Excel's case, leading the company to allege she was not fit to serve in the civil courts and lambast what it called her 'off-the-wall judgment'.

But now the company has changed all its entrance signs at the Peel Centre, increasing the type size by the little matter of 615%. So 'pay and display' is now in text about 80mm high, giving drivers a clearer alert that they are entering a pay zone (see picture, right).

In court, Excel admitted it had for several years imposed £100 parking charge notices on 3,800 motorists a year because they hadn't bought tickets.

Cutts said this was probably because, like him, the drivers hadn't seen the words 'pay and display'. Thus a stream of phoney (ie, non-official) fines was sloshing into Excel's coffers. Last year Excel paid its managing director an extraordinary £766,353 salary (Mail on Sunday, 27 May 2012).

Other signs throughout the Peel Centre car park remain as bad as ever, with very small print and, in places, semiliterate and nonsensical text. Excel has covered up whole paragraphs with yellow tape – it's not clear why, but it may be connected to Excel's recent breaches of Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency rules, which led to it being suspended for three months from lucrative access to the DVLA's databank of drivers' names and addresses. This meant Excel was unable to chase drivers who don't pay its



non-fines, costing the company thousands of pounds a week.

The new entrance signs state that drivers who break Excel's rules by, for example, overstaying or straddling a white line when parked are thereby agreeing to pay a £100 contractual charge.

The BPA's code of practice, to which Excel has signed up, says the contractual charge must be reasonable and not punitive. So the £100 price tag is very interesting – how can it be reasonable and not punitive at that level?

Excel tries to enforce its charge notices with a string of tough letters from solicitors and debt collectors threatening court action, and about 75% of people cave in under the pressure and pay up. In practice, Excel rarely takes anyone to court.

The signs dotted around the car park continue to threaten that drivers who break Excel's rules may have their vehicles clamped and towed away, but clamping on private land has been illegal since October.

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