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TX: 23.04.03 – DISABLED PEOPLE IN PETERBOROUGH COMPLAIN ABOUT LOCAL PARKING BAY POLICY

PRESENTER: WINIFRED ROBINSON

ROBINSON

If you are disabled, live in Peterborough and own a car you can now look forward to a personal visit from the leader of the local council who's in the process of working out just who's using and just who's abusing the provision of parking bays for disabled drivers. Neville Sanders is convinced there's such widespread abuse of the system he wants to make sure only genuine applications for a disabled parking bay are approved. Now whether this is a sensible crackdown on fraud or an imposition on people making a legitimate claim for a recognised benefit rather depends on your point of view but it has outraged one woman so much that she's started a campaign against the policy, as our reporter Carolyn Atkinson found out.

ACTUALITY

Hello Jean.

Come in.

Hello, just come to wish you a happy birthday.

JEAN NORTH

I am not able to walk very far. I have got angina, osteoarthritis, diverticulitis and now I have broken my hip. All I asked for when I moved here a year ago was for a disabled parking where I can stand my car.

ATKINSON

That's because Jean North's neighbours, quite legitimately, come along after she goes out, spot the empty bay, pull up and park. But that leaves Jean high and dry when she returns. So she's given up going out.

JEAN NORTH

I've had my car out twice in a year, so I'm housebound at the moment. I've got a zimmer frame from the centre to here is quite a way and no way could I walk that distance with a zimmer frame. I am not lying, I would not lie, I would not say I'm disabled if I wasn't.

ATKINSON

Seventy seven year old ex-servicewoman Jean North is one of at least 30 people in Peterborough who since last November have applied for disabled bays outside their homes which they or any other blue badge holder could park in. Many were sent letters saying they were eligible and that the bays would be provided but then a couple of days later they were told the answer's no.

The decision has been made by the leader of the Conservative controlled council, Neville Sanders, who says it's all part of a parking review taking place in the city. It's a chance, as he puts it, to crackdown on those who are abusing the system. But many people with disabilities say they're being victimised and are the subject of allegations by Councillor Sanders, like this description in his letter to the local Labour MP, Helen Clarke, about Jean North.

JEAN NORTH

The letter says that if there was a £5 note laying on the floor I could beat him to it, even with a bad foot, I could still beat him to it. No way could I beat him to it. I can't walk that far, let alone run and pick up a £5 note.

ATKINSON

Councillor Anthony Pears has taken up Mrs North's case, he claims the council review is discriminating against the massive majority of genuinely disabled people.

PEARS

The idea is that from the 15th September 2003 decriminalised parking will be introduced, which means that instead of the police enforcing parking and what have you it will be within the remit of the local authority. Now for that to come into fruition there needs to be a three month moratorium while this is under consideration by the Secretary of State - no new traffic regulation orders will be introduced. What appears to have happened here is that the leader of the council has decreed that from the 15th November 2002 until 15th September all traffic regulation orders will be considered by him. However, he will not allow any disabled on-street parking bays during that period.

ATKINSON

In other words not the three months but 10 months. But the fact is he's not breaking the law. Under the Road Traffic Regulations Act 1984 there's no obligation for a council to provide disabled parking bays. But Peterborough's position is seen by many as going against the spirit of that law and the spirit of the Disability Discrimination Act. The Disability Information Advice Line or DIAL is helping some of the disabled people affected. Its chairman, Gary Latham, says many are feeling threatened, housebound and confused.

LATHAM

They're fearful for the future, they simply do not know or understand what the situation is going to be in a few months time. But people who have been suffering are now fearful that their problem is never going to be resolved because the council is saying one thing to one person and another one to another.

ATKINSON

Donald Wilson has severe nerve injuries and drives a specially adapted car which he operates with one leg. Donald says, unlike Jean North who hopes she may get a bay in September, he says he has a letter which says he will never get a parking bay.

WILSON

I think it's quite confusing. I'm being told they're not putting disabled parking bays in ever. Other people are being told we're doing an assessment, wait until September. What is the real thing that's going on? Is it a case of yes we're putting them in, no we're not putting them in. I just don't know.

ATKINSON

Council leader Neville Sanders has refused to be interviewed by You and Yours, twice putting the phone down mid conversation. He's not allowing other councillors or non-elected council officers to speak to us either. According to the council press office this subject is being dealt with only by Councillor Sanders. He's decided to meet every applicant, as he puts it, to ensure that those in

genuine need receive a bay quickly and that their requirements are met. But that's not on, according to Councillor Anthony Pears.

PEARS

He has decided that he has a better idea of what needs are over occupational therapists or GPs or other professionals.

ATKINSON

But what about the argument that a lot of people said that some people are misusing blue badges and they are applying for things that they're not qualified for?

PEARS

Well that's what professionals will weed out, that's what they're there to do. It is not the position for the leader of the council. There is abuse obviously in any service that's offered there are people that are going to abuse it but we're missing the point, the point is there are people with genuine need whose only chance for independent living is to have access to their car.

ATKINSON

And for Jean North she's looking forward to the day when she can take her car out for only the third time in more than a year.

NORTH

I'm hoping and praying that I will be able to get out of this prison because that's what I'm in, I'm a prisoner in my own home. I will not let this drop. I will fight it every inch of the way.

ROBINSON

And that was Jean North ending that report by Carolyn Atkinson.