

# **Consultation on the Re-introduction of Hospital Parking Charges**

## **Overview**

On 20 September the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Rt Hon Chris Heaton-Harris, wrote to Permanent Secretaries of Northern Ireland departments directing them to launch public consultations on measures to support budget sustainability by raising additional revenue.

Businesses and citizens all benefit from the public services and amenities provided by the government. Contributing to these services is a way of ensuring they are sustained and improved for the greater good.

The Department of Health is now seeking views on the 'Re-introduction of Hospital Parking Charges' as a fair and appropriate measure to generate additional income for the Health Service.

## **Why your views matter**

Your voice matters, and your perspective is invaluable in designing a financially sustainable, inclusive, and prosperous society.

It is really important to have your say in how public services are shaped. The decisions made today will have far-reaching consequences for generations to come.

**The Royal College of Psychiatrists (RCPsych) is the statutory body responsible for the supervision of the training and accreditation of Psychiatrists in the UK and for providing guidelines and advice regarding the treatment, care, and prevention of mental and behavioural disorders. Among its principal aims are to improve the outcomes for those with mental illness and to improve the mental health of individuals, families and communities.**

**The College has approximately 440 members in Northern Ireland (including Doctors in training) who provide the backbone of the local Psychiatric service, offering inpatient, day patient and outpatient treatment, as well as specialist care and consultation across a large range of settings.**

**This response is submitted on behalf of the Royal College of Psychiatrists in Northern Ireland Devolved Council.**

**Dated: 8 January 2024**

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Richard Wilson', with a horizontal line underneath it.

**Dr Richard Wilson Chair RCPsych NI & Vice President RCPsych**

**- on behalf of RCPsych NI**

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The issue of car parking charges at hospital and treatment sites is a highly discussed issue in Europe as well as here in the UK. However, it seems that it is only in the UK and specifically within this consultation in Northern Ireland that the money is to be used for the provision of NHS services. In other European countries the local hospitals and treatment centres decide on what the money is spent on and it is not a central policy decision in each country as to how the money is spent. Germany seems to have the lowest rates. This article "[Beyond the Meter: Exploring Hospital car parking costs in Europe](https://euroweeklynews.com/2023/12/27/hospital-parking-costs-europe-spain-uk-nhs/#)" <https://euroweeklynews.com/2023/12/27/hospital-parking-costs-europe-spain-uk-nhs/#> summarises a review with an emphasis on Spain and also the Nordic countries. Another article "The Rising controversy of hospital car parking charges in France" <https://www.connexionfrance.com/article/French-news/The-rising-controversy-of-French-hospitals-charging-for-parking#> looks at the varied approach in France. In the Republic of Ireland there are generally charges for everyone although with exemptions in certain situations. <https://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/health-family/what-does-it-cost-to-use-your-local-hospital-car-park-1.4186802#> It is clear that there is no consistent approach and it is often left to each care provider to develop their own policy and this varies quite a bit. The guidance for hospital Car Parking in England is discussed further in response to question 2, however in England there has been a significant increase in hospital car parking charges <https://www.thelondoneconomic.com/news/car-parking-fees-at-hospitals-soar-by-50-in-a-year-figures-show-365717/> . This in particular impacts on nursing and support workers on low salaries. It is recognized that free parking will be open to abuse and systems to protect it will cost money. It also is recognized where there is free parking there are complaints from staff, patients and visitors about the state of the car parks and the level of security. Some form of charge will generally be necessary even to just maintain the car parking system without using hospital funds for this purchase.

It is our view that the generation of additional income for the Health Service should be decided through central taxation and not dependent on car parking charges which would vary from one hospital or HSC Trust to another. However extra funding for managing the Parking system and patient comforts/ services could be considered to be sourced through Car Parking charges as well as funding the Car parking system.

We would accept a small charge for patients and visitors in keeping with what had been charged at the hospital sites previously and not exceeding £5 to £6 each day. The top daily rate varies through Europe - however it is important that patients and visitors should not be penalized when they are having to visit hospital on a regular or daily basis. This group of patients/visitors should be exempt - in particular visitors to patients who are admitted to the mental health units, as their stay is usually longer than in other specialties (see response to Q2)

Staff should not have to pay a contribution to car parking; however this disproportionately helps only those who can afford a car. Other schemes should be considered:

- Concessionary rates for NHS staff on Public transport
- Improving Cycle to work programmes
- Car sharing incentives
- Park and Ride schemes
- Improving Public Transport to hospitals.

This latter point about Public transport is very relevant especially to rural hospitals. For example Bluestone, Grangewood and Tyrone and Fermanagh hospitals which are a little off the beaten track and harder to reach by public transport and with the Tyrone and Fermanagh hospitals in particular covering such a huge geographical area, it is particularly difficult to reach by public transport from SE or SW Fermanagh, involving a couple of bus changes. Given that we still have a lot of out-of-area admissions for psychiatric patients, this can compound the issue. Visitors often have no option but to drive to and park at hospitals.

One also has to consider the impact on communities near hospitals, especially in the cities, of cars parked on local streets from early morning to late in the evening as well as their impact on traffic flow. Thus any money generated should be used to improve the car parking system.

Private companies which profit from car parking systems should not be used.

There should also be the option for people to donate more than their parking charge but they would need to know what it was being invested in.

There is also a need for a whole review of City parking approaches.

1. Do you agree (in principle) that the re-introduction of hospital parking charges is fair and appropriate in the context of the Department's need to generate additional income for the Health Service given the current pressures on budgets?

*Please select only one item*

Yes - and please see comments above.

No

Please provide below any comments for the reasons for your selection.

2. On the basis that it may result in increased hospital parking charges, would you support the following concessions which could help reduce the impact charging may have on some patients, visitors and staff?

- a. Enhancing exceptions for persons with a diagnosis of a terminal illness and relatives of in-patients who are terminally ill and/or receiving end of lifecare.

*Please select only one item*

Yes

No

- b. Enhancing exceptions for patients with mental health disabilities and those accessing addiction services, as parking charges may act as a barrier to access treatment.

*Please select only one item*

Yes

No

- c. Providing 30 minutes of parking free across all chargeable sites, which will help staff and public set down and collect persons/items

*Please select only one item*

Yes

No

- d. Providing free staff parking to permitted pass holders.

*Please select only one item*

Yes

No

The options listed here are too limited. The number of mandatory exemptions in the DHSC guidance that applies to England should be the very least to be included <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/nhs-patient-visitor-and-staff-car-parking-principles/nhs-patient-visitor-and-staff-car-parking-principles> . There should be exemption for visitors and patients who have to visit the hospital regularly/frequently, irrespective of diagnosis - eg visiting children or people in a mental health unit (where length of stays are longer on average). Also people may have to attend outpatients on a regular basis. There is a risk that car park charges could be cumulative over a short period of time and could be a disincentive for people to attend, especially the most vulnerable in society. The DHSC guideline highlights the need for Trusts to monitor the charges and also any private company which is involved in the management or administration of car parking charges or systems.

It must be remembered that payment of disability benefit (PIP) stops after a patient has been in hospital for longer than 28 days. Their carer will have their carer's allowance stopped (and carer's allowance is a means-tested benefit paid to someone earning no more than £139 per week). The introduction of parking charges places an additional financial burden on financially vulnerable people.

Staff who are dependent on their cars for work or work night or other shifts where public transport may not be available, should be exempted even if a tiered approach to staff car parking is introduced.

However, an option for voluntary contribution should be well advertised and encouraged for those who can pay.

30 minute for set down and collection seems reasonable.

3. Have you identified any Section 75 equality issues as a result of the current hospital parking charges policy?

*Please select only one item*

Yes

No

Please provide below any comments for the reasons for your selection.

Mental Illness and Learning Disability all relate to Disability.

4. Taking account of the impact on demand once hospital parking charges are abolished, do you believe that the re-introduction of hospital parking charges could negatively impact people from rural areas?

*Please select only one item*

Yes

No

Please provide below any comments for the reasons for your selections.

Public Transport would need to be improved to hospitals in rural areas.