



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Health

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Hospital Parking Charges Bill: Written
Submissions

13 January 2022

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Colm Gildernew (Chairperson)
Mrs Pam Cameron (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Paula Bradshaw
Mr Gerry Carroll
Mr Alan Chambers
Mrs Deborah Erskine
Ms Órlaithí Flynn
Mr Colin McGrath
Ms Carál Ní Chuilín

The Chairperson (Mr Gildernew): Do any members wish to declare an interest? No. Thank you.

The call for evidence on the Bill closed on 22 December 2021, and a total of six submissions were received. Those can be found in members' packs.

The Committee should now decide from which organisations it wishes to hear oral evidence. Are members content to schedule the organisations that have already provided written submissions?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson (Mr Gildernew): Are members content that the Department is also invited to give oral evidence?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson (Mr Gildernew): It is suggested that we might like to hear from those in areas where this operates, such as Scotland and Wales. I think that England is bringing in something of this nature. From them, we might learn what the difficulties are and what the hurdles might be. Clerk, can you advise on how we might include them?

The Committee Clerk: I have had discussions about our research team carrying out work on what is happening in other jurisdictions in order to give us a clearer picture of that. I am discussing that with the research team at the moment.

The Chairperson (Mr Gildernew): Pending that report, we can assess who else it might be useful to hear from. Are members content with that?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson (Mr Gildernew): Do members have any other comments or suggestions for who we should invite to give oral evidence on the Bill?

Ms Ní Chuilín: It has occurred to me that, if we have not already done so, we should invite Marie Curie and some of the cancer charities that support individuals and families. They were the people who first brought the Bill to Fra McCann and Aisling Reilly. It might be an idea for them to give evidence as well.

The Chairperson (Mr Gildernew): OK. Marie Curie. Was there was another one that you mentioned, Carál?

Ms Ní Chuilín: It was just some of the charities that help families and individuals through cancer treatment. If Marie Curie could cover that, fair enough.

The Chairperson (Mr Gildernew): OK. I will check with the Clerk. What would the logistics of that be, Clerk?

The Committee Clerk: Chair, we can certainly get in touch with them to see whether they would be willing to give evidence. It would just mean scheduling a few additional sessions.

The Chairperson (Mr Gildernew): OK.

Mr McGrath: On that last point that the Clerk made, we can see what will happen. The trusts and the Department will say that this is bad and that they need the money, and just about every other sector will say that it is good. In the interest of trying to get it moving as quickly as possible and not delaying it by putting in extra sessions, is there a way of minimising the evidence that we receive? That is not to minimise the voices, but it is such a clear-cut issue. There are basically two sides: those who get the money and want to keep it; and those who have to pay the money and do not want to pay it. If we end up with too many presenters, we will just hear the same information over and over again.

I do not want to impede the Bill and prevent it from moving as quickly as possible. The Clerk said that we are into the stage of having to schedule extra sessions. Is there a way of doing that so that we maybe bring together all those who are on one side and all those who are on the other, to try to get it done in sessions, so that we can progress the Bill as quickly as possible? With things like the autism and adoption legislation, there are many different and varying views. You can see from the written submissions that the views on this Bill pretty much fall into two camps.

The Chairperson (Mr Gildernew): OK.

Mr Chambers: I do not entirely agree with Colin that it is a yes or no issue about the money. There are implications and maybe unintended consequences of this action. We have to take a holistic view of it, rather than just settling for the arguments of whether it is better to raise the money or not. There are a lot of other issues that we have discussed. Hopefully, as we go through the consideration of the Bill, we will look at all the potential unintended consequences.

There is a body that, I think, should maybe be invited to give evidence. Excuse me, I do not know its full name, but there is a statutory body that looks after the interest of patients. Maybe somebody could help me with the name of that.

Ms Ní Chuilín: It is the Patient and Client Council.

Mr Chambers: Yes. That is it. It might be useful to ask it to make a contribution from a patient's perspective. It may have something to offer us. I suggest that we invite it to give evidence. Thank you, Mr Chairman.

The Chairperson (Mr Gildernew): OK. There are two further suggestions at this time.

Mrs Cameron: I do not disagree with Alan. We need to be cautious. I understand where Colin is coming from, but we need to be careful. We are talking about legislation, and rushed legislation can be very dangerous. There could well be unintended consequences, and we need to fully explore the outworkings of the Bill and the impact that it may have on trust services. We need to make sure that

we go into the detail that we should go into with our scrutiny of the Bill. It is almost the opposite of what Colin said. Although I understand where he is coming from, we need to be very careful and cautious that we do not damage the health service in some way. In an ideal world, we would all love to give everything for free. However, we need to be sensible and to ensure that the proper scrutiny takes place at Committee.

Ms Bradshaw: I agree with Pam and Alan about making sure that we get it right, the unintended consequences etc.

The other aspect that I raised at Second Stage was public transport. I know that it probably sits slightly outside the Bill, but there is a need for us to engage with potential alternatives or ways in which public transport can be better partnered with. There is a need for more green travel. That is not what the Bill intends. It intends to support car owners and drivers. Do we need to look at public transport as well?

The Chairperson (Mr Gildernew): Carál, I said that I would come back to you.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Alan prompted me to mention the Patient and Client Council. There is also Macmillan Cancer Support and even the Rural Community Network, because a lot of families are having to travel. As other members said, regardless of where support may or may not fall, this is legislation. I get Colin's point: we could add lots of groups into that, including public transport, but that is outside the scope of the Bill. That is perhaps something that we could put in the report. However, we should give those groups the possibility of providing additional written evidence. If they feel that they need to come to the Committee, we should do that, as we would do with any other piece of legislation that goes through the Committee.

The Chairperson (Mr Gildernew): OK. I think that it is best to ask the Committee Clerk, who will have taken a note of that, to see how the logistics of that would work out. We have had it out to public consultation, but I agree that we need to apply due rigour, and it is important in that sense. I certainly do not want to foreshorten anything in a way that would impact quality. I will ask the Committee Clerk to come back to us on that, and we will make a further decision.

Mrs Cameron: I share Paula's concerns around transport and all those issues, and I understand that the scope of the Bill may not allow for all that. However, we still need to have those conversations with individuals. I wonder what role local government has in all this. Are we looking at consulting local traders, for example, and at the knock-on impact that car parking capacity may have on other walks of life, such as retail, trade and local government? We should be casting our net as widely as possible in order to ensure that we are looking at every avenue and that we cover all the areas of concern.

The Chairperson (Mr Gildernew): My reason for mentioning the public consultation is that the net went out completely widely. I will bring the Committee Clerk back in, but my concern is that, if we start to approach people, we may end up in danger of skewing it in a particular way. The other point to make is that it is important that we hear from other areas that have done it, because a lot of those issues have been considered by them. Perhaps that is a way to get to some of those other issues, with areas that have real-life, real-time experience of introducing this measure. Clearly, in that sense, it can be done. What are the thoughts of the Committee Clerk on the discussion and on how we might be able to move that forward in the way that members are suggesting?

The Committee Clerk: If members are content, we can get in touch with all those organisations that were mentioned to see, first of all, whether they want to submit some written evidence to us. Like you said, we went out for public consultation and anybody could have responded. It may be that time frames prevented some people from responding. As a first step, it might be worth writing to them to ask whether they would like to submit written evidence or come before the Committee. We can try to put a tight turnaround on that as well, because we were planning to take evidence on this matter in the first week of February. There is a wee bit of time to line up similar groups. No doubt we will have the trusts together for one session, and we will try to bring other groups together for one session. We will manage it as best we can, but, first, we need to know who wants to come and give evidence to us. Some of those organisations may not have the capacity to come, or we may line up some other organisations that have already submitted evidence. I suggest that, as a first step, we get in touch in writing and ask whether they would be prepared to submit written evidence and want to come and give oral evidence.

Ms Ní Chuilín: May I come in, Chair?

The Chairperson (Mr Gildernew): Briefly, Carál, please.

Ms Ní Chuilín: It is a very brief point. There were over 1,000 responses to the Bill, and, when Aisling and Catherine came to the Committee, it was clear that there is huge public interest in it, particularly for people who have been impacted. We need to bear that in mind. We do not need to do another consultation on the Bill, because it has already been done.

The Chairperson (Mr Gildernew): Yes. That will provide those organisations with a second opportunity. It would also be useful if we could identify someone in the Scottish or Welsh system who has been through it and may have overarching experience of the challenges or difficulties. That would have to be contextualised for our situation, but it may be useful. Are members content for the Clerk to do a further piece of work on that, additional to the people on whom we have already agreed?

Members indicated assent.

Mrs Cameron: Have we checked with the Department whether work has been commissioned on barriers for the health workforce? Does any commissioned work dive into the detail of finding out what the barriers are? Could we ask the Department whether it has done that or is looking into that topic, to find out whether car parking has been a barrier to people joining the health service? If it has done that, it would be good to see the findings.

The Chairperson (Mr Gildernew): OK. Clerk, will you draw that together? We will then bring it back to members to see how we can progress it in the way that they are keen to do.

The Committee Clerk: Yes, Chair.