

# Evidence from Belfast Health & Social Care Trust to the Committee for Health on the Hospital Parking Charges Bill



December 2021

## Summary

Belfast HSC Trust provides car parking facilities for the benefit of service users, carers, staff and members of the public attending our facilities. All of the car parks are owned and operated by the Trust. There had previously been a Private Finance Initiative (PFI) arrangement for some of the car parks on the Royal Hospitals site however this ended in November 2018.

Car parking arrangements applied in the Trust are guided by the Department of Health's (DoH) ***Policy for Car Parking Provision and Management in the Health & Social Care Sector***.

To minimise the health and environmental impacts of car travel, staff, patients, visitors and others accessing our sites are encouraged to travel by public transport, walk, cycle or car share. The Trust provides facilities to support cycling and lift sharing and operates schemes to incentivise public transport travel by staff.

There is a strategic move across Belfast Trust to increase the number of virtual appointments offered for outpatient appointments and these have greatly increased over the past 2 years. The Trust has also introduced a drive through Phlebotomy service to save patients having to park to attend these appointments.

Free parking is available at most Trust facilities, however charges apply to patients, visitors and other members of the public at the Royal, Belfast City and Mater Hospitals. Charges are applied to staff working at the same sites and for some staff at the Musgrave Park Hospital.

The average charge for patients attending hospital ranges from £1 to £1.60. For any patient or their relative where the duration and/or frequency of visits leads to significant car parking charges, Trust provides free parking as guided by the DoH Regional Eligibility Matrix for Free Parking.

Financial assistance with hospital travel costs is also available for those on a low income under the Hospital Travel Costs Scheme.

Staff pay for parking as a salary deduction and the monthly charge ranges from £3.25 to £19.65, depending on their contracted hours and base site.

Because the number of staff requesting car parking exceeds the amount of available parking, some staff on the Royal Hospital park in the public car park and pay the public rate of £5 per day. To address this issue, the Trust is in the process of introducing car parking access criteria for all staff parking. The application of the criteria will prioritise car parking for those staff who do not have ready and easy access to alternative travel modes because of their shift pattern, work requirements, caring responsibilities or other substantial reason(s). The new application and assessment process is currently being rolled out to include staff at the Royal, Belfast City and Mater Hospitals in the first instance and may be applied to other sites where demand for car parking exceeds the available parking.

Currently the cost of operating car parks exceeds the income from car parking charges. The deficit is currently funded from resources intended for direct patient care.

The feedback that the Trust has received from staff and patients in relation to parking does not identify that the cost of parking is unreasonable but rather concerns relate to the availability of parking. The Trust is working to address that problem, with the introduction of car parking access criteria for all staff but it also needs a charging mechanism to prevent unauthorised parking.

Belfast Trust is concerned that the abolition of hospital car parking charges will lead to increased misuse of public car parks by commuters to avoid expensive city centre car parking charges. This will reduce the available parking for patients and staff and will lead to increased queues for parking and consequent site congestion.

The Trust is concerned that abolishing car parking charges will have a detrimental impact on the progress that has been made to date in encouraging a modal shift from single occupant car travel to more sustainable travel modes.

By removing car parking charges the Trust will effectively be using patient care resources to subsidise travel for those who can afford car travel which would be inequitable for staff travelling by alternative travel modes.

The Trust does not believe that the proposal that control of sites could be achieved through the introduction of Automatic Number Plate Recognition Systems (ANPRS) given the nature of the urgency of some attendances and the lack of access by some patients to the necessary technology.

The Trust is of the view that the cost of car parking should be met by those using the service. This arrangement ensures that all users continue to pay a relatively low charge for a convenient, safe and secure car parking service. It also ensures that funds intended for direct patient care are not directed towards subsidising an unhealthy and unsustainable mode of travel.

Belfast Trust accepts that there are problems with its current car parking service on some sites but these are being addressed by the Trust in line with the DoH Policy and this is not an issue that requires a legislative solution.

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## 1. Introduction

Belfast Health and Social Care Trust is the largest integrated health and social care Trust in the United Kingdom.

We deliver integrated health and social care to approximately 340,000 citizens in Belfast and provide the majority of regional specialist services to all of Northern Ireland. We have an annual budget of £1.3bn and a workforce over 20,000 (full time and part time). Belfast Trust also comprises the major teaching and training hospitals in Northern Ireland. Services are provided across a large number of acute and long-stay hospitals, Wellbeing & Treatment Centres, Clinics, Residential Facilities, Day Centres and other community facilities.

The purpose of this document is to explain the current arrangements for car parking in the Trust and to identify the concerns that the Trust has about the implications of the Hospital Parking Charges Bill.

## 2. Car Parking Arrangements in Belfast Trust

All of the Trust's hospital sites are accessible by public transport and some are supported by train as well as metro and glider services. For the benefit of service users, carers, staff and members of the public attending our facilities who travel by car, the Trust also provides car parking facilities.

Car parking arrangements applied in the Trust are guided by the Department of Health's (DoH) ***Policy for Car Parking Provision and Management in the Health & Social Care Sector***. Responsibility for management of the car parks rests with the Trust's Executive Director of Nursing & User Experience.

Free parking is available at most Trust facilities, however charges apply to patients, visitors and other members of the public at the:

- Royal Hospitals
- Belfast City Hospital
- Mater Hospital.

Charges are applied to staff working at the same sites and for some staff at the Musgrave Park Hospital.

Access to car parks on these sites is controlled by barriers and the public take a ticket on entry and pay before leaving the car park. A cashless payment option is available for convenience.

Staff who are allocated access to a Trust car park, use their Identification Pass or a cross site parking pass, to enter the car parks for which they are allocated access.

No adjustments have been made to the car parking charges since the Trust was formed in 2007 under the Review of Public Administration (with the exception of slight increases on the Royal Hospitals site). For that reason there are variances in the public and staff charges across the legacy sites.

Tables 1 and 2 show the charges currently applied on each site.

**Table 1: Current Public Car Parking Charges in BHSCT**

Length of Stay	RVH	BCH	MIH
<b>Up to 1 hour</b>	1.60	1.10	1.00
<b>1-3 hours</b>	1.60	2.30	1.00
<b>3-4 hours</b>	1.60	2.80	1.00
<b>4-5 hours</b>	2.50	5.00	1.00
<b>5-6 hours</b>	2.50	8.30	1.00
<b>6-7 hours</b>	5.00	11.00	1.00
<b>7-8 hours</b>	5.00	11.00	1.00
<b>Daily Rate 8+</b>	5.00	11.00	1.00

Information from the car parking systems show that the majority of patient and visitor stays do not exceed 3 hours. The cost of this ranges from £1 to £2.30 depending on the hospital. As per DoH Policy, any patients who may incur high parking costs due to the duration and/ or frequency of their treatment, receive free parking. Free parking is also offered to relatives who have an extended stay with patients. More information on this is provided under 6.1.

**Table 2: Current Staff Car Parking Charges in BHSCT**

Hospital Site	Monthly Charge
<b>BCH</b>	
Full Time	6.50
Part Time	3.25
<b>Mater Main Car Park</b>	
Full Time	8.33
Part Time	4.16
<b>Mater St John's Car Park</b>	
Full Time	16.66
Part Time	8.33
<b>Musgrave Park Hospital - McKinney House</b>	
Full Time	6.50
Part Time	3.25
<b>Royal Hospitals</b>	
Full Time	19.65
Part Time Up to and including 30 Hours	15.52
Part Time Up to and including 25 Hours	12.93
Part Time Up to and including 20 Hours	10.34
Up to 5 Sessions	10.74
Over 5 Sessions	19.65

Staff pay for parking as a salary deduction and the monthly charge ranges from £3.25 to £19.65, depending on their contacted hours and base site.

There had previously been a Private Finance Initiative (PFI) arrangement for some of the car parks on the Royal Hospitals site however this ended in November 2018 when management of those car parks transferred to the Trust.

Currently the cost of operating car parks exceeds the income from car parking charges. The deficit is shown in Table 3. The deficit is currently funded from resources intended for direct patient care.

**Table 3: Income from Car Parking and Annual Operating Costs**

	2020/2021	2019/2020	2018/2019
<b>Income from Car Parking charges</b>	£1,264,190	£3,211,401	£3,237,393
<b>Car Park Operating Costs*</b>	£3,522,000	£3,522,000	£3,522,000
<b>Deficit</b>	-£2,257,810	-£310,599	-£284,607

\* An exercise to calculate the full operating costs was completed in 2019 and this figure has been used for subsequent years.

### 3. Strategic Drivers for Applying Car Parking Charges

#### 3.1 Department of Health Policy

Belfast Trust must comply with policy directed by the Department for Health (DoH). In June 2012, it published a **Policy for Car Parking Provision and Management in the Health & Social Care Sector**. This document set out the key principles for car parking in Health & Social Care:

- Car-parking solutions adopted at each HSC site must fit the particular needs and circumstances of the facility and, if introduced as part of a local solution, Trusts must be able to demonstrate the effectiveness of such decisions.
- Car-parking charging should be set taking into account existing charges in the surrounding locale. Charging should be used for payback on investment and to help cover the cost of the provision and maintenance of car-parking including the associated security costs. In the event that there is a surplus, it should be reinvested in patient services.
- Environmental and sustainability responsibilities must be acknowledged and considered when making decisions concerning car-parking provision and charging. Such decisions must demonstrate the principle of transparency and charging. If introduced, charging must be justified as part of a wider, environmentally planned approach to travel management that facilitates access to HSC sites by patients, carers, visitors and staff.
- The regional guidance for eligibility criteria for free car-parking must continue to be applied to ensure consistency across the health and social care system.
- HSC Trusts should ensure that there is a reasonable allocation of car parking spaces available to allow patients and carers to attend clinics and appointments, including access for emergencies. There should be clear information available to patients on how to get to the site including parking arrangements and any free car-parking criteria or concessions.
- HSC Trusts should ensure that a reasonable allocation of spaces is made available for staff taking into consideration the overall availability of car-parking on the site and balancing the needs of patients and visitors.
- Arrangements for allocating and charging for staff parking, which must reflect the needs of good employment practice and essential car use required for the delivery of services, must be agreed through local partnership arrangements.
- Where patients and visitors are required to pay, consideration should be given to charging staff. Staff charges should be standardised across Trusts as far as possible and may be based on Agenda for Change bandings or part/full time employment or on a percentage of salary capped at an annual maximum. Local

arrangements should be put in place to accommodate staff who need to use “pay” car parks for a short periods daily.

- The capacity to secure adequate resources in respect of any capital requirements for investment in infrastructure may be explored through the submission of an appropriate business case.
- Equality screening/local consultation should be carried out locally in each Trust.

Belfast Trust has been working towards meeting these principles, and efforts have been focussed more recently through a Car Parking Strategy Group chaired by the Director of Finance and Estates which comprises of Trust staff and Trade Union colleagues. The Trust’s key objective for car parking is to:

*“Provide long term, secure and affordable car parking, including disabled parking, which will meet future patient, staff and visitor car parking demands across the BHSCT sites and to comply with the DoH Policy for car parking provision and Management June 2012”*

Some of the Car Parking Principles have been achieved or are planned for implementation. Other principles require wider consultation i.e. that the income generated from car parking must be sufficient to cover the cost of providing the service and maintaining it to the level that users expect.

### **3.2 Financial Balance**

The costs associated with car parks include infrastructure, rates, staff, security, cash handling, tickets, lighting, gritting, cleansing, surface repairs, maintenance of barriers etc. The Department of Health (NI) (DoH) has set a strategic direction that that the income from car parking should meet the cost of operating the car parks. This can only be achieved in Belfast Trust if charges are applied for parking.

### **3.3 Maintaining Car Parking Capacity**

Current car parking charges are inexpensive compared to city centre car parks and attract staff and other commuters to park in Trust car parks leaving very few spaces in the public car parks for patients and visitors. Complaints are frequently received from service users, relatives/carers and other visiting members of the public about the lack of parking spaces available when they attend for an appointment or to visit. This leads to late attendance and on occasions missed appointments due to long queues at car parks. This can add to the anxiety that many patients may already be experiencing and leads to understandable levels of frustration.

At BCH the majority of car parking spaces are shared by service users, staff and visiting member of the public and 30% of the available spaces are protected for public parking. At the Royal, public and staff car parking areas are separated, with an approximate 50:50 split. It is suspected however that staff or other commuters park in the public car parks at the Royal as these car parks are 80% occupied by 8.30am on weekdays – generally patient appointments or visiting sessions do not commence until after this time. The application of high all day parking charges at the BCH of £11 has acted as a deterrent to unauthorised parking and has protected capacity in a way that the lower public parking charge in the Royal, of £5 per day has not.

### **3.4 Reducing Environmental and Health Impacts**

As a health provider, the harmful impacts of air pollution are of great concern to the Trust. More than one in every 24 deaths in Belfast is linked to long-term exposure to air pollution. The air quality in Belfast breaks the World Health Organisation's air pollution guidelines and much of it generated from petrol and diesel cars.



To reduce harmful air pollution, there is commitment by all public bodies to reduce the impact of vehicle emissions and congestion in and around the greater Belfast area. The Trust meets its corporate social responsibility, through our **Sustainable Development Strategy 2016-2021** which has an objective to reduce the number of single occupancy car journeys to its site. The framework for achieving the objective is the Belfast Trust Travel Plan 2018. This was first developed in 2011 and has been revised and developed since. The Travel Plan aims to:

- Improve access for all staff, patients and visitors to our sites;
- Encourage a reduction in car use to work and for business purposes;
- Improve the choice of travel to work options and encourage travel by public transport, walking, cycling and car sharing;
- Improve the health and wellbeing of staff through the promotion of active travel; and
- Reduce the environmental impact of travel to our sites.

It is accepted that because of the 24 hour nature of our facilities and the limited mobility of some of those attending our services, the current car parking provision needs to be maintained however, given the overall objective of the Department for Infrastructure (DfI) document **Belfast on the Move** and Belfast City Council's **Local Development Plan**, the Trust will apply its corporate social responsibility by ensuring effective management of its car parks through access control and an appropriate charging structure to ensure that the amount of car travel to its sites is kept to a minimum.

#### 4. Problems with the Current Car Parking Arrangements

##### 4.1 Inequity in Charges

The charges currently applied have not been amended since the formation of Belfast HSC Trust in 2007. The exception is for the Royal Hospital site where the costs were increased slightly by the private operator that previously managed some of the car parks on that site. As a consequence, the charges vary significantly and there is no equity in terms of the charges that are applied (See tables 1 and 2). The charges applied on the BCH site for all day parking are high as a condition of the planning approval obtained at that time to deter commuter parking and increased congestion.

Trust staff and the public using the car parking facilities on sites other than the Royal Hospitals, Belfast City Hospital and the Mater Hospital, do not pay for parking.

##### 4.2 Car Parking Capacity

Belfast Trust encourages staff to commute to work by public transport, walking, cycling, by motorbike or to car share. There are however many staff who because of their shift pattern, work requirements or distance of commute, can only access work by car. The demand for car parking by staff exceeds the limited amount of car parking available on each site. This is a particular problem on the Royal Hospitals site. Allocated car parking for staff reached capacity a number of years ago with many staff on waiting lists for car parking for up to 3 years. As a consequence, staff often park in the public car parks and pay the daily charge for all day parking which is £5. This then leaves very few spaces in the public car parks for patients and visitors. Complaints are frequently received from service users, relatives/carers and other visiting members of the public about the lack of parking spaces available when they attend for an appointment or to visit. This leads to late attendance and on occasions missed appointments due to long queues at car parks. This can add to the anxiety that many patients may already be experiencing and leads to understandable levels of frustration.

Increasing the amount of available parking on the Royal Hospitals site is not likely in the foreseeable future, given the high capital cost associated with building a car park and the competing demands for capital investment. The Trust is also bound by the planning constraints of the Roads Services and Belfast City Council Planners who will resist any increase in car parking capacity on the site given the consequent impact on the surrounding road's network and the local community in terms of air quality and congestion.

To resolve this capacity problem, the Trust is in the process of introducing car parking access criteria for all staff parking. This will ensure that the available staff parking provision is targeted towards those in greatest need. The application of the criteria will prioritise car parking for those staff who do not have ready and easy access to alternative travel modes because of their shift pattern, work requirements, caring responsibilities or other substantial reason(s). The new application and assessment process is currently being rolled out to include staff at the Royal, Belfast City and Mater Hospitals in the first instance and may be applied to other sites where the cost of maintaining car parks is high and/or where demand for car parking exceeds the available parking. If those staff who do have ready and easy access to alternative travel options did not take their car to work, there would be capacity to release some of the spaces in public car parks for staff who meet the car park access criteria, without disadvantaging service users and visiting member of the public.

For this to be effective however it needs to be combined with a charging structure that will discourage staff who could travel by other means, still choosing to park in the public car park. The Trust is considering increasing the fees for all day parking to ensure spaces are available for patients and visitors when they need access to services.

### **4.3 Financial Deficit**

Currently Belfast Trust is operating its car parks at a deficit. The cost of operating and maintaining the car parks in Belfast Trust currently exceeds the income that is derived from the charges that are applied. The costs associated with car parks include infrastructure, rates, staff, security, cash handling, tickets, lighting, gritting, cleansing, surface repairs, maintenance of barriers etc.

The deficit each year is being met from resources that would otherwise be used for patient and service user care.

The Trust wants to reach a position where the income from car parking meets the cost of operating the car parks and so is exploring options for increasing the current charges and/or applying charges on other sites with 100 or more parking spaces and/or introduce charges on smaller sites where demand for parking exceeds the parking space available.

## **5. What is Being Done to Reduce the Need for Car Parking**

### **5.1 For Patients and Visitors**

#### ***5.1.1 Virtual Appointments***

As we emerge from COVID-19, there is a strategic move across Belfast Trust to increase the number of virtual appointments offered for outpatient appointments. A virtual appointment is an appointment that takes place between a patient and a clinician using video or telephone, as opposed to face-to-face, where appropriate. Belfast Trust provides an extensive range of clinics through its Outpatients Department across Acute and Community sites to over 600,000 people each year including the delivery of some regional services. Using a variety of IT platforms, outpatient appointments are made for clinics in the Outpatient Department including services from ENT, Maternity, Mental Health, Cancer, Dental, Radiology etc.

Virtual consultations are deemed to be a necessary part of future service delivery where appropriate because of the range of benefits for both patients, carers and staff. For example, patients are spared the cost and inconvenience of travelling to a face-to-face consultation, and healthcare systems can deliver safe and quality care with greater levels of efficiency.

Whilst it is acknowledged that virtual appointments will not be suitable for all service users, the increased use of virtual appointments where appropriate will result in eligible patients not being required to attend the hospital or healthcare setting.

#### 5.1.2 Phlebotomy Drive Through Service

Another response to the COVID-19 pandemic at Belfast Trust has been the establishment of a Phlebotomy Centre based at the Musgrave Park Hospital (MPH) site. The Phlebotomy Centre comprises both a drive-through and an in-house service. Phlebotomy is the process of making a puncture in a vein usually in the arm, with a cannula, for the purpose of drawing blood.

The Phlebotomy Centre initially served patients from Hepatology (Liver), and Endocrine services at MPH over 5 days per week. The pilot was further extended to additional specialities and now supports all virtual outpatient services and those hospital-discharged patients previously referred to primary care for phlebotomy. Feedback from patients has been positive with many of them telling staff that they saved time because the appointment was quicker and that they did not have to face the logistics of parking their car on busy acute sites.

#### 5.1.4 Northern Ireland Ambulance Service

Those patients who have a defined medical need for transport by ambulance may access the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service Patient Care Service for which no charge applies. Eligible service users may access the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service's (NIAS) Patient Care Service, which provides non-emergency transport to and from hospital for patients who have a defined medical need for transport, as determined by a medical practitioner.

The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service provides transport for patients:

- Attending outpatient appointments at hospital
- Requiring investigation or treatment at hospital
- Being admitted to hospital
- Being transferred between hospitals
- Being discharged from hospital.

Information on eligibility and booking is available on the NIAS website.

#### 5.1.5 Public Transport

There are a number of public transport options to enable service users and visitors to access health and social care sites across Belfast Trust, thus reducing the need for queuing and paying for a car parking space. The Belfast Trust website provides details on accessing acute sites by public transport, including information and relevant links. There is also information on Door 2 Door Transport Services that are funded by the Department for Infrastructure.

Translink services have stops within the grounds of the Royal Hospitals and Musgrave Park Hospital (MPH) sites as well as on adjacent roads. BCH and MPH have a train stop adjacent to their site.

The Trust funds a free Park & Ride Service from Black's Road to the Royal Hospitals site which operates every half hour from 7am to 6.30pm Monday to Friday.

Concessions are provided on scheduled services operated by Translink.

Free travel for:

- everyone aged 60 and over
- people who are registered blind
- war disablement pensioners

Half fare travel for people:

- who get the mobility component of Personal Independence Payment (PIP)
- who have had a driving license refused or revoked on medical grounds
- who have a recognised learning disability
- who are partially-sighted (sight impaired).

#### 5.1.6 Free Blue Badge Spaces and Drop-off Zones

There are Blue Badge spaces close to hospital entrances at all our hospitals for which no parking charge is applied. The Trust operates enforcement arrangements to ensure that these spaces are not used by motorists not displaying a Blue Badge. The numbers of free spaces detailed below are in addition to the protected Blue Badge spaces within the public car parks.

Royal Victoria Hospital and Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick – 28

Belfast City Hospital – 10

Mater Hospital – 16

The Trust has recently created drop off zones at the Royal Victoria Hospital and Belfast City Hospital to ensure that patients can be left off at hospital entrances; and waiting areas where relatives can remain in the vehicle and park at no cost while waiting for the patient to finish their appointment. This service is facilitated by the increased use of mobile phones for communication with relatives. These arrangements are being applied on other sites as enforcement measures are rolled out to ensure the appropriate use of the spaces.

There is no parking charge applied for the first 15 minutes to facilitate drop off as necessary within car parks or to allow time to leave the car park if no suitable parking is available.

## **5.2 For Staff**

### 5.2.1 Support for Alternative Travel Options

The **Belfast Trust Travel Plan 2018** supports incentives for staff to avail of alternative travel options to single occupant car journeys. The Trust provides a vast range of information for staff on sustainable travel on its dedicated intranet hub page.

Staff can also apply for the following, some of which are salary sacrifice/ income tax saving initiatives:

- Cycle to Work Scheme;
- Lift/Car Share Scheme;
- Annual Translink Card.

The Trust have also completed the following projects;

- Providing a free Park & Ride Service from Black's Road to the Royal Hospitals site that operates every 30 minutes between 7am and 6.30pm
- Providing an Internal Shuttle Bus Service between Royal Hospitals and BCH
- Providing individual personalised travel plans
- Improving secure cycle parking facilities for cyclists on hospital sites
- Provided cycle training for staff
- Developed Safe Cycling Routes between sites
- Installed Belfast Bikes docking stations at key sites

- Introduced of Microsoft Teams for meetings and training
- Provided cycle repair stations at Royal Hospitals and BCH
- Provided free secure covered parking for motorcycles and mopeds at Royal Hospitals

The Trust intends to continue to implement and develop the Travel Plan in partnership with external bodies such as Sustrans and Translink and works with shared site partners Queens University Belfast and Belfast City Council.

The Travel Plan will also benefit from forthcoming initiatives that will support the objective to reduce single car journeys by staff. These include:

- The Belfast Bicycle Network to support safer cycling;
- Expansion of the Belfast Bikes Scheme with more stations adjacent to Trust facilities;
- Provision of additional Park & Ride Facilities by Translink;
- Construction of a Translink Public Transport Hub on the Grosvenor Road adjacent to the Royal Hospitals and Belfast City Hospital sites.

### 5.2.2 Smarter Working Methods

At present, the Trust has a number of flexible working policies that staff can apply for. These policies aim to improve employees' working lives by achieving a healthier work life balance. Flexible working policies include:

- Job sharing;
- Flexi-time scheme;
- Compressed working; and
- Homeworking.

These policies allow for flexible working and work can be arranged to suit travel such as public transport timetables or working hours of staff who may car share or have child care commitments.

In order to comply with *Working Safely During COVID* guidelines, the Trust developed a holistic resource for staff and managers which increased the opportunity, where appropriate, for staff to work from home. This has not only helped reduce the risk of spreading the virus but has also eased traffic across all sites and the use of the car parking facilities by staff.

Increased use of Microsoft Teams and Zoom has significantly reduced the requirement for staff to need a car to travel for meetings or training.

### 5.2.3 Free Parking out of Hours

Free parking is currently available for staff on the Royal Hospitals site at night and at weekends in the waiting areas that are assigned for patient use during weekdays.

The Trust also plans to provide free parking for staff on call who do not meet the criteria for car parking access during normal working hours.

## **6. Support for Patients who May Face High Car Parking Charges**

### 6.1 Free Parking Vouchers

Information from Trust car parking systems indicate that the majority of patients and visitors do not park for longer than 2½ hours, with many parking for shorter periods. The cost of parking for up to 3 hours is:

Royal Hospitals	£1.60
Belfast City Hospital	£2.30
Mater Hospital	£1.00

This is not an excessive cost for patients who attend infrequently. For any patient or their relative where the duration and/or frequency of visits leads to significant car

parking charges, the Trust provides free parking as guided by the DoH Regional Eligibility Matrix for Free Parking, as detailed below:

**Table 4: DoH Free Parking Eligibility Matrix**

Care Path	Application of Free Car Parking			
	Patient	Next Kin/Partner	of Relative	Visitor
<b>Radiotherapy Chemotherapy</b>	Yes	Yes if transporting patient	Yes if transporting patient	N/A
<b>Renal dialysis</b>	Yes	As above	As above	N/A
<b>Critical Care/ High Dependency</b>	N/A	Yes	Discretionary	Discretionary

Trust staff use discretion to apply the eligibility criteria in other situations where the duration and/or frequency of visits lead to significant charges e.g.

- a patient may have a number of outpatient appointments over an extended period;
- a patient may benefit from lengthy or frequent visits from relatives or friends to help with adjustment to a new environment;
- a patient outside the prescribed treatment categories who has to make lengthy and/or frequent visits for treatment;
- relatives spending a great deal of time sitting with a very sick or dying relative.

Free parking is also offered to voluntary drivers and people donating blood at the Blood Transfusion Service based in the grounds of Belfast City Hospital.

The matrix is promoted on the Trust's website and Trust staff promote the matrix on all hospital sites to ensure that patients and their relatives are aware of the availability of free parking and how this is facilitated.

The number of free car parking exemption vouchers issues over a recent 6 month period are shown in Table 5.

**Table 5: Number of Parking Exemption Vouchers Issued**

June 2021 to November 21	BCH	Royal Hospitals
One shot passes	26,800	18
Weekly passes	310	265
Monthly passes	60	100

No records are maintained for the Mater Hospital

Historically, due to the nature of services provided on the Belfast City Hospital site (it provides Renal, Chemotherapy and Radiotherapy services), the uptake of free car parking passes has been significantly higher compared to other hospital sites.

The Trust is committed to further increasing awareness of this scheme amongst staff and patients/carers on the Royal Hospitals and Mater Hospital sites.

### 6.2 Hospital Travel Cost Scheme

Some service users are eligible for financial help with hospital travel costs under the Hospital Travel Costs Scheme. Financial assistance is available for those on a low income, who need Health Service treatment at a hospital, Health Service centre or private clinic and have been under the care of a consultant. The NI Direct website provides the following summary of eligibility for this scheme:

You can claim hospital travel costs if you, or those you depend on, get at least one of the following:

- *Income Support*
- *Jobseeker's Allowance (income-based)*
- *Employment and Support Allowance (income-related)*
- *Guarantee Pension Credit*

Depending on your income level you may also qualify for the scheme if you get one of the following:

- *Child Tax Credit (with or without Working Tax Credit)*
- *Working Tax Credit with the disability element or severe disability element*

The following tables indicate the number of claims to the Hospital Travel Cost Scheme at the Royal Victoria Hospital and at Belfast City Hospital for the period from 2017 to 2020.

**Table 6: Number of Royal Victoria Hospital claims to Travel Cost Scheme**

Financial Year	Total Number of claims	Total Value of claims
2019-2020	6,081	£ 109,650.67
2018-2019	6,568	£ 111,595.29
2017-2018	7,392	£ 118,586.23

**Table 7: Number of Belfast City Hospital claims to Travel Cost Scheme**

Financial Year	Total Number of claims	Total Value of claims
2019-2020	8,609	£ 151,428.10
2018-2019	9,549	£ 160,798.95
2017-2018	10,711	£ 166,217.25

The Trust promotes awareness of this scheme to ensure that service users and their relatives are aware of the benefit and how this is facilitated.

## 7. Potential Impact of the Hospital Parking Charges Bill

### 7.1 Access for Patients

Free parking will significantly exacerbate what is already a far from ideal situation with car park queues, culminating in a poor or negative experience for patients accessing Trust services. This is reflected in the high number of complaints the Trust currently receives from service users, relatives/carers and other visiting members of the public about the lack of parking spaces available when they attend for an appointment. By comparison, the Trust has received very few complaints about the cost of car parking. Existing car parking charges are inexpensive when compared to parking charges in other commercial car parks. This currently encourages commuters to park in car parks at the Royal Hospitals and the Mater Hospital and use the Glider or other bus services into Belfast City Centre.

Table 8 shows the charges applied in the closest public car parks to our hospitals. The Trust was planning to address this inappropriate use of our car parks by increasing the rates for all day parking.

If there were to be no charge for parking on hospital sites, the Trust is very concerned that this will encourage more commuters to use the hospital car parks, bearing in mind the close proximity of some hospital sites to the city centre; which will significantly impact on patients being able to easily access services.

**Table 8: Tariffs Applied in Nearby Commercial Car Parks at April 2021**

Car Park	Bedford St	Castle Court	Dublin Road	Great Northern	Grosvenor Rd	Lanyon
Up to 1 hour	2.50	1.90	3.50	3.50	2.20	3.00
1-3 hours	5.00-6.00	4.00 - 6.00	up to 7.00	10.50	6.60	6.00-9.00
3-4 hours	7.00	6.00 - 7.50	up to 10.00	14.00	8.80	9.00-12.00
4-5 hours	8.00	7.50 - 9.00	13.00	17.50	12.10	12.00-15.00
5-6 hours	9.00	9.00 - 11.00	13.00	18.00	15.40	15.00
6-7 hours	10.00	11.00-12.00	15.00	18.00	18.70	18.00
7-8 hours	15.00	12.00	15.00	18.00	21.00	18.00
Daily Rate 8+	17.00	12.00-15.00	17.00	18.00	21.00	18.00

## 7.2 Inequality for Staff

Free parking would create an inequality between staff.

If the staff who are able to bring their car to work do not have to pay for the use of the car park, they will effectively have their travel subsidised by the Trust. This subsidy is not made available to staff travelling to work by other means. Many Trust staff travel to work by public transport by choice but for many, who cannot afford a car, it is their only travel option. These staff often express concerns about the high cost of public transport. While the Trust has worked with Translink to optimise the savings available to staff, the Trust could not consider diverting resources from patient care to subsidise staff public transport travel. If car parking charges for staff were abolished, and staff had access to free car parking, the Trust would effectively be using patient funds to subsidise travel costs for some staff and not others and the benefit would not be targeted towards those who are most financially disadvantaged.

## 7.3 Environment and Health

Free parking would have a detrimental impact on the health of Trust staff and local residents.

As a health provider, the harmful impacts of air pollution are of great concern to the Trust and it is committed to reduce the impact of vehicle emissions and congestion in and around its facilities. The provision of free parking at hospitals will act as an incentive for staff, patients and visitors to commute by car rather than by healthier more sustainable forms of travel. This will have a detrimental impact on the air quality around our hospitals and it will impact on the health of staff by encouraging less healthy forms of travel.

Given the known health consequences of vehicle emissions, the Department of Health and Health Trusts should be able to apply whatever measures will support a change to healthier more sustainable travel modes without legislative restrictions.

## 7.4 Financial

Free parking is not affordable to the Trust.

The cost of operating and maintaining the car parks in Belfast Trust currently exceeds the income that is derived from the charges that are applied. The costs associated



with car parks include infrastructure, rates, staff, security, cash handling, tickets, lighting, gritting, cleansing, surface repairs, maintenance of barriers etc. The current deficit is being met each year from resources that would otherwise be used for patient and service user care.

If the current annual income from car parking charges of £3.2million is no longer recovered, then the amount that will have to be redirected from patient and service user provision monies to maintain car parks, will be over £3.5 million per year.

## **8. Recommendations**

Trusts should continue to be able to impose car parking charges for staff, patients and visitors as one of a number of measures to prevent unauthorised parking that impacts on the ability for patients to access services and essential staff to access their place of work. Charging is also required to ensure that patient care resources are not used to maintain car parks.

The Department for Health should engage with Trusts to ensure that car parking charges are fair and reasonable and to achieve uniformity in charges where possible between Trusts.

The Trust regularly surveys staff to determine their current travel modes and to understand the barriers to making a modal shift. The responses consistently indicate that the cost of public transport is a concern for those who travel by bus or train and is a deterrent for staff making a modal shift. If the Assembly wishes to take action to support Health Service staff, then the focus should be making public transport more affordable for those on a low income.

## **9. Conclusion**

This document has shown the actual costs incurred by patients and staff for car parking in Belfast Trust and the measures that are in place to eliminate or reduce the financial impact of car parking. The actual position is very different from that portrayed by the Bill sponsor and in the case of Belfast Trust, the Bill will not result in significant savings for staff or patients.

The feedback that the Trust has received from staff and patients in relation to parking does not identify that the cost of parking is unreasonable but rather concerns relate to the availability of parking. The Trust is working to address that problem, with the introduction of car parking access criteria for all staff, but it also needs a charging mechanism to prevent unauthorised parking.

It has been proposed that unauthorised access would be controlled through the introduction of Automatic Number Plate Recognition Systems (ANPRS). This would require patients to book their parking in advance with evidence of the reason for attending. This would not be possible for the patient or relative arriving at hospital in an emergency situation. The Trust is also concerned that some patients may not have access to the technology required to arrange parking. Belfast Trust has been working towards improving access to its sites and we see the introduction of ANPRS as a barrier in this respect.

The Trust is of the view that the cost of car parking should be met by those using the service. This arrangement ensures that all users continue to pay a relatively low charge for a convenient, safe and secure car parking service. It also ensures that funds intended for direct patient care are not directed towards subsidising an unhealthy and unsustainable mode of travel.

Belfast Trust accepts that there are problems with its current car parking service on some sites but these are being addressed by the Trust in line with the DoH Policy and this is not an issue that requires a legislative solution.