

NIC-ICTU Health Committee response to Hospital Parking Charges Bill

December 2021

The NIC-ICTU Health Committee is grateful for the invitation from the NI Assembly Committee for Health to share our views on the Hospital Parking Charges Bill.

The NIC-ICTU Health committee is comprised of various affiliate unions to NIC-ICTU that represent workers at all levels across the entire Health and Social Care (HSC) system. Our focus is on policy development and implementation and we engage with the Department of Health, the health arms-length bodies (Health and Social Care Board, Public Health Agency, etc) and HSC Trusts on this basis. The Committee does not engage in collective bargaining on behalf of our collective memberships, a process which is taken forward by a separate structure.

Our affiliates were asked to contribute comments to the NIC-ICTU secretariat for inclusion in a common response. The NIA Health committee may also receive separate responses from our affiliates representing NHS staff and service users.

All affiliates stated that they favour the abolition of hospital car parking charges for all NHS workers, patients and visitors. Furthermore, it was also proposed that Car Parking charges are suspended immediately while the Bill is being considered.

All shared the view that a significant amount of low paid NHS workers monthly wage is spent on parking.

It was noted that it is the less well paid workers and carers that are having to pay for parking where Managers, Consultants, etc, get passes to park and dedicated spaces.

Hospital car parking fees are a stealth tax on the sick and an additional tax on NHS staff.

In regard to patients and their families having to attend sick and dying loved ones the last thing they should have to concern themselves with is parking payments or the affordability of them.

Below are some further points for consideration:

- Car parking charges abolished in Wales in 2008 and Scotland in 2009
- During the pandemic car parking was free to NHS staff but reinstated, despite the pandemic's persistence.
- £15M collected from NI's health trusts in a 3-year period
- Revenue raised doubled from 2016/17 to 2018/19
- More than 22,000 penalties were issued for parking offences across those 3 years
- £15,673,977 has been raised by all 5 NI health trusts from parking charges
- Over £2.8m of above income related to 3 trusts for staff parking
- Figures indicative of how finances have been handled across the health service.
- Hospital car parking charges are decided individually by the trusts.
- Differences within trusts therefore creates inequalities and pay parity issues for workers, families and patients
- Car parking disproportionately affects those from rural areas, both patients and staff.
- The abolition of charges would be a real term show of recognition of the critical work staff undertake.

- It would also critically help to address the recruitment and retention of staff.

Physiotherapists, to take an example of a profession, work in the community but have a hospital base. They might also be out on visits and back in for a short while to base - then back out and back in - so rarely meet criteria for the permits but can rack up bills as they have lots of short stays in paid car parks. They have no option but to drive to work as they require their car for work.

Many of the Allied Health Professionals utilise a range of equipment to provide care for patients. This must be taken with them to visit patients in the community and therefore it is important to understand that these particular AHP's are not able to use public transport as a car is required to do this.

Many of the AHP workforce travel lengthy distances from their homes and public transport is neither accessible nor at convenient times especially for those that work shift patterns within a 24hour/7-day rotas. With rising fuel costs these staff are financially disadvantaged yet again having to pay for car parking in their workplace.

There was a request to seek information on the criteria for AHP staff to acquire hospital car parking. Numerous staff have been on waiting list several years on car parking space and nursing staff due to shift patterns have been able to acquire space in advance of AHP staff.

Another example raised concerns The transport division based out of BCH are currently proposing that staff who currently use the transport car park (free of charge) will be prevented from doing so from January 2022. The rationale is that it is better for the environment if staff use public transport. However, for many of the staff impacted, multiple bus routes will be required to make the journey to work. The reliability and connectivity timing issues will impact both in terms of cost and time for staff. Even working and living in Belfast can mean 2 buses are required to reach work with a wait in the city centre for a connection. Transport links are not as developed as they should be and certainly outside of Belfast this problem is even more prominent. /

In relation to health and safety many of the professional bodies have raised concerns about their members' safety when they have parked on side streets far from their place of work. This is mainly due to limited parking spaces and high parking charges. In some instances, members are having to walk back to their car alone and in the dark (during the winter months) which increases the risk to their personal safety. Having free parking could enable members to park closer to their workplace, avoiding the need for walking alone or indeed at night.

The removal of the car parking charges will not deal with the capacity issues which should be noted. In one trust there are approximately 2000 staff waiting on a car parking space and in some cases, it can take up to 3 years to be allocated a space, this needs to be addressed.

Car parking charges are essentially a tax on the sick one of the most vulnerable groups in our society. We must challenge this at all levels and ask are patients making decisions on whether they can attend appointments based on if they can afford the car parking fees. The department of health states they want to tackle health inequalities, and this is one way in which they could help those that are struggling financially and living in poverty.

Car parking fees go against the very ethos of the NHS, free at the point of access and we must ensure that these fees are abolished.

We hope that these points are taken onto consideration by the MLAs on the NIA Health committee as they consider the Hospital Parking Charges Bill, and as ever, we would be happy to discuss further with the committee of required.

21 December 2021.