

FROM THE MINISTER OF HEALTH



Department of
Health

An Roinn Sláinte

Máinnystrie O Poustie

www.health-ni.gov.uk

Mr Colm Gildernew MLA
Chair, Committee for Health
Room 410
Parliament Buildings
Stormont
BT4 3XX

Castle Buildings
Stormont Estate
BELFAST, BT4 3SQ
Tel: 028 9052 2556
Email: private.office@health-ni.gov.uk

Your ref: C007/22
Our Ref: CORR/3948/2022
Date: *2nd* February 2022

Dear *Colm,*

Thank you for your correspondence of 25th November 2021 in which you requested the views of the Department on the Hospital Car Parking Charged Bill. I understand the Health Committee have scheduled an oral briefing for tomorrow, 3rd February 2022 from Departmental officials. Officials who will be in attendance are as follows:

Mrs Preeti Miller, Director of Infrastructure Investment

Miss Anne Marie Smyth, Management Services Unit

As Committee Member's will be aware the Department's policy on car parking provision and management in the Health and Social Care (HSC) sector for Northern Ireland was published in 2012 and sets the direction for car park management including charging.

The policy states that it is for each Health and Social Care Trust (HSCT) to determine the way that the car parking policy is applied to each of their sites, to enable them to take into account local issues.

I recognise that charging for car parking is a highly emotive issue that divides opinion. On one hand car parking charges can be viewed as an additional financial burden on patients and families, and an additional cost for our staff who must use their vehicles to get into work to carry out their contracted duties.

On the other hand, charging to park on HSCT sites provides a source of revenue to cover costs associated with car parking operations and maintenance. Levying a charge could also be seen to act as a deterrent for inappropriate and inconsiderate parking which prevents legitimate users accessing car parks. Car parking abuse continues to represent a challenge on hospital sites and is evidenced by policies such as fines / wheel clamping which have had to be adopted on some hospital sites.

Charging for parking at hospital sites is an important issue that impacts not only on health policy, but other policy areas, such as the environment and infrastructure.

A table which outlines the Departmental position on each of the Bill clauses is attached.

Having reviewed the Hospital Car Parking Charges Bill I can confirm that it is my intention to table a Departmental amendment at any upcoming consideration stage. My aim is to ensure that the Bill is fair, but also workable in practice for the HSC system and to ensure that patients get access to hospital when they need it.

Whilst I still acknowledge with the broad intent behind this Bill, I do have real concerns that before a definitive position is adopted on charging that all consequences, intended and unintended, must first be properly considered. Members will already be aware of some of the specific points being raised by Trusts.

Therefore, as a possible alternative, I have asked officials to commence the process of drafting the necessary amendment/s that would legally commit my Department to carrying out an in depth review of the 2012 policy. Key areas for review would include:

the practical implications of removing charging, the benefit of removing charging for staff, patients and visitors, the cost recovery model; staff charging / parking eligibility; sustainable and active public transport solutions, climate change commitments and a full review of the free car parking eligibility.

Such a review of the full policy would greatly assist by providing a more holistic overview of this important issue.

I trust you find this to be a helpful reply.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Robin Swann'.

Robin Swann MLA
Minister for Health

PRIVATE MEMBERS BILL – Hospital Parking Charges Bill		Sponsor – Aisling Reilly MLA (Sinn Fein)
Clause	Objective	Department of Health response
Clause 1: “No power to charge for car parks”	<p>(1) The Department may not impose a charge in connection with the parking of vehicles by workers at hospitals, patients at hospitals or visitors to hospitals.</p> <p>(2) A Health and Social Care Trust, and any other body referred to in Article 3(3) (a), may not impose a charge in connection with the parking of vehicles by workers at hospitals, patients at hospitals or visitors to hospitals.</p> <p>(3) The prohibitions in (1) and (2) extend to entering into arrangements or permitting other person to enter into arrangements in connection with the provision or management of facilities as a result of which a charge will or may be imposed in connection with the parking of vehicles by workers at hospitals, patients at hospitals or visitors to hospitals.</p> <p>(4) Nothing in the article entitles the Department, a Health and Social Care Trust or any other persons to decide not to make such provision for parking facilities at hospitals as it would otherwise consider necessary or appropriate.</p>	<p>The introduction of this clause is likely to impact significantly on the Department.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The use of car-parking charging reflects a reasonable balance between the perceived needs of legitimate car park users and the costs of providing and maintaining car-parking facilities. • The Department is already facing a significant funding gap in its future years financial position and given existing financial commitments it's unlikely the Department will be in position to direct additional funding to absorb this loss of revenue from the abolishment of car parking charges . The approx. £9m recurrent cost, plus any unidentified costs, associated with passing this Bill will add to an already extremely difficult financial position. • There is the potential that passing the Hospital Parking Charges Bill as currently drafted will have adverse impact on patient care due to requirement to redirect revenue to maintain the functioning and maintenance of car parks • At present there is not sufficient space to provide free car parking for everyone, particularly at sites where space is limited. Charging at these sites creates turnover in visitor parking, in that one space can be used several times per day. However if we were to provide free car parking to staff this would not only create accessibility issues for patients, it would also require significant investment to address the capacity issues, whether this be through the construction of new car parks or putting in place park and ride facilities for staff at locations adjacent to hospitals. In 2019 the Belfast

Trust as part of the Children's Hospital application for planning had included additional parking requirements of 300 spaces to address the existing pressures along with any additionality created by the new building. The estimated cost of the car park was £24m.

- Several hospitals sites in Northern Ireland currently do not have the capacity for all staff nor patients and visitors to park on site - especially at peak times, or, in larger, more specialised hospitals. This can result in stress for patients, visitors and staff alike. It can also result in patients missing or arriving late to appointments; thus impacting their health, leading to poor patient experience, and costs for the health service.
- Charging for car parking on hospital sites where space is limited is an effective mechanism in encouraging turnover in the use of spaces, which helps to ensure that spaces are available for patients and visitors.
- Should hospital car parks be free to use for all without restriction, this may be discriminatory to those trying to access their place of work without an option other than to travel by private car i.e. the car parks may be full of persons using cars for shorter urban journeys who have options to use public transport, active transport or other more sustainable options.
- Also free parking has the potential to be used by commuters and as a park and ride facility therefore denying spaces for patients when they are attending appointments or visiting sick relatives.
- Only the Belfast and South Eastern Trusts charge staff for parking. The Northern, Southern and Western Trusts currently do not routinely charge staff for car parking. There are however voluntary pay schemes in the Northern and Southern Trusts where some staff have chosen to pay £30 per month for a designated car parking space. Staff charges should be

		<p>standardised across all Trusts as far as possible and the department is working closely with Department for Infrastructure colleagues in regards to the provision of subsidised public transport / park and ride facilities for HSC staff.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Environmental and sustainability responsibilities must be acknowledged and considered when making decisions concerning car parking provision and charging. The department along with HSCTs will be increasingly obliged to work with other governmental departments to achieve net zero commitments in regards to climate change. As health providers, the harmful impacts of air pollution are of great concern and we are committed to reduce the impact of vehicle emissions and congestion in and around hospital facilities. The provision of free parking at hospitals will attract more vehicles to the site and will act as an incentive for staff 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.• The policy on car parking provision and management currently includes the criteria for the provision of free and concessionary parking for patients on a particular care path such as cancer. Furthermore, HSC Trusts can exercise discretion to apply the eligibility criteria in other situations, where the duration and / or frequency of visits, lead to significant charges incurred by patients or relatives.• Increasing pressures on traffic management and the current challenging financial position means that the Departmental policy for car parking needs to be refined further to ensure greater consistency across all HSCTs sites.
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		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A joint review of the current car parking provision and management policy by Departmental and HSCTs representatives to ensure consistent application across all HSCTs and standardise the costs used in full cost recovery was due to commence in 2019 but it was paused due to Covid-19 pressures.
<p>Clause 2 - This Act comes into operation at the end of the period of 6 months beginning with the day on which it receives Royal Assent.</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Hospital Car Parking Charges Bill does not outline what alternative arrangements would be put in place to manage and control spaces in hospital car parks, should such charges be abolished. • Alternative parking management solutions would need to be carefully researched to establish how effective they would be at controlling the management of spaces, congestion and the cost implications. • For example an Automatic Number Plate recognition system would require significant capital investment to install and ongoing revenue to manage the technology. • Significant capital investment would be also be required to address capacity issues. • Budgetary implications could only be assessed once a costed implementation plan is devised. • Given current Covid-19 pressures on the Department and HSCTs the abolishment of car parking charges could not be achieved within the 6 months following Royal Assent.
<p>Clause 3 - This Act may be cited as the Hospital Parking</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Department is unaware of any relevant forthcoming British or EU legislation regarding the abolishment of car parking charges on health and social care sites. The provision and management of car parking in the Health

Charges
Act (NI)
2021

and Social Care sector in Northern Ireland is best managed by the provision of Departmental policy and ensuring its consistent application.



Committee for Health

Wendy Patterson
DALO
Department of Health

By email: Wendy.patterson@health-ni.gov.uk

Our Ref: C334/21

25 November 2021

Dear Wendy,

RE: Hospital Parking Charges Bill

At its meeting on 25 November 2021, the Health Committee agreed to seek the views of the Department of Health on the Hospital Parking Charges Bill.

The purpose of the Private Members' Bill, which was introduced on 18 October 2021, is to prohibit the imposition by Health and Social Care hospitals of charges for car parking. I enclose for your information a copy of the Bill and Explanatory and Financial Memorandum.

I would appreciate the Department's views on this Bill by 22 December 2021.

Yours sincerely,

Keith McBride
Clerk
Committee for Health

Cc: Suzanne.Howe@health-ni.gov.uk
Craig.Murray@health-ni.gov.uk