

Macmillan Cancer Support views on Hospital Parking Charges Bill

Macmillan Cancer Support welcomes the opportunity from the Committee for Health to provide our views on the provisions of the Hospital Parking Charges Bill. As an organisation which represents People Living with Cancer's experience and views, we have sought to provide the Committee with some examples of how car parking charges impacts on people who are receiving treatment and support for their cancer. We are supportive of the proposal to remove car parking charges for patients and whoever is transporting them, but we also recognise that parking spaces are scarce as it is, and we would like to see more information set out on how this will be mitigated for as part of a wider new approach to car parking as a whole.

Current policy

We are aware that under the current policy, patients who are receiving chemotherapy or radiotherapy are exempt from car parking charges, including if they have a relative who is transporting them. This means patients are exempt if they are attending for chemotherapy or radiotherapy but may have to pay for other outpatient appointments such as biopsy, scans, test results or other less regular forms of treatment. We have also heard from people living with cancer that they have faced barriers under the current policy in being able to access free parking when their appointments are not regular, are split between sites or when relatives are not transporting patients.

Impact of Car Parking Charges on People Living with Cancer

Cancer can have a devastating impact on your finances and hospital car parking charges can add significantly to the worry many patients and their loved ones are already feeling when they attend their appointments. Our Macmillan Benefits Advisers have reported that car parking charges are a cost frequently mentioned by people living with cancer, and that they often need to refer people to the Macmillan Grants team so they are able to access financial support for parking and travel costs.

People who live further from the hospital sites and in rural areas are much more likely to need to use personal transport as they may have limited access to public transport to attend hospital appointments. Indeed if they are able to use public transport, some will avoid doing so due to barriers around timing and accessibility of services. These means they are more likely to require the use of a parking space and potentially having to pay to do so.

The impact of COVID-19 has also meant people are less likely to want to use public transport and may have to pay for parking when previously they could have used public transport. We are also aware that during the height of the pandemic, some hospital cash offices had to close for a period and any claims for help with travel to hospital had to be posted to a central address. Our benefits advisors said that they heard from people that this more complicated process has put many people off from claiming as they were having to claim for each separate journey every time.

Effective operation of the system also relies on people living with cancer knowing that they are entitled to free parking and going to get their exemption from within the hospital. A system that removes car parking charges all together is more accessible for people living with cancer than a system which places the onus on the person remembering that they need to ask for an exemption, or having to claim it back afterwards.

Quotes from People Living with Cancer

"The cost of travel to Derry was very high. If you are working you can't claim it back. You only get help with parking if you are a long term patient, otherwise you have to pay."

"All different ages and circumstances can get cancer so the impact can be very varied. Free parking at each site would help."

"We shouldn't have to deal with financial anxiety and panic on top of cancer"

"No one asked if transport to appointments was an issue"

"I wasn't told that you could get help with your car parking for instance...cancer is an expensive business"

The Cost of Cancer

Macmillan recently carried out some research into the financial burden people living with cancer face in Northern Ireland, and more than nine in ten people with cancer from the region (96%) who took part in new research reported a financial impact from their diagnosis. Two-thirds of participants from Northern Ireland (65%) had been severely financially affected by their diagnosis, and a **quarter reported experiencing extra costs of travelling to and from their appointments** (25%).

Even before Covid-19, Macmillan were receiving more and more calls to the Support Line and Macmillan Benefits Advice Service from people living with cancer worried about the financial impact of their diagnosis, but we know the pandemic has only heightened these concerns.

Conclusion

We are supportive of the removal of car parking charges for patients or whomever is transporting them to any appointments related to their cancer. We do believe that removing parking charges would alleviate some of the financial burden people living with cancer face. However, we also recognise that this could create increased demand for car parking spaces when the current provision of spaces is already very tight. We know from people living with cancer that not being able to get parked and being late or missing an appointment is already a concern, and we would like to see consideration of how this will be mitigated as the Bill is to progress. It is clear that implementation of this Bill should sit alongside a holistic approach to improving travel to and from hospital. There is a need to ensure parking is simple and stress free for patients while also guaranteeing timely and frequent public transport options.