



Marie Curie response

Hospital Parking Charges Bill

Care and support
through terminal illness

ABOUT MARIE CURIE

1. Marie Curie is a leader in the provision of care and support to people affected by terminal illnesses in Northern Ireland. We provide a range of services including the Marie Curie hospice in Belfast, Nursing Service and Helper Service. Each year we provided care and support for over 4,000 people living with a terminal illness, their carers and loved ones.
2. We welcome the opportunity to respond to the Health Committee's call for evidence on the Hospital Parking Charges Bill.

COMMENTS ON THE PROVISIONS OF THE HOSPITAL PARKING CHARGES BILL

3. **Marie Curie supports the provisions in the Hospital Parking Charges Bill, which we believe will help to relieve some of the financial pressures facing terminally ill people, their carers and loved ones in Northern Ireland. Households affected by terminal illnesses face a number of significant extra costs and, as a population which is much more likely to visit hospital on a frequent basis, car parking charges are one contributor to the financial strain they are under. The reduction or abolishment of these parking charges will leave dying people and their loved ones with more money to afford essentials and meet other daily living costs.**
4. Research suggests that up to two-thirds of households impacted by terminal illnesses face financial pressure as a result. ^[1] The impact of their condition may mean that dying patients have to pay for expensive equipment or home adaptations – for example wheelchair ramps, stair lifts and accessible wet rooms – to allow them to remain in their own home and maintain a decent quality of life; while they are also likely to experience additional costs for things like specialist food and higher phone, broadband and energy bills.
5. This latter element can impose particularly high costs – for example, average energy bills for people with motor neurone disease nearly double after diagnosis, ^[2] while people with cancer in the UK are estimated to have spent an additional £15.7m a year on energy bills during the period 2014-2016. ^[3] This situation has only been compounded by the rise in energy bills since last year and the unique disadvantage imposed on NI customers by the fact that only two gas suppliers operate here.
6. These high extra costs come at a time when opportunities for paid employment are severely diminished – not just for terminally ill patients, who will be forced to give up work as their condition deteriorates, but also for their carers as well. In 2018, over a fifth of informal carers of palliative or end of life patients reported having to reduce their working hours to provide care, with 43% saying they were struggling to make ends meet financially. ^[4]
7. In the context described above, hospital car parking charges represent an extra cost imposed on dying people and their loved ones when many can least afford it. These parking costs are inescapable – dying patients can't simply choose to stay away from hospital when they need care, and while the option of active travel may be available for other groups of hospital users/visitors, this is obviously unviable for someone living with a terminal illness. Similarly, opportunities to visit a dying person in hospital cannot be passed up by their loved ones due to the limited amount of time they may have left to live, and driving will often provide the quickest and most convenient way to do so.

¹ Marie Curie (2019). The cost of dying: The financial impact of terminal illness.

² Demos (2017). MND costs: Exploring the financial impact of motor neurone disease.

³ Macmillan Cancer Support (2016). Cancer patients risk being left out in the cold this winter.

⁴ Carers UK (2018). State of caring 2018.

8. Marie Curie would highlight that the Hospital Parking Charges Bill provides an opportunity to end the postcode lottery that currently exists in Northern Ireland. We would argue that this inequity exists on a number of different levels:
- As the Committee is aware, parking charges are not imposed in all hospital sites in Northern Ireland, and even among those sites that do charge, the fee is not standardised – for example, varying from £1 *per day* in one Belfast hospital to over £1 *per hour* in another. ^[5]
 - The parking charge exemption systems in some hospital sites, while very welcomed, do not cover all terminally or chronically ill people who may visit hospital frequently. For example, the RVH's exemption system does not include, as standard, people with chronic respiratory diseases or advanced neurological conditions.
 - While parking charges may be waived for relatives spending time with dying loved ones, this is at the discretion of staff and, as with any discretionary system, some deserving people will fall through the cracks.
 - Eligibility for the Hospital Travel Cost Scheme does not include those in receipt of Personal Independence Payments. This is an anomaly given that that benefit is awarded in explicit recognition that claimants face extra costs as a result of living with an illness or disability.
9. The Bill would end this postcode lottery and ensure that terminally ill people, their carers and loved ones in some parts of Northern Ireland do not face extra costs for going to a hospital that do not exist in other parts.

[For more information please contact:](#)

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⁵ Assembly Research and Information Service (2021). Research and Information Service Bill Paper: Hospital Parking Charges Bill.