

Rural Community Network Response to the Hospital Parking Charges Bill

January 2022.

Rural Community Network is grateful for the invitation from the NI Assembly Committee for Health to share our views on the Hospital Parking Charges Bill. RCN supports the intention of the Bill to abolish hospital car parking charges for staff, patients, and visitors.

Background to RCN

Rural Community Network (RCN) is a regional voluntary organisation established in 1991 by local community organisations to articulate the voice of rural communities on issues relating to poverty, disadvantage, equality, social exclusion, and community development. Our vision is of vibrant, articulate, inclusive and sustainable rural communities across Northern Ireland contributing to a prosperous, equitable, peaceful, and stable society. Our mission is to provide an effective voice for and support to rural communities, particularly those who are most disadvantaged.

RCN has 250 member groups across Northern Ireland. Its Board is representative of its membership base with more than half of its representatives (12) elected democratically from the community. The remaining representatives are from a mix of organisations that provide support or have a sectoral interest within rural communities. RCN's aims are:

- to empower the voice of rural communities
- to champion excellence in rural community development practice
- to develop civic leadership in rural communities
- to actively work towards an equitable and peaceful society
- to promote the sustainable development of rural communities

Rural communities make up approximately 35% of the population of Northern Ireland.

RCN views on the Hospital Parking Charges Bill

RCN supports the intention of the Bill to abolish hospital car parking charges for staff, patients, and visitors. Rural dwellers have less opportunity to access public transport and are more dependent on private car to meet their travel needs:

"The most recent published data from the Travel Survey NI (2016-18) revealed that less than a quarter (20%) of rural dwellers live within a 3-minute walk of the nearest bus stop, compared with 39% of those living in urban areas – with 9% of rural dwellers living a 44 minute or longer walk to their nearest stop. This may account for the large majority of adults living in rural areas who report holding a full driving licence (85%, compared with 71% of urban dwellers). More than half (52%) of rural households reported 'never' using bus services."¹

¹ Key Rural Issues Northern Ireland 2020 DAERA available at <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/daera/Key%20Rural%20Issues%202020%20-%20Final.pdf>

People who require ongoing hospital treatment are more likely to have lower incomes due to disruption to their earnings caused by ill-health or disability. Hospital car parking charges add to the financial stress experienced in those households.

The well documented increase in costs of energy and food is having a severe impact on household incomes across Northern Ireland and exacerbating poverty. This is impacting in rural communities where rural households are just as likely as those in urban areas to fall below either relative or absolute poverty levels:

“Rural households are just as likely as those in urban areas to fall below either relative or absolute poverty levels. However, overall figures for rural areas disguise intra-rural differences in the experience of poverty. Poverty levels in households in rural areas which are more than an hour’s journey from Belfast are much higher than those of rural areas closer to the city.”²

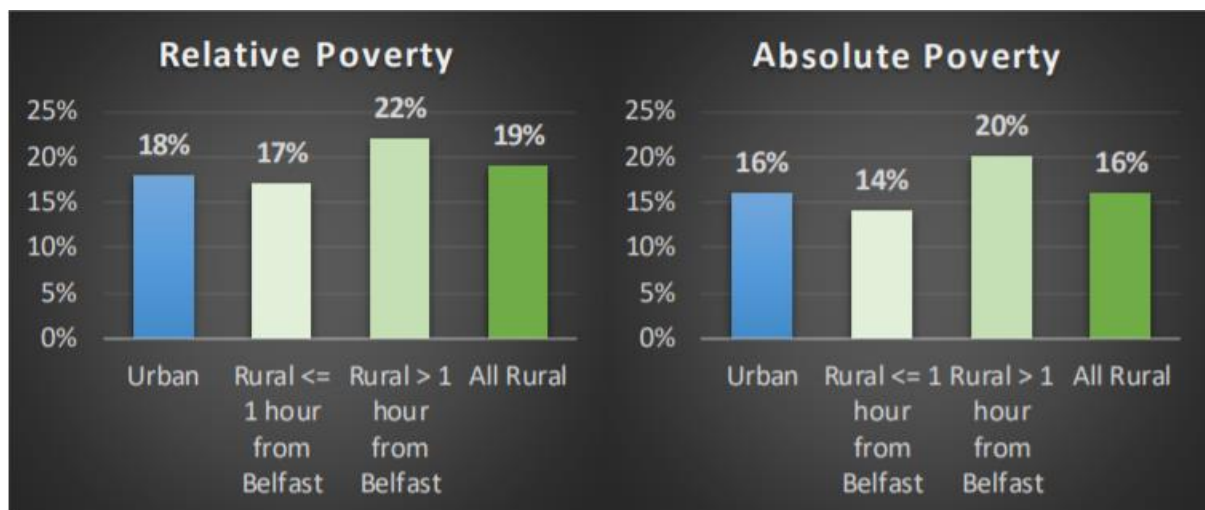


Figure 46: Proportion of Households in Poverty (after Housing Costs), Urban/Rural Comparison, 2018/19 Source: Households Below Average Income (HBAI), Department for Communities (DfC), 2018/19

“Rural pensioners are almost twice as likely to be in relative or absolute poverty as their urban counterparts.”³

The higher level of absolute poverty amongst rural pensioners as well as the difficulty of accessing public transport and the reality that older people are more likely to require hospital treatment more regularly as they age provides further compelling reasons to abolish hospital car parking charges.

The health minister has indicated that the reorganisation of health services in future will mean that many specialist medical services are likely to locate in fewer hospital sites. This will lead to more expense for people in rural communities who will have longer distances to

² Key Rural Issues Northern Ireland 2020 DAERA available at <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/daera/Key%20Rural%20Issues%202020%20-%20Final.pdf>

³ Ibid

travel to access specialist hospital treatments/outpatient clinics etc. This potential re-structuring of health service delivery will also impact on specialist staff whose job base may be re-located to another site.

Parking charges are a potential deterrent to those in poverty accessing health care and specialist appointments. Meaning the poorest families and individuals are likely to suffer greater levels of health inequality than the general population.

For these reasons we support the intention of the bill to end hospital car parking charges.

People who travel to hospital on public transport can have their fares refunded if they are low income – does that apply to hospital parking charges? Not sure?

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