

Car Parking Increased Charge Rate Proposal
Consultation Response from Fermanagh and Omagh District Council
[Western Health and Social Care Trust]

Brief Background to the Fermanagh and Omagh District Council Area

The District Council area is home to 114,992 people, approximately 52,500 jobs and 7,175 businesses. The District Council area is Northern Ireland's largest region in terms of land mass - approximately 3,000km² (or 20% of NI) - and is the smallest in terms of population. As a result, the population density of approximately 41 people per km² is the sparsest in Northern Ireland. This is a key feature of the district but presents challenges in terms of accessibility and service delivery.

Consultation Response

Fermanagh and Omagh District Council (Council) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Western Health and Social Care Trust (WHSCT) on the proposed increase to the car parking charge rates.

The Council understands that the WHSCT is proposing to increase the car parking charges on existing 'Paid' car parking spaces in Altnagelvin, Omagh Hospital and Primary Care Complex, and the South West Acute Hospital (Enniskillen). By doing so, the WHSCT aims to ensure that the charge rate reflects a reasonable contribution towards recovering the costs associated with the overall provision, management and maintenance of car parking on these sites.

It is interesting to note that currently, in Westminster there is a Bill which will undertake its 'second reading' in the House of Commons in March 2018 entitled 'Hospital Car Parking Charges (Abolition) Bill 2017-19'.

The proposed Bill, proposing the abolition of all hospital car parking charges, aims to give peace of mind to patients, visitors and hospital staff – many of whom may be already struggling with the ever-increasing cost of living.

Individuals Most Impacted Upon

Hospital car parking charges, and the proposed increases, will have the most significant impact on the most vulnerable groups within the community. Those that are likely to bear the brunt of increasing hospital car parking fees include:

- disabled people
- frequent outpatient attenders
- visitors with relatives who are gravely ill, or carers of such people
- visitors to relatives who have an extended stay in hospital, or carers of such people
- carers of people in the above groups where appropriate
- Hospital based staff – medical, allied health professional, domiciliary and cleaning and administrative staff.

Whilst the Council recognises that it is essential for the Western Health and Social Care Trust to maintain the car parks, and pay for their annual upkeep, increasing charges which will impact upon vulnerable groups is not an acceptable means of providing that funding.

The individuals who work in our hospitals (doctors, nurses, carers, porters, cleaners, other support staff, etc) provide a necessary public service by caring for those who are sick and 'at risk' – they should not be financially penalised because of the area, or setting in which, they choose to work. It would be unfair to further penalise (financially) staff who provide such an invaluable service to all of us.

There are various pieces of research which have taken account of the car parking fees and the effects which these have on various types of patients (and their families) which are most effected. For example:

- Bliss (a UK charity for babies that are born sick or prematurely) estimates that families could have to pay up to £250 for car parking, when babies are kept in neo-natal units for up to 8 weeks.
- CLIC Sargent research shows that cancer patients and their families could spend as much as £50 per week for car parking at hospitals, when receiving treatment.

Potential Exemptions to Car Parking Charges

The Council feels strongly that there should be provisions in place to ensure that those who are gravely ill, as well as their families, are not put under further financial stress and ensure that car parking charges are not just seen as a further 'tax on the sick'.

Patients suffering from cancer and other, serious, long term conditions should be entitled to free parking at hospitals. It would also be worthwhile to ensure that there are some discretionary measures which can be utilised when there are occasions when individuals (who are regular patients/outpatients) where the duration/frequency of hospital visits may lead to significant charges. Examples could include patients (or their attending family members) who are attending for radiotherapy/chemotherapy, renal dialysis or those in critical care/high dependency units.

Appendix two – within the consultation documentation – outlines the concessionary parking arrangements which the Trust has developed for some groups of patients and visitors who attend hospital frequently, or for lengthy periods of time. Although the rate of concession is not stated for all patients (or next of kin/partner/relative) - parking should be completely free for those attending:

- Radiotherapy / Chemotherapy.
- Critical Care / High Dependency.
- Renal Dialysis.

The Council also believes that there should be free parking for any next of kin / relatives who may have to attend the following wards – either frequently or for lengthy periods of time:

- Paediatrics.
- NNICU.
- Coronary Care Unit.
- Cancer Centre Wards.
- Other General Wards with children of 14-17 years where Accompanying Adults are required.

In relation to the hospital services / units outlined above (which the Council believes should be 'free of charge'), individuals can only claim by placing additional work on Ward Sisters, Senior Nurses and Ward Managers. Currently, there is a substantial amount of work expected of these employees and additional pressures on these individuals could impact on service delivery elsewhere.

Details of charges, concessions and additional charges should be well publicised including at car park entrances, wherever payment is made and inside the hospital. They should also be included on the hospital website and on patient letters and forms, where appropriate.

The Council also notes that within Appendix Two, there is a maximum of £1.80 which can be claimed back (for parking) by:

- 'Outpatients attending frequently'.
- 'Outpatients attending more than one chargeable hospital site'.
- 'Patients frequently attending Physiotherapy/Dermatology treatments'.

The '£1.80' threshold represents two hours – under the proposed car parking charges (including increases). Council stresses that this concessionary rate is unlikely to cover all the parking charges which will be incurred by these patients/outpatients, and recommends that the concessionary rate is increased to allow for up to 4 hours parking.

The Council agrees with the WHSCT in recognising the vital roles played by Voluntary Drivers and Blood Donors – like hospital staff the services and opportunities provided by these individuals are vital to the smooth running of the WHSCT and Health Services in general – concessions and free parking will help to encourage and retain individuals as both Voluntary Drivers and Blood Donors.

The Council also understands that the WHSCT operates a regional Hospital Travel Costs Scheme for people on specific benefits and/or low incomes – this should be explored and continued within the WHSCT area ensuring that those who are most 'at risk' are not the most impacted upon by car parking charges.

Price Setting and Car Park Cost Recovery

There are a number of issues in relation to setting a price for car parking in WHSCT Hospital Car Parks. The regional Health and Social Care Car Parking Policy states that car park charging should be set taking into account existing charges in the surrounding areas. It also states that car parking should be used for payback on

investment and to help cover the cost of the provision, maintenance and security of car parking spaces.

The Council would also like to point out that the projected 'recovery cost per space' is much more expensive than the price of local car parks in the District – both publicly and privately-owned. The fact that the 'Trust Recovery Cost per Space (per hour)' is £0.93 (in Omagh) and £1.41 (in the South West Acute Hospital) more expensive than the average local public car park charge is extremely worrying and excessive. If this difference is related solely to outside contractors providing car parking services – it would be beneficial to look at other options which could result in cost-efficiencies and savings i.e. joint procurement options with other hospitals/trusts.

Number of Paid Parking Spaces

At present, the current car parking provision at Hospitals in the WHSCT area is:

- Omagh Hospital and Primary Care Complex – 82% 'free' / 18% 'paid'.
- South West Acute Hospital (Enniskillen) – 82% 'free' / 18% 'paid'.
- Altnagelvin Hospital – 80% 'free' / 20% 'paid'.

The Council believes that although the current car parking provision is slightly above the recommended ratio of a minimum of 70% free/30% paid spaces. there should be no reduction in the number of 'free' spaces. As the district council area is predominately rural, people have a high dependency on the use of cars and limited access to public transport in order to access hospital services.

Proposed Increase in Hourly Charges

The fact that the majority of individuals who currently use 'paid for' car parking spaces do so for a period of 0-3 hours is stated within the consultation documents. However, Council believes that it is unfair to financially penalise those who are visiting the hospital for a shorter period of time – as these individuals may still be visiting hospital quite regularly.

Council also wishes to restate that the proposed increase in hourly car parking charges for the hospitals in the WHSCT area is substantially higher than the average local hourly car parking rate – both in private sector and public sector. The proposed increase in charges (for one hour) will be on average 40p more expensive than private car parking providers, whilst it will be 60p more expensive than the average local publicly owned car parks – in both Omagh and in Enniskillen.

Potential Alternatives

Even though the proposed increase in car parking charges will only be implemented for 0-3 hours, the Council believes that there could be alternatives arrangements put in place before any increase in car parking charges is implemented. For example:

- Joint procurement (with other hospitals / trust areas) for car parking services – e.g. management, enforcement and maintenance services.

- Explore the possibility of providing car park management/services internally (if applicable).
- Aim to improve the management of car parks, particularly around the enforcement of car parking infringements (this may result in a natural increase in car parking return).
- Joint working with local transport providers – particularly rural transport providers to encourage more individuals to use public / rural transport when attending the hospital for appointments or visiting. Public transport within the Fermanagh and Omagh District has been under constant threat over the last number of years due to budgetary constraints. A joint approach between the relevant statutory agencies, public transport providers, rural transport providers and the Trust could assist in providing more transport opportunities to hospitals – from urban and rural areas within the District.

Conclusion

The Council welcomes the opportunity to respond to the WHSCT in relation to the consultation on increasing car parking charging rates for:

- South West Acute Hospital (Enniskillen).
- Omagh Hospital and Primary Care Complex.
- Altnagelvin (Derry/Londonderry).

The Council understands the budgetary pressures felt by the Trust – not only in relation to car parking services and car park management, but also in relation to the delivery of all Health Services.

However, the Council cannot support the increase in hourly car park charges which will see hospital car parking spaces charged at a substantially higher rate to other local privately owned, and publicly owned, car parks. The WHSCT should look at alternative arrangements (some of which are outlined within this response document) which may create more income, or cost-efficient savings, in the day-to-day management of hospital car parks.

Concessions, and free car parking, should be guaranteed to patients (and next of kin/partners) who are attending hospital regularly or for lengthy periods of time such as those outlined within this response document.