

Westminster Hall Debate, Parking charges for NHS staff at hospitals during the COVID-19 outbreak, 1 December 2020

NHS Providers is the membership organisation for the NHS hospital, mental health, community and ambulance services that treat patients and service users in the NHS. We help those NHS trusts and foundation trusts to deliver high-quality, patient-focused care by enabling them to learn from each other, acting as their public voice and helping shape the system in which they operate.

NHS Providers has all trusts in voluntary membership, collectively accounting for £87bn of annual expenditure and employing more than one million staff.

Key points

- The issue of free parking at NHS trusts and foundation trusts is complex. Not all NHS trusts own the car parks on their sites and individual trusts set are able to set their own parking policies.
- Trust leaders want patients to be able to access care at minimum cost and maximum convenience, which is why many already offer parking concessions. But providing parking carries a cost and we must ensure that this is not taken from funding for patient care
- Following the 2019 general election the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) announced that from April this year, all trusts in England would be expected to provide free car parking to certain groups, including blue badge holders and outpatients who attend regular appointments for long-term conditions. It also includes parents of sick children staying in hospital overnight and staff working night shifts. The cost of this policy was supposed to be carried by the government.
- In March of this year, the DHSC announced that the secretary of state would give immediate financial backing for all trusts to provide free parking for staff for the duration of the coronavirus pandemic and urged trusts to make use of government funding to abolish car parking charges for their staff during the pandemic. It is unclear for how long the government will plan to subsidise free NHS staff car parking for. We urge the government to provide clarity on the issue of staff car parking as soon as possible.
- Demand for hospital car parking space has increased significantly during the pandemic, particularly given the public is currently less inclined to use public transport.

- The new car parking concessions will come into effect from **1 January 2021**. According to the eligibility criteria, NHS staff can park free of charge providing they are working overnight. Therefore, if all staff working at any time are to be exempt from car parking charges beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, the government must ensure trusts are financially covered.
- We support the measure to provide free car parking to staff, but sufficient funding must be provided to trusts to avoid any resources being taken from frontline services and ultimately impacting on patient care.

COVID-19 and staff car parking

On 25 March, the DHSC announced that the secretary of state would give immediate financial backing for all trusts to provide free parking for staff for the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic. While the government is urging all trusts to make use of government funding to abolish car parking charges for their staff during the pandemic, it is unclear how much has already been spent on funding parking concessions for staff during this period. We would welcome clarity from the government on the overall funding pot available for free staff parking.

It is also unclear what precisely is meant by the 'duration of the pandemic' and, if after the pandemic, the expectation is that trusts should fund free car parking beyond those groups eligible in the initial criteria. For example, the policy announced in December 2019 stated that specifically staff working overnight were eligible for free car parking. We would welcome further clarity from the government on both the definition of the 'duration of the pandemic' and eligibility for free criteria.

We support the measure to provide free car parking for staff. However, if this measure remains in place in the future, it will be vital for trusts to receive sufficient funding to pay for it, to enable them to maintain their premises, and put any extra revenue back into frontline services.

Funding

Hospital car parks are expensive to run and maintain for trusts. The revenue generated by hospital carparking is mainly used to maintain these facilities, with any surpluses reinvested in care for patients. That is why it is crucial that trusts do not lose out financially from any new policies relating to car parking.

When the government made their announcement to scrap car parking charges for certain groups in December 2019, they did not confirm whether their policy would be funded with new money from the Treasury or sourced from the existing overall DHSC budget. We note that the 2019 Conservative Party

manifesto put forward costings to fund the car parking concessions (£93m in 2020/21, £95m in 2021/22, £97m 2022/23 and £99m in 2023/24). We still need to receive clarity about how funding will have been made available for this financial year, and for 2021/22.

The NHS estates returns information collection data (ERIC) – where trusts self-report the amount they receive in income from parking charges – show that in 2018/19, providers' income from car parking charges was £272m. £186m of revenue came from car parking charges for patients and visitors, and £86m from charges for staff. Free car parking for NHS staff, without any qualifying factors such as those introduced in the government's definitions, would mean trusts might incur additional costs without compensation.

The loss of income should be offset in full by funding from the government and we believe that the cost of paying for the policy should not come at the expense of cuts to frontline funding. NHS Providers is calling on the Treasury to ensure additional funding is available to the Department for Health and Social Care to fund policies relating to hospital car parking charges. It should not come from the core NHS allocation or the vital non-NHS portion of the DHSC budget.

Technology and administration

To implement a policy of free parking, trusts will very likely need to rely on certain types of technology to recognise if people are entitled to park at hospital car parks. This may include Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR), or possibly QR codes on patients' hospital appointment letters, which could be scanned on entering and exiting the car park.

For large acute hospitals situated near town and city centres, car parking facilities are more likely to be used by people not attending or visiting hospitals if the technology is not in place to monitor concessions. For example, evidence from Scotland showed the capacity of hospital car parks could be stretched if systems were not in place to ensure that car park users are attending hospital.

Many trusts currently do not have the appropriate technology in place, meaning that they are likely to face cost pressures due to the need to enhance technology. It is important that additional capital funding is allocated to trusts to pay for new physical and digital infrastructure needed to implement the policy.

It is also highly likely that introducing a policy of free parking at hospitals, whether for certain groups, or for all patients and staff, will result in an added administrative burden for staff which must be

recognised and adequately addressed. It is key that bureaucratic burden on staff, who are already coping with heavy workloads and have limited capacity to take on additional work, is mitigated.

NHS Providers View

The issue of free parking at NHS trusts and foundation trusts is complex. Not all NHS trusts own the car parks on their sites and individual trusts set their own parking policies. This means there is some variation in what patients in different local areas will pay. We understand why this can be frustrating for patients and NHS trusts do their best to minimise these charges. For example, concessions are often offered to people with disabilities or those receiving on going treatment (such as chemotherapy). Many NHS trusts will also ensure patients who are in hospital for a day or more pay a set amount and not by the hour which is more expensive.

Recent government announcements made following the general election and since the outbreak of COVID-19 to allow certain groups to park for free will be welcome for many people who regularly attend hospital. We support the recent measure to provide free car parking to staff but believe that, should this measure remain in place, sufficient funding must be provided to trusts to avoid any resources being taken from frontline services. Car parks are expensive to run and maintain. Revenue generated is used to maintain facilities to ensure they are safe for patients and staff. Any extra revenue is reinvested in care for patients. Abolishing car parking charges entirely would cost around £200 million, meaning that funding would need to be found elsewhere to pay for this. Any changes should not come at the expense of frontline NHS services, and should not be funded by trusts themselves. In addition, any loss of income as a result of exemptions should be offset in full by funding from the government.