

23 February 2010

NHS Car Parking Consultation
Gateway Review and Estates & Facilities Division (GREFD)
Department of Health
3N13
Quarry House
Quarry Hill
Leeds
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Dear Sir/Madam,

Response to the Department of Health consultation – NHS Car parking; improving access for patients

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the consultation on NHS Car Parking. We welcome the move towards improving access at hospitals across England by reviewing car parking practice but we have some comments about the options laid out in the consultation document.

Preferred option

Consumer Focus believes hospital car parking systems should be built around the needs of patients and their visitors. While a new system should reflect those needs it should also be simple and easy to understand for users. Proposals based on length of stay for in-patients, or amount of visits for out-patients and visitors, will need to be clear on how they would operate, how people would know about them and how patients and visitors would be able to access them. Patients and visitors will continue to be dissatisfied with a system if they cannot understand it or the complicated rationale behind concessionary rates. A simple system should not force customers to pay upfront to be reimbursed later.

The preferred option of free parking to all in-patients and their visitors, with the possibility of increased concessions to out-patients, risks encouraging greater car use by enabling more free parking to people who may have otherwise have used public transport and reducing existing capacity in hospital car parks. This has the risk of transferring car parking capacity on to surrounding areas to the detriment of local communities. To enable both the implementation of a simple, easy to understand system and to ensure existing capacity, Consumer Focus believes changes to hospital car parking must form part of a wider integrated approach to hospital transport. This should take into consideration public transport, hospital taxi schemes and other hospital transport, and the impact on local areas.

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Integrated transport systems

Consumer Focus believes decisions on car parking as part of a wider approach must involve engagement with patients and visitors, staff and local communities. An integrated approach is essential in meeting patient needs and in providing options to patients and visitors on whether they use hospital parking or appropriate alternatives. It should also provide an opportunity for local residents to have a say in how their local areas are run.

Consumer Focus believes the approach of creating a cap on charging, to intentionally price some people out of their cars, is incompatible with supporting customers who need their cars the most. Capping is likely to price only the poorest out of their cars.

Without an adequate, integrated transport system in place it is unlikely hospitals will be able to cope with future demand on their hospital car parking services and will be unlikely to meet the transport needs of future patients and visitors.

Funding

Consumer Focus does not believe it realistic to expect that back office savings can be made in the next three years that could fund this proposal. With major spending cuts ahead for all public services the NHS Confederation has estimated up to £10 billion could be cut from spending, while the NHS' own Chief Executive, Sir David Nicholson, has estimated cuts of up to £20 billion over the next three years.

We would ask the Department of Health to be clear about where savings will come from to fund new concessions in hospital parking, and to guarantee that funds should not be redirected from patient care. Expected savings should not reduce long term investment and development in back office systems which ultimately provide the infrastructure for staff to deliver patient-focused care.

Patients should also not see a reduction in the level of care they receive if hospitals struggle to find savings to provide free car parking. They must not reduce investment in car parking facilities through a lack of dedicated revenue and they must not allow other aspects of hospital services to become chargeable to patients. Particularly, public transport users should not be expected to subsidise free parking through the introduction of charging on other services.

We look forward to the Department of Health response to the consultation. If you would like any further information on Consumer Focus or on the comments we have provided in this consultation please contact henny.abuzaid@consumerfocus.org.uk.

Yours faithfully

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