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Hospital parking charges named the most hated of all parking fees

Parking charges at hospitals in England have been voted the most disliked of all parking fees in a survey carried out by the RAC.

Sixty-four per cent of motorists said that hospital parking charges were the most unwelcome, way ahead of the next most unpopular which were private parking charges made at some supermarkets, shopping centres and other private car parks; only 12% of those questioned cited these as the most unpopular.

Of the other choices: on-street town centre parking charges only attracted 8% of votes; residential parking permits, 7%; and railway station parking fees were cited by just 4%.

The RAC research, carried out among 1,217 motorists, found that nearly half (48%) think the Government should take action to scrap hospital fees in England – a move which would bring England in line with Wales and Scotland where charges have already been abolished.

Wales introduced free hospital parking from 1 April 2008 and Scotland scrapped parking fees at 14 hospitals at the end of 2008, leaving only three Scottish hospitals built under the Private Finance Initiative charging parking fees.

More than a quarter of those surveyed (27%), however, said they didn't mind paying a charge to park at a hospital, but that the charges were too high and should be lowered or capped, and a further 21% said they didn't like paying hospital parking charges but felt they were probably necessary.

While motorists are clearly aggrieved at having to pay to park at English hospitals, there are also concerns about the limited payment methods provided as there was overwhelming support (63%) for payment always being made on exiting car parks. This would end the need for people to have to return to their cars to top up parking fees if their stay was longer than they were anticipating.

In addition, more than half (55%) believe hospital parking machines should always give change and a similar percentage (53%) think hospital parking machines should always have the facility to accept debit or credit card payments.

RAC spokesman Simon Williams said: “While we would like to see parking charges at hospitals in England scrapped that might be an unrealistic hope, particularly as many hospitals appear to be using the additional income to support patient care. Surely, charges should only be made to cover the maintenance and operation costs of car parks and not as a way to generate extra revenue.

“Making hospital parking in England free would mean funds for operating and maintaining car parks would need to be found from other areas of hospital budgets which could potentially have unwelcome consequences for healthcare delivery.

“Recognising this we want to see parking at English hospitals made as fair as possible. At the very least every hospital should be conforming to the car parking principles set out by the NHS which say that staff, patients and visitors should be able to park as safely, conveniently and economically as possible, and that charges should be reasonable for the area.

“Our research shows that ease of payment is an issue for hospital visitors. The vast majority of people surveyed by the RAC would like to see car parks where payment is made on leaving so they don’t have to try to guess their length of stay, something which is never easy to do when visiting a sick friend or relative or rushing to hospital in an emergency situation.

“We understand that this may not always be practical due to many hospitals having lots of smaller ‘pay and display’ car parks, but it would be a major step forwards if it could be implemented in larger car parks.

“In terms of paying for parking, motorists would like machines that give change alongside the option to pay by debit or credit card, something that does not appear to be very common at hospitals. Considering many of these car parks are run by highly profitable private parking firms it ought to be possible to implement this.

“Both features – paying on exit and machines that accept card payments and give change – would help to take away some of the stress about being fined when attending an appointment or receiving treatment or urgently visiting a sick relative.”

If England was to consider following Wales and Scotland’s lead in scrapping parking charges at hospitals, then steps would, of course, need to be taken to ensure that only those visiting hospital were able to park and that hospital parking was not used by shoppers or commuters.

Simon Williams added: “A validation system would prevent those not on hospital business from taking advantage of free parking so only those with a genuine reason to be there would benefit.

“And, similar to the situation in Scotland, there may be some hospitals that have been built under private finance initiatives where it may not be possible to provide free visitor parking. Nevertheless, a mechanism needs to be in place to ensure that charges are reasonable and payment facilities meet the needs of users.”

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