

Parking panacea?

Ill health can affect anyone at anytime; worrying about travel cost does not help the recovery process. Public Service Review joins the debate on the thorny issue of car parking at hospitals...

News that Preston City Council had refused additional car parking at the Royal Preston Hospital, has led the senior management to look at alternative ways of managing the high volume of traffic to the site.

The hospital, part of Lancashire Teaching Hospital's NHS Foundation Trust, was built in the 1970s, and has been expanding ever since. During this time, car use in the area between 1980 and 2003 has grown by 81%¹. The hospital has found that the majority of patients using the vital services choose to come by car. This causes the car parks to overflow and create traffic queues.

However, Lancashire Teaching Hospital's NHS Foundation Trust appointed a travel plan co-ordinator in August to improve travel to the hospital and encourage a reduction in car use by staff and patients. The appointment of a Trust travel plan co-ordinator demonstrates the Trust's commitment to reducing the volume of local traffic, and its hopes to work with local councils to bring the traffic problem under control.

Carol McKay, the recently appointed Travel Plan Co-ordinator, said: "Traffic is getting progressively worse. The hospital is constantly improving its services and with the new developments in the Fulwood area, it has meant more local traffic than the local road network can cope with.



"The hospital hopes to play its part and it has become one of the first organisations in Lancashire to employ a Trust Travel Plan Co-ordinator. We are going to look at transport improvements and changes to car parking to try to bring the situation under control."

Dennis Benson, Chair of Lancashire Teaching Hospital's NHS Foundation Trust, said: "Ideally we would have liked more car parking spaces at Royal Preston Hospital but it had been made quite clear by Preston City Council that it doesn't consider this an option.



"Therefore we'll explain to patients, visitors and staff that the Council won't allow us to provide additional car parking facilities, and our new travel plan co-ordinator will do what she can to improve the situation.

"We have to be realistic though, because encouraging more people to walk, cycle or come by bus requires a massive cultural change and shift in attitude by people who are accustomed to using their cars. It also requires a major input from local councils to improve

public transport links and encourage bus providers to offer quick, easily accessible and cheaper services."

However, the Foundation Trust has had some considerable success in the past in expanding its car parking facilities at other hospitals. At Chorley and South Ribble, construction began on a new 100-space car park in September 2005 to help alleviate the parking problems on the site, and work was completed the following March. The car park is for staff working at the hospital, but the introduction of this new facility has helped to ease parking problems for patients and visitors around the hospital.



Ian Cox, Director of Facilities at Lancashire Teaching Hospital's NHS Foundation Trust, said: "Car parking is a problem at our hospitals in Chorley and Preston. The extra spaces at Chorley and South Ribble Hospital will make it quicker and easier for people to find a parking space."

Dennis Benson went on to comment at the time: "Thanks to the co-operation of Chorley Council, we now have relief from our parking problems. We have not been able so far to obtain the same support at Preston where the problem will therefore continue."

"Given the growth in car ownership, this problem will return unless we begin to take seriously the need to car share."

In addition to the 100-space staff car park, Chorley and South Ribble Hospital was able to create 20 spaces in June this year, including three disabled spaces for patients and visitors to the hospital. On this new development, Ian Cox said: "The new public parking spaces at Chorley Hospital are part of an ongoing programme of car parking improvements."

Parking facilities in hospitals across the country have recently been criticised in Wales as an 'indirect tax' on healthcare by the Welsh secretary of the BMA. The charity Macmillan Cancer Support research shows that the single biggest expense incurred by cancer patients is the cost of travel to hospital. Hospitals are making huge savings by freeing up costly in-patient beds and delivering cancer treatment on an out-patient basis, but the financial burden has shifted on to patients in the form of increased travel costs. Combined with this is the cost of parking once a patient arrives at hospital.

The report looks at:

- The extent of travel costs incurred by cancer patients undergoing treatment;
- The extent of parking charges and the availability of concessions for cancer patients in UK hospitals;
- How well the schemes for reimbursing travel costs are working and being promoted within hospitals.

Key recommendations from the report are:

- Patients undergoing treatment for cancer should be eligible for assistance on a non means-tested basis under the Hospital Travel Costs Scheme (HTCS);
- Patients undergoing treatment for cancer should be exempt from all hospital parking charges;
- The Hospital Travel Costs Scheme (HTCS) should be better publicised and reimbursement arrangements simplified;
- Cancer patients who use hospital transport should be given the option of an ambulance car;
- Patients travelling to hospital for cancer treatment should be exempt from all charges and tolls for using roads, tunnels and bridges.

The full report is available at www.macmillan.org.

Parking is without a doubt an important issue because there are so many cars on the road now. Car parks and residential streets seem to be overloaded with vehicles. The issue of parking at hospitals is one that keeps cropping up in the news and it needs to be tackled. Staff and patients should not suffer financially, and other hospital users who are well should consider car sharing or alternative forms of transport. While there has been much debate recently about the role of the private sector in public services, they certainly have a role to play in providing innovative solutions to alleviate the exasperating problems of parking.

¹ Source: Department of Transport.

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