Abolition of NHS Prescription Charges (Scotland) Bill

Bill Number: SP Bill 35
Introduced on: 19 January 2005
Introduced by: Colin Fox (Member’s Bill)
Fell: 25 January 2006

Passage of the Bill

The Abolition of NHS Prescription Charges (Scotland) Bill (SP Bill 35) was introduced by Colin Fox MSP on 19 January 2005. Stage 1 commenced on 1 February 2005 with the Health Committee as the lead committee. In its Stage 1 report the Health Committee, by a narrow majority, recommended that Parliament support the general principles of the Bill. The stage 1 debate took place on 25 January 2006 when the Bill fell with 40 votes in favour, 77 against and 1 abstention.

Purpose and objectives of the Bill

The Bill sought to abolish all charges for Scottish NHS prescriptions and so, by removing this barrier, improve access to prescription medicines and improve public health. The existing system of prescription charges is perceived to be anomalous and is not based on either need or ability to pay.

Provisions of the Bill

The Bill sought to amend section 69 of the National Health Service (Scotland) Act 1978. This amendment would remove the power of Scottish Ministers to set charges for Scottish prescriptions and would revoke the regulations which set out the current level of charge (National Health Service (Charges for Drugs and Appliances) Amendment Regulations 2005 (SSI 2005/124)).

Parliamentary consideration

The Health Committee’s consideration of the Bill centred on the public health and economic impact of abolishing prescription charges.

The Health Committee sought evidence that prescription charges act as a barrier to accessing medicines and as a consequence have a detrimental impact on health. Some evidence received by the Committee suggested that this was the case. However the Committee also felt that removing charges would financially benefit those who can afford to pay and remove revenue from the NHS. In relation to the assertion that removing charges would reduce hospital admissions, neither the Health Committee nor the Finance Committee were convinced that these savings would be at a level sufficient to offset the total cost of the Bill.
Both the Health Committee and the Finance Committee were of the opinion that the cost of the Bill could be significantly higher than estimated in the financial memorandum. Both Committees believed that abolishing charges would lead to an increase in demand for health services and prescription medicines. This increase was not quantified in the memorandum.

Nevertheless, when considering the Bill, the Health Committee was aware that as part of the Partnership Agreement, the Scottish Executive was committed to reviewing the prescription charging system. Some Members of the Committee expressed their disquiet that two and a half years later the Scottish Executive had not issued a consultation on proposed changes. Having heard evidence of the anomalies in the system, all Members of the Committee were of the opinion that the status quo was not an option and in the absence of alternative proposals from the Scottish Executive, the Committee narrowly voted in favour of the Bill.

Despite the Health Committee’s support, the Bill fell at the stage 1 debate. Much of the opposition in the debate centred on the cost of the Bill as it was felt that it would not only remove revenue from the NHS but would increase demand for services.