

Petitioner submission of 27 February 2024

PE2079/B: Introduce legislation to provide for exemptions in paying medical facility parking charges and to create a new classification of parking badge for care-givers

Introduction and Context

1.1 As the petitioner for PE2079, I am compelled to address the response provided by the Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health, and Social Care. This response underscores the urgent need for legislative reform to address the significant challenges faced by disabled individuals and their carers in accessing medical facilities in Scotland.

1.2 Regrettably, the Cabinet Secretary's response reveals a profound misunderstanding of the challenges carers face. This petition emerges from genuine, empirical evidence gathered alongside insights from a community of carers – and just as important, personal experience during my 14 years as an unpaid carer – which despite being a year and a half clear of that role, still continues to linger financially.

The apparent disconnect in the Cabinet Secretary's understanding deeply concerns us, especially amid a cost-of-living crisis.

1.3 To state it plainly, it is utterly unacceptable for a carer to expend half of their allowance on parking fees next to an NHS facility lacking its own parking, especially when the local council imposes charges as steep as £6 per hour. To the ordinary person that may not seem much, but when your income is less than £80 per week, it is a different matter entirely.

1.4 This response endeavors to spotlight the system's failings and to lay out a comprehensive plan for the requisite legislative and policy reforms.

Critical Analysis of the Cabinet Secretary's Submission

2.1 While the Cabinet Secretary acknowledges the Blue Badge scheme's importance, this recognition fails to extend to the unique circumstances of carers performing tasks in the absence of the disabled individual they support. The current policy, which restricts badge use to scenarios where the disabled individual is present, severely hampers the carer's ability to provide effective care. It is a criminal offence to use a

legal document (which a parking pass is) without the person being there – and as the Cabinet Secretary freely states, parking passes are issued to people – not vehicles.

2.2 The submission also neglects the widespread issue of insufficient NHS parking, particularly at specialised clinics and smaller medical units. This oversight ignores the financial and logistical burdens placed on patients and carers, who are left with no choice but to incur significant parking expenses.

2.3 Moreover, there's an alarming trend where blue badges are disallowed within a reasonable distance of medical facilities, and parking charges are notably higher in areas surrounding medical institutions, often situated near universities or other high-traffic venues. This policy disproportionately affects the disabled and carers, evidencing a policy flaw that discriminates against those most in need of consideration.

2.4 The specific case of exorbitant parking fees at the Edinburgh Eye Pavilion, for instance, highlights a broader issue of access and equity within our healthcare system. Such prohibitive costs directly conflict with the ethos of a healthcare system that is supposed to be free at the point of delivery.

Legislative and Policy Amendments

3.1 Introduction of a Carers' Badge Scheme –

The evidence gathered thus far underscores the critical need for a Carers' Badge scheme. This initiative would address the unique role of carers, who frequently must venture outside the home to provide care, thereby recognizing the fluid nature of caregiving responsibilities.

3.2 The time has come for Scotland to confront a pivotal question: do we genuinely value our carers, or are we content with mere lip service?

My 14 years of caregiving experience have shown me that the current support system for carers is severely lacking. The discrepancy between the support that is promised and the reality on the ground is stark, leaving carers to fend for themselves against a multitude of challenges. It may ruffle feathers to say, but if parking charges were levied against any other cohort of protected characteristic, purely for having to engage in their normal role in life, MSP's would be screaming it from the balcony of parliament – but for carers and the disabled, we'll see.

3.3 The era of minor adjustments and incremental changes must end. We are at a juncture where we must either fully commit to empowering carers or continue to overlook their crucial role.

Carers are the linchpin of the NHS and social care system, tirelessly bridging the gaps left by systemic deficiencies. Ignoring the obstacles they face is not just neglect—it is outright hypocrisy, especially considering their pivotal role during the pandemic.

3.4 The ethos of dignity, fairness, and respect, championed by Social Security Scotland (coined by the Scottish Government), must be the ethos that is used in this matter – and it must extend beyond mere slogans. The grim reality where carers and the disabled are forced to choose between parking and basic necessities (because £10 can be the difference between eating or not) starkly contradicts these values. This untenable situation calls for immediate and decisive action.

3.5 The Cabinet Secretary's final remark that "there are no plans to intervene on this matter" prompts a critical interrogation of the Scottish Government's commitment to addressing discrimination against society's most vulnerable. The government's inaction in the face of challenges faced by carers, who play a vital role in sustaining the health and social care system, is indefensible. Leading to the obvious question about intervention on this issue: Why not?

3.6 By introducing a Carers' Badge, we can begin to tangibly demonstrate our support for carers, transcending the inadequate support historically provided by Westminster – and by abolishing, uniformly, parking charges around medical facilities with no parking of its own – we remedy a clear injustice to those who are being discriminated against.

The badge would not only facilitate carers' access to essential services but also symbolize a genuine commitment to improving their circumstances.

3.7 It is imperative for the Scottish Government to undertake a thorough examination of parking policies concerning medical facilities, aiming to extend exemptions and mitigate the undue burdens on carers and disabled individuals. This issue cannot be left to local councils who have already had decades to remedy this and whose financial interests often outweigh the needs of carers.

3.8 The essence of my petition is the belief that access to medical facilities is a fundamental right and I would challenge the Scottish Government to answer why that is not the case.

The proposed legislation I am calling for must address both the financial impact of parking charges and establish a new parking badge category for caregivers without delay.

Conclusion and Call to Action

4.1 The Cabinet Secretary's submission highlights a significant gap in our healthcare system's inclusivity and accessibility. The implementation of a Carers' Badge and the overhaul of parking charge exemptions are crucial steps toward ensuring the dignity and rights of those in caregiving roles, irrespective of whether or not they form part of plans currently considered by the Scottish Government.

I continue to urge the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government to consider these recommendations with the seriousness and urgency they deserve. Our collective responsibility is to foster a healthcare system that is accessible, equitable, and supportive of everyone's needs.