

Peter Peacock MSP

Speech in the Scottish Parliament

Highlands and Islands Airports (Car Parking Charges)

24 February 2010

Peter Peacock : I welcome the debate and I am pleased to support Liam McArthur's motion.

I welcome his comments: he gave a clear analysis of the situation and drew out the special features of island life.

Alasdair Allan supported that.

I lived in Orkney for a couple of years, back in the 1970s, which was probably before Liam McArthur was born.

That remark was unduly complimentary, so I withdraw it immediately.

When one lives on an island, one begins to recognise that air travel is much more common than it is in other communities in our society and that it is, for a variety of reasons of the sort that Liam McArthur touched on, more of a necessity than a choice.

One factor is that there are few alternative transport choices from the islands, other than ferries, which take a long time and involve further journeys at the end.

Air services are lifeline services that come at a very high cost to island residents.

I was going to quote some figures, but Liam McArthur has already done so, so I will not.

People who travel on business or for hospital visits often do not return to the islands for more than 24 hours.

Therefore, by definition, a parking charge would be greater than it might be for mainland dwellers.

Those were some of the reasons why the previous Administration introduced the air discount scheme, which recognised the high costs for people who live on the islands.

The scheme has huge advantages.

Any charging regime in car parks on the islands would begin to erode the value of the scheme, albeit in a small way.

Of course, once charges were established in principle, there is no reason why in future years they would not rise substantially, which would further erode that basic policy.

It is clear that HIAL has wanted to introduce car parking charges for a long time.

I understand that there were, previously, proposals, which Tavish Scott stopped at the time.

He was right to do that.

The current minister is wrong to have permitted charges.

However, perhaps following the example of others today, he can show contrition and demonstrate that he, too, can say "Sorry", then we can all make progress together.

Liam McArthur is right that HIAL has acted in a high-handed manner.

I regret that and I hope that it has learned lessons from the process.

As I said, air services are lifeline services.

An interesting feature of the emerging situation is the contradiction in Government policy.

As members have said, many people in Orkney use air services to visit relatives in hospital in Aberdeen and people in the Western Isles go to Raigmore hospital in Inverness.

People who live on the mainland can drive to a hospital and, because of SNP policy, can park free of charge.

The Government lauds that policy.

However, under the proposals, people who visit hospitals from the islands would pay hospital car parking charges—the only difference is that they would pay them to HIAL and do so in Kirkwall and, potentially, Sumburgh and Stornoway.

That cannot be right.

It would be daft administratively to create a system to refund those individuals, which would be required in order to have a consistent policy from the Government.

Therefore, it is better just to do away with the parking charge proposals now and not let the process move further forward.

People who visit hospitals and who do business from the islands already pay substantial charges.

They pay for an expensive flight and they probably pay for a hotel overnight if they are visiting a relative in Aberdeen or Inverness.

To add to that cost would simply be wrong.

A small amount of revenue would be raised relative to the challenge that HIAL faces, and it would come from islanders' pockets.

It would be a shame if that were to happen.

I urge HIAL not to proceed and I hope that we will have the strong encouragement of the minister.