

## Hospital parking lottery

Some healthcare trusts are making huge profits from patients and visitors

### HEALTH

**S**ome hospitals are making more than a million pounds a year in profits from patients, visitors and staff using their car parks.

As part of this month's transport investigation, we used the Freedom of Information Act to find out the profit margins made from car park fees at 23 of England's busiest trusts, over three years.

We asked the trusts how much they spend on running parking facilities, what they charge for four-hour parking and how much they make from patients, visitors and staff using their car parks.

In 2008/09, profit margins ranged from just 3% (£31,385) at Gloucestershire Hospitals to 534% (£1,070,476) at Norfolk & Norwich University Hospital (see right).

Four-hour fees also differed, with the cheapest and most expensive trusts actually making a loss: from £1.10 at Newcastle-upon-Tyne Hospitals (£253,981 / 9% loss) to £5 at Hull & East Yorkshire Hospitals (£335,643 / 26% loss) for the same period.

Trusts aren't supposed to run parking at a loss – to stop it being subsidised by money intended for healthcare. Charging

also aims to encourage public transport use and to keep out non-hospital users.

A spokesperson from Norfolk & Norwich told us that it hadn't increased charges in the past five years and that revenue goes into improving patient care. Others explained that income funded the upkeep and security of car parks, with any remainder supporting patient care.

Claire Lilley, Which? health policy adviser, said: 'The NHS principle is that healthcare is funded through taxation not by patients paying for ancillary services. Our research shows high charges don't always result in high profits but, where they do, these charges should be reduced.'

#### TAKE ACTION

■ In Northern Ireland, certain patients (such as those on renal dialysis) and certain family members get free parking – ask your trust. There are no mandatory exemptions in England, but ask your trust about its own reduced or free parking fee policies. Parking is free in Wales and Scotland.



Southampton has profitable car parks

#### HOSPITAL PARKING PROFITS 2008/09 – THE TOP FIVE

Trust	Profit (profit margin)
Norfolk & Norwich University Hospital	£1,070,476 (534%)
Southampton University Hospitals	£1,388,367 (376%)
East Kent Hospitals	£1,022,332 (175%)
Mid Yorkshire Hospitals	£866,783 (112%)
Sheffield Teaching Hospitals	£1,110,415 (106%)



## Care system shake-up The Which? view on government plans

**W**hich? has given a cautious 'thumbs up' to government plans for England's long-term care system to end the postcode lottery of provision.

Instead of those with over £23,000 in capital being left without support and having to sell homes to fund care, everyone would get at least a quarter of necessary care funded by the state. Proposals for meeting any remaining care include people

paying directly or through insurance schemes.

The proposed National Care Service sounds positive but it would mean a continued reliance on informal carers.

Also, while the importance of maintaining people's independence is recognised, with disability equipment and gadgets, for example, more detail is needed about how this would work.

Our director of policy and communications, Helen McCallum, said: 'We want a fair, affordable, adequate and sustainable system that meets everyone's needs. We're giving the proposals a cautious thumbs-up but specific proposals are overdue and we need to see them.'

We'll be meeting key people and responding to the plans. You can respond too by visiting <http://careandsupport.direct.gov>.

# Estate agent fees are judged to be unfair

Thousands of landlords could claim back money that they paid to Foxtons estate agents after High Court ruling

**T**housands of consumers who let out their properties could claim back fees paid to Foxtons estate agents following a High Court ruling.

The South East estate agent has been slammed for making private landlords adhere to unfair terms and conditions that weren't presented in 'plain, intelligible language' following the charge brought by the Office of Fair Trading.

Judge Justice Mann ruled that Foxtons' repeat renewal commission of 11% of rental fees (paid each year after first tenancy terms expire) was unjustifiable. Also unjustifiable was its 2.5% commission for selling properties to tenants. The judge said that landlords would be 'astonished' to learn that they'd have to pay this additional fee.

Justice Mann said that the terms should have featured more prominently in the contract and sales literature.

Simon Austin let out his flat in Hampstead, north London, through Foxtons. He told us: 'Foxtons was appalling. It used its contract to secure commission even after my tenants had vacated the property. I'm delighted it finally got what it deserved.'

Which? lawyer Chris Warner said: 'This judgment paves the way for consumers who've paid unfair fees to Foxtons to get their money back.'

'It also means that similar terms in other estate agents' contracts may be unfair.'

Foxtons had not appealed the ruling at the time of going to press.



Simon Austin had to pay high fees

#### TAKE ACTION!

■ If you feel that you've paid unfair commission to an estate agent, send it a Letter of Claim citing this judgment, giving 28 days for reimbursement. For more information, see [www.which.co.uk/estateagents](http://www.which.co.uk/estateagents).

## FAIR DEALS FOR CONSUMERS MORTGAGES

# Mortgage borrowers squeezed

Home loan providers fail to follow Bank of England rates

**H**omeowners are being overcharged by lenders failing to reduce mortgage rates in line with the Bank of England base rate.

Which? looked at standard variable rates (SVR), which mortgages usually revert to at the end of initial deals. We compared the ten lenders with the biggest market share among Which? members in our latest mortgage satisfaction survey.

They were: Abbey, Alliance & Leicester, Britannia Building Society, Cheltenham & Gloucester, First Direct, Halifax, HSBC, Nationwide Building Society, NatWest and Woolwich.

In July 2008, there was a gap of 1.7% between the Bank of England base rate and the average SVR of these lenders but, by July 2009, the difference had grown to 3.21%.

Cathy Neal, senior researcher for Which? Money, said: 'As the number of mortgage deals has fallen and more people have ended up with mortgages above 90% of their property's value, many have had no option but to stay on their lender's SVR. Lenders should pass on base rate cuts to ease the pressure on borrowers in the recession.'

Monthly cost of a £100,000 repayment mortgage with 20 years to go – from your top ten lenders



Highest SVR  
Alliance & Leicester 4.99%

**£659**



Lowest SVR  
Woolwich 1.99%

**£505**

#### TAKE ACTION!

■ Make use of our mortgage comparison tool – at [www.which.co.uk/mortgagecalc](http://www.which.co.uk/mortgagecalc) – to find out whether you could get a better mortgage deal.