

**Joint Report of the Assistant Chief Executive and the Director of Adult Social Services**

**Report to Executive Board**

**Date: 20 June 2012**

**Subject:** The government's Blue Badge reform programme – an update on the impact of recent changes

Are specific electoral Wards affected? If relevant, name(s) of Ward(s):	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Are there implications for equality and diversity and cohesion and integration?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Is the decision eligible for Call-In?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Does the report contain confidential or exempt information? If relevant, Access to Information Procedure Rule number: Appendix number:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No

**Summary of main issues**

- Members received a report in November 2011 which detailed a number of significant changes to the national blue badge parking scheme, including a new computer system to process applications and a new organisation which would produce badges on behalf of all Councils with effect from the 1st January 2012.
- At the time of the report, there was some uncertainty as to how the new arrangements would work in practice and thus Members requested a further report be produced for Executive Board once all of the new arrangements had been brought in.
- This report summarises for Members the experience of implementing the above after the first 3 months of the full changes coming into operation. The report also explains how the assessment process has been changed and is now managed in Leeds to support the new national requirements.

**Recommendations**

Members are requested to:

- note the position regarding the recent impact of the of changes to the administration of blue badges in Leeds.
- note and endorse the arrangements for assessing persons applying for a blue badge.
- note the actions taken to continue to improve the delivery of the scheme in Leeds.

## **1 Purpose of this report**

- 1.1 To inform members of the impact of the recent changes brought about by the Government's national blue badge reform programme.
- 1.2 To endorse the arrangements in place to undertake assessments for blue badges.
- 1.3 To note the actions taken to continue to improve the delivery of the scheme in Leeds.

## **2 Background information**

- 2.1 The report to Executive Board on 2 November 2011 summarised the national reforms to blue badge administration, assessment and enforcement. The changes aim to improve fair access for disabled people, by reducing abuse of the scheme and in turn easing the pressure on available parking spaces. There are 36,000 blue badge holders in Leeds. Badges are usually issued for three years and enable the holder to park for free on the street, in disabled parking bays, and park on double yellow lines for up to three hours.
- 2.2 The main changes have been:
  - From 1 April 2011, the replacement of GP reports with the introduction of an Independent Mobility Assessment (IMA).
  - Changes in April and June 2011 to the blue badge eligibility criteria, removing the discretion to local authorities for considering eligibility, and putting in place an appeal process for people who were declined a badge at assessment;
  - In November 2011, the law was changed to increase the maximum amount local authorities can charge from £2 to £10; and
  - From 1 January 2012, a new permit introduced designed to address fraud and forgery concerns. This new permit is now produced by a national provider at a charge of £4.60 for each permit issued under the contract (for an initial period of 5 years).
- 2.3 The council has been obliged to comply with the national reform programme, as there is no provision for councils to produce a legal blue badge themselves. In responding to the changes the council agreed to introduce a standard administrative charge of £10 and offer concessions to the following groups:
  - No charge for terminally ill people, children up to the age of 16, war pensioners and armed forces personnel; and
  - £5 charge for people replacing lost or stolen badges.
- 2.3 Executive Board at the time of approving the above changes requested a follow up report on the experience of implementing the new arrangements.

### **3 Main issues**

- 3.1 The report provides an update on the changes to the blue badge process describing the changed assessment process in Leeds, the number of badges issued and feedback received from customers.

#### **Assessment Process**

- 3.2 It is the responsibility of the local authority to ensure that badges are only issued to residents who satisfy one or more of the eligibility criteria set out in the legislation that governs the scheme. A badge cannot be legally issued to anyone who does not satisfy at least one of the criteria.
- 3.3 The eligibility criteria are set by the Department for Transport and are used by all Local Authorities to determine eligibility.
- 3.4 There are two types of eligibility for a badge. Those people 'eligible without further assessment' – previously known as automatic, or 'eligible subject to further assessment' – previously known as discretionary. The latter are the cohort that are assessed by the IMA team which is based at St George's Centre, Middleton;
- 3.5 The team assesses all new applicants who have applied for a badge and also those people, under 80, who are applying for a replacement badge. Persons over 80 who obtained a badge under the previous criteria and provide appropriate evidence are not seen by the IMA team.
- 3.6 The team undertake a full functional mobility assessment, but also identify other areas of unmet need and signpost customers onto adult social care and other organisations giving added value to the assessment process. An appeal process for people who were declined a badge at assessment has been introduced.
- 3.7 Since April 2011 approximately 100 applicants have used the appeal process. Less than 10 applicants have had the decision changed following their appeal. This is due to the fact that the assessment process is very clear and the documentation, when completed, clearly identifies a person's ability to mobilise.
- 3.8 Several people have made representation to the Local Government Ombudsman regarding the Blue Badge process. To date only one of these cases has been fully considered, and the Ombudsman found the process used in Leeds, for applying, being assessed and the appeal process to be fair, and has found in favour of the Local Authority.
- 3.9 The assessment arrangements being followed in Leeds ensure that the eligibility criteria are applied whilst providing efficient use of existing resources.
- 3.10 The number of applicants approved for a badge is around 70%, and this is the same for new applicants and for those having an assessment for a renewal of a badge.

#### **Resource implications**

- 3.11 It is expected that the number of people requiring an assessment will remain high at about 5000 per year until 2015, when all badge holders not meeting the essential criteria will have had an assessment, including whether they will need to be reassessed if they apply to replace their badge on its expiry after three years.
- 3.12 Executive Board were previously interested in the resourcing issues of the new arrangements, particularly the arrangements for assessing applicants in person. As described above the Council set up during 2011-12 an IMA team to assess in person those people who may be eligible under the 'eligible subject to further assessment' previously known as discretionary.
- 3.13 The IMA team has been fully staffed since October 2011, and are currently assessing, in person, around 200 people per month approving around 70% of those seen.
- 3.14 The IMA team resource was established based on information provided from existing records. The team comprises of one full time Occupational Therapist, two full time mobility assessors and a full time administrator. As the work has developed it has become apparent that the workload is greater than anticipated and the workflows across the year are uneven. There has been a high demand for assessments in April and the team have found it difficult to keep up with demand, and this has resulted in a small increase in waiting times for in person assessments. The team is currently able to undertake 50 in person assessments per week.
- 3.15 Demand for the service has been difficult to predict for 2 reasons. As new applicants are made aware of the assessment process, some people subsequently do not then proceed with their application for an IMA assessment. Secondly, there is not an even distribution of applications throughout the year, creating peaks and troughs of demand over the year, for example, the figures for renewals range from 282 a month, in February to 723 in May.

## **Remedial Actions**

- 3.16 Since March 2012, when the renewal forecasts were received by the team, a new telescreen pathway was developed to consider applications using existing social care records. Over the last twelve months a review has been undertaken about how this service managed the workloads and as a consequence modifications have been made to the assessment processes to achieve a more even balance between in-person and telescreen assessments. This will allow a more flexible response to any backlog issues should they arise.

In addition:

- The Department has determined to expand the team by recruiting one occupational therapist to increase the capacity for personal assessments within existing financial resources.
- The Department will secure the funding within Adult Social Care for the additional admin resource capacity within the team to manage the workloads more effectively.

- 3.17 Other service improvement related activity includes :

- The service since mid March has conducted over 150 telescreen assessments. The learning from this is that in particular circumstances it provides an adequate and safe method for completing mobility assessments and allows a more flexible response to fluctuating demands.
- The service has been reorganised so that appointments on three, out of five, working days are being held for renewal assessments. This is to ensure that an individual's badge does not expire whilst waiting for a mobility assessment.
- It is recognised that admin procedures are currently over burdensome and can be simplified as currently all letters are individually generated. A mail merge facility has been requested and this will increase efficiency in sending out letters for appointments without delay.

## **Customer feedback**

- 3.18 In the previous report to Executive Board, some concerns were expressed about a number of features of the new arrangements, and the risks of the new national blue badge ICT system. In particular, we wrote to the Transport Minister in October 2011 outlining concerns as to the impact on customers if the new processes and systems were not available on time or if they failed to work in practice.
- 3.19 In practice, whilst there have been some occasional 'teething' issues, it is pleasing to report that the systems have been delivered on time without any major problems arising. The smooth implementation of the new system from 1st January 2012 was assisted however by a number of actions:
- Encouraging early applications from people whose badges were due to expire early in January 2012 and maximising badges which could be issued prior to 31 December 2011;
  - Telephone screening as an alternative in appropriate cases combined with a streamlined process for persons aged 80 plus currently holding a badge;
  - Ensuring sufficient resources in the processing and assessment teams.
- 3.20 We have seen some additional feedback from customers compared to the same period in the previous year, including an increase in complaints. This is not unexpected given the extent of changes which have taken place. We have learned from this feedback and in some cases it has led to improved processes going forward.
- 3.21 The change from GP assessment to an independent medical assessment is the area of greatest change for applicants. The IMA team have been keen to capture customer feedback about this part of the process. The team, as stated earlier, is based at St Georges Centre, Middleton. Initially there were concerns that people may find accessing the centre difficult. As can be seen below the customer satisfaction returns do not bear this out.
- 3.22 Since February 2012, 231 people attending for assessment have completed customer satisfaction surveys, rating the following:
- Treated with respect during the assessment: 100%;
  - Waiting time acceptable: 98%;

- Information and advice about appointment: 97% (as good or excellent);
- Application form: 91% (as good or excellent);
- Appointment process: 88% (as good or excellent);
- Ability to access the building easily: 86%;

3.23 Where negative feedback has been received, this has been about signage to the centre and parking availability rather than getting to the centre itself. Looking ahead it is planned that the team will relocate to a more central location at the “AT Hub” at Clarence Road in central Leeds in 2013. The “AT Hub” will provide co-located Assistive Technology (AT) services (this includes daily living equipment, care ring and telecare, adaptations and other technology which supports the safety and independence of older and disabled people) across health, social care the voluntary and independent sector. People using the IMA service will have the opportunity to find out and access the full range of AT services to support their independence.

## **Badges issued January to March 2012**

3.24 In the first 3 months of this calendar year 2169 badges were issued of which 1502 were approved without assessment . Of the 667 requiring an assessment 457 were approved and 117 were declined .

3.25 Under the changed assessment arrangements 93 people did not complete their application. A number of these people had already paid the £10 administration fee thus indicating that applicants have not been discouraged from applying for a badge because of the fee itself. Where applicants do not complete the process but have already paid , a refund is issued.

## **4 Corporate Considerations**

### **4.1 Consultation and Engagement**

4.1.1 In addition to consultation undertaken by the Department for Transport nationally, the council has consulted on the full range of reforms locally. This has included consultation with approximately 70 disabled people and their carers; a focus group facilitated by an independent disabled organisation and a postal survey of 2000 current blue badge holders.

4.1.2 As part of ongoing service delivery people attending assessments are now routinely asked to complete a satisfaction survey, as outlined in section 3.18 above. Further consultation will take place in the current year.

### **4.2 Equality and Diversity/Cohesion and Integration**

4.2.1 Two Equality, Diversity, Cohesion and Integration Impact Assessments have been undertaken , one in relation to the introduction of an administrative charge and the other in relation to the reforms as a whole . In relation to charging, the assessment identified that while many people would prefer not to have to pay an administration charge, the introduction of such a charge would not impact on people’s ability to access the scheme. The evidence to date suggests that the charge has not been a factor in deterring people from applying for a badge.

4.2.2 The second assessment identified a number of action points in relation to the assessment process. Progress has been made in several areas such as:

- Signposting to other relevant services is a key element of the IMA assessment.
- The IMA assessment team is a key partner in the development of the AT Hub and feedback from customers using St Georges Centre is being used to inform planning of the new centre.
- Continuous statistics are being collated regarding the number of assessment completed, number of badges awarded and declined, number of appeals received, number of customers signposted to other services.
- The IMA team have introduced a customer satisfaction form that is completed on the day of assessment

4.2.4 Looking ahead we will continue to capture and analyse customer feedback from blue badge applicants with a view to identifying service improvements and also any issues that may potentially have an adverse equality impact.

### **4.3 Council Policies and City Priorities**

4.3.1 The issues detailed in this report relate to two council priority areas as follows:

4.3.2 City Priority Plan 2011-2015 – Best City for Health and Wellbeing: Increase the proportion of people with long term conditions feeling supported to be independent and manage their condition. The reforms in total aim to improve the fairness of the Blue Badge Parking Permit Scheme, and to reduce the incidence of fraudulent use and application. This should increase the availability of disabled parking bays to be used by those with a genuine need.

4.3.3 Council Business Plan 2011-2015 – Increase the usage of self service options available to the public, by ensuring all high demand transactions can be undertaken online. The reforms include a national online application form accessed via the Directgov website at [http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/DisabledPeople/MotoringAndTransport/Bluebadgescheme/DG\\_181208](http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/DisabledPeople/MotoringAndTransport/Bluebadgescheme/DG_181208)

### **4.4 Resources and Value for Money**

4.4.1 The previous Executive board report in November recommended the introduction of an administrative charge of £10 for the issue of a badge. We have found that there has been an increase in administrative tasks such as:

- Scanning and uploading photos in a digital format;
- Administering and updating the BBIS national blue badge system; and
- Additional contact and queries relating to the new arrangements including payment options.

4.4.2 The experience of operating the new computer system and processes since the 1<sup>st</sup> January confirms our expectations, that the new arrangements would bring

additional administration thus supporting the earlier decision to introduce a charge.

- 4.4.3 Looking ahead as greater knowledge and experience of the new arrangements is obtained it will continue be important to review processes to identify the potential for service improvements.

#### **4.5 Legal Implications, Access to Information and Call In**

- 4.5.1 No new issues are raised in this report.

#### **4.6 Risk Management**

- 4.6.1 It is important to continue to monitor the capacity of the IMA team to undertake assessments in the required timescale particularly in the light of projected peaks in demand. The concerns are currently rated as a 'low' to 'medium' impact as the team are able to undertake telephone assessments in appropriate cases.

### **5 Conclusions**

- 5.1 This report has summarised the recent impact of the changes made in Leeds to comply with the national blue badge reforms including summarising the changed assessment process. The report identifies good overall progress made in relation to implementation of the new arrangements, and of a generally positive response from customers.

### **6 Recommendations**

- 6.1 Members are requested to note the progress made in creating and delivering the new Blue Badge scheme in Leeds
- 6.2 Members are asked to endorse the assessment arrangements in Leeds ,as detailed in section 3.2 -3.6 of this report.
- 6.3 Members are asked to note the actions taken in section 3.12 - 3.13 to continue to improve the delivery of the scheme in Leeds.

### **7 Background documents <sup>1</sup>**

- Executive Board report November 2011
- Blue Badge reform – summary of Government reforms  
<http://www.dft.gov.uk/publications/blue-badge-reform-summary-govt-reforms>
- Equality, Diversity, Cohesion and Integrations Impact Assessment – the Introduction of charges
- Equality, Diversity, Cohesion and Integrations Impact Assessment – Blue Badge reforms
- Customer Satisfaction Survey summary April 2012

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<sup>1</sup> The background documents listed in this section are available for inspection on request for a period of four years following the date of the relevant meeting. Accordingly this list does not include documents containing exempt or confidential information, or any published works. Requests to inspect any background documents should be submitted to the report author.