
REVIEW OF THE BLUE BADGE SCHEME

**Responsible Cabinet Member – Councillor Veronica Copeland,
Adult Social Care and Housing Portfolio**

Responsible Director - Murray Rose, Director of People

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. The purpose of this report is to seek Members' approval for the changes required in order to implement the Government's reform programme for the Blue Badge parking scheme for disabled people. The reforms are due to come into force on the 1st January 2012 and from then Local Authorities will no longer be able to produce disabled parking badges themselves, but will authorise these to be issued from a new nationally operated Blue Badge Improvement Services (BBIS).
2. To seek approval to increase the fees for a Blue Badge parking permit in response to:
 - (a) Changes in legislation; and
 - (b) The implementation of increased charges to the Council for the issuing of Blue Badges from a new nationally operated Blue Badge Improvement Service.

Summary

3. Earlier this year a letter was sent to Local Authority Leaders and Chief Executives advising that the Government had announced wide-ranging reforms to the Blue Badge disabled parking scheme. The reform programme consists of a number of complementary projects that, when implemented together, should help local authorities improve operational efficiency, reduce costs and improve customer services. The changes should prevent abuse of the scheme and ensure that the concession is targeted fairly and sustainably.
4. The proposals have been discussed with the joint DBC/DAD Equality Impact Assessment Sub Group to seek guidance on implementing the national proposals in a fair and accessible way.
5. The national proposals require the Council to implement provisions that include a central database and the supply of badges to a national design. A fee of £5 will be charged to the Council by the national provider for each approved and completed application. The approval covers a three year period. It is therefore proposed that the Council's charge to the

applicant be raised to £10 to cover the national provider fee and the Council's administrative costs. The current fee, which is retained locally, is £2.

6. Administrative changes will be required to be able to enter local application records onto the national database and to request badges. Limited IT changes will be required to link the Council's Care First system to the national database.

Recommendation

7. It is recommended that:-
 - (a) The £10 charge, in line with other local authority proposals both regionally and nationally, is adopted.
 - (b) Changes to administration and IT systems in order to implement the new system be approved.
 - (c) The operation of the new arrangements for Blue Badge parking and for disabled parking enforcement be reviewed during 2012 in consultation with disabled people.

Reasons

8. The recommendations are supported by the following reasons:-
 - (a) Local authorities have to adopt the above reforms and are being charged £5 per transaction.
 - (b) The proposals will help to address future pressures and increased demand.
 - (c) To continue to improve the operation of disabled parking in the Borough

Murray Rose
Director of People

Background Papers

Summary of the Government's reforms to the Blue Badge Scheme
Access Agreement

Lynn Walker: Extension 3754

S17 Crime and Disorder	The contents of this report have been considered in the context of the requirements placed on the Council by Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, namely, the duty on the Council to exercise its functions with due regard to the likely effect of the exercise of those functions on, and the need to do all that it reasonably can to prevent, crime and disorder in its area. It is considered that the new arrangements will be beneficial in reducing crime as there should be a reduction in fraud and misuse of the Blue Badge.
Health and Well Being	The proposals optimise independent living for people with a disability
Carbon Impact	The issues contained within this report do not have an impact on carbon emissions
Diversity	The provision of Blue Badge supports those with a physical disability
Wards Affected	All wards
Groups Affected	This report impacts on children and adults, including older people with a physical disability
Budget and Policy Framework	This report does not recommend any changes to the Policy Framework
Key Decision	This is a key decision because agreement to the recommendation will result in a significant number of people receiving an increased charge
Urgent Decision	For the purpose of the 'call-in' procedure this represents an urgent matter as the scheme has to be introduced early in 2012.
One Darlington: Perfectly Placed	The proposed improved scheme contributes to the sustainable Community Strategy in terms of Healthy Darlington
Efficiency	The reforms to the Blue Badge Scheme should improve operational efficiency

MAIN REPORT

Information and Analysis

9. The Blue Badge Scheme provides a range of parking concessions for people with severe mobility problems who have difficulty using public transport. The badge enables holders to park close to where they need to go. The scheme operates throughout the UK and is currently administered by local authorities who deal with applications and issue badges. The current system requires the local authority to fully administer and process applications, complete assessments and make decisions regarding the allocation of Blue Badges.
10. Current arrangements, revolving around local systems and databases, cause difficulties in parking enforcement of blue badges. Cross boundary use of Blue Badges causes delays in checking the validity of badges by Parking Wardens in different geographical areas. The system is prone to widespread abuse, with fraud estimated to cost local authorities £46 million in parking revenues that should have been paid.

The National System

11. Department for Transport (DfT) has introduced proposals to tackle these issues, with the introduction of a central database and a standard national badge. A national provider has been contracted to implement the Blue Badge Improvement Service (BBIS), including these key changes.
12. The new badge design is the only one that can be legally issued by local authorities once the scheme is implemented for all new applicants and renewals. The Council must therefore sign-up to the new arrangements if it is to continue providing the Blue Badge service to residents.
13. Under the new legislation local authorities will remain responsible for:
 - (a) Local administration and enforcement of the scheme
 - (b) Making decisions on who should be given a badge
 - (c) Carry out residency and identity checks
 - (d) Setting the fee to be charged locally
 - (e) Dealing with on-line, paper-based or telephone applications

Fees

14. The maximum fee that local authorities are able to charge for the badge has been raised to £10 to reflect the additional costs in administering the scheme. This includes a £5 payment for each approved badge to the national provider. The charge covers the cost of the new badge, the parking clock, the information leaflet, postage and access to all the other Blue Badge services. It includes a mandatory £5 payment to the national provider and would cover the local administration and assessment costs. The fee can only be charged to successful applicants therefore local authorities will have to absorb the cost of unsuccessful applications.

15. The majority of local authorities are planning to adopt the maximum £10 fee in order to cover set-up and administration costs. With each badge valid for three years the £10 fee is recommended as fair and not excessive. A national calculation suggests that the average user of a Blue Badge will save £300 in parking charges over the three year period. This is the amount that would be saved by a person using a Town Centre car park in Darlington for a single weekly visit of two hours duration.

Assessing Applicants

16. The Council's assessment process for Blue Badge applications has been recently introduced in anticipation of the new arrangements. Applicants are assessed against a matrix of criteria. Any person scoring 20 or more on the matrix qualifies automatically. Any person who is on High Rate Disability Living Allowance, registered blind, terminally ill or on the Armed Forces Compensation Scheme also qualifies automatically.
17. Applicants scoring under 17 will not be approved. Refused applicants can ask to be reconsidered, but after a further refusal no further application will be considered unless there is a change of circumstances.
18. Control of the existing budget for assessments was transferred from the Department of Health to local authorities through the Department for Health Learning Disability and Health Reform Grant in April 2011. This funding enables local authorities to carry out assessments, where required, for those applicants who do not meet the 'automatic' criteria. Applicants scoring 17 – 19 on the matrix will be referred to Occupational Therapy for assessment.
19. Changes to the current IT systems are required to allow the Council's Care First system to link with the new national database. At this stage it is anticipated these will have minimal cost implications.

Consultation and Impact of Proposals

20. DfT have conducted an Equality Impact Assessment in consultation with local authorities and disabled people and representative organisations. The assessment considered the potential impacts of the range of policy options before proposals were finalised.
21. The areas in which the Council will continue to have discretion about how it delivers the scheme locally are referenced in paragraph 13. The proposals have been discussed at the DBC/DAD Equalities Impact Assessment Sub Group around how to respond to these areas of local discretion.
22. It has not been possible in the timescale available for adopting the national proposals to carry out the engagement work needed for full local impact assessment. However, in the following areas of concern raised in the discussion at the Sub-Group about the implementation of the application and assessment process, it is intended to proceed in ways that would address issues raised:
 - (a) Continuing to provide access to the application process through the maximum range of channels, including on-line through the national system; on-line through the Council

website; in person at the reception/Customer Centre; and by telephone; and through all of these channels by the individual applying for the badge or by proxy.

- (b) Assisting applicants to provide the passport photograph required for the new badge, including providing a service at the customer access point and by home visit.
- (c) Reviewing the current application form to ensure it provides all the information required by the central database and for the assessment process, and to ensure it meets accessibility and easy read standards.

23. However, Sub-Group members questioned the need to raise the fee to £10 and challenged the Council to introduce a more stringent assessment procedure, with face-to-face assessment of every applicant to ensure that only people with a valid need for a Blue Badge would be approved. The primary concern of disabled people in the discussion is to eliminate abuse and fraud in the system.

24. Whilst highlighting these concerns, the views of officers are as follows:

- (a) As indicated in paragraphs 14 and 15 above, the £10 fee is considered fair over a 3 year period, taking into account the £5 national recharge, the Council's costs, the cost of non-approved applications for which no fee will be charged, and the savings in parking costs for Blue Badge holders.
- (b) The Council's current assessment process has been introduced recently and is significantly more rigorous than the GP authorisation process that it replaced. Whilst we would expect to see a reduction in the current number of more than 6,000 Blue Badge holders under the new arrangements, it would be impractical to introduce a face-to-face assessment for all applicants.

25. The main concern expressed by the Disabled Sub Group members was in relation to enforcement. Abuses occur primarily in the use of Blue Badges and of disabled parking spaces by non-disabled people rather than in the application process.

26. Given that the Council must implement the new national arrangements in the New Year, it is recommended that these concerns be addressed by reviewing the enforcement of Blue Badge parking during 2012 to identify opportunities for strengthening enforcement and reducing abuse with the benefit of the new national arrangements in place and operational. This review would include engagement with disabled people and full Disability Equalities Impact Assessment to support improvements in the service.