

Report to: **Adult Social Care and Community Safety Scrutiny Committee**

Date: **8 November 2012**

By: **Director of Adult Social Care**

Title of report: **Blue Badge Service**

Purpose of report: **To update the Scrutiny Committee on the Blue Badge Service**

1. Financial Appraisal

1.1 Appendix 1 sets out the financial information for the Blue Car Badge Service, taking into account the Department of Transport (DfT) changes in service delivery, as outlined in the report.

2. Background and Supporting Information

2.1 Following a review by the DfT in January 2012, some significant changes had to take place in the Blue Badge Service. These are summarised as background information in Appendix 2.

2.2 The Blue Badge scheme provides a national arrangement of parking concessions for people with severe permanent walking difficulties who travel regularly in a vehicle as either a driver or passenger. It also applies to people who are registered as severely sight impaired (blind) and people with severe upper limb disabilities who regularly use an adapted car. The eligibility criteria remained unchanged as a result of the changes, with the decision on eligibility remaining with the local authority to make.

2.3 In East Sussex there are on average 27,000 badges on issue at any one time. It is widely acknowledged that a proportion of these badges may have been issued to individuals who do not meet the eligibility criteria as set out by the DfT and that the Blue Badge is a statutory provision that is open to be misused and abused. As badges are issued for three years, it will take this length of time for all existing badge holders to be fully reviewed and a more accurate understanding of demand established.

2.4 The Blue Badge issuing process is time consuming and, although the new DfT changes have improved the process, even with the introduction of Lean the issuing of badges is labour intensive.

3. Issues Arising as a Result of Changes

3.1 As a result of the changes introduced in January, some delays arose in the processing and issuing of Blue Badges. East Sussex has not been alone in dealing with these issues, with the majority of other local authorities reporting similar delays caused by the new system and assessment process. The delays resulted from:

- The additional data inputting required into both Blue Badge Improvement Service (BBIS) and Carefirst. No interface system was automatically made available by the BBIS developers.
- The additional requirement for certified identification to support an application with a significant number of applications having to be returned as incomplete even though clear instructions had been provided.
- The BBIS system failing on a number of occasions.
- The increase in the number of complaints and enquiries that the team had to deal with either in writing or via the helpline.

4. Action Taken

The following summarises steps taken to improve the service:

4.1 Additional resources have been allocated to the service, plus staff have been working Saturdays throughout September and October to process and issue badges.

4.2 Renewal letters are sent out to badge holders whose badges are due to expire. The renewal process has been streamlined with letters being sent out 8/10 weeks prior to badges expiring, giving applicants additional time to re-apply. A system has also been developed to give priority to existing badge holders, to ensure badges are issued to eligible individuals before their existing badge expires. Renewal letters are now centrally printed which has created efficiencies and savings within the service.

4.3 Mobility assessment clinics have been established across the whole of the County. Additional clinics have been required to deal with the volume of applications, including the need to increase the number of therapy staff to undertake assessments to determine eligibility.

4.4 Given the volume of incomplete applications received and the time taken chasing applicants for the required information, incomplete forms are now sent back to the individual. This has streamlined the process allowing resources to be used effectively within the team.

4.5 The service assists people, if required, to complete the application form over the telephone if they are having difficulty. The application form has also been simplified significantly to make it easier to complete. There are now separate sections appropriate to the different eligibility groups, reducing the size of the respective forms that need to be completed. We have also rewritten the guidance to support the completion of the form, making it simpler and easier to understand.

4.6 The department's Business Information Team has been working to develop an IT system that interfaces between BBIS and ASC client record system, Carefirst, called 'Badger'. The system will dramatically reduce data entry requirements by the service and will provide more accurate information on workflow and activity analysis.

4.7 The department has also developed a policy for the Blue Badges Scheme and an Operational Instruction for the assessment and allocation of badges, which includes how appeals are dealt with, the investigation of misuse and abuse and how as a department we undertake prosecution, linking robustly with the legal department and parking officers as well as the police. East Sussex is one of the few authorities to have taken these steps and is seen as a positive way forward, to ensure clarity and equity of service provision. Work is also taking place to provide parking enforcement officers with access to BBIS to support enforcement and the senior issuing officer regularly supports enforcement action days with the police and parking officers.

4.8 In reference to the recent system failure, we have also been advised that new guidance has been issued by BBIS and that Cable & Wireless have been advised that Blue Badges need to be seen as a high priority service due to the impact a system failure has on the disabled applicant.

5. Management Information

5.1 The service is now in a position to provide weekly monitoring information on the volume of activity being dealt with in the team. This has proved useful in flagging where possible delays may occur, so proactive steps can be taken to address any blockages. The service is now on average issuing between 300 - 500 badges a week and receives on average 120 items of post a day.

5.2 Blue Badge renewal application forms are now taking on average 4-6 weeks to process, with new applications taking slightly longer (8 weeks) especially if a mobility assessment is required. This is a significant reduction in the previous 8/10 week timeframe.

5.3 The number of incomplete applications has also reduced significantly.

5.4 The number of complaints and helpline calls concerning the delay has reduced significantly over the last 4 weeks

6. Benefits Realised

6.1 There is now in place a fair, consistent and reliable process of applying the eligibility criteria for Blue Badges; ensuring that badges are being issued to those individuals who are eligible and in the long term will help to reduce the fraudulent misuse of badges.

6.2 The department now has a policy for the Blue Badges Scheme and an Operational Instruction for the assessment and allocation of badges including appeals, the investigation of misuse and abuse and prosecution.

6.3 The new BBIS national database system has made it possible to flag immediately if an applicant is attempting to gain a badge from more than one county; plus it allows parking departments to be able to check the validity of badges immediately which supports effective enforcement.

6.4 In future the new database will also be used to record, where appropriate, that a renewal badge can be issued with no further assessment required, which in the future will cut down on waiting times.

6.5 Significant steps have been taken in the team to streamline and improve the issuing process. It is acknowledged that improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the service is an ongoing and continuous process. However the committee can be assured that badges are being issued in a timely and appropriate manner.

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Blue Badge Scheme

2011/12 Actual £'000		2012/13 Budget £'000	2012/13 Outturn £'000	2013/14 Estimate £'000	Notes
164	Expenditure Employees	295	341	295	Staffing of 0.5 fte Senior Practitioner OT , 3 OT, 1 Senior Issuing Officer, 1.77 Issuing Officers, 3 Issuing Assistants, 1 Issuing Assistant Helpline, 1 Mobility Assessment Officer. The 2012/13 outturn projection includes the cost of agency staff to clear backlogs.
0	Transport	2	2	2	
40	Supplies and Services	5	7	5	2011/12 costs represent GP fees previously covered by Health
10	Third Party Payments	28	28	28	Cost of new badges
54	Support Services	2	33	2	The 2012/13 outturn projection includes printing and franking costs to clear backlogs.
268	Total Expenditure	332	411	332	
	Income				
151	- Government Grants	271	271	271	Funding from within Learning Disabilities and Health Reform Grant
29	Fees and Charges	61	72	61	Blue Badge charge at £10.
180	Total Income	332	343	332	
88	Net Budget	0	68	0	

Summary of DfT changes to Blue Badge Service

The significant changes that came into effect in January 2012 are as follows:

- The issuing of badges transferred from the local authority to a national central point of production and distribution, much the same as the DVLA and Passport Office operate now.
- Introduction of a more sophisticated design of badge to help prevent fraud
- Introduction of a central database and numbering scheme
- There was a significant increase in the cost of a blue badge. As part of the fraud measures, the cost for the physical badge including wallet is £4.85 (plus VAT). New DfT guidance allowed LA to charge at a level 'that more appropriately covers cost' up to a maximum of £10. East Sussex previous £2 charge had remained unchanged since 1983 and following a consultation exercise and Lead Member approval it was agreed that ESCC would charge the maximum of £10 with the remaining monies being used to off set the actual cost of issuing the badge including the introduction of mobility clinics and the improvement in investigation and enforcement of misuse
- In line with government guidance the Local Authority was required to compulsory introduce Independent Mobility Assessments to determine eligibility to replace the process of GPs providing medical information to support an applicant's eligibility.