

BLUE BADGE REFORM

Blue Badge Reform Programme May 2009 update

Latest Blue Badge News

Introduction

This is the first in a series of newsletters which the Blue Badge Programme team at DfT will issue for the duration of the programme.

'The Comprehensive Blue Badge Reform Strategy' was published in October 2008, and includes a number of commitments to reform and improve a scheme that helps to enhance the quality of life and access for disabled people. The Blue Badge Programme is being established to ensure that we deliver the commitments in the strategy within five years.

The main commitments in the strategy are to;

- extend the eligibility criteria to people with certain temporary mobility problems (lasting at least one year), people with severe mental impairments, severely disabled service personnel/veterans and more children under three years old with specific medical conditions;
- provide an IT enabled solution to allow for data-sharing to overcome weaknesses in the current operation, enforcement and delivery of the Scheme.
- provide local authorities with up to £15 million per year to conduct improved independent medical assessments;
- improve the service delivery to badge holders;
- create Local Authority 'Centres of Excellence' to share good practice;
- enable local authorities to charge a more appropriate fee for badges;
- work with other partners to improve other aspects of the scheme.

The purpose of these bulletins is to update all interested stakeholders on;

- progress through the legislative process
- key developments in the wider activity of the Blue Badge Programme
- news of recent publications and website updates

Milestones for this month

The Blue Badge Programme is in its early stages. In May, the programme team will continue to;

- research and develop policy options, with assistance from informal consultations with stakeholders;
- support the Centres of Excellence in sharing good practice;
- develop and expand the Blue Badge Programme team;
- establish programme and project governance and management arrangements;

Blue Badge Projects:

Data Sharing Project: This aims to address many of the weaknesses in the current operation, enforcement and delivery of the Scheme. It will enable local authorities to share data so that all local authority and enforcement officers will be able to perform validity and other enforcement checks. We will also explore whether the project can deliver other service improvements to badge holders, for example, more automatic renewals for people who claim the Higher Mobility Rate of the Disability Living Allowance.

New Enforcement Powers Project: The Blue Badge Reform Strategy includes a commitment to examine the scope for on-the-spot confiscation of Badges being used unlawfully by non-Badge holders. This project will;

- explore the evidence base;
- identify the options for enabling confiscation and for making other improvements to the enforcement regime;
- identify associated requirements such as training, accreditation and an appeals mechanism;
- deliver the preferred option which may include new legislation; and
- produce associated guidance to assist Local Authorities in using any new powers effectively.

Independent Medical Assessments:

People applying for a Blue Badge under the 'eligible subject to further assessment' criteria often undergo medical assessment to determine eligibility.

Research suggests that local variations in administration and assessment practices, and the common use of an individuals' GP, have led to an inconsistent and inequitable allocation of Badges.

The objective of the Independent Medical Assessment (IMA) project is to raise standards in local eligibility assessment by promoting the use of independent medical assessments. Local Authorities are to be given responsibility for funding Blue Badge assessments, and will be provided with up to £15m per year to conduct improved assessments.

The main elements of the IMA project are:

- Grant distribution - research, development and consultation on options for the distribution of a grant (of up to £15m per annum) to local authorities. This will involve the transfer of existing NHS budgets that are currently being used to determine eligibility;

- Improving local assessment - research on, and promotion of, existing good practices around medical assessment and development of guidance / toolkit for local authorities; and research and piloting of joint mobility assessment arrangements with, *inter alia*, concessionary travel.

The Department's Blue Badge Team is keen to deliver this project in partnership with local authorities and to draw on specialist local authority expertise. We have an opportunity for a 12 month inward secondment to the DfT for an individual from a local authority. For further information, or to express an interest, please contact caroline.fish@dft.gsi.gov.uk by Friday 22nd May.

Centres of Excellence: In January 2008 the Department issued new guidance to English Local Authorities on administering and enforcing the Blue Badge Scheme. In October 2008 the following local authorities in England were awarded a share of a £500k fund and Blue Badge Centres of Excellence (COE) status:

- Manchester and Bolton as joint COE for North West England
- Rotherham as COE for Yorkshire and Humberside
- Southampton as COE for South East England
- Birmingham and Coventry as joint COE for the West Midlands
- Wandsworth and Kensington and Chelsea as joint COE for London.

The aim of the COEs is to act as beacons of good practice and promote improved blue Badge administration, assessment and enforcement to other Local Authorities.

On 12th February 2009, the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea and the London Borough of Wandsworth invited all

London Boroughs to attend the London Centre of Excellence Launch. Members of staff from each Borough's Blue Badge administration, assessment, enforcement and investigative teams were invited. The two host Boroughs were delighted that on the day over 115 officers from 27 Boroughs attended and took part in discussion groups covering topics such as 'mobility assessments' and 'investigating fraud, misuse and prosecutions'.

Following the discussion groups, boroughs were invited to discuss with other attendees what they had learned and how they were going to use this information in their own Blue Badge operations. Common themes raised were the need to strengthen enforcement and prosecution practices in order to discourage fraud. Many Borough officers were keen to improve upon their mobility assessment processes and to continue networking and sharing best practice.

Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council is due to hold its first information sharing conference in Rotherham on the 12th May 2009. All councils in Yorkshire and Humber are invited to join them to discuss how Rotherham achieved their status as a Centre of Excellence, their next steps and how all councils can work better together in the future. Refreshments and lunch will be provided on the day and accommodation can be arranged on request.

Anyone interested in attending should contact Claire Smith at Rotherham Council on 01709 334296 or by email claire-nas.smith@rotherham.gov.uk.

Eligibility Extension: The Blue Badge Scheme provides essential support to disabled people. As part of the Eligibility Extension Project we want to ensure that the maximum number of people who have a genuinely severe disability can benefit from the Scheme.

The Government is planning to extend the Blue Badge Scheme to the following groups:

- People with the most severe mental impairments/extremely disruptive behavioural problems, because of the difficulties that they can face crossing the road safely. This will include people who have very advanced forms of dementia and severe forms of autistic spectrum disorder.
- Specific individuals with temporary mobility problems lasting a minimum of one year. During their treatment those who experience major traumas, strokes or require joint replacements may be just as immobile as permanently disabled people who already benefit from a Blue Badge. We think it is only fair to provide this group of people with temporary Blue Badges until they make a recovery.
- More children under the age of three, with specific medical conditions, who were dependent upon bulky medical equipment or required access to medical care. This is due to the very real difficulty that their parents face transporting them safely from their homes. Once these children reach the age of three, they will be able to apply for a Badge under the other categories of eligibility described in this Strategy.
- Injured active/ex-service personnel in receipt of specific tariffs of award under the Armed Forces Compensation Scheme.

Improvements to Badge security features:

This project will explore how the badges themselves could be improved so that it is more difficult to forge or copy them or to alter details such as the expiry date. We will also consider how we can improve the security of the production and distribution process.

Reports or Publications Now Available

If you would like more information about the Blue Badge Programme please visit our website, listed below:

Blue Badge DfT website:

<http://www.dft.gov.uk/transportforyou/access/bluebadge/>

Blue Badge publications and resources:

<http://www.dft.gov.uk/transportforyou/access/bluebadge/pubs/>

Please follow the link below for The Blue Badge Reform Strategy;

<http://www.dft.gov.uk/transportforyou/access/bluebadge/bluebadgereform/bbreformstrategy.pdf>

Keeping In Touch

You can contact the Blue Badge Helpline on either 0207 944 2914 or 0161 367 0009.

Or by email at blue.badge@dft.gsi.gov.uk