

Bath & North East Somerset Council			
DECISION MAKER:	Cllr Roger Symonds, Cabinet Member for Transport		
DECISION DATE:	On or after 14th March 2012	EXECUTIVE FORWARD PLAN REFERENCE:	
		E	2346
TITLE:	Blue Badge Reform Programme and Charges		
WARD:	All		
AN OPEN PUBLIC ITEM			
List of attachments to this report: Appendix 1 – Equalities Impact Assessment Appendix 2 – Consultation Responses			

1 THE ISSUE

- 1.1 A revised, nationwide scheme for the issuing and management of "blue badges" will be implemented in January 2012. This report considers how the Council might decide to operate the scheme locally (given that there are options within the scheme) and what charge should be made to applicants.

2 RECOMMENDATION

The Cabinet member is asked to agree that:

- 2.1 A £10 fee will be charged for the issue of a blue badge for all new applications, renewal applications and replacements due to loss or theft processed from 1st April 2012 and this fee will contribute to external fees and internal administration costs.
- 2.2 That the basic service will be used and none of the additional options including the data entry, secure posting and fast track posting service will be specified
- 2.3 That the additional income received is used to for the enforcement of Blue Badge abuse service using a specialist company

3. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

3.1 As of the 1st January 2012, changes will be made to the administration of the blue badge scheme and the associated IT systems used. From this date all badges nationally will be issued by one company, Northgate, who have been instructed by the Department for Transport to carry out this work. All local authorities who issue blue badges are required to sign up to the new scheme.

3.2 As part of the scheme, there will be a charge to each local authority for each blue badge issued or replaced; this will be £4.60 per badge excluding VAT. This cost includes the new badge, parking clock, the rights and responsibilities leaflet, a covering letter and 2nd class postage.

3.3 The local authority can also opt in to:-

- (1) Have badges fast tracked at an additional cost of £2.45 per badge
- (2) Sign up to a data entry support service at £4.96 per application and £2.68 per update (Northgate will input the application information but the authority would still make the decision as to whether an application is successful)
- (3) Include secure posting –prices will vary depending on level of security/tracking required
- (4) Have an integrated badge and clock design for an additional £0.25 per badge issued

We do not plan to sign up to the above options initially but intend to review our approach as the new scheme is bedded in.

3.4 To offset the costs involved, Local Authorities will be allowed to charge each successful applicant a minimum of £2 and a maximum of £10 for each blue badge issued to contribute to offsetting the costs of issuing badges. The exact cost is a matter for the Local Authority to decide locally.

3.5 Currently the cost of purchasing and administering the blue badge scheme is met from the Parking Services budget. Under current legislation, Local Authorities are permitted to charge a maximum of £2 for the badge, a figure not reviewed since 1983. However, due to the low level of the transaction and the costs associated with collecting the fee many authorities, ourselves included, do not charge for the service. The current cost to the authority for delivering this scheme is therefore approximately £21k per annum, including 3/4 FTE member of staff to process the badges and the purchase costs of the badge itself.

3.6 The changes to the scheme will result in an increase of costs to the authority of approximately £10k per annum to £31k due to higher cost per badge. To ensure that all badges are issued in a timely manner no reduction to staffing are recommended at this time.

3.6 There are no further additional costs to the authority for software, licences or any other aspects as part of this change as all costs are being funded by the Department for Transport as part of the Blue Badge Improvement Scheme (BBIS)

3.7 It is however proposed that an additional £25k per annum is spent on enforcement of the service with approximately 50% being recovered in fines from Magistrates Court back to the authority.

3.8 The Council's 2012/13 budget anticipates the recommendation of this report being agreed.

4 CORPORATE PRIORITIES

- *Promoting independence and positive lives for everyone.* The continued issuing of blue badges will help disabled people maintain their independence and their ability to access services.
- *Creating neighbourhoods where people are proud to live.* The opportunity for crime will be reduced through the implementation of the new centralised system. It will help reduce theft of badges for profit and thus reduce instances of car crime targeted at the theft of blue badges. Reinvestment of fees into enforcement (as in paragraph 3.7) will further reduce the level of blue badge fraud as a result of successful prosecutions and the publicity this is likely to attract.

5 THE REPORT

5.1 The Government announced on 14 February 2011 a major programme of reforms to the Blue Badge scheme. The reform programme has been developed in consultation with disabled people, local authorities and other stakeholders, and on the basis of research and economic analysis. The reforms will deliver the most comprehensive changes to the Blue Badge scheme for 40 years.

5.2 The reforms to the system are designed to crackdown on drivers who abuse the scheme and other changes to make it more sustainable for the future.

5.3 The benefits of the wider changes such as the new blue badge design include:

- Fraud prevention – automated checks can be made at the application stage to prevent multiple and fraudulent applications.
- Use of sophisticated anti fraud technologies on the new badge, more security in the supply, storage and distribution of the badge
- Quick and easy enforcement checks by officers anywhere in the country on badges issued by any local authority.

5.4 Currently in Bath and North East Somerset a total of approximately 9000 badges are in circulation. The life of a badge is usually 3 years. It is expected that blue badge holders will need to submit a renewal application at least once every three years.

5.5 A blue badge can be issued under the following criteria:

You are automatically eligible to apply for a badge if you are over two years old and either: receive the Higher Rate of the Mobility Component of the Disability Living Allowance; are registered severely sight impaired (blind); receive a War Pensioner's Mobility Supplement Subject to assessment you may also be eligible for a badge if you are over two years old and either: have a permanent and sustainable disability which means you cannot walk, or which makes walking very difficult; drive a motor vehicle regularly, have a severe disability in both arms, and unable to operate all or some types of parking meter (or would find it very difficult to operate them).

If you are a parent of a child who is less than two years old, you may apply for a badge for your child if they have a specific medical condition which means that they either: must always be accompanied by bulky medical equipment which cannot be carried around without great difficulty; need to be kept near a vehicle at all times, so that they can, if necessary, be treated in the vehicle, or quickly driven to a place where they can be treated, such as a hospital

- 5.6 The option within the new regulations to charge between £2 and £10 does give flexibility to local authorities to set their own charging levels.
- 5.7 The abuse of blue badges is a significant issue for those who need access to facilities that having a badge brings and an issue that receives a large amount of complaint. Most abuse, according to recent studies, is from misuse by family/friends of the holder when they are not present. The badge should not be used even when performing tasks on behalf of the disabled person.
- 5.8 To combat this fraud it is necessary to use specialist services to prosecute offenders using the criminal system. Working in partnership under a joint procurement with Bristol City Council is proposed that we appoint BBFI Ltd to undertake the enforcement on behalf of the council. It should also be noted that each member of the public who uses a badge to procure free parking on street is a customer who is not using the car parks and possibly paying to park. Therefore the introduction and publication of successful prosecutions will reduce levels of fraud. The impact and seriousness of abuse from a user's forum perspective can be seen in Appendix 1, response by Equality B&NES to the local consultation recently held on the blue badge changes.
- 5.9 As part of the agreement we will release a minimum of 4 press releases per year highlighting the enforcement and any successful prosecutions. This is anticipated to further reduce abuse over time.

6 RISK MANAGEMENT

- 6.1 The report author and Cabinet member have fully reviewed the risk assessment related to the issue and recommendations, in compliance with the Council's decision making risk management guidance.

7 EQUALITIES

- 7.1 An Equalities Impact Analysis (EqIA) has been completed and is attached as Appendix 1 of this report. Adverse impacts were identified where the proposed fee is met by economically disadvantaged people who qualify for a badge. The fee is however low (£10 for 3 years generally) and badge users will benefit as a result of reduced levels of abuse of the scheme particularly as the result of reinvestment of fees into enforcement. Around two thirds of blue badge holders are over 65 years old and they too will benefit through reduced abuse as parking spaces will be made available through implementing improved enforcement measures.

8 RATIONALE

- 8.1 The benefits from adopting the new system for the affected groups are significant. However, the costs for the new system are also significantly higher than the previous system. Therefore charging the full fee of £10, whilst not making the service completely self-funded, does reduce significantly the costs to the authority.
- 8.2 As detailed in 2.4 above the current charging structure for blue badges does not cover all costs associated with providing this service and the annual net cost to the Authority is currently £21k per annum.
- 8.3 Research has indicated that other local authorities are considering increasing the badge fee to £10, including all neighbouring authorities.
- 8.4 The life of the badge, as referred to above, is usually 3 years from issue which equates to £3.33 per annum. The badge allows significant parking concessions and benefits to the holder including free parking in Pay & Display bays on street and the ability to park on Double Yellow Lines for up to 3 hours where a loading ban is not in force. Additionally the issue of a badge removes the need for the holder to purchase a Residents Parking Permit within the Residents Parking Zones which currently cost between £30 and £140 depending on the location and numbers of permits issued and therefore still represents a significant saving per annum if the applicant resides within the zone.
- 8.5 The additional income received will help pay for the enforcement thus reducing complaints and abuse.

9 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 9.1 Do nothing – this option was rejected as changes to the scheme are significant and improve the service significantly. The authority must participate in the revised scheme if it is to continue in its current role and the new scheme is considered beneficial to all parties.
- 9.2 Charge at a rate less than the full £10 fee – this option was rejected as the service, even at the full rate of £10, is not self-funding.
- 9.3 Do not enforce – this option was rejected due to the high level of complaints and potential loss in income the abuse may cause. Additionally, we have a duty to ensure that all sections of the community can access the facilities available and abuse of parking areas is not a barrier.

10 CONSULTATION

- 10.1 Other Public Sector Bodies; Section 151 Finance Officer; Monitoring Officer
- 10.2 Full consultation was undertaken by the Department for Transport in regard to the changes proposed. All key stakeholders were included within the consultation process.
- 10.3 A further local consultation has been carried out prior to this report. This involved contacting the representatives of disabled people across Bath and North East Somerset as advised by the Equalities Team, listed below, for their views.

Bath People First-Equality B&NES
Action 4 Pensioners
Headway
Clover House
BEMSCA
Access Banes
The Care Forum

Only one response was received, from Equality B&NES, stating that “*whilst no increase in charges is welcome in the current climate we accept that £10 for a three year badge represents good value for money.*” The full response is attached as Appendix 2 for reference.

- 10.4 In addition, a letter has been received from Radstock Town Council which expresses concerns regarding the proposed charges. (See Appendix 2)

11 ISSUES TO CONSIDER IN REACHING THE DECISION

- 11.1 Social Inclusion; Customer Focus; Human Rights; Other Legal Considerations

12 ADVICE SOUGHT

- 12.1 The Council's Monitoring Officer (Divisional Director – Legal and Democratic Services) and Section 151 Officer (Divisional Director - Finance) have had the opportunity to input to this report and have cleared it for publication.

Contact person	Chris Major 01225 394231
Background papers	<p><i>Consultation, including public Impact Assessment: Blue Badge Reform Programme: A consultation document, DfT, March 2010</i> http://www.dft.gov.uk/consultations/closed/2010-20/</p> <p><i>Research report: Blue Badge Reform Strategy: Enforcement Evidence Base, DfT, March 2010</i> http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+/http://dft.gov.uk/adobepdf/259428/281009/enforcementevidence.pdf</p> <p><i>Previous Government strategy, including Impact Assessment: Comprehensive Blue Badge (Disabled Parking) Reform Strategy (England), DfT, October 2008</i></p>

	http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+/http://www.dft.gov.uk/transportfor you/access/bluebadge/reform/reformstrategy/bbreformstrategy.pdf
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