

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD



Report subject	Informal Working Group Report - Blue Badge Service Update Report
Meeting date	21 October 2024
Status	Public Report
Executive summary	<p>This report provides an update on the recommended officer actions made in relation to the Informal working group report submitted to Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 9 October 2023.</p> <p>An update is also provided covering current blue badge processing performance which highlights a number of ongoing challenges currently facing the service, along with an action plan for improvement.</p>
Recommendations	<p>It is RECOMMENDED that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">(a) The progress update on previously agreed actions are noted.(b) The update on current blue badge processing performance is noted.(c) O&S Board provide any further comment.
Reason for recommendations	To ensure O&S are aware of Officer considerations in relation to the recommendations posed, and the ongoing plans for improvement.
Portfolio Holder(s):	Councillor Andy Martin, Portfolio Holder for Customer, Culture & Communications
Corporate Director	Matti Raudsepp, Director of Customer & Property
Report Authors	Stuart Walters, Customer Services Manager
Wards	Council-wide
Classification	Update

Background

1. At its meeting on 9 October 2023, Overview and Scrutiny Board considered a report produced by Councillor Stephen Bartlett – Chairman, Overview and Scrutiny Board and Lindsay Marshall – Overview and Scrutiny Specialist, following an informal review of the Council's Blue Badge process.
2. The report recommended 5 actions to Officers and asked for progress to be reported in October 2024.
3. By way of setting the context for the blue badge service, there are currently 20,984 Blue Badges on issue within the BCP Council area. The Department of Transport however provides a guideline to local authorities of 12 weeks in which to conclude a blue badge new application or renewal, although this is not a mandatory or statutory timeline. This timescale reflects the eligibility and verification requirements that must be completed regardless of whether an application is new or a renewal. Most blue badges last for a period of 3 years but there are exceptions to this for specific circumstances.
4. The assessment team consists of 3.23 FTE (1 full time and 3 part time staff members). Current demand over the period April – September 2024 has been 5681 new applications or renewals, which represents a 30% increase (1322 applications) compared to the same period the year before. Current processing performance is running at 14 weeks, which exceeds the target timeline of 12 weeks. This is explained in more detail later in this report.
5. An update on recommendations reported to Overview and Scrutiny on 9 October 2023 is provided as follows:
 - a) **Officers continue to explore methods and the costs of providing blue badge renewal applicants with a renewal reminder and make appropriate recommendations to the responsible cabinet portfolio holder.**

The Blue Badge system has had the automatic reminder element enabled. Anyone who applied online will receive an automatic reminder of their badge's expiry 12 weeks before the expiry date.

Those applicants who complete a paper application will not receive a reminder. The current Blue Badge system does not have a report facility that allows the extraction of Badges that are due to expire along with the relevant contact details. Therefore, we are unable to send reminders to those that apply via a paper application.

If we were to introduce a manual process, of sending reminders for paper-based applicants, the cost would be c £2k per annum in postage. Officer time to extract data and generate the letters would divert staff capacity from processing applications and would increase processing times.

The contract for the current Blue Badge system is expiring in April 2025. Work is underway with the Transformation programme to develop the Customer Relationship

Management system (Microsoft Dynamics) to deliver Blue Badge case management, an element of which will be reminders for all.

- b) Officers consider the addition of a carers tick box to the application form to indicate the blue badge holder receives services from adult social care which may allow verification of the application via data held by the council.**

The Application form is a Department for Transport form, which is not BCP's to edit. The form has a declaration included that reads '*you also agree that Bournemouth Christchurch and Poole council may check your eligibility with the information they hold, and this includes checking with other services such as adult social care*'.

Currently any check of Adult Social Care records requires the submission of a request from the Blue Badge team to the Adult Social Care contact centre.

The Council's target operating model is to improve data sharing across BCP departments in an automated way which will reduce the burden on applicants for any service to have to verify information repeatedly. Progress is being made towards this and the administration of blue badge requests have been agreed for development in the next Microsoft dynamics work package under the customer transformation project.

In the meantime, direct access to the Adult Social Care system has been requested and is expected to be in place by the end of October 2024.

- c) Officers consult with LGA members on the appropriateness of the blue badge fee to determine if an approach to government to increase the fee is desirable or warranted.**

Fees in England are up to £10 for a badge, in Scotland the cost is £20 and in Wales it is free.

The Blue Badge Local Authority peer group have been contacted regarding support for an increase in the fee. The group are supportive of an increase, but the consensus is that it has been discussed with the Department for Transport (DfT) several times. The appetite for any change from the DfT has been low.

- d) Officers consider producing a blue badge service flow chart.**

The preference is that the Blue Badge pages of the website are rewritten as part of the wider ongoing website transformation project. The pages are scheduled to be reviewed in October / November 2024. Greater attention will be given to displaying the process and timescales involved to aid customer understanding and expectation.

- e) Officers consider adding a note on the council website to explain why an application may take up to 12 weeks to process.**

Further information has been added to the website to explain why an application or a decision on an application may take up to 12 weeks. The text is below:

'New applications and renewals are currently taking around 12 weeks to process. This meets the average processing timescales set out by the Department of Transport.'

New applications and renewals are treated the same when it comes to assessment of eligibility.

When evidence provided does not give us the required level of clarity, we will have to contact other healthcare professionals or the Department for Works and Pensions. This can cause delays to the assessment process'.

Current performance

6. The service is currently experiencing challenges with the delivery of the Blue Badge service within the target 12 week timescales. Current performance is averaging 14 weeks. This is primarily due to increased demand, although there are a range of actions that are being taken that will collectively help to ease the pressure on the processing team and to deliver a more satisfactory service.

Throughout 2020 many badges expired and were not renewed, due to Covid restrictions on travel and shielding. The easing of Covid restrictions late in 2020 / 2021, produced a surge in new and renewal applications. To process the badges as quickly as possible, a decision was made to undertake minimal eligibility checks for renewals on the basis that these customers had undergone the verification process potentially a number of times previously.

Recommendations from Audit followed in 2022, and full eligibility checking had to be reintroduced, which led to a return to a longer decision-making times.

Generally, a badge has a three-year life span, those badges issued under the quicker verification process in 2021 have now become due for renewal. This has led to a 48% increase in renewals between April and October, compared to the same period last year. At the same time the service has seen an 11% increase in new applications. The table below shows the changes in demand across the two periods.

Blue Badge April to October 2024 comparison to same period 2023					
	2023	2024	Change	% Change	Direction
Applications Received	4359	5681	1322	30%	↑
New Applications	2085	2322	237	11%	↑
Renewal Applications	2274	3359	1085	48%	↑
Badges Issued	3915	4110	195	5%	↑
Applications Refused	797	839	42	5%	↑
Decisions made by team	4712	5064	352	7%	↑

In addition to the increased demand the service has experienced, it has also been impacted by a long-term team management absence. Another member of the Customer Service Management team has now taken on responsibility for the service and is working to improve processes and reduce decision making times. The detailed action plan is shown in Appendix 1. The changes detailed will not individually impact performance significantly but collectively it is anticipated that they will increase the efficiency of the service and help performance to reach, and then pass the 12 week timescale over time.

The short-term aim is to get decision making back to under 12 weeks, with a medium to long term aim of achieving a 6 – 8-week timeframe, although this will remain subject to maintaining stable demand and staffing capacity.

Summary of financial implications

7. There are no financial implications connected with this update.

Summary of legal implications

8. There are no legal implications connected with this update.

Summary of human resources implications

9. There are no human resources implications connected with this update.

Summary of sustainability impact

10. There are no sustainability implications connected with this update.

Summary of public health implications

11. There are no public health implications connected with this update.

Summary of equality implications

12. There are no changes connected with this update which require an equalities impact assessment. However, the ability of residents with eligible disabilities to access a blue badge is designed to support independence, mobility and access to services. Any difficulties in applying for, or renewing a permit can impact this objective.

Summary of risk assessment

13. The blue badge service is subject to DfT guidelines around processing timescales. Although everything is done within the resources available to meet the target 12 week turnaround timescale, it is not subject to a statutory requirement in this respect.

Background papers

14. The informal Working Group report produced for 9 October 2023 Overview and Scrutiny. [\(Public Pack\)Agenda Document for Overview and Scrutiny Board, 09/10/2023 18:00 \(bcpcouncil.gov.uk\)](#)

Appendix 1 - Action Plan

Assessment			
Ref.	Action	Outcome	Progress
ASSTM 01	All letter templates to be reviewed and updates to the system to input standard paragraphs to prevent from having to manually type standardised evidence requests.	Reduction in time producing bespoke letters	Complete
ASSTM 02	Reduce amount of 'work pots' (LA Stages) the team must monitor to search for the eldest application before being able to process – Appeals pots condensed into 1 and Assess Paper stage removed.	Reduction in the need for excess checking	Complete
ASSTM 03	Implement a pre-assessment process capturing applications who haven't provided mandatory evidence much quicker	Timely request for additional information Reduce application assessment time	Complete
ASSTM 04	Stop customers from having to re-apply when they have completed the online form incorrectly and they are not automatically eligible	Reducing number of applications received Reduction in 'rejection' notifications	In Progress
ASSTM 05	Access to Adult Social Care Database	Improve processing times Reduce additional demands on ASC	In Progress
ASSTM 06	Recruit an Apprentice for Blue Badge to remove all 'business admin' tasks from Assessment Team	Improved decision making timeframe	In Progress
ASSTM 07	Publish updated Blue Badge Policy following annual review	Ensure a consistent BCP approach to application assessment	In Progress
ASSTM 08	Create resilience on Tell Us Once processing to enable fair distribution of work to the team	Improved use of limited resources	In Progress

Telephony and Email			
Ref.	Action	Outcome	Progress
TELEML 01	Create new Document Types within CMS to make document uploading more transparent	Improved view of documents within application	Complete
TELEML 02	Increase number of staff handling emails	Improved resilience; quicker response	In Progress
TELEML 03	Increase number of staff handling telephone enquiries and enhance ability to amend / update application details	Improved processing timelines	In Progress
Digital Mailroom / Hand delivered post			
Ref.	Action	Outcome	Progress
DMHDP01	Review and update training guides	Consistent approach to post /application handling	Complete
DMHDP02	Blue Badge Assessor to audit Digital Mailroom monthly to ensure all Cheques / postal orders are cashed; returned Badges are correctly disposed of and database updated	Ensure timely banking of fees. Ensure old badges are destroyed to prevent fraud Ensure database is updated to prevent fraud/ distress	Complete