

Adults and Safer City Scrutiny Panel

Minutes - 26 March 2019

Attendance

Members of the Adults and Safer City Scrutiny Panel

Cllr Simon Bennett (Vice-Chair)
Cllr Sohail Khan
Cllr Linda Leach (Chair)
Cllr Asha Mattu
Cllr Barbara McGarrity
Cllr Anwen Muston
Cllr Zee Russell

In Attendance

Cllr Sandra Samuels Cabinet Member for Adult Services

Witnesses

Lisa Taylor Head of Customer Services
Lisa Powell Team Leader
Cherry Doyle Customer Services Business Process Lead

Part 1 – items open to the press and public

Item No. *Title*

- 1 **Apologies**
Apologies were received from the following:

Cllr Sue Roberts MBE
Cllr Rupinderjit Kaur
- 2 **Declarations of Interest**
Cllrs Zee Russell and Linda Leach declared a non pecuniary interest in agenda 5 – Update on Blue Badge scheme.
- 3 **Minutes of previous meetings (29.1.19)**
The minutes were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.
- 4 **Matters arising**
Item 7 Serious Violence and Exploitation Strategy 2019-22 Consultation

Earl Piggott-Smith, Scrutiny Officer, reminded the panel that a final draft of the document will be sent when it has been considered by Cabinet at the meeting on 10 April 2019.

5 **Update on the Blue Badge scheme**

Lisa Taylor, Head of Customer Services, advised the panel that she had recently taken responsibility for the local administration of Blue Badge scheme. The Head of Customer Service introduced Cherry Doyle, Business Process Lead, and Lisa Powell, Duty Manager to the panel.

The Head of Customer Service advised the panel that the administration of the Blue Badge scheme had been transferred to the Customer Services team in 2015. The panel were advised that City of Wolverhampton Council (CWC) administers the national Blue Badge scheme on behalf of the Department of Transport.

The Head of Customer Services gave a brief overview of the scheme and changes made to the national contract in 2019. The changes to the scheme had created difficulties for local authorities and locally it has been used to review the operation of the scheme. The Head of Customer Services advised the panel of the current application and assessment process and the performance of the service. The Head of Customer Services advised the panel that on average 400 applications are received monthly and the processing times have increased. The average time to process an application in 2018 was 10 weeks. There are no figures currently available for 2019 but will be provided at a future meeting date.

The Head of Customer Services advised the panel the online application process is managed by Department for Transport. Local authorities have more discretion about the content of the paper application and the panel were advised that discussions were ongoing to make changes to paper form easier to complete. The changes are intended to reduce delays in the process and improve performance.

The panel were advised that it is not possible to provide analysis of the applications as they move through each stage of the assessment process to better understand the causes of delays or where extra resources are needed to manage the demand.

The Head of Customer Services added that work is being done to make the process more efficient and the easier for the public. The panel were advised that extra resources across the service can be brought in where needed and work is being done to create a larger dedicated team to process the applications. There are currently two dedicated employees responsible for processing Blue Badge applications within the team. The Head of Customer Services suggested that a progress report on the performance of the service be presented in six-months to the panel. The report will include details of any changes to scheme following the recent national public consultation where the Govt has invited views on extending the eligibility criteria scheme to include other groups. This particular change, if adopted, will require a review of the current working arrangements in order to manage the expected increase in the number of applications and also communicate any changes to the public.

The Head of Customer Services commented on the low number of complaints received and explained that a proportion of the contacts are dealt within as service requests within the team.

Many of the contacts are related to queries about the progress of applications submitted for assessment. The Head of Customer Services outlined the key future risks to the service as detailed in the briefing paper. The panel were invited to comment on the paper.

Lisa Powell, Duty Manager, explained the criteria to qualify automatically for a Blue Badge and the role of occupational therapy in undertaking a mobility assessment for people who do not qualify automatically. The assessment was previously done by an external company but is now done internally. The Duty Manager advised that it normally take 21 days for a badge to be printed and sent to an applicant. The panel were advised that a change to the company contracted to print the blue badges nationally is experiencing problems which has led to delays in applicants receiving their badges. The Government in response to concerns about the backlog has reduced the SLA target to print badges from 7 to 5 days, which should hopefully reduce the time taken to print badges. The panel thanked the presenters for the report.

The panel queried the number of dedicated employees in the team responsible for processing applications for Blue Badges. The panel commented on the view expressed by SAGA and CAB who argued that forms should be processed in much shorter period.

The panel were advised that there are two full time members of the team. The work of the team can be supported by other resources in response to an increase in demand. The Head of Customer Services advised the new assessment criteria was introduced in Scotland in 2018 and the change had led to an increase in the number of applications. The Head of Customer Services added that the current use of resources will be reviewed to look at how best to deal with 'pinch points' in the current assessment process which is causing delays. There is no seasonal variation in the number of applications received.

Lisa Powell, Duty Manager, advised the panel that the occupational health service has two staff who assess applications that do not automatically qualify for a Blue Badge. The Duty Manager outlined details of the assessment process.

The Duty Manager advised the panel of different approaches adopted by local authorities when calculating the date a paper application will be accepted, some authorities, such as Dudley MBC who will only start counting the time taken when all the required information has been received. The panel were advised that CWC calculate the time taken to process an application from the date it is received.

To support applicant's advice sessions are arranged at local library, there is a lengthy waiting list for people wanting to book a meeting. The panel expressed concern that the level of dedicated resources was not sufficient to meet the level of demand and also process the backlog of applications.

The panel expressed concern about possible changes to when an application would be processed, where information required was either incomplete or incorrect and further enquiries would be necessary before it could be processed.

The Head of Customer Services advised the panel that the proposed change suggested in consultation would be to extend the assessment criteria to include people with hidden disabilities, such as people with dementia. The panel suggested if resources could be arranged around the date of renewal by using information already held to identify people.

The Director of Adult Services reminded panel members that the new assessment criteria would still require an applicant to show a link to their ability to travel, and not solely on the basis of having a specific qualifying illness or medical condition.

The panel expressed concern about the referring the public to the voluntary sector for advice on Blue Badge at a time when they are under financial pressure and limited resources.

The Head of Customer Service suggested a further report is presented to the panel in September 2019 on progress and details of any changes to the eligibility criteria. The report to include details of performance data at each of application assessment process and comparison with a previous period. The panel support a review of current resources in the team and would like to see proposals on how current number of applications can be managed with the overall aim of reducing waiting times for issuing of Blue Badges.

Resolved:

1. The panel agreed to the note the report.
2. The Head of Customer Service to present a report to the panel 24 September 2019 detailing progress in responding to the issues highlighted in the report and specifically on changes to the eligibility criteria and delays in the assessment process.

6

Adults and Safer City Scrutiny Panel 2019/20 Future Work Programme

Earl Piggott-Smith, Scrutiny Officer, presented the draft work programme for information and comment. The panel agreed to add a future report on the Blue Badge scheme to the work programme.

The panel discussed the provision of care services aimed at helping people to remain independent in their own home. The panel discussed the range of preventative services and the role of the voluntary sector in helping people to stay independent. The panel discussed the support given to voluntary sector groups and links to other community support. The panel agreed to add this issue to panel work programme for 2019/20.

Resolved:

The panel agreed to the update the work programme and include a report on the administration of the Blue Badge scheme and community support available to residents to help support their independence, as a future agenda items.