

# Briefing Note

**Title: Blue Badge Update**

**Date: 18 July 2022**

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**Job Title: Contact Centre Manager**

**Intended Audience:**

Internal

Partner organisation

Public

Confidential

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## Purpose

To provide an update on the Blue Badge service to Scrutiny Board, providing information on processing times, complaints and Councillor enquiries received.

## Background

The Blue Badge scheme is governed nationally by the Department for Transport (DfT) and administrated locally by local authorities (the guidance can be found here <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-blue-badge-scheme-local-authority-guidance-england/blue-badge> . Within City of Wolverhampton Council, this process is managed by Customer Services, supported by Independent Living Services (where assessment by an Occupational Therapist (OT) is required).

OT's are qualified health care professionals who carry out the mobility eligibility assessments for Blue Badge applicants who don't meet the criteria for an automatic badge. The general principles for determining the eligibility of individual applicants can be found here [Blue Badge scheme local authority guidance \(England\) - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#).

## 2021/22 Performance Summary

The government guidance states that a decision is usually made within 12 weeks (84 days). Between 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022, the service processed a total of **4676 applications** and the average processing time was **9 weeks**.

Applications are received both via online application and paper-based application. Customer Services also deliver Blue Badge surgeries in the community (Wednesfield Library and Bilston Library) as well as in the Civic Centre to support customers with completing their applications.

For the financial year 2021/2022, 4122 applications (88%) were received online and 554 paper applications (12%).

The processing times for automatic eligibility and OT based assessments is as follows:

<b>Applications received by type</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Average processing time including *badge delivery</b>
OT assessment required	2189	105 days (15 weeks)
Automatic eligibility	2486	56 days (8 weeks)

Automatic eligibility applications are processed solely by the Blue Badge Team and do not require any input from OT.

Average processing times have been impacted by awaiting supplementary information from applicants, employee sickness during our peak periods for 2021 and awaiting OT assessments. The amount of blue badge requests in 2021/22 was also up from 3376 in 2020/21 due to the pandemic delaying applications.

### **Current Position – 2022/23 Q1 performance**

From 1 April 2022 to 30 June 2022, 1360 Blue Badge Applications were received. Included in this total, 686 have been processed with applicants receiving an outcome, 165 are waiting for OT assessment, 271 awaiting further information from the applicant and 216 to be processed. With the remaining 22 applications at other various stages including awaiting payment, appeals and waiting for the cheque to clear.

During this period, we commenced the trialling of a processing team for Blue Badge applications which has resulted in a significant reduction in the processing time.

The below table shows the average processing time of the 686 processed applications received during quarter 1.

<b>Applications received by type</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Average processing time including *badge delivery</b>
OT assessment required	151	34 days (4 weeks)
Automatic eligibility	535	35 days (5 weeks)

Automatic eligibility has a longer processing time in the performance 2022-23 to date, due to several cases where the customer has outstanding information to provide in order to process their application.

Badges are produced and delivered directly from APS (the company we use for production of badges), this process takes 7-10 days. We include badge production and delivery within our processing time.

On average the service receives 90 applications, 200 phone calls and 100 emails a week. There is a dedicated phone line for Blue Badge enquiries. For the period 1 April 2021 – 31 March 2022 we received 25,684 calls and abandoned 2.1% (527 calls). This equates to an average of two calls abandoned per working day. 5772 emails were actioned during the same period.

## **Benchmarking**

Currently, there is no formal regional benchmarking group for Blue Badge processing. Customer Services have contacted a number of Local Authorities (LA) to start the process of establishing a group.

We do regularly engage with neighbouring authorities (Birmingham, Dudley, Walsall and Sandwell) to identify areas of best/good practice and to compare case management processes and timescales.

Most neighbouring authorities work to the DfT timescale of 12 weeks and have advised that their yearly average processing time is 8-10 weeks. Average processing times can vary throughout the year as this is dependent on the number of applications received.

There is a difference in how we record application processing times in comparison to other local authorities. CWC's timescale starts from the point an application is received, whilst most LA's start their timescale from the point when all supporting information has been received. This is significant, as CWC receive a number of applications without the relevant supporting information, as well as incomplete applications. Customer Services are currently undertaking a fact-finding exercise to establish the impact on our processing times and to explore the option of recording this in a different way.

Birmingham outsources their Blue Badge service and have an average processing time of 4-6 weeks. Dudley have confirmed that during periods where demand is high, they have outsourced the DBA element of their process. Further work will be undertaken to understand these models in detail, and to adopt best practice where appropriate.

## **Customer Feedback and enquiries**

We consistently monitor all types of feedback from customers, to ensure that we can monitor, improve and tailor the service we provide. Over the past 12 months we have received the following:

- Nine Councillor Enquiries relating to Blue Badges were received via the Councillor Enquiry Unit (CEU) over the last 12 months.
- Two corporate complaints were received about the service, one relating to a lost Blue Badge which was partially upheld, and the other was regarding the Blue Badge process which was not upheld as we follow the process guidance as set by the DfT.
- 17 customer comments on the services were received via our website, which included:
  - Three positive comments;
  - One questioning how to make a payment which has now been rectified with Gov Pay;
  - Twelve with general enquiries;
  - One comment disagreeing with the Blue Badge renewal criteria.

Currently, any enquiries received via the CEU are responded to via CEU. Due to recent feedback, we have agreed with CEU that we will respond directly to the Councillor and copy in CEU. This will allow CEU to continue to track responses while enabling Councillors to contact the service directly for further enquiries.

## Appeals Process

We have guidance on our web page and regarding eligibility and the appeals process for Wolverhampton on our webpage: [Required Proof of Entitlement for a Blue Badge | City Of Wolverhampton Council](#)

At point of refusal, applicants are advised of their right of appeal. The Panel is made up of the Principal OT, a Section Leader from Customer Services, a manager outside of both services and a representative from EDI.

The appeal panel use evidence from experts such as GP's and Consultants. Evidence that has been received from GPs in the past has sometimes been really broad preventing us evidencing that an applicant meets the criteria as set by DfT. An example of this is a GP writing to confirm that their patient has difficulty walking, but without the detail required for a Blue Badge:

Please see snapshot below from: [Blue Badge scheme local authority guidance \(England\) - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#).

*4.48 The applicant will need to show that, as a result of their enduring and substantial disability, they are unable to walk very far without experiencing severe difficulty; and that their inability to walk is affected to the extent that they would be unable to access goods and services unless allowed to park close to shops, public buildings, and other facilities. Several factors may be relevant to determining this:*

*Excessive pain reported by the applicant whilst walking, or as a consequence of the effort of walking.*

*Pain is subjective, and some people have higher pain thresholds than others. Consideration may need to be given to cross-referencing an applicant's reported experience of pain with information they provide about their enduring and substantial disability, details of medication they take, coping strategies they have adopted, and any courses of treatment designed to help them manage their pain.*

*Any breathlessness reported by the applicant whilst walking, or as a consequence of the effort of walking.*

*The applicant's reported breathlessness may need to be cross-referenced with details of diagnosed medical conditions known to cause breathlessness (for example, emphysema) and any observations of the applicant's respiratory rate during a mobility assessment.*

*4.49 It does not matter whether excessive pain or breathlessness occurs at the time of walking, or later - what counts is that it is a direct result of their attempt to walk.*

*4.50 The distance an applicant is able to walk without excessive pain or breathlessness; taking due consideration of the environment the individual usually walks:*

- if an applicant is unable to walk 30 metres (33 yards) in total, then their walking ability is not appreciable, and they can be deemed as having very considerable difficulty in walking'*
- the applicant may be deemed eligible if they can walk 30-80 metres (33-87.5 yards) without pain or breathlessness, but demonstrate very considerable difficulty in walking through a combination of other factors - for example, extremely slow pace and/or their manner of walking*
- applicants who can walk more than 80 metres (87.5 yards) and do not demonstrate very considerable difficulty in walking through any other factors would not be deemed as eligible*

*4.51 The speed at which they are able to walk. As a guide, a typical adult can walk in a minute:*

- brisk pace - >90 metres per minute*
- normal pace - 61-90 metres per minute*
- slow pace - 40-60 metres per minute*
- very slow pace - <40 metres per minute*

### **Improvements already underway**

The Blue Badge paper and online application forms are owned by DfT however, we have been looking at ways in how we can continue to support our customers to make the process simple for them and have been working on the following:

- Previously, Customer Service Officers (CSO's) handled calls, email enquiries and processed applications for Blue Badges . As a pilot, we have temporarily set up a separate team to process applications only, to improve our processing times and customer engagement to reduce delays and to build resilience for future impacts of employee absence. This has been met within existing resources and but has impacted on our service as we have been using call handlers from other areas of the business to support emails and calls. This pilot has been successful and will be implemented as BAU.

- Cross training across the team has been a priority in recent weeks, to ensure we have a robust and reliable source of CSO's to enable the service to work at maximum capacity should there be any absences. The training has impacted on recent processing times, but the benefits will be realised over the coming months.
- Team members have recently attended a training course with Northgate (supplier for our Blue Badge system), this was an excellent opportunity to improve their system knowledge and learn some extra hints and tips around the CMS system, and how to use it to its full extent.
- We are working with the Independent Living Service to review OT assessor resource, to work together to create a positive impact on assessment times for our service.
- The council's Blue Badge web page is currently under review. Our aim is to make it more user friendly by adding a 'how to' video guide to support customers with online applications. We have liaised with our Equality, Diversity and Inclusion colleagues and are receiving support from Zebra Signs to create a sign language, subtitled and audio video. The website content will be updated and will include clear timescales to manage customer expectation.
- We have promoted our support surgery dates and locations with local libraries and GP surgeries. We will also work with our third sector partners to further promote our surgeries. Since July 2021 the Blue Badge Team have undertaken 54 appointments to support residents with their Blue Badge applications. We are currently identifying additional surgery locations.
- As of 31 January 2022, we went live with GovPay which allows applicants to pay online when applying which can reduce their application time by up to two weeks. Since 'Go Live' 79% of applicants have paid online.
- We are working with Northgate to see if we can build a tracking system to enable customers to login and see progress of their application. We are also looking at how we can auto generate letters/emails to customers to update them on their application, this is currently a manual process.