

Inquiry into the Blue Badge Scheme in Wales: Eligibility and Implementation - Summary note of focus groups

1 May 2019

Background

As part of the **Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee** inquiry into the **Blue Badge Scheme in Wales**, the National Assembly for Wales' Citizen Engagement Team has been gathering the views of citizens across Wales on the Scheme.

Methodology

The Citizen Engagement Team suggested a qualitative research approach to the inquiry delivered via a series of focus groups. This approach was agreed by the Committee in January 2019.

12 focus groups were arranged across Wales involving **102 citizens** from **all five Assembly regions**. Focus groups were arranged in Bridgend, Caerphilly, Cardiff, Ceredigion (Aberystwyth), Flintshire (Mold and Shotton) Gwynedd (Bangor), Pembrokeshire (Haverfordwest), Powys (Knighton and Llandrindod Wells) and Swansea (Pontarddulais). Those participating in the focus group sessions came from the aforementioned local authority areas and other local authority areas in Wales.

Participants included current and former Blue Badge holders, potential Blue Badge applicants, those who had their applications refused, carers and relevant council staff.

Participants were sourced through a number of relevant organisations and groups including Age Cymru, Carers Wales, Credu, Disability Wales, Learning Disability Wales



and the MS Society, as well as disability forums and access groups in Arfon, Ceredigion, Flintshire, Knighton and Powys . Other participants were sourced via a short explainer video on the Scheme which was promoted on the Assembly’s social media channels.

Format

Participants discussed the following themes as part of the focus group sessions:-

- Support, information and guidance available on the Blue Badge Scheme in Wales (including accessibility of information – braille, easy-read etc.)
- The application process
- Eligibility criteria for a Blue Badge
- Assessment
- Public awareness
- Rejection of a Blue Badge application
- Reassessment
- Abuse of the Blue Badge Scheme
- Enforcement
- Fees charged for a replacement badge
- Any deterioration in rights as a Blue Badge holder (for example, charging for parking).

Summary of key contributions

Support and information

Most focus group participants agreed that a greater level of support and information is necessary for those wishing to apply for a Blue Badge.

“I have had a Blue Badge since I was about 50 years old and it used to be easy, but not anymore. People who’ve had a badge for years are being turned down on renewal. They keep moving the goalposts.”

Blue Badge holder, Cardiff

In addition to greater support and information at the application stage, many participants believed that information should be readily available on the location, size and variety of disabled parking spaces at a destination.

“I wish there was a map app similar to Google Maps, which you could download on your phone to show where disabled parking spaces are located. You can find out where restaurants and fuel stops are on Google Maps, so why not disabled parking spaces? That would be awesome and would benefit a lot of disabled people.”

Blue Badge holder, Cardiff

Whilst the majority of participants were of the view that greater support and information is required at the application stage, some did have positive experiences.

“With me, getting it (the Blue Badge) was really smooth because the RNIB (Royal National Institute of Blind People) have done fantastic work in making sure that the information is given to people who are visually impaired, in a range of ways - and the eye clinic liaison officer service is a fantastic resource in making sure information is getting out to visually impaired people, but that may not be the case with other disabilities.”

Blue Badge holder, Powys

Many participants explained that it is the voluntary organisations who predominantly provide the support to those who need assistance with a Blue Badge application, but this is diminishing.

“One of the major problems is with voluntary organisations - their services are being pared down. We are being cut to the core, so the support available to people who need help with the application form is minimal.”

Carer, Powys

However, the majority of participants who described positive experiences of the application process were primarily those who qualified for a Blue Badge automatically.

“I’m from Llanelli and I’ve never had to show myself. They’ve (Carmarthenshire County Council) never made me feel small.”

Blue Badge holder, Carmarthenshire

Some participants explained there are unique challenges for those who are registered blind or with a severe sight impairment.

“I’m pretty good on a computer and have access to plenty of assisted technology, but I struggled to find it (information relating to the Blue Badge Scheme), and then find a version I could read.”

Blue Badge holder, Cardiff

A large proportion of those with sight loss are older people, many of whom may not have access to the internet or have low digital skill. It was suggested that a dedicated telephone number would be useful.

The accessibility of application forms both in terms of the language used and the availability of hard copies was discussed. Some participants said they found the language on the application form and supporting guidance, confusing.

“Why don’t they make the forms available in public places such as libraries? Not everyone has the internet.”

Blue Badge holder, Gwynedd

Assessment

Some participants were of the view that those carrying out the assessment do not have the level of knowledge and expertise necessary in order to make an informed decision on an applicant’s eligibility for a Blue Badge.

“I was turned down once – I have heart and breathing problems, but they’re not interested in that. They were more interested in if I had rails installed in my house. I was also asked if I had a walking stick – I should have been asked 15 or so questions, but I don’t remember that many.”

Former Blue Badge holder, Bridgend

“People who work in this building (council offices) are clerks. Most don’t have any experience of any kind of medical condition. If a doctor says ‘Look this person needs it (the Blue Badge)’, all the council should be doing is dishing it out. The whole focus of the assessments is points. How do you get points? I wasn’t given any information on that and surely that can vary from assessor to assessor. It shouldn’t be down to points – a person’s health and wellbeing is at stake.”

Parent of a Blue Badge applicant whose application was rejected, Ceredigion

All participants agreed that where possible, having an assessor conduct the assessment at the applicant’s property would be helpful.

“We hear so much about assessment for PIP and Employment and Support Allowance (ESA), which is cruel and demeaning and done by people who are supposed to be professional, who don’t have experience or knowledge of your particular problem. As long as the Blue Badge assessments are not conducted by the same people, that’s fine.”

Blue Badge holder, Bridgend

Those who were considered “subject to further assessment” tended to recount more negative experiences of the assessment process which included difficulty parking at/ and inaccessibility of council offices, the stress of having to undergo an assessment and doubts over the expertise of assessors.

“We were sitting there for ages. She was given a form to fill which immediately put her on edge. She was told to stand against a wall to have her photo taken. It seems to me that the process could be simplified so much. My wife is in receipt of the highest mobility component of PIP – surely that’s all she needs to show? She should be able to send a copy of the PIP form to the local authority and the Blue Badge should arrive in the post.”

Partner of a Blue Badge holder, Swansea

Some participants explained that some have permanent conditions which are unlikely to improve or will deteriorate and as such, it does not make sense to conduct a re-assessment for a Blue Badge. Common sense should prevail in such circumstances.

“There’s a certain group of people you know who are not going to get better. They shouldn’t be assessed as often as they are. It should be like a driving licence where the badge lasts for 10 years for people with certain conditions.”

Parent of a Blue Badge holder, Pembrokeshire

We also heard a view from a participant who had previously been involved in administering Blue Badges.

“So with the old forms, which they changed recently to this very long convoluted form – I was never medically trained, but I would read through the form and it was very easy to say whether the person was automatically entitled or whether I’d need to send something to the GP. The medical professional would effectively make that decision.”

Participant with experience of administering Blue Badges, Powys

Abuse of the Blue Badge Scheme and Blue Badge holders

Views on whether abuse of the Blue Badge Scheme in Wales is widespread were largely mixed. Whilst some participants shared accounts of friends and/or family of Blue Badge holders using the Badge when the badge holder is not in the vehicle, others had not witnessed any abuse.

“Before my son was born, I never took much notice. You can’t judge, but we all do. I’ll look at some people and think ‘Are they disabled?’. I’ve seen some people park in an accessible parking space before limping into the shop on one leg, and limping out on the other.”

Parent of a Blue Badge holder, Pembrokeshire

Some participants explained they have witnessed people park in disabled parking spaces without displaying a Blue Badge, rush into a shop and then back to their car.

“I do challenge if I see someone who doesn’t look disabled, but I don’t challenge aggressively. I query because of the preconceptions - I might not be seeing what the problem is. I really object to people abusing the Badge. If you do it (challenge them) carefully, you don’t get people’s back up.”

Blue Badge holder and carer of a Blue Badge holder, Newport

Many participants discussed the perception of abuse and explained that whilst some people may be abusing the Scheme, any widespread abuse may simply be perceived and does not reflect the reality.

“I think it’s more perception. I think the amount of people who do abuse it is probably small, but it’s such an inflammatory issue that I think it gets more attention.”

Blue Badge holder, Powys

Some participants explained that many disabilities are invisible and that the extension in the eligibility criteria for a Blue Badge to those with cognitive impairments has meant that those with less visible disabilities are unfairly viewed as people abusing the Scheme.

“I know someone who got hassled in Tesco car park a couple of months ago and I felt very sorry for her. She had about six people around her questioning her because she was parked in a blue badge space saying “How dare you park there, you haven’t got a disability!” - well that lady might have a disability you can’t see!”

Parent of a Blue Badge holder, Pembrokeshire

“For those people with ME who are lucky enough to get a Blue Badge, they do get abuse from members of the public – because they don’t have a wheelchair or walking stick – people think they’re abusing the system.”

Parent of a Blue Badge applicant whose application was rejected, Ceredigion

Some participants explained that members of the public have become accustomed to associating disability predominantly with physical disabilities due to the prevalence of the disability logo, which shows a person in a wheelchair. It was suggested by some participants that introducing a variety of disability logos or different colour badges to denote different disabilities may help combat abuse of Blue Badge holders by showing that the Scheme covers a range of disabilities.

“I notice a difference and get abuse when I dress differently. If I dress nicely and my hair is done, they will look me up and down and question whether I am in fact, disabled.”

Blue Badge holder, Bridgend

Some groups discussed those with variable disabilities who may qualify for a Blue Badge, explaining that there should be a civic duty on people to only use a Blue Badge parking space when it is essential.

“If you have a variable condition, there’s an onus on you as a citizen to use it only when appropriate and you need it. This is difficult to enforce so it comes down to education and doing the right thing.”

Blue Badge holder, Carmarthenshire

Enforcement

The majority of participants agreed that whilst there is some enforcement, it is often lacking and there is significant room for improvement.

“I’ve been charged £70 for failing to show my badge, so there is some enforcement.”

Blue Badge holder, Bridgend

Most participants agreed that those caught abusing the Scheme should be required to pay a significant monetary fine (one participant suggested a £1,000 fine) and have their Blue Badge cancelled. However, concerns were raised by many participants that a Blue Badge holder who was unaware their Badge may have been used without their knowledge could be unfairly punished.

An increase in the number of spot checks by traffic wardens was a popular manner of enforcement by many participants. However, some participants had concerns about the knowledge of some traffic wardens regarding the rights associated with a Blue Badge.

“When I use my Blue Badge in Swansea, I parked where it allows someone to park for two hours and no return within one hour. I approached a traffic officer to see whether I could park for longer as a Blue Badge holder but he didn’t have a clue.”

Blue Badge holder and carer of a Blue Badge holder, Rhondda Cynon Taf

Some participants were aware of the disparities between public and private land, explaining that certain businesses may be reluctant to take enforcement action against those abusing the Scheme as it may have a detrimental impact on their business.

Abuse of the Scheme and any associated enforcement action was primarily discussed in the context of supermarket/ shop car parks (as opposed to ‘on-road’ or residential car parking). In such instances, the majority of participants were of the view that an onus should be placed on the shop to report abuse of the Scheme to the relevant local authority and/ or to take greater responsibility for enforcement (wheel clamping was suggested by some participants).

In addition to spot checks, some participants queried whether technology could be utilised to counter any abuse of the Scheme:

“There was an occasion when I went to put my car registration number into a payment machine and a photo of my car flashed up on screen – there were cameras in the bollards. With advancements in technology, can something similar be done to ‘police’ the abuse of disabled parking spaces?”

Blue Badge holder, Bridgend

Some participants explained that legislation needs to be introduced which is applicable across Wales on both public and private land. If the law is broken, a substantial fine should be paid. This could also result in positive PR for the Scheme, as

if it is enforced rigorously, it could mean that less people are likely to abuse the scheme as the majority are unlikely to want to incur such a fine.

“There is a duty under the Equality Act that if you make a reasonable adjustment like a Blue Badge parking space, you have a duty to manage it to make sure it’s effective. If you fail to do so, it cannot be considered a ‘reasonable adjustment’ – but the Equality Act isn’t enforceable in that way.”

Council employee, Pembrokeshire

Most participants were largely against the idea of having a photograph of the Blue Badge holder on the front of a Blue Badge, believing it to be a breach of an individual’s privacy. This could also cause safety issues if, for example, a vulnerable person is parking in a Blue Badge parking space late at night.

Public awareness

Some participants were of the view that unfavourable media coverage of those with disabilities has contributed to the negative public perception of people with disabilities.

“The media hasn’t helped because it implies that if you’ve got a Blue Badge, you’re a scrounger in some way.”

Council employee, Pembrokeshire

Many participants agreed that greater public awareness is necessary in order to inform the public of the range of disabilities which may qualify an individual for a Blue Badge, and that any requisite assessment is rigorous and robust.

Participants shared a number of ideas on how the public could be better informed about the Scheme. The following were some of the more popular ideas:-

- A television campaign/ advert featuring a range of people with different disabilities using a Blue Badge;
- Disability badges showing different disability logos or colours to denote different disabilities;
- Adding the phrase ‘*Not all disabilities are visible*’ to the Blue Badge
- Including information on the Scheme in the Highway code

The majority of participants explained that associating disability with wheelchair use is in the national psyche because of the ubiquity of the disability logo, which depicts a person in a wheelchair.

“There definitely needs to be greater public awareness. I used to get people staring, even as a wheelchair user, especially when I was younger and I had a group of friends in the car. You could say they were thinking ‘Why is there a group of young girls using an accessible space?’ It was only when they saw the wheelchair that people stopped staring.”

Blue Badge holder, Ceredigion

Some participants also discussed awareness of the rules and rights associated with the Scheme and the need for greater clarity. For example, some participants were unaware that a Blue Badge holder can park on double yellow lines for up to three hours as long as they are not causing an obstruction, whilst others were unaware that the Blue Badge holder needs to be in the vehicle when the family member, friend or carer is parking in a disabled parking space. Others thought they could not get a Blue Badge unless they were in receipt of Personal Independence Payment (PIP), whilst some believed you needed a car to qualify for a Blue Badge.

Disabled parking spaces and built environment

The size and amount of disabled parking spaces and associated built environment was a common theme discussed at length during the majority of focus groups.

“When I park in a disabled bay in work, the bay is a normal sized bay which can be difficult. I therefore requested a disabled parking bay at the end so that I can open the door fully and swing myself out. In other car parks, I’ve had to get someone to drive the car out of the space so I can get out.”

Blue Badge holder and carer of a Blue Badge holder, Rhondda Cynon Taf

Some participants explained that in some car parks, parking spaces for those with disabilities are the same size as non-disabled parking spaces and merely have the disability symbol painted on the floor.

Most participants explained that allowing enough space either side of the vehicle and to the rear (to allow any disability equipment to be unloaded with greater ease) is essential.

“A friend of mine is a wheelchair user and people regularly park across the back of her car so she can’t get out.”

Blue Badge holder, Cardiff

In addition to the size and accessibility of disability parking spaces, the built environment which surrounds a parking space was considered very important. Most participants explained that in their experience, disabled parking spaces are generally located near central walkways. However, some participants described issues with the location of trolley shelters at supermarkets, which are often located further away from the parking spaces.

“There was an issue at one supermarket car park where a bay was painted next to a dropped curb, which meant that if anyone had parked there, it would be impossible for a wheelchair user to reach the supermarket. I complained to the manager and the following day, it was hatched out with yellow paint and bollards put there which were wide enough for a mobility scooter to pass.”

Blue Badge holder and carer of a Blue Badge holder, Newport

Most participants believed that disabled parking spaces should be uniform in size, however there were exceptions, with some participants explaining that a variety of spaces are needed to meet the individual needs of a Blue Badge holder.

“Some people with certain disabilities require wider parking spaces, but others don’t. There should be a variety of spaces so that there’s space for those who don’t need a wheelchair, but need a Blue Badge space.”

Blue Badge holder, Bridgend

Some participants described the difficulties they have experienced in multi-storey car parks where the ceilings are often not high enough and the spaces not wide enough to allow ease of access for both the individual and any equipment they may have (for example, a mobility scooter).

“For me, it doesn’t matter if it’s next to the shop door – what I need is space.”

Blue Badge holder, Carmarthenshire

Safety was also a common theme when discussing built environment. Car parks can often be dangerous for people with disabilities if the infrastructure is inadequate.

“I can’t put my shopping in the back of the van because of all the hoists, so I have to put it on the seat inside the sliding door so I can get the shopping in and out. Sometimes I have to park over two bays to be able to get stuff out of the vehicle.”

Blue badge holder, Ceredigion

Temporary Blue Badges

Many participants were unaware that temporary badges are available.

“I took a friend to get a Blue Badge who was having chemotherapy at the time. She was told by the hospital that she was entitled to a temporary Blue Badge. She rang County Hall who said they’d send her a form but never did. She was sent an appointment letter where she was required to present herself at County Hall. She rang again to request a form but nothing was sent. She arrived at County Hall and was given a form, but it was the incorrect form. Can there be a system where all you need to show is a letter from a specialist? Because when you’re very unwell, going through such a process is very distressing.”

Blue Badge holder, Swansea

Those who were aware of temporary Blue Badges believed that the application process should be simplified as much as possible as those applying are often acutely ill and undergoing treatment which means the process can often be more onerous for them.

“My wife had an accident, so I called to apply for a temporary badge. I was asked if she had the accident more than six months ago. I said no, but I was told she had to have the condition for six or more months – it’s crazy!”

Blue Badge holder, Rhondda Cynon Taf

Reapplication process

Most participants agreed that the reapplication process for a Blue Badge is simple and straightforward, but others, particularly in Anglesey, Flintshire and Gwynedd felt the re-application process was difficult. Identification documents are required on reapplication, but some people are not registered drivers and have no passport.

Paying for parking

In some places it is not clear whether Blue Badge holders need to pay or not.

“Why cant they just have the logo and say whether you pay or not?”

Blue Badge holder, Flintshire

There was particular confusion between public and private car parks and any associated payment requirements.

“The charging regime is a postcode lottery.”

Blue Badge holder, Gwynedd

It was clear from most participants that some areas are charging for parking in Blue Badge parking spaces, whilst others are not. Some participants explained that concessions are offered to Blue Badge holders in some areas, such as extra time.

Many participants explained that people with disabilities often face greater financial deprivation than those without disabilities and therefore, finding money to pay parking charged from an already constrained income is difficult.