

THURROCK DIVERSITY NETWORK LIMITED



Thurrock Diversity Network Limited

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Introduction

Thurrock Diversity Network Limited is a Community Benefit Society, working for the benefit of Disabled Adult Residents in Thurrock, promoting inclusive services and independent living. At a Network meeting in October 2017 our members took part in the Government's recent "Blue Badge Citizen Survey".¹

The stated aims of the Survey are to:

The Department for Transport have recently started a project to transform the Blue Badge service. The following set of questions will help us to better understand citizens' needs. If any questions are not relevant, feel free to leave them unanswered. Your answers will be anonymised and will not affect your personal use of the scheme. The survey should take no longer than 15 minutes to complete.

The Survey

The Survey consisted of 35 individual questions, across 9 topics, including:

Applying for a Blue Badge, Benefits (of using the Blue Badge), Renewing a Blue Badge (including further details), Help & Support (including further details), General Information, Enforcement, Physical Blue Badge, Any Other Comments, and finally, About You.

¹ The Survey can be found at: <http://www.smartsurvey.co.uk/s/AU14U/>

Analysis of the Survey

The precise rationale behind the new project is not yet clear, nor is the exact meaning of “transformation” in this context. It is clear however, that the questions are wide ranging and we could be facing a complete overhaul of the Blue Badge system in terms of eligibility, evidence, application, assessments, benefits associated with the Scheme and uses as well as a potential move towards digitising the process, and possibly even the Blue Badge itself.

We utilised and referred to *the Department for Transport – “Blue Badge Scheme: Rights & Responsibilities – August 2017”*² information booklet when discussing and supporting our members to complete the Survey

Applying for a Blue Badge

For our members, the understanding and experience of using the Blue Badge Scheme ranged from finding the process “quite easy” and recognising that because “[I] am entitled to Enhanced Rate for Getting Around under Personal Independence Payment...for others it can be more difficult as an assessment is needed, and this can be subjective”

Our members had a broad understanding that the Blue Badge is allocated to Disabled people, or organisations supporting/providing transport to Disabled people or people with mobility difficulties. Members were aware that the Badge travels with the individual in any private vehicle, in which they drive or are a passenger.

The majority of our members who have experienced the Blue Badge Application process, made the application themselves, or assisted a client, family member or friend to do so.

Many of our members applied for a Blue Badge after acquiring their impairment, for example as a result of Stroke, injury, or age-related neurological and/or mobility difficulties. These changes in circumstance meant that individuals needed to utilise wider parking bays for ease of access, to be closer to civic amenities, facilities, goods, services etc. and for greater access to social activities and opportunities to reduce isolation. To park on single and double yellow lines as part of “on-street” parking for up to 3 hours.

The majority of our members who use Blue Badges, applied via post and enclosed a cheque with only 2 applying in person and paying by card

All applications were made to the local Unitary authority, Thurrock Council.

² See: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-blue-badge-scheme-rights-and-responsibilities-in-england>

In terms of the application process respondents said that getting help and advice in order to fill in the form was vital and that Thurrock Centre for Independent Living (TCIL) was a valuable resource.

Satisfaction levels in terms of the application process ranged from very dissatisfied to very satisfied, recognising that many people required assistance to understand and digest the form's 14 pages, but in fact only 4 pages may be relevant, depending upon whether people were "passported" from DLA or PIP.

Benefits of using the Blue Badge Scheme

In terms of the benefits provided by the Blue Badge Scheme, our members make use of the following:

- Exemption from the congestion charge
- Reduction/Exemption for the DartCharge on the QEII Bridge Crossing
- Parking on double yellow lines for up to 3 hours
- Use of designated on-street parking bays
- Use of off-street parking bays
- Use across the EU

The Renewal Process

Thurrock Council's policy is to not send out renewal reminders to Blue Badge holders within its jurisdiction.

The majority of respondents renewed their Badges either in person or by post. Those people in receipt of Higher Rate DLA or Enhanced Rate PIP found the renewal process easy and straightforward, but those without, did not.

Most people were either neutral or satisfied with the process, but highlighted that renewal letters would be of great help.

Help & Support

Every respondent indicated a need for help or assistance, primarily from a local Third Sector organisation – Thurrock Centre for Independent Living (TCIL) in relation to the renewal process, generally due to feeling overwhelmed by the paperwork. Respondents who requested it, were assisted in person

Supporting the Voluntary Sector

This help and support is not officially commissioned, either locally or nationally, it is left to a charity to provide this vital service and the system should be improved to recognise this help and support which is addressing an unmet need. Relevant funding should be made available in this regard.

Blue Badges – Improving the General Information

General information should continue to be provided on paper and in a variety of format to preserve choice and accessibility to the widest range of individuals.

Enforcement

Our members were of the view that the relevant authorities should take more comprehensive action and prosecute those people who park in Blue Badge Bays who are not entitled to do so, or who use the Blue Badge maliciously or fraudulently. Work should also be carried out to publicise the penalties widely.

Suggested improvements to the Blue Badge Scheme

- Keep the Blue Badge Scheme as it is now.
- Consider making the questions on the application form clearer.
- Consider reducing the required number of forms of I.D. Several members felt that the amount of detail required was excessive.
- Consider advertising on television, perhaps during relevant programmes, re: eligibility and applying, and that you do not need to own a car. Could also highlight the penalties for fraud and misuse, akin to television licence advertising.
- Make the issuing of renewal reminders mandatory for all local authorities, with an option for people to be sent a paper copy of the form, akin to the postal vote, as not everyone, particularly Disabled people has access to the Internet (see below).
- Provide a Direct Line to the relevant Department or team, with a named contact person locally.

The Time Clock and Blue Badge

All of our members who took part in the survey indicated satisfaction with the time clock in principle and also discussed the idea of integrating the 2 components (plastic badge and time clock) into one single unit or perhaps using some kind of key fob if this feasible. All members were of the view that a digital only solution would not be appropriate and should not be adopted. See below for details of concerns around the digital divide

Digital Divide

The fact that the Blue Badge is currently “portable” i.e. it travels with the Disabled person is ideal, as it is not “tied” to one vehicle – this provides flexibility and maximises choice and control for Disabled People in deciding how and when and with whom to travel.

However, any move to a Digital Only version of the Blue Badge should be discouraged, whilst assistive technology and apps can be highly useful for Disabled people, older people, their families and carers, not everyone has access to or can afford a smart phone or electronic/digital equivalent.

The Digital Divide is real and this poses an issue for people in areas where Local Authorities are providing services with a “Digital by Default” approach to access to information advice, guidance and support. Certainly, all of our members who participated in the survey indicated that they either have basic Internet skills or only use the Internet for specific tasks.

It is important to recognise that Disabled people are 20% less likely to have access to the Internet than their non-Disabled peers. Therefore, paper copies should continue to be made available alongside any digital alternatives or associated developments.

In 2017, of disabled adults aged 16 to 24 years, 97.1% were recent internet users, compared with 99.5% who were not disabled. Of disabled adults aged 75 years and over, 34% were recent internet users, compared with 50% who were not disabled.³

In addition, Disabled people experience communication access limitations with regard to internet access at home:

Disabled people are significantly less likely to live in households with access to the internet than non-disabled people. In 2011, 61% of disabled people lived in households with internet access, compared to 86% of non-disabled people⁴

Choice, quality, availability of products and services, including digital apps is limited for Disabled people, particularly for individuals for whom access to the Internet is not available

³ See: Internet users in the UK: 2017 -

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/businessindustryandtrade/itandinternetindustry/bulletins/internetusers/2017#internet-use-by-disabled-adults>

⁴ See: The Office for Disability Issues: Official Statistics, Disability facts and figures. Available at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/disability-facts-and-figures/disability-facts-and-figures>

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and therefore may need help and support in order to access it. Such help and support would need to be sufficiently resourced.

Furthermore, in 2017, the Office for National Statistics released data for internet use in the UK. It found that 22% of disabled adults had never used the internet in 2017, down 25% in 2016.⁵

Conclusion

Thurrock Diversity Network welcomes the opportunity to contribute to and influence and shape the future of the Blue Badge Scheme.

It is important to note that the first parking scheme for disabled people (the Orange Badge Scheme) was created in 1971 to promote greater independent mobility and social inclusion. The Blue Badge Scheme as we know it today was introduced on 1 April 2000.⁶

It is vital that the original key aims are not lost in favour of tighter eligibility, coupled with a “digital by default” approach and cost cutting exercises, hidden behind complete “transformation” or overhaul.

We look forward to seeing the views of our members reflected accurately in any developments of the Scheme.

Thurrock Diversity Network – November 2018

⁵ ONS: Internet users in the UK: 2017 - How internet use is correlated to various socio-demographic characteristics, such as age, sex, disability and geographical location. The annual estimates are based on Quarter 1 of each survey year. Available at:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/businessindustryandtrade/itandinternetindustry/bulletins/internetusers/2017>

⁶ See: The Strategic Review of the Blue Badge Scheme (2007). Available at:

<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20101007202626/http://dft.gov.uk/adobepdf/259428/281009/bluebadgeindepreview.pdf>