

Individual Cabinet member Delegated Decision

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Reform of Blue Badge Scheme

Purpose of Report

1. To request approval to charge a fee of £10.00 for the provision of a Blue (disabled) Parking Badge.

Background

2. The Government announced on 14th February 2011 a major programme of reforms to the Blue Badge scheme. The reform programme has been developed in consultation with disabled people, local authorities and other stakeholders, and on the basis of research and economic analysis. These changes come into effect on 1st January 2012.
3. The reforms have been introduced to respond to future challenges and help ensure that disabled people have fair and equal access to the benefits the concession offers, regardless of where they live. Current problems identified by government include high levels of abuse and misuse of badges, increasing demand for badges and pressures to extend eligibility, inconsistent administration and assessment and inefficient service delivery by some local authorities.

4. The main measures that are being introduced are:-
- i) Implement a new badge design that is harder to copy, forge and alter. This includes changing arrangements for printing, personalising and distributing badges to prevent fraud from happening in the first place;
 - ii) Amend primary and secondary legislation to provide improved powers for local authorities to tackle abuse and fraud;
 - iii) Transfer control of eligibility assessment funding from the NHS to local authorities;
 - iv) Amend legislation to require wider use of independent mobility assessments to determine eligibility, including where previously that assessment was carried out by a GP;
 - v) Extend eligibility to more disabled children under the age of 3 with specific medical conditions;
 - vi) Provide continuous automatic entitlement to a badge to specific severely disabled service personnel and veterans;
 - vii) Establish with local authorities a service improvement project that will deliver operational efficiency savings, help to reduce and prevent abuse and improve customer services. The project will also deliver an on-line application facility and should result in faster, more automatic renewals for people whose circumstances do not change between renewal periods;
 - viii) Raise the maximum fee for a badge that local authorities can charge from £2.00 to £10.00;
 - ix) Enable disabled Armed Forces personnel and their families posted overseas on UK bases to apply for a badge;
5. Wiltshire Council reviewed its Blue Badge process in January 2008. As a result the decision was taken to remove the £2.00 fee since the cost of processing the fee outweighed the income generated. In addition, a full end to end process review was undertaken which improved the service to the customer whilst maintaining standards that met DfT requirements.
6. The main changes affecting Wiltshire Council are the way that the Blue Badges will be generated in the future. All badges will be produced centrally by government and sent to the applicant.
7. In addition government are encouraging councils to use the government's centralised database and their standard application form to enable increased fraud checking. The Wiltshire Blue Badge Team has evaluated these options and intends to use the government's database and application form. The current access database is overdue for replacement and the government application form is thorough and incorporates many of the council's current questions.

The centralised government database will provide:-

- i) secure printing, supply and distribution of badges; the badge will be harder to copy and to forge and the physical security features of the badge will be enhanced, with the use of new technologies and printing techniques.
- ii) a common store of key information on badges and badge holders to enable verification checks to be made quickly and easily, either from a PC or possibly via smart phones or similar technology;
- iii) a web-based management information system for local authorities;
- iv) a standard on-line application form.

8. Changes to enforcement powers

8.1 The government will be extending grounds available to local authorities to refuse to issue including, providing local authority authorised officers with a power to recover, on-the-spot, badges that have been cancelled or misused. In addition the existing legislation will be amended to clarify wrongful use of a badge and the powers to inspect badges and new powers will give local authorities the ability to undertake more effective enforcement activity should they wish to do so. The intention of these changes will result in the greater availability of parking spaces, protecting the scheme for genuine badge holders who have the most need.

9. Changes to the fee

9.1 Under current legislation, local authorities can charge a badge fee of up to £2.00 for those whose applications are successful. This fee is payable on issue of a badge (not on application) and has not changed since 1983. The legislation will be changed so that local authorities can charge successful applicants up to a maximum of £10.00. It will still be for local authorities to decide the fee that will be payable locally.

9.2 However the government are charging the local authority a mandatory flat fee of £4.60 per badge.

In addition to the new mandatory charge of £4.60 per badge, there are additional costs to the Council of processing payments such administration time to scan in photos electronically, buying stocks of spare clocks (customers occasionally lose them), returning incomplete forms and checking information and staff overhead time and costs to deliver this.

9.3 There are also 2 other optional services that local authorities can take up:

- i) Data Entry Support Service (DESS), which is essentially outsourcing the task of entering application details onto the central database – This is at a cost of £4.96 per application. (Note: this is simply data entry)
- ii) Details Update Support Service (DUSS), which is similar to the above but refers to updating changes in circumstances – At a cost of £2.68 per application.

The Blue Badge team have evaluated these other services and will not be utilising them at this stage.

10. Consultation

10.1 The reform programme has been developed by the government in consultation with disabled people, local authorities and other stakeholders, and on the basis of research and economic analysis.

10.2 Checks have been made with surrounding authorities on the charges they intend to make. The findings are below:-

Authority	Current charge for	Proposed charge for Badge Jan 1st	Status of council approval to charge new rate
BANES	No charge	No information	Decision will be made at the end of January 2012
Cornwall	£2.00	£10.00	Awaiting formal approval
Devon	No charge	Awaiting decision from members	None
Dorset	£2.00	£10.00	Approved
Gloucestershire	£2.00	£10.00	Awaiting formal approval
Hampshire	£2.00	£10.00	Approved
Somerset	£2.00	Consultation with members – deadline 15 th January	None
Swindon	£2.00	£10.00	Awaiting formal

			approval
Surrey	£2.00	£10.00	Approved

11. Options Considered

- 11.1 Evaluation of the government's database and application form has demonstrated that this can be used by Wiltshire to satisfy the current excellent service we provide. In addition it offers the opportunity for us to gain from the fraud and other centralised checking services. Historic information will need to be retained on the existing database until the expiration of the badges in three years. After that time the Council will not need to maintain a database and the associated licence and running costs.
- 11.2 Councillor John Thomson, The Cabinet Member Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Adult Care, Communities and Housing has lobbied the government about these changes and the increased charge. Whilst his points have been listened to, the government is continuing to roll out the new badges and process for the production of the badges which means that Wiltshire will be required to comply and consequently increase its costs.
- 11.3 The Council are not able to refuse to comply with the new government arrangements for the provision of badges since these are mandatory and the new badges can only be issued through the government's supplier Northgate.
- 11.4 The Council could continue with its policy of not charging for a Blue Badge however, in the current financial climate it is not possible to absorb the additional mandatory charge by government to the Council of £4.60 per badge and the additional processing times.

12. Reason for Decision

- 12.1 It is necessary for the Council to make a decision on whether to charge for the Blue Badges. The information on this change to the service arrived after the budget setting process was completed and will be in place before the completion of the next budget round. A formal decision to charge is, therefore, necessary.

