

An  
Independent  
Inquiry  
Report

# Blue Badge Scheme



## About Healthwatch Devon

Healthwatch Devon is the local, independent consumer champion for health and social care services.

One of the key functions of Healthwatch Devon is to obtain the views of local people regarding their needs for, and experiences of, local care services and importantly to make these views known.

Since Healthwatch Devon was introduced in 2013, thousands of people have shared their views and experiences with us in relation to their local health and social care services.

The experiences we gather are entered (anonymously) into our evidence bank. A summary of this information is then shared with those who commission, provide, regulate and monitor healthcare services in Devon.



## About this report

This report brings together experiences that have been shared with Healthwatch Devon by Healthwatch Champions who are based in Citizens Advice Centres across the County and information gathered whilst exploring these concerns further.

Individuals had contacted Citizens Advice because they were worried about the outcome of a recent Blue Badge assessment. Assessments had resulted in them not being eligible for a Blue Badge award, even though in some cases they had been eligible before.

As we were collecting these experiences, we wrote to Devon County Council to request information about the assessment process and to find out if they too had received concerns similar to those that we had heard.

Devon County Council informed us that the feedback they have received about the service focussed on the same issues that we were hearing about, which are:

1. Applicant disagrees with information contained in the assessment.
2. Applicant who was recently eligible for a Blue Badge, assessed as no longer eligible.
3. Attitude of the assessor.

## Key findings

Based on the experiences presented within this report, we found the main issues to be:

- An inconsistency in the quality of blue badge assessments.
- Concerns about how the assessment criteria are applied and adherence to the national guidelines.
- A lack of privacy, resulting in the process being uncomfortable and intimidating.
- Staff attitudes; a lack of dignity and respect. Individuals did not feel that their voice had been heard and that their needs had not been fully considered.
- The negative impact that being refused a Blue Badge can have on an individual's health and wellbeing.

*“I recently had an assessment to see if I was eligible for a blue badge so that my carer could take me out in the car. I was asked to do many different things to see what I can and can't do. I found this very difficult and it made me feel uncomfortable and embarrassed.”*

A full version of this report with further detail is available from  
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Healthwatch Devon is a registered charity (no: 155202)

## Recommendations

Our report recommended that;

- Devon County Council and Devon Health and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee review this report alongside any other evidence Devon County Council holds in relation to people's experiences of the Blue Badge assessment service.
- Devon County Council considers carrying out a review of the Blue Badge assessment process to identify what steps can be taken to improve the quality of the service for applicants.

## Follow Up

We are pleased to report that Devon County Council accepted the recommendations made.

- Devon County Council fully accept the findings in our report and have provided reassurance that a full review of the service has been carried out and improvements have been made that will address the concerns raised.
- Action taken by Devon County Council to improve the service is summarised on the next page.

*“Individual has a 15-year-old son with Downs Syndrome who is awaiting a scan to confirm scoliosis. Healthwatch Champion is giving advice and support to this individual. He has had a Blue Badge since he was 3 years old but was refused one when the family moved to Devon. The effect of this is that it is increasingly difficult to go out at all as her son has to be held by the hand and managed at all times as he has no road sense and wanders off. He is getting stronger and she is getting less strong so is very worried about their future and getting out and about. Their application was supported by the Downs Syndrome Society who were appalled that he was refused a badge. The assessment and eligibility process by DCC needs to be questioned. Refusal of a Blue Badge can have dire consequences for individuals.”*



# Summary of formal response from Devon County Council to our report

A comprehensive review of the blue badge scheme identified areas where the process could be improved. The main changes are:

- Customer Service Centre advisors can no longer reject applications and can only approve automatic renewals.
- If the Blue Badge team are in any doubt over eligibility from the information they have from the applicant, they refer for an Independent Mobility Assessment (IMA) or a Desk Based Assessment (DBA) rather than accept or reject.
- CSC advisors and BB Team ask all applicants if they have additional medical evidence to support their application at first point of contact or send a letter inviting applicant to provide this before making any decision, this prevents unnecessary IMAs or attendance at IMA without all relevant evidence.
- The provider commissioned to undertake IMA's has been asked to make alterations to the process for inviting applicants to IMA to reduce the instances of non-attendance due to short notice.
- A revised suite of letters to ensure our process is more customer friendly.

Changes recently implemented will address key findings from the report as follows:

### *An inconsistency in the quality of assessments.*

- CSC advisors can no longer approve or reject applications or renewals unless an automatic renewal.
- Each applicant is given every opportunity to provide additional medical evidence to support their application before any decision is taken.
- The contract for provision of IMAs and DBAs has been retendered and the council is working closely with the new provider to ensure consistency of approach and application of the Department for Transport (DfT) guidelines regarding eligibility.

### *Concerns about how the assessment criteria are applied and adherence to the national guidelines.*

- The new provider undertaking IMAs is experienced in this area and will be both using a small cohort of experienced assessors and undertaking quality assurance peer checking of assessments.
- The revised DfT criteria have been in place for over 3 years now and any initial problems around inconsistent interpretation and application of these guidelines will have been addressed.
- Full training has been provided to the small Blue Badge Team within the council in relation to the DfT guidelines and the team has been in place since the implementation of this new criteria.

### *A lack of privacy, resulting in the process being uncomfortable and intimidating.*

- The current venue in Barnstaple is looking to be substituted for a more suitable, less public venue.
- The concerns raised have been shared with the current provider and will be shared with the

new provider so that we can ensure that assessments are conducted in an appropriate manner and in a suitable environment.

### *Staff attitudes; a lack of dignity and respect. Individuals did not feel that their voice had been heard and that their needs had not been fully considered.*

- All concerns raised regarding attitude, dignity, respect and applicants feeling that their voice had not been heard are referred back to the provider with a request that this is looked into and a report sent back to the council as well as training and supervision being undertaken for the individuals concerned.
- The new provider has been informed that the expectation is that all applicants are treated sensitively, that their dignity is respected and that all of their views are recorded. Decisions will take into consideration these views and that the guidance is consistently applied with explanations of decisions being clearly documented within the assessment, which the council will be sharing, in full with all applicants whose application is declined.

