

Blue Badge online applications: Accessibility for disabled and older people for Age UK Shropshire, Telford & Wrekin

Background

Back in September 2020 we had reported a significant equalities issue about older people being unable to apply for and receive a blue badge in Shropshire following it moving to a digital-by-default application (a decision made in February/March 2020).

We have recorded the personal information of all older people coming to us for help with a blue badge application in the last 21 months and have periodically checked whether they have 1) been able to apply for a blue badge through the online route and 2) whether they have received their badge.

Our most recent conclusion to our watching brief with blue badge applicants found that only 28% of older people coming to Age UK for help with a blue badge application are now safely in receipt of one. This is a significant drop in application successes as over 90% of people coming to Age UK in the past received their blue badge after we assisted them with a paper application.

Though Shropshire Council have said they assist applicants over the phone. This is usually for people in receipt of passporting benefits like DLA or PIP, but these benefits are not available to older people and thus telephone support from the blue badge team is not available either.

There is much uncertainty about mobility assessments that previously took place at Louise House. Over the course of the pandemic, it is our understanding that people had been referred for an assessment of their mobility but the assessments themselves have been suspended with no plans to start them up again. This left many applications left open for an unreasonable amount of time (some over 12 months) without any idea as to when a final decision can be made.

Recently a decision has been made to demand third party evidence from older applicants instead of doing mobility assessments. The most common evidence requested is a "Summary Care Record" from the client's GP. The council inform the applicant that they have to provide such evidence and if the evidence is not submitted within a certain period of time, the application lapses or is withdrawn. This is a policy decision adopted by Shropshire Council which is unhelpful for applicants as many GP practices in Shropshire are notoriously inaccessible or difficult to obtain evidence from. For those that are accessible, a small number of GP practices have asked our clients to ask the council to write to them with the evidence request (which the council will not do) or to ring back after winter / covid pressures have subsided. Applicants have also been confused about what they are asking the practice for. This creates problems with cost and stress to the applicant. Lastly, there have been incidents of applicant's evidence going missing once it has been posted to Shirehall. It has either gone missing or is not being paired with the correct application. This could be attributed to understaffing at Shirehall. One applicant sent that their medical evidence three times, followed up via a call to discover the evidence was "not received" by Shirehall. The applicant needed to ask the GP practice for the medical summary three times over.

It is important to report that a number of the 28% of people above that have received their blue badge have done so because we have posted out paper applications to the clients' address at our cost. Others have sought face to face help from the "Shropshire Local" hub at the Darwin centre in Shrewsbury – the amount of applicants that could manage to put in an online application without Age UK / Shropshire Council's assistance is much lower than 28%, proving that digital-by-default is quite harmful and excludes older and disabled people from crucial benefits and services. Something Shropshire Council already highlighted in a research paper in 2016 and also highlighted in a number of research papers published by Age UK.

It is worth noting that the Darwin Centre where the "Shropshire Local" hub is based does not have a shop mobility scheme nor any nearby disabled parking for people with mobility issues.

The Carers Trust also assisted clients with blue badge applications but our understanding is that this service and its funding has now been brought in-house within Shropshire Council and assistance with blue badges is no longer available – further limiting access to face-to-face support.

Now that we are coming out of the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions for what government is touting to be the final time, we believe that now would be the time to co-produce meaningful short and long term solutions to address this significant issue. We would want to discuss: -

- When/if Shropshire Council plan on re-opening the Library customer service points and whether they will be able to assist digitally excluded older people from applying for a blue badge
- A clear and transparent criteria as to when the Council issue out paper applications to people. Especially older people who call the council and explain that they are not online or they don't own a computer. Reasonable adjustments need to be made for older/disabled people to apply for a blue badge themselves.
- We require Shropshire Council buy-in and collaboration to furnish Age UK volunteers with tablet computers and 4G sim cards / Mifi devices to complete online blue badge applications in the community this will achieve the Council's aim of ensuing more claims come in through the online route and ensure accessibility of the scheme. This solution will need training, equipment and collaboration from Shropshire Council but will be a cheaper way to provide quality support.
- A change in policy in requesting third party evidence, either removing the demand altogether or taking the burden of proof off the applicant entirely meaning the Council ask for third party evidence directly.
- When Shropshire Council plan on restarting mobility assessments for those applicants who have been waiting over 12 months for one.

Age UK would like to be part of the solution to these issues raised and co-produce an action plan to address them.

We would highlight that there is significant concern in public health and across the country about the affect the pandemic lockdown has had on older people's mobility and the longer term health implications (and costs) of this. If people are unable to access blue badges this will only exacerbate the situation.