

## ACCESS AND DISABILITIES WORKING GROUP

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### Present:

Councillors Eden (Chair)

Williams (Vice Chair)

Manghnani

Khan

Helen Bryant - Access Officer - RBC

Clare Muir - Policy and Voluntary Sector Manager - RBC

Carole Lee - Blue Badge Team - Lead Occupational Therapist - RBC

Samantha Midwinter - Blue Badge Team - Senior Occupational Therapist

Isabelle Redfern - Rehabilitation Officer - RBC

Nigel McAlister

Trish Wright - MS Therapy Centre/Readibus

Carol Froud

Michael Froud

Jenny Turner

Laxshmi Kachwaha - Readibus

Stuart Pearce - Guide Dogs

Diane Goodlock - MS Society

Douglas Dean - Thames Valley Pensioners' Convention

### Apologies

Gary Saunders

Bob Bristow - Chair, Reading Association for the Blind (RAB)

### 1. COUNCILLORS' DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

None

### 2. MINUTES

Notes of the meeting held on 29 November were agreed as a correct record, except for changing the date for declaration of the Minutes of the previous meeting being a correct record.

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### 3. MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES

Diane Goodlock said that there had been some filming in The Oracle for Purple Tuesday - the management had realised how difficult access could be, and the Manager said that more would be done. There had been some issues around invisible disabilities.

### 4. BLUE BADGES

Sam Midwinter and Carole Lee from the Blue Badge Service said that they were carrying out face to face and desktop assessments.

Carole said that she hoped that the answers that she had already given had given an oversight of the service.

Blue Badges had been reviewed nationally in 2012. More stringent assessments were now necessary. Carole said that the Council had been following that requirement very carefully, and were very proud of the service that they provided to the residents of Reading. When the service started there had been a very steep learning curve for officers. It was a brand new service with new guidance and many changes had to be implemented as the team went along. Feedback and complaints were addressed and used in a positive way to form the service. Copies of the assessment tools were available at the meeting, which had been changed to fit the service. There was also a self- assessment tool.

When people applied for a new Badge, they might be automatically eligible, which was dependent on several things, including points awarded for PIP (Personal Independence Payment), Mobility Allowance, and so on.

If someone was automatically eligible, they just had to send their evidence of eligibility to the Blue Badge Team at the Council, and this would be processed and a badge issued.

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When someone was not automatically eligible, the Blue Badge Team would look at the application; eligibility subject to further assessment; there were around 40 such applications a month. The team would look at these making decisions from the information supplied, and ask for extra information from, among others, GPs, Consultants etc., and also check the computer system to see if the person applying was known to them.

Some were already receiving services, and they would not have to go through a difficult assessment if they were obviously in need; a light touch only was needed.

For those applicants where there was not enough information, or there were concerns that they did not meet the criteria, they would be asked to come in for a face-to-face assessment. There was an Occupational Therapist who came in two days a week to carry out these assessments, who was very nice and tried not to be intimidating. People would be invited in, there would be a timed mobility assessment, and then the form would be discussed, to see how the applicant was managing to move around and so on. This form would be scored, as scientifically as possible and the information that the Department for Transport gave, including training, had been used to create the form. Feedback was also used from people who felt that they needed to be listened to more. People could also score themselves - sometimes people considered themselves to be more independent than the OTs did. Then a decision was made as to whether the applicant was eligible. There was also a very robust "review of decision", (most people called it an appeal process) - people could come back if they were not satisfied. Another OT would carry this out. Applicants might be invited back for another assessment with another OT.

Nigel McAlister said that this all sounded good, but he had concerns about the applications which looked good on paper, but applicants might exaggerate their condition on their application. He thought that some might just get through the process without further assessment. This was mentioned in one of the questions. How was the accuracy of the system validated? It would be better to have a small percentage, a random sample of application forms and invite the applicants in to be seen by OTs. If the sample proves that the system is working, this was good, and the system could be validated. Otherwise, there might be a number of people who had Badges who were not entitled to them.

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Carole said that she thought it was a good point, and there was an opportunity to lie. Carole said that she liked the idea and that it might be possible to do something like this. It would be considered. Fraud was sometimes picked up when looking through applications and this was reported to the Fraud Team. Information on medication was asked for, and people would have to be very clever in order to commit fraud. It was open to some level of fraud, but Reading had fewer than 3% of people who had a Blue Badge, which was equivalent to some London boroughs and places like Manchester, because Reading was like a mini-London borough.

The system was quite robust, and there was not an excess of people applying, and the Independent Mobility Assessment had caused a significant drop in applications. Carole said that she thought that an audit could be done, but was not sure how it could be implemented, but would come back and talk to the Group on another occasion.

Sam said that she liked the idea as well, but reiterated that background information was also looked at as well as the paper application, and cross-referencing with Social Services records.

Carole said that the service was about to get Connect Care, which was a way of limited access to GP records, hospital records and those that OTs used, among others.

Councillor Eden asked about the numbers of badges issued, how many were automatic, and how many required further assessment, and how many face to face and how many just looking at paperwork.

Carole said that the number of badges issued in total was 1,720 2017-18, this year so far it was 1,584. Desktop assessments - 59% last year, 48% this year - 8% then had a face to face assessment; 39% of those not automatically eligible were issued without applicants being seen, this year approximately 43% were automatically eligible. There was not the capacity or the funding to run a more expansive service, and it was difficult to recruit OTs to Reading and so resources had to be used carefully.

Stuart Pearce asked why Reading had among the lowest rate for issuing badges - was it because people were unaware?

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Carole said that people were very aware of Blue Badges and that people would be signposted if they rang up Social Services. There may be other factors; fewer people might drive, more people might use public transport more, there were also areas of deprivation. The badges were certainly not over-prescribed.

Diane Goodlock asked if there was a waiting list for people to come to be assessed and how long it took for them to come through; Sam and Carole said that they were very proud of the fact that from receipt of the application to assessment there was a two-week turnaround, and from the point of assessment applicants could get a badge from two-weeks.

Douglas Dean said that he did not find the assessment at all intimidating and was very grateful for the additional help he had received.

Carole explained that there was a very small number of children under the age of 3 who were eligible for Blue Badges who had, for example, lots of bulky medical equipment and were difficult to transport around. Most children would become eligible for a badge when they get PIP (Personal Independence Payment).

Carole said that she was unable to answer questions regarding fraud, and where the spaces were on the website.

Nigel said that he had had lots of discussions when he lived in Buckinghamshire; they had discovered fraud that they had had no idea existed; they used a retired police officer for one day a week, and had prosecuted at least 4 people, in the infancy of the scheme. He said that the Council needed a specialist team, and that they should discuss this problem with the High Wycombe team in Buckinghamshire. Contact details were available. The Department for Transport advocates this.

Fraudulent use of the scheme degraded the scheme as a whole. Nigel said that he found it very hard to find a Blue Badge space in Reading, even though there were a lot of spaces. Revenue was also lost. People might be parking all day on a parking meter and some would possibly be fraudulent. Councillor Eden said that the press release was to show that there was a deterrent. It was not a victimless crime and people needed to be reminded that it was affecting people. Cllr Eden said that she had chaired national events on this subject. Different authorities had different resources available.

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Carol Froud asked who was entitled to ask to see the photograph on the back of the Blue Badge; she had only been asked twice. Carole Lee said that she was not sure, but expected that Parking Attendants were entitled to check and that she would find out and report to the next meeting. Councillor Eden said it was her understanding that Parking Attendants were entitled to check and that it did not happen often enough. If anybody was asked, they should not feel negative about this because it meant that those who were entitled to a Blue Badge had one.

Diane asked if someone from Parking Services could report to the next meeting. Councillor Eden said that this would be a good idea and a request would be made.

Councillor Khan said that he thought the Council had a van, and could detect parking violations. They could take details of cars which were parked contrary to parking regulations, i.e. misusing a Blue Badge and report back. It was pointed out that the Blue Badge was not exclusively for use with a certain car so it was difficult to enforce that.

Carole asked if the members would like an update on what was happening with the new Blue Badge criteria; the members of the Group thought that this would be useful.

Councillor Eden said that it was her understanding that the scheme was now being expanded to allow parity between physical disabilities and some mental health conditions.

Carole said that it had not gone live yet as final guidance had not been sent, but the latest information had been circulated. The idea was to support people with, for example, dementia or cognitive issues who may be physically able but would be difficult to control, or people who have Autism or other learning difficulties (high end) where they needed to be escorted, so it would not just be anyone with a hidden disability. It was more for people who would not be able to use public transport. They would then be able to take part in activities. The assessment process needed to be worked out. There was already work being done on a trial addition to the assessment form.

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Nigel said that lots of charities were against the expansion of the scheme, possibly because they felt that many local authorities were not following the guidance of the existing scheme, and may not have robust systems to issue the current badges, and that expansion could make this worse. Supposing that the Council experienced a 20% increase in Blue Badge applications, the question was asked would there also be an increase in the number of spaces available.

Councillor Eden asked if there was any sort of feeling of what the level of increase might be. Carole Lee said that she could not answer the question about the number of parking spaces. She said that there had actually been a decrease in the numbers of applications and Badges issued - the numbers were plateauing if anything. Carole saw it as being only people with cognitive impairments who would be the main people to benefit.

Councillor Eden said that if a Badge would not help with the disabled person's medical issue or disability then a Blue Badge would not be issued. Nigel said that the problem was not the website itself, but the map on the website was out-of-date and that some of the locations of Blue Badge spaces did not appear. The question needed to be asked how often the maps and other documents were updated and when.

Diane Goodlock said that because of the building work the pages really needed to be updated daily, but it would not be realistic.

Douglas Dean said that it would be useful to have a list of all Blue Badge Spaces.

Nigel said that there needed to be an update in terms of signage, because of problems with clarity. There also needed to be an update on the council's website as to where all the Blue Badge spaces were.

Councillor Eden thanked Carole and Sam for their contribution to the meeting.

### 5. ACCESSIBLE PLAY EQUIPMENT IN PARKS

Councillor Eden said that the question of access to parks for disabled people needed to be discussed again. The Lead Member for Parks might be invited to a future meeting.

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Helen explained that she had spoken to George Baptiste - there was to be a 3- year package of funding to spend on play equipment, including accessible play and they wanted to improve the access to the sites also. The money was coming from the Community Infrastructure Levy. Unfortunately there had been no feedback from the inclusive schools.

Councillor Eden said that there was the issue of the ERAPA play equipment which was coming to the end of its life, Prospect Park was also a problem; bark chippings are not suitable for everybody, especially people using wheelchairs, and there was also sand which is inaccessible for wheelchair users too. There was a small area in Christchurch Meadows, although this also had limited access. Councillor Eden suggested that officers from Parks should come to the next meeting and that the members of the Group urge the officers to consult widely about play equipment. ERAPA had been in the news recently but there was a wider issue about access to outdoor play for all children. Accessible play equipment was good for all children, regardless of ability.

Diane said that lots of flats are built with no play areas; developers should be paying for play equipment for all children.

Councillor Eden said that the CIL was used to buy play equipment but there was not much money around.

The Parks department invited Helen Bryant to have a site visit.

### 6. BUS PASSES

The consultation on Reading Bus Passes had resulted in the eligibility for bus passes for disabled people and companions remaining as it was.

Councillor Eden thanked everybody who had contributed to the response to the consultation.

Councillor Eden had talked privately and publically about how important bus passes were to people. The council did not want to make these cuts.

Jenny Turner said that Liz Johnson had thanked the Group very much.

Councillor Eden said that she had been particularly concerned about Companion Passes being cut.

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### 7. POST OFFICE MOVE

Helen Bryant said that she had been asked by Sarah Gee, Head of Housing and Neighbourhood Services, on behalf of Councillor Tony Page, to find out what was happening about the imminent move of the main Post Office.

The plan was to shut the main Post Office and move it to WH Smiths. Diane Goodlock said that they were moving the Post Office in Wokingham too. Diane said that she had been in the existing lift in WH Smith and that it had been a very bad experience; the whole lift shook and there was no room for a companion to ride in the lift too. It was very dangerous. Diane also said that people with children and push chairs would also have a problem.

Helen explained that she went to the site; there was only an 8 person lift in the store. You could not turn round in the lift and there was no mirror. There was no audible announcement to say at which floor you had arrived. There were stairs but it was uncertain how suitable for some ambulant disabled people they would be. It would be inadvisable for many ambulant disabled people to use the escalator, and it only went up.

Helen did not know how far away the area allocated to the Post Office was to be from the lift, but in order to qualify for the standard rate of PIP an applicant would only need to move more than 50 metres but no more than 200 metres. Diane said that the Post Office was to be at the back of the store. She had been to a consultation event; Helen did not know about this. There was an existing Post Office in the Broad Street Mall which was fairly accessible, but Helen said that having two Post Offices on the first floor meant that people were reliant on the maintenance regimes of WH Smith and the Broad Street Mall. The same thing applied to the escalator in WH Smith. The lifts in the Broad Street Mall were better, as they were 16 person lifts, but the problem still remained.

Councillor Eden asked when the decision was to be made; Helen said that the Post Office was still meant to be moving in May this year. Councillor Eden said that she could understand that Post Offices were sharing premises, and this was quite normal, but that they were generally on the ground floor, and that although it was up to the Post Office to decide where their premises were, it was a concern that both were now going to be on the first floor given the number of Post Offices that had either closed or been moved. It was suggested that a letter would be drafted from the Working Group, endorsing the comments of the Access Officer.

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A vote was held for and against first floor Post Offices: the Council Officers were excluded: the result was a unanimous vote against.

Councillor Eden suggested that Matt Rodda MP be asked to raise the issue, as he had been campaigning on the issue.

Councillor Khan asked if Alok Sharma MP could be asked to assist as well; a letter could be written. Councillor Eden had repeatedly invited Mr Sharma to visit the Working Group, but he had not been able to find the time so far. It was **agreed** that Councillor Magnani would contact Mr Sharma.

### AOB

Councillor Eden reminded the group about REMAP service, which was a group of retired engineers who designed bespoke solutions for disabled people, free of charge; although donations were welcome; and then the case studies were shown on their website.

Helen would send the PDF about the service to the members of the group.

<https://www.remap.org.uk/contact-remap/>

If the members of the Group knew anybody who needed their services they were asked to spread the word.

Carol Froud said that pavements were a problem, especially at the bus stop near the Butts - they were very uneven there, and also in Tilehurst they were very bad. It was very difficult to get to the meeting. The camber of pavements in Tilehurst meant that they were very difficult to move on. Trish Wright said that she had reported problems and that sometimes Highways went out to have a look, but nothing was done.

Councillor Eden explained that local road networks were not as well-funded as the national roads, and the pavements even less so.

Douglas Dean said that a representative from REMAP had visited the diabetes group and Douglas had suggested that he give a talk to the Older Person's Working Group - the important point was that REMAP did not charge for their services. Douglas demonstrated a gadget that had been created by one of the engineers. They made some more complicated things and some simple things.

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Nigel said that he wanted the Minutes circulated sooner and that it was not workable for them to be sent a long time after the meeting. Also the date of the minutes at the top of the paper should reflect the date of the Minutes referred to.

He asked if the swimming pool proposed at Palmer Park had been considered by the Working Group and asked what the access arrangements for the pool would be. The Group agreed that this should be discussed at a future meeting, before it went to planning stage. Diane said that the Group had requested that this be looked at.

Helen said that she attended a consultation meeting about it but that there had not been much detail - the meeting was about the park in general. Helen said that she had seen no plans.

Councillor Eden said that this issue should be discussed with the Leisure Team to decide when it would be appropriate for it to be taken to the meeting.

Regarding the Minutes, Helen said that she did not mind doing the minutes earlier, but that she had been carrying on from the way it was done when Committee Services were taking the Minutes. Councillor Eden said that there was no need to continue this, as long as Helen was happy to write and distribute the Minutes earlier.

Diane expressed concerns about the amount of building work that was encroaching on footways; recently she had wanted to go into town from East Reading but was prevented because of obstructions in the footways. In December Diane was unable to get past to allow a parent with a pushchair through and could not reverse; this was near Kings Point. There was too much traffic to go into the road. Jacksons Corner was also a major problem; trying to get into Market Place. Councillor Eden said that Planning Services should look into this, if there was a breach of planning conditions. Homebase was also a big problem area. Councillor Eden said that people should contact Planning Services.

Carol said that she had gone to Abbey Church and when she went by they had been taken over completely by builders. Diane said that the Council was supposed to put a notice in the paper to alert people when this would happen. These issues needed to be reported, and Parking Services should also be invited to the next meeting.

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Stuart Pearce said that since Cow Lane had reopened the level of traffic going through Tilehurst had increased a lot. Trying to cross Church End lane where there were no crossings was very difficult and the roads were very badly damaged and were unable to handle the increase in traffic. Highways and Traffic Management should attend a future meeting to discuss this.

Isabelle Redfern said that she had been communicating with Helen for around a month regarding the station area for people with visual impairments, because there were no landmarks to guide them. Network Rail was contacted about the possibility of a tactile line to be installed to guide people from the bus stops in Station Road to the station entrances. Councillor Eden said that this should be supported and anything that the Group could do to bring this forward would be agreed.

Carole asked if the Group could discuss the potholes and also the ramps at Cow Lane, because they were extremely uncomfortable and made some impairments and ailments worse because people were shaken around in their cars. The Group needed to find out who would be responsible for the works in the area.

The dip in the road enabled the buses to go through but it did need to be smoothed out somewhat.

Diane reported a pothole and by three days it had been repaired. It had been very big and deep.

Helen also reported that there had been two very big potholes outside her bungalow that made the building shake when buses went into them; they had finally been repaired.

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