

Applying for a Blue Badge and other council services if people are not online



June 2023

Overview and key points

Age UK and Age Cymru regularly hear about the problems that older people who are not online can experience in our digital world, including accessing local authority services such as applying for a Blue Badge. This is concerning because it could mean people miss out on essential support. Age UK believes all public sector organisations should offer offline access and make people aware of the different options. This is important to ensure that they are providing a good service for all citizens as well complying with the Public Service Equality Duty.

To get a better picture of the position across the country we carried out a survey of local Age UK organisations in England and local Age Cymru partners in Wales to find out how people can apply for a Blue Badge and other local authority support in their area. We received feedback from 61 of our local organisations in England and Wales (around half).

We found that:

- In most areas there is strong encouragement to access council services digitally which risks excluding people who do not use the internet.
- One in six (10) Age UKs told us people needed to use the internet in order to apply for a Blue Badge in their area.
- While most Age UKs said there was at least one offline way of applying for a Blue Badges (using a paper form, by telephone and/or through a face-to-face appointment), often these are not promoted. Only 13 (less than a quarter) organisations said it was easy for people who are offline to find out about and apply for a Blue Badge in their area.
- Many councils encourage people to seek help with Blue Badges from organisations such as Age UK which is placing additional strain on already hard-pressed services. In some cases, older people could apply without being dependent on others if councils offered easy to use alternatives to the online system.
- Around two-thirds of respondents told us that people are also having difficulties accessing other council services if they cannot do so online. Housing related services were mentioned most frequently although some said all council services were hard to access offline.
- We acknowledge that local authorities are under great financial pressures, but they need to make sure that their services are fully accessible. We hope that this survey will encourage councils to review their systems and work with local organisations to ensure that all their services are available to everyone.
- While there will always be a need for suitable alternatives to online access, some older people are able to gain digital skills with appropriate support. Digital inclusion services run by Age UKs and other organisations can help people safely engage in the digital world.

Background

Many organisations, including most local authorities, strongly encourage people to access services digitally and in some cases do not offer offline alternatives. For older people who are comfortable using technology the systems can work well. However, Age UK analysis indicates there are still 2.7 million people in the UK aged 65+ who have not used the internet in the last three months – most of who say they have never used it.ⁱ Digital exclusion is particularly high among the oldest age groups – around a third (34%) of those aged 75+ and one in ten (10%) of those aged 65-74 do not use the internet whereas virtually all in groups aged under 55 do. Even if people use the internet, they may only use it for certain activities. While someone may carry out tasks such as emailing, making video calls, or searching for information, this does not mean they have the confidence and skills to safely apply for support online as this can involve inputting personal information and uploading photos or other evidence.

Back in 2018, Age UK carried out a mystery shopping exercise looking at access to Housing Benefit and Council Tax Reduction - local authority administered benefits which provide help towards rent and council tax for low-income people. Our findings suggested that many people who were offline would find it difficult to apply for these benefits.ⁱⁱ A more recent Age UK London report shows this continues to be a problem. Using Freedom of Information requests, they found a third (31%) of councils in London do not offer a way to apply for Housing Benefit or Council Tax Reduction without using the internet.ⁱⁱⁱ

Following concerns raised by local organisations, we decided to look at offline access to another council delivered service, namely applying for a Blue Badge (which provides parking concessions to people with disabilities or health conditions). We circulated an online survey to local partners in England and Wales in late 2022 asking about the application process for Blue Badges and other council support in their area. We received 78 individual responses, from a total of 61 Age UKs – nearly half of local partners in England and Wales. All regions were represented. Below we summarise the main findings and include quotes from some of the respondents.

A few points about the survey:

- The numbers given here relate to the 61 organisations rather than the total number of individual advisers who responded.
- When we refer to 'Age UKs' this includes local Age UK local organisations (or partners) in England and local Age Cymru partners.
- It should be noted that some Age UK's cover more than one local authority area, so the figures don't represent the numbers of councils covered.
- We have not named the Age UK organisations or their councils because we feel it is for local organisations to decide what information they want to make public about how systems are working in their area.

- The focus of this note is on the impact of digital access, although in relation to Blue Badges, other issues were raised including delays and difficulties getting relevant evidence.

The Public Sector Equality Duty

The Public Sector Equality Duty means public bodies should be meeting the needs of those with protected characteristics which include age and disability. Equality considerations should be reflected in the design of policies and the delivery of services. As digital exclusion is linked to both age and disability, we question whether public bodies are meeting their duty if they do not offer an easy to use, alternative way to access their services.

Applying for a Blue Badge

Virtually everyone that responded to our survey said that Blue Badge applications could be made online in the area they cover. One said claims were made over the phone although people still had to upload evidence online. Most Age UKs said they were aware of other options – around two-thirds (60%) mentioned paper forms, two in five (25%) telephone claims and a quarter (15%) face-to-face appointments. Ten (around one in six) Age UKs told us people needed to use the internet in order to apply for a Blue Badge in their area. However, even when other options were available, in many areas councils wanted people to use the digital system.

‘Digital exclusion is the biggest barrier to clients getting a blue badge.’

‘It feels like it is designed for the benefit of the Authority and for efficiency, no acknowledgement of the number of older and disabled people who are digitally excluded.’

Approaches taken by councils varied as demonstrated by an Age UK which covers three councils. One required people to apply online with no help offered, another had online applications although it was possible to download a form, while the third was described as ‘very accessible’ offering applications by phone, post, email, and online, all with help if needed.

It can be hard to find out about different options

While most councils have alternative ways of applying for the Blue Badge these are often not promoted. We asked if it was easy for people to find out about and use offline ways of applying. For all three offline options, the majority of organisations who responded said it was not. For example, although 36 Age UKs said paper forms were available, less than a

third of these (11) said it was easy to find out about and use this service. Overall, only 13 Age UKs (less than a quarter) said it was easy to find out about and apply for a Blue Badge offline (using a paper form, by telephone and/or through a face-to-face appointment).

'Terrible - have to argue with council staff to get paper forms, and when asked if they would help people complete them who can't do it themselves, we're told 'we have no obligation to assist people to apply, we simply process the applications that are made'.

'The paper forms are available but when our clients call the council, we know they are told to apply online first and they are not being offered a paper form unless they press them. We raised this with the council, and they say that they do offer paper forms to be sent out.'

'Contact [council] and a telephone appointment can be arranged. However, some clients are told they can ONLY be done online. Information is inconsistent.'

We also heard that even if people are online, they can find the process difficult while offline options, when available, may also be hard to use. In some cases, councils suggest people attend a face-to-face appointment, but venues may not be easy to get to.

'[Our County] is a large county geographically with limited public transport for those in rural areas. The online Blue Badge forms work well for those who can access the internet themselves. However, the council suggest that anyone who needs assistance can access face-to-face help from one of their advisers. We have local council offices where people can receive face-to-face help however, there are only five centres open (there were 11 before the pandemic) which means there's often not one local enough or accessible to a resident depending on their location in the county.'

'It is very difficult at the moment. The councils will not helpthe online form can be difficult to navigate and the biggest problem people find is then uploading/attaching the supporting info. Paper forms are actively discouraged due to the processors working from home and lots of people are struggling.'

'I understand Library Plus are funded to support with online applications. However, clients tell us they can't always help with how to complete the forms and many clients feel their information is personal and don't want to share it in a public environment. Also, it's not just about the online applications, it's also about the expectation to have an email address that the council will use to communicate with them. Many clients simply can't manage this and make the application which they are not able to follow up on or can't apply for the benefit at all.'

'People are encouraged to apply online and seek help from friends and family if necessary, however the process is lengthy and complicated, requiring several document uploads and photos to be submitted. This excludes older people, those without access to

the internet, or poor connection to broadband, and individuals who have health problems that prevent them from using a computer, tablet, or phone to make the application.'

But there were some positive examples

Although many respondents said there were problems in their area, there were examples of good practice. One Age UK commented that the Blue Badge Team provided 'an outstanding service'. Another said people in their county could apply by telephone or ask for a paper application form and there was also an independent community-based service, funded by the local authority and health services, which could provide support including through home visits.

Getting help with an application

We asked what councils suggest people do if they need help because they cannot apply online and there is no suitable alternative way of applying. Around two-thirds of organisations responded to this question, with over half saying councils suggested people contacted Age UK or another voluntary organisation. Respondents said people were also told to ask friends or family, while a few mentioned the library as a place to get help.

Blue Badge applications put pressure on Age UK and other voluntary services

Our survey suggests that many councils expect Age UK and other organisations to assist with Blue Badge applications and will refer people to these services for help. The majority (86%) of organisations completing the survey told us they helped people who do not use the internet apply for online support such as the Blue Badge. This can be through a face-to-face service in their offices, a home visit or over the telephone.

While supporting people to get the help they need is an important role for our information and advice services, in some areas the demand for help with Blue Badges is putting a strain on already stretched services. Advisers have also told us that the process is complicated and time consuming, for example requiring people to provide evidence digitally.

'Digitally excluded people who want to apply for a Blue Badge come into our centre for help. We create email address for them for the first time and support them to apply by scanning their relevant documents and we make sure they come in to check their emails at the centre as some don't have a device or connectivity. They still have to learn the significance of having an email address. We have to make sure they remember their email address and password for future communications.'

While sometimes people then become interested in gaining digital skills, for many this is not something they want to, or feel able to do. They just need help with the application.

Some older people who approach our advice services could apply without assistance if councils offered easy to use ways to apply, along with appropriate support. This would free up time for our staff and volunteers to support other older people in need and would also prevent individuals having to be dependent on others.

'Although there is a paper application the County Council lists ourselves as the support system in place to help people apply.'

'We assist with Blue Badge forms face-to-face and via telephone. Without this service many would not apply.'

'We have seen a significant increase in help needed for Blue Badges in our area as it is mainly done online. We have now recruited 4 volunteers to help with the online forms as it was so much in demand.'

'We have worked hard with the council to try and include non-digital applicants, we have agreed with them that if we do the application on line but they have no email address to progress digitally they will send a letter out regarding information and payment they require.'

'We've been inundated with people needing help to apply or renew their Blue Badges. They either don't have online access or find the form (both online and paper) too confusing. The system is very clunky and a lot of people don't understand which bits of the form they need to fill in which results in further delays as they then get asked to provide more information.'

One Age UK told us they had made the difficult decision to stop supporting Blue Badge applications.

'The reason for this is that the demand is so high we would do little else, and we receive no funding for this service. We are signposting clients to [the council], who we are told will provide telephone assistance for those without internet access, though in reality clients tell us that [the council] advise they can only be done online.'

Friends and families

Councils also suggest people get help from friends and family who are online. In some cases, this may work well. However, not everyone has someone they can ask or who they trust enough to share personal details with. For example, people need to provide information about health conditions for the Blue Badge and, if they are claiming benefits like Housing Benefit, they have to provide information about their income and savings and their bank account details. There can also be practical issues if the older person does not have an email address and someone else has made the application on their behalf.

'Online options require the person to have an email account. Many do not have this or rely on using a family member. This causes problems for the client not being updated or informed. In some cases, the client has had their application closed due to not responding in time. The client has not been told about the email by a family member or it is in their spam box.'

Other council services

We also asked if there were other council services that could only be applied for online or that people find difficult to access because they do not use the internet. Around two-thirds (41) gave us information or examples with some describing difficulties getting telephone numbers or finding alternative ways of accessing services. Ten organisations that responded said that nearly all services were online.

'Yes, all Council Services!'

'Almost everything is only available online, ordering a birth/marriage etc certificate can be done by phone but hardly anything else.'

'Most services are now online and hide the telephone number.'

'All council applications are online. All evidence is expected to be uploaded online. The council do push this a lot and alternatives are not advertised. The actual information about this is online, so if you are not online you cannot even access the information to find out about what is available anyway.'

Of those who gave specific examples, the most common services mentioned related to housing including applying for Housing Benefit and Council Tax Reduction, applying for social housing and bidding for properties once accepted on the waiting list.

'Housing Benefit and Council Tax Support. Applications for Council Tax discount for severe mental impairment. Also housing applications can only be made online, the bidding process is online only as well.'

'Most of the housing related applications are online - but if required can obtain a paper version. The difficulty with trying to access services related to housing or council tax benefits is that the lines through to the council are always very busy and long wait times for a response.'

'Housing Benefit and Council Tax Reduction can only be accessed on line. Registering for social housing is also an online service only.'

Other services mentioned where people face difficulties if they are not online include: renewing bus passes, parking permits, claiming benefits, accessing shopping vouchers via the local assistance fund, garden waste recycling service, reporting a local problem such as litter or damaged streetlights, and getting information about council services.

Representations to the council

Over half (34) of Age UK's who responded said they had contacted their council about the lack of online options. Most who responded said little had happened as a result or the council felt the current situation was satisfactory.

'The issue was raised approx 3-4 years ago when [the council] moved to online applications. Discussions were held between ourselves and [the council] and we were assured that telephone appointments were an option. However, clients often tell us that [the council] advised them they have to apply online.'

'We emailed several times to [the council] expressing concerns about withdrawing paper applications for Blue Badges. Our concerns were acknowledged but no other action taken.'

'Sent a letter to the Blue Badge Dept asking for meeting re processing, and other practical difficulties, took 9 months and a formal complaint to get a response. Response was 'we are doing fine, not interested in the problems you describe'.'

However, there were a few examples of positive engagement.

'We have emailed and attended summits with the council on digital inclusion. They have agreed to make changes to their application processes that doesn't exclude vulnerable people ie older people, people with disabilities, people who are not computer savvy etc'

'We raised the issue when it first transitioned to on-line only, this resulted in an offer to do phone options'.

'Another Age UK told us they were working closely with their local authority 'to continue to raise the challenges of digital exclusion for older people and that there must be options maintained for those who will never be online'. The council now offer a telephone claim with the Blue Badge team which the Age UK said had been 'hard fought to get them to offer this!!'.

'Housing benefit is online only - no paper copies available. As home visits had to stop for Age UK at start of covid and we were not able to fill out online forms without verifying ID, we contacted the council re difficulties for people not online. We now have a direct referral route to the council who will telephone and carry out claims over the phone.'

'We are inundated with requests for help to complete applications on paper, it is very hard for the elderly to do online as they are required to have a scanner and a digital camera for the photo and the knowledge of how to put it all together. We got together with other agencies to lobby [the council] to keep manual forms in place as they wished to go 100% digital. Luckily, we won but they do not publicise that forms are available.'

Implications of this survey

We heard examples of good practice but, overall, most of the 61 organisations that responded to our survey reported that people are facing difficulties applying for a Blue Badge and other support from their local authority due to pressure to apply online. And a survey of this kind will only tell us about those older people who seek help from Age UK – there are likely to be others who have found the process too difficult and have given up without applying for the support they need.

Requiring or strongly encouraging online claims or failing to promote available alternative options means that some people who are offline have to ask for support from others – increasing dependency and placing increased demands on organisations who provide information and advice.

We acknowledge that local authorities are under great financial pressures, but they need to make sure that their services are accessible to everyone. Digital exclusion increases with age and disability, and these are protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010 which introduced the Public Service Equality Duty. Councils should be considering equality considerations in the design of policies and the delivery of services. So, if councils are not providing suitable non-digital alternative ways to apply for benefits it can be argued that they are not fulfilling their duties under Act.

We hope that this survey will encourage councils to review their systems and work with local organisations to ensure that all their services are equally accessible to everyone.

Age UK provides support to increase digital engagement

The focus of this note is around access to services for those who have limited digital skills many of whom may never be able to apply for support online confidently and safely. However, Age UK knows that there are also many older people who benefit greatly from being online and more could do so with the right support. Locally and nationally Age UK works to increase digital engagement and around two-thirds of the Age UK's responding to the survey said their organisation provided digital inclusion services to help older people gain digital skills. Most older learners need ongoing support, tailored to their needs and

preferences, and going at their own pace. Often this is most effective when delivered on a one-to-one basis.^{iv}

However, this level of support can be resource-heavy, and funding for schemes needs to be based on quality rather than quantity of delivery to ensure real impact. Age UK welcomes the support that we receive nationally and locally from businesses and other funders, but we could do much more with greater resources.

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ⁱ Age UK analysis of Quarterly Labour Force Survey, Jan-March 2021, projected to 2022

ⁱⁱ https://www.ageuk.org.uk/globalassets/age-uk/documents/reports-and-publications/reports-and-briefings/active-communities/rb_may18_everything_is_online_nowadays.pdf

https://www.ageuk.org.uk/bp-assets/globalassets/london/documents/ageuk_london_mtdg_foi_final.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ https://www.ageuk.org.uk/bp-assets/globalassets/london/documents/ageuk_london_mtdg_foi_final.pdf

^{iv} <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/our-impact/programmes/digital-skills/>