

ACCESS FOR ALL

The BPA has launched a working group to tackle Blue Badge theft and misuse. Here, we assess the scale of the issue

WORDS | ANDREA BALL

Blue Badge fraud and disabled parking misuse is on the rise, with figures from the National Agency for Blue Badge Fraud Investigations (BBFi) suggesting up to 70% of Blue Badges are being misused or were fraudulently obtained. According to recent data, the number of Blue Badge thefts in London has more than quadrupled in the past decade.

“We know that Blue Badge theft is going through the roof,” says Graham Footer, chief executive of Disabled Motoring UK (DMUK) and a member of the BPA’s Blue Badge Working Group. “In London pubs, Blue Badges are being sold for hundreds of pounds due to the savings on parking fees. I dare say it’s the same across all major cities and urban areas.”

If someone breaks into a car to steal a Blue Badge, it can have a profound effect on a disabled person’s life. Not only do they have to pay to fix a broken window, but insurance premiums can be affected and then they have to wait for a replacement badge. Similarly, if a Blue Badge holder is planning a trip into town and can’t park because too many people are abusing disabled bays – through misuse, or using stolen or fraudulent badges – that person has no choice other than to turn around and go home. “That could be a hospital or a doctor’s appointment, or just a haircut, but it messes up their whole day,” says Graham.

Public awareness and enforcement

“I think a lack of public awareness of why Blue Badges and disabled spaces are needed is fundamental to the increase in misuse,” adds Steven Foster, parking team manager at Newcastle City Council and chair of the BPA’s Professional Development and Standards board.

He also blames a lack of enforcement, in both the public and private sectors. “Within the private sector there’s a desire not to take enforcement action because it’s perceived as something that could drive customers away. There’s a failure to realise the benefits to society of taking enforcement action and that it could actually encourage people to visit the shops.”

A lack of enforcement by local authorities is often blamed on cost, but Paul Slowey of the BBFi, which works with local authorities to enforce the scheme, argues that prosecutions don’t have to create a dent in councils’ coffers.

The BBFi provided Enfield Council with a template prosecution pack to help

“People think Blue Badge theft is harmless, but there is a wider cost and it has a huge impact”

**Seema Chandwani,
Haringey Council**



the parking department decide whether offences should be dealt with by the parking team or sent for prosecution. Over a three-year period, it issued 234 summonses for Blue Badge misuse in contravention of the Fraud Act.

“Prosecutions would always be in batches of five or six, and a barrister booked for a day at a cost of £100 per case,” explains Paul. “About one in 20 motorists would plead not guilty and attend a trial, costing a further £500 in barristers’ fees. Some 226 people were convicted with fines totalling £43,362 and costs awarded to Enfield of £71,156 – an average of £314.85 per case compared to legal costs of £100.

“The one major caveat is the quality of the officers preparing the evidence pack,” Paul adds. “The cases were prepared by highly qualified BBFi investigators. This is within the capability of a council corporate anti-fraud team but not a parking team – unless it buys in specialist skills.”

Stephen Goodall, senior criminal investigations officer at Portsmouth City Council, has worked with and advised numerous authorities over the past 15 years regarding investigations and prosecutions. He argues that while employing trained, dedicated investigators will always bring the best results, it isn’t always required.

“Using simple investigative techniques and templated documents, which can all be carried out by a senior officer or manager, you can achieve a prosecution for under £500 using your own legal services,” says Stephen. “For authorities that use a shared legal service or do not have capacity, an external solicitor or barrister could be instructed to present the case in court on behalf of the authority for under £200 per case.

“While this does involve some financial input from the service, you can recoup →

some of this by claiming court costs. On average we receive court costs of £500 per case which can be used to fund future prosecutions.”

Remember, not all cases require prosecution. “Blue Badge fraud is fraud, and fraud is a criminal offence that should be prosecuted. However for misuse, there are other avenues that you can go down and, in some circumstances, prosecution may be too harsh,” says Graham.

“If somebody is misusing a Blue Badge because they don’t understand their rights and responsibilities, and they think that what they’re doing is legitimate, under those circumstances, alternative measures such as community resolution orders or a simple warning letter can be effective. We know that of the people who receive those letters, a high percentage don’t reoffend.”

Fall in prosecutions

The Government no longer collects data on Blue Badge prosecutions, stating that the statistics were not widely used, but figures from 2021 show there were just 698 prosecutions for Blue Badge misuse across all local authorities in England, a 49 per cent fall on the previous year. Of those 698 prosecutions, 454 were in London, and 119 were from just one borough.

Initiatives like Haringey Council’s virtual parking permit system have shown promise in tackling Blue Badge fraud. Crime figures fell by 65% following the launch of its virtual parking permit system in August 2021, and the authority was recognised at the 2023 British Parking Awards for its use of technology to tackle Blue Badge fraud.

“We were about to turn all of our permits paperless and we wondered if we could give our Blue Badge holders a free paperless permit, so they didn’t have to put their badge in the car window,” explains Seema Chandwani, cabinet member for tackling inequality and resident services.

The council worked with Taranto, its parking management IT system provider,



“We need to ensure local authorities know what is available to them from an enforcement perspective”

Steven Foster, Newcastle City Council

to develop the virtual equivalent of a Blue Badge and integrate it into its parking permit system. Taranto’s Blue Badge software enables CEOs to use handheld machines to check for fraud, which makes it easier for back-office administrators to process applications.

“We had concerns from the community that disabled bays weren’t being used by people with disabilities, and the same message was coming from the disabled community saying that they knew that people were misusing their badges, or had stolen badges,” says Seema. “So we decided to co-produce our enforcement policy.”

Understanding how important it was to the people who were actually experiencing disabled parking in the borough has led to a raft of changes. “As well as the enforcement and paperless badges, we’ve just started the first phase of putting a disabled parking bay outside every GP surgery. The next phase is outside every pharmacy in the borough, and then outside every dentist.”

While Seema is proud of the work that’s been achieved in Haringey, and the →

Success story: Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea + PayByPhone

In 2020, the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea replaced all its pay and display machines with a cashless system, which posed a challenge for Blue Badge holders. Previously, Blue Badge customers purchased a ticket from the machine for a nominal amount – a minimum of 20p – and displaying the ticket with the Blue Badge meant they were entitled to an hour of additional parking for free.

PayByPhone (the council’s cashless parking payment provider) worked with the council, with NSL, which operates the borough’s parking enforcement services, and with the borough’s Action on Disability group

and disability campaigners, to come up with a technological solution.

The system enables Blue Badge holders to buy a reduced parking session digitally and informs CEOs in real time that the driver is entitled to the concessionary rate and an extra hour free.

Almost five years on, the scheme is still running successfully. “It was the first of its kind in any large city across the UK,” says Rebecca Maisey, senior client director for PayByPhone. “It set a new standard for accommodating Blue Badge holders in pay-to-park visitor bays, helping to mitigate some of the misuse of physical Blue Badges.”

recognition the council has received at the British Parking Awards – having also won the 2024 Accessible Parking Award – she is acutely aware that a national strategy is needed to truly address the problem.

“It’s great that other boroughs, such as neighbouring Brent, are introducing similar schemes,” she says, “but I don’t think it’s solving the problem. I should be able to login and see that someone is a Blue Badge holder and a resident in Brent, so they don’t have to display their badge when they come to Haringey. The barrier is that I don’t know what software Brent uses. They could be with a different software company that doesn’t speak to the software company that we use. The

“We want all local authorities across the UK to be enforcing the Blue Badge”

Graham Footer, DMUK

technology is there. What I’m hoping for is the will to make it national.”

Graham agrees: “I completely understand the thinking behind digital Blue Badges, but for me it can only work if it’s a national scheme. People need to be putting their names and weight behind the idea and helping to make it happen, rather than ignoring the problem and hoping it goes away.”

Spreading the word

While enforcement is crucial to the integrity of the Blue Badge scheme, communicating to the wider community how misuse can affect disabled people is also key. “If people don’t understand the importance of Blue Badge bays, we’ll continue enforcing forever,” says Steven. “Enforcing doesn’t stop the bays being misused. We need to stop it at source and ensure that the importance of the bays is understood by the community.”

Graham argues that disabled people also need to be better informed: “Local authorities need to ensure that people’s rights and responsibilities are explained to them when their badge is issued. Plus, more needs to be done in terms of education and information to reinforce

BPA VIEW

“2025 will be a big year for championing accessible parking and this includes protecting the integrity of the Blue Badge scheme. The newly formed task force will be creating best practice guidance and a City & Guilds Assured pathway programme. Also, look out for the Blue Badge Learning Labs at this year’s BPA Live events.”

Sarah Greenslade, BPA content and research manager

those messages. It’s important to keep it in people’s minds as to when, where and how they can use the badge.”

Sharing educational messages is one aspect of the BPA’s new Blue Badge Working Group. It also plans to lobby the Department for Transport for regulatory change. “We want to raise awareness and bring together people from different parking sectors across the country with different expertise to exchange ideas and best practice,” says Steven. “We’re determined to make a difference to the way that Blue Badge misuse is being tackled.”

And while Blue Badge misuse is the focus of the working group, according to Steven it’s just one element of the wider issue of improving access, alongside pavement parking and EV charging points. “There’s a body of work here that needs to be done to raise the profile of disabled motorists.”



Essential contacts

BPA Live Learning Labs focus on tackling Blue Badge abuse and fraud: landing.britishparking.co.uk/bpa-live. DMUK supports disabled drivers, passengers and Blue Badge holders: disabledmotoring.org. National Blue Badge Day of Action is an annual event that unites local authorities in a collective effort to enforce the scheme and educate the public on proper badge usage: bbfi.org.uk. BPA has a Working Group developing guidance on Blue Badge enforcement. Contact Sarah Greenslade to join: sarah.g@britishparking.co.uk