

You need to go to the supermarket to do some shopping. You drive around the car park looking for a parking space, and end up going home because the Blue Badge bays near the store entrance are occupied, and you're not up to walking far. Sound familiar?

Parking is a serious business for people with arthritis because it can be the gateway to an independent life. It is something that Linda Logan who's 57 and has rheumatoid arthritis (RA), feels strongly about. 'I know sometimes I look fine but it doesn't mean to say I can put one foot in front of the other,' she says. 'Being able to park can mean the difference between going out or not going out, and if I feel well enough I want to be able to access where I'm going to.'

Badge of independence

Many people with arthritis are eligible for the Blue Badge scheme, which gives access to parking concessions. The scheme is open to anyone who receives the higher rate mobility component of Disability Living Allowance; has a permanent disability which means they are unable to walk or have considerable difficulty in walking; or has a severe disability in both upper limbs and regularly drives a car but cannot turn the steering wheel by hand, even if a knob is fitted.

The social service departments of local councils in England and Wales, the social work department in Scotland and the Department for Regional Development in Northern Ireland, issue Blue Badges. It's



Parking: the gateway to independence



Catherine Osborn looks at why parking is such an issue for people with arthritis and what can be done...

worth applying if you think you meet the criteria. 'Some people with arthritis don't consider themselves to be disabled but could still be eligible for a Blue Badge,' says Tom Gentry, public affairs officer at Arthritis Care. 'Don't be afraid to say if you're having difficulties as you might be able to get one.'

Fifty-five-year-old James Ashmore who has had two hip replacements because of osteoarthritis finds his Blue Badge invaluable. 'When I am able to park it makes a huge difference,' he says. 'I still have certain kinds of mobility problems so using a Blue Badge is a lifesaver for me.'

If you have a Blue Badge you can park in disabled parking bays and free of charge at parking meters on-street and pay-and-display on-street parking. You can

also often park on single or double yellow lines for up to three hours in England, Northern Ireland and Wales, and without any time limit in Scotland, except where there is a ban on loading or unloading. If you're not sure, check any signs where you are parking for information about restrictions.

Many people with arthritis enjoy the benefits of the Blue Badge scheme but admit that it has its drawbacks, such as people abusing the system by parking in disabled bays without a Blue Badge and using a badge when they shouldn't be.

Kathleen Caisey, who has RA, is no longer able to drive but has a Blue Badge so that her husband can park when he drives her somewhere. 'I don't think disabled parking bays are adequately checked for fraudulent use,' she says. 'People without Blue Badges just see a space and nip in, and workmen sometimes think "I'm only going to be here a few minutes, so I'll park here".'

According to Tom Gentry, abuse of disabled parking bays is due to lack of understanding. 'It's an attitude problem,'



Blue Badges – under reform

KLIFE

he says. 'For people with arthritis, walking from their car to the shops can be difficult, especially if they're carrying bags. Someone without a Blue Badge parking in a disabled bay can really disrupt life for other people. It can stop them living their life.'

In the UK, it is a criminal offence for someone who is not disabled to use a Blue Badge and they can be fined up to £1,000. People who park in a local authority disabled parking bay without a Blue Badge can get a parking ticket. If you suspect someone is misusing a Blue Badge, it is a good idea to report it to a police officer, traffic warden or traffic enforcement officer rather than confront the person yourself.

Abuse and rudeness from the general public is another problem that people with arthritis face when using Blue Badge bays. Linda was approached by someone who didn't believe she was disabled. 'An elderly man got aggressive with me because I was younger than him, and I think he felt I didn't have the right to park there,' she says.

Sixty-year-old Pat Fletcher who has RA and lives in Derby has found her own way of dealing with the problem. 'In Derby city centre when I see people without Blue Badges sitting in the car waiting for people, I say: "Do you know the traffic

wardens patrol this area regularly now? You need to be careful or you'll get a ticket." It does worry them.'

In October 2007, a number of changes were made to the Blue Badge scheme including: extending the scheme to children under two years of age who, because of their specific medical condition, need to travel with bulky medical equipment or to be close to a vehicle for emergency medical treatment; adding a hologram to the design of the badge to help reduce fraud; and extending the scheme to include severely disabled people who drive non-adapted vehicles, but are unable to operate parking meters.

A review of the Blue Badge scheme, which will consider, amongst other things, whether people with temporary disabilities should be eligible, is also underway and a comprehensive reform strategy will be published in April 2008.

Supermarket sweep

Local authorities are responsible for policing Blue Badge use in public parking areas, but it is a different story when it comes to privately owned car parks, such as supermarkets. 'Under the Disability Discrimination Act supermarkets have to have provision for disabled parking,' says Tom Gentry, 'but it's down to supermarkets

to enforce it and not much is done.'

Bad planning, such as building spaces on slopes, or a long way from the store entrance can also cause difficulties. Pat has experienced problems in her local supermarket and uses humour to get her point across. 'There's a cash point next to the disabled parking bays and people often park there, which blocks off the disabled bays. If you want to reverse, people parked there will say "I'll only be a minute", so when I'm reversing out and I'm blocking them in I say "I'll only be a minute".'

According to Helen Smith, director of policy and campaigns for Mobilise, a charity for disabled drivers, 90 per cent of their correspondence is from people complaining about not being able to park.

Mobilise is one of the charities that supports the Baywatch campaign. 'The campaign was started in 2001 to highlight the fact that in supermarkets, the majority of disabled parking bays are occupied by people who do not have Blue Badges and have no right to park in those bays,' says Helen. 'Through sheer laziness and ignorance they decide that they want to park close to the shop entrance and deprive people that really need those bays from parking there.'

The goal of the campaign is to bring disabled parking bay abuse to the attention of supermarket managers. Helen would like to see fines introduced for misuse of bays and says that this year's campaign has been the most successful yet. 'ASDA is doing a trial in six stores in Merseyside where they will be fining people. Sainsbury's has fined over 2,200 people. Morrisons has greatly reduced the number of people abusing bays. They don't fine but they do have people who police the bays and ask people to move if they don't have a Blue Badge.'

Hospital parking

Having arthritis can mean regular visits to various hospital departments, so it helps to be able to find a parking space nearby. For Kathleen, this is an ongoing problem. 'I can never get a disabled bay at my local hospital,' she says. 'The car park is run by a private company. You don't have to pay in a disabled bay, but in an ordinary bay you do. I might have three visits a week to different departments and costs do mount up.'

Kathleen decided to take action and spoke to the person in charge of the car park. He was 'most unpleasant' which prompted Kathleen to write to her MP who then contacted the hospital. The chief executive responded saying that hospital policy meant that no one with a Blue Badge would be charged for parking anywhere in the hospital. Kathleen is still waiting to hear how she can claim back the money for her parking tickets, but this is progress.

Taking action

The way disabled parking bays are operated, whether they are owned by the local authority or a private company, means that it is best to tackle the problem at a local level. If you are having problems at a specific car park find out who is responsible for managing it and get in touch with them. That might mean going to the customer services desk at your supermarket, or speaking to a traffic enforcement officer.

A letter can often have more impact than a verbal complaint, as Linda explains. 'I don't think screaming and shouting is the answer,' she says. 'If the car park is owned by a private company write to them and point out what's happening.' Tom Gentry



agrees. 'Write to your local council,' he says. 'If there are a number of people who are having a problem, get together and write a letter together or go and see your local councillor. We always recommend visiting your local MP because they have good links and can put weight behind what they're saying.'

Watch this space

Problems with disabled parking don't just affect people with arthritis, and according to Steve McBride, policy and campaigns manager for Arthritis Care in Northern Ireland, this can add strength to campaigns. 'The Blue Badge scheme is UK-wide, but a lot of the problems tend to be local,' he says. 'Because this is something that affects all disabled people, it's good to have allies and work cross-sector. I'm on the committee of Baywatch, and we encourage members to get involved in that.'

It's worth checking if your local disability group is running a campaign on parking, or contacting your local Arthritis Care campaigns manager to find out how you

Finding a parking space near where you regularly visit can make all the difference

can get your views heard. (Visit www.arthritiscare.org.uk/campaigns or call: 020 7380 6547.)

Siobhain McCurrach, policy and campaigns manager for Arthritis Care in South England, has been working with volunteers on a series of MP shadowing days, taking MPs around their local town highlighting access problems such as parking at their local railway station.

Fenton Robb, who lives in the Scottish Borders, is concerned that drivers using on-street parking could make it impossible for disabled people to park near to where they live. Fenton's wife, who has arthritis in her hands and arms and mobility difficulties, has had problems parking in their street, which prompted Fenton to put a petition on the Prime Minister's website asking for local authorities to designate on-street parking for disabled people near their homes. 'New developments are eating up on-street parking space and local authorities should have a duty to protect disabled drivers from discrimination in this way,' he says. 'I thought the petition would be a good way of drawing attention to the problem.'

As Helen Smith explains, there's no easy solution, but progress is being made. 'There isn't going to be an overnight cure. It takes a long time to get anywhere but it's one that we're not going to give up on.'

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Have you had any parking problems? Let us know by writing to: The Editor, Arthritis News, 18 Stephenson Way, London NW1 2HD or via email: editor@arthritiscare.org.uk

Blue Badge bonus

Would you like to win a UK road atlas specifically for Blue Badge holders? We're offering five readers the chance to win a Gowrings Mobility UK Road Atlas. For your chance to win, send a postcard including your name and address to: Arthritis News, 18 Stephenson Way, London NW1 2HD. The first five entries received by 31 March will win.

PIE Enterprises are offering readers a free copy of the atlas when they order one of their Blue Badge Protectors (priced £17.99 for a single protector and £22.99 for a Blue Badge and time disc protector). To order, telephone: 0870 444 5435 and quote reference PIEUK01. You can also buy online at: www.parkingforbluebadges.com/shop