

Freedom Pass - Written Submissions – Personal Experiences

The following paper sets out the experiences to date of those who were affected by the Councils handling of the Freedom Pass renewal in May this year.

We have invited submissions from individuals, organisations, GPs, disability and pensioner groups, clinics, local libraries and have placed advertisements in both the Southwark News and the South London Press.

Submission One

In February I phoned the Council a few times to find out what was happening and what I needed to do to renew my freedom pass. I was told to wait until I got the application in the post.

On the 3rd of March 2008 I sent off my freedom pass application as soon as I received it, with two recent passport photos. I also sent a recent copy of my water bill and a copy of my DWP letter showing I get highest rate mobility DLA, to the disability services Po box 51504 London SE 1 9 ZU.

A number of times after that date, I phoned 02075252141 and 0207525 2306, as I was worried I hadn't heard or had anything in reply. Each time I just got an answer message saying that the current pass has been extended until the end May 2008.

Towards the middle of May, someone answered the phone and said I was entitled to the pass and I would receive it in the post before the end of May.

On the 2 June 2008 I phoned again and was told to go the one stop shop on Walworth Rd. I arrived there at 9.15 am and found a large queue already snaking outside of the building. After about 1/2 hour I was unable to stand up and sat on the floor and the staff who were giving out the tickets didn't take any notice of me when I said I couldn't stand anymore and I felt ill.

One of the people in the queue got a member of staff to take me inside the building so I could sit down and wait for my turn. I waited 3 1/2 hours before it was my turn, yes 3 1/2 hours I waited to be seen. When I got to the counter finally, the lady took my details but couldn't find any papers on me, so she had to phone through to the office to check. Thankfully they confirmed I was entitled to the pass. She then hand filled in the form for me to go to the post office. By this time I was exhausted and was having problems trying to walk even with a walking stick.

After a big struggle, I got to Walworth rd post office and queued up. When I got to the counter the lady told me I had to go back to the one stop shop as the form was no good for a renewal because it was now 2 June and I need a new pass application form. When I had left the one stop shop the queues went all the way down the street onto Walworth Rd itself. I told the post office lady that no way was I going back to queue again as I had already queued for 3 1/2 hours, the queue now was a lot worse and my health did not allow me to go back. I didn't even know how I was going to make it back home. She called her manager and the manager thankfully told her to cross out renewal and change the form to a new application.

The whole thing from 3rd march until 2 June was totally stressful and unnecessary.

My application was clear cut. I have been award indefinitely DLA highest rate mobility and I filled and sent all my details required on the 3rd march, so I should not have had all the problems I did to get the pass, especially since the end date was extended from 31 March to 31 May.

The new passport photos of me weren't even used for my new freedom pass either.

I really hope lessons will be learnt by this. I never had any problems with the old method of getting a renewal.

People were standing up on 2 June in that queue for over 3 1/2 hours at the one stop shop. I really don't now how they did it. It was a bad way to treat people with disabilities and health problems.

Submission Two

Further to our telephone discussion today: I applied for a freedom pass in April of 2008 and to date have heard nothing back. This is a long time to wait without any reply. I understand there has been some delay and was told this when I enquired about 5 weeks ago but I was told that it was being sorted out.

Submission Three

I am having trouble getting my new full disable freedom pass. I was told they were waiting for my Doctor to send back the information.

When I phoned my Doctors on the 11/6/2008 they told me that they had sent the information back on the 28/04/2008 and they would fax another copy to them right away that day.

Submission Four

I went through the dreaded process of obtaining a disabled freedom pass and the wait was long. There was no communication throughout the process and the communication that I got after numerous phone calls was very unhelpful.

I think that Southwark Council should implement some strategies to deal with the influx of claims and to communicate back to the parties involved.

This has contributed to the stress that my poor mental health already gives me. Thank you and I hope you can sort out this mess before the next issue date of 2010. If that's not too much to ask.

Submission Five

My mother-in-law's disabled badge expires on 21st July and she has not yet received her renewal. She is 83 and is getting quite distressed.

I rang today to speak to the disability/blue badge department and the number responds with 'mailbox full' hence switchboard then put me through to your area.

Could you please investigate whether her renewal request has been issued and what happens in the event that this is not received before expiry date?

Submission Six

I saw the notice in the news about the renewal of my freedom pass and to ring 02075252141 after many attempts i spoke to a lady and was told to go to the one stop shop an get a renewal form this i did an sent off. About a week after i sent my renewal i got a phone call telling me it was not a renewal but had to re a ply an they sent me a form could not have done this long before the renewal date.

I started to worry getting near the end of may made many attempts to phone 5252141 but each time was cut off, on the 28th may 08 i received a letter informing me i had been turn down the reason not known if disability will last more then two years i was so mad as i fit the automatic criteria i phoned 5252141 each time was cut off before speaking two anyone. I sent off my appeal on the same day 28/05/08 an handed in a letter from my gp on 08/06/08 to the one stop shop, the appeals response is worse then the renewal i should have had reply within 5 working days the only way i could get them to respond was to make a complaint as need to know that my appeal had not been lost, on the 13/06/08 i made my complaint was told they had 10days to respond i go a letter post mark 10/07/08 but the letter dated 23/06/08 was so it was in the 10days to respond.

I still await the outcome of my appeal i put this all down to bad management and our many of us have had to suffer because.

Submission Seven

I am writing to tell you that to date, I am still waiting for my freedom pass renewal. I am virtually housebound, and when I received my renewal form I filled it in and sent it together with proof of ID, receipt of DLA and 2 passport photos. I then handed them to my carer who gave them to her boss who in turn checked that every thing was in order. They then sent it off for me.

However my pass ran out in March and after making several calls to the Freedom Pass phone number: 020 7525 2306, explaining that I am virtually housebound and cannot get to Walworth Road in person. I was assured that my pass would be sent to me but I have heard absolutely nothing and still have no pass. This means that when and if I can get out, I have to pay fares.

Submission Eight

Unfortunately, me and my wife were victims of the freedom pass fiasco. We were standing out in the rain for hours, for two days. We were inside the Town Hall Walworth from 9am to 5pm on both occasions and we were still refused our disabled bus passes. My wife and I then went the following week also and I handed my old disabled buss pass because I was so embarrassed by the whole scenario. My wife got her bus pass eventually, after her doctor signed the form. I just went to the Post Office and got my OAP buss pass instead.

Submission Nine

This submission is a series of correspondence between the Council and someone applying for Freedom Pass renewal. The individual's name, address and date of birth have been removed to protect identity.

This email was sent to csc@southwark.gov.uk on 9 June 2008:

I wrote to you on **15 May 2008**, lodging my Appeal, having been declined a Freedom Pass after 11 years of having one.

I have not heard back from you to confirm receipt of the papers.

According to your Appeals Procedure, I should receive a written acknowledgement **within 5 working days**.

I asked my GP to write separately [ticking the appropriate box on my Appeals form] and there has been some confusion on his part. I will be seeing him this morning to endeavour to clarify his role in this matter.

The lack of a Freedom Pass, after all this time, is impacting on my Depression and Anxiety and I would like the Appeal dealt with as soon as possible, and acknowledgment that you received my initial letter of 15 May.

Thank you.

I also wrote to the CEO on the same day - but received neither acknowledgment or response of any kind:

Dear Ms Shepperd

I am someone who has suffered from Chronic Depression and Anxiety for over 30 years.

In 1991, I was made redundant from a very responsible job, which had brought me to live and work in SE London in 1987. During that time, I managed the D&A.

11 years ago, my then GP recommended me for a Freedom Pass, which I was very grateful to receive. It was renewed every 2 years, including two years ago, when the rules were, understandably, tightened.

I am assuming that it was granted to me on the discretionary grounds, under long term Mental Health, which affects my ability to move around as freely as I would wish: **'A severe enduring long term mental health condition'**.

Several years **after** initially receiving the FP, I was granted Disability Living Allowance: Higher Rate Care and Lower Rate Mobility. The latter was granted because: "you need someone to guide or supervise you when you are walking on routes that are unfamiliar".

Similarly to two years ago, I sent a copy of the letter to support my reapplication.

However, I was declined this year [less than a year before I will qualify on age grounds].

As well as undermining the hard work I have done, on my Depression and Anxiety [which affects my concentration, energy levels and low self-esteem] I am wondering why at least one other person with **exactly** the same Mental Health Problems, also in

receipt of Lower Rate Mobility, has been granted the FP, delighted for her though I am.

She does not have a 'full Enhanced Care Programme Approach' - indeed neither of us knows what that is!

The day I received the letter declining me the new FP - **15 May 2008** - I wrote back to the SHSC [using the envelope provided] but have not heard a word from them.

According to the Appeals Procedure, I should have had an initial letter of acknowledgement **within 5 working days**. My GP is writing separately to them.

I have always been extremely grateful for the FP, particularly because I live on a fixed income, due to long-term ill health. It enables me to move around London, when I am able, and return home faster when the Anxiety and Panic Attacks become overwhelming.

None of this makes any sense to me - particularly after having had one for all this time and I am *exceedingly* distressed by this decision, which has exacerbated my illness.

I have now posted the letter of support from my GP, first class. Evidently there was some confusion about his role in the Appeal process.

Whilst writing, I would like to bring to your attention the following **facts** about my Depression and Anxiety:

Depression can render me **immobile** and prevent me from moving further than the confines of my flat. It can be akin to being 'superglued' to my chair and **slows the decision-making process** to such a degree that even deciding whether or not to have a cup of tea or a cup of coffee, becomes a major problem.

Concentration is impaired - wrong tubes and buses can be taken, going in the opposite direction - which is why I receive the lower rate of Mobility, DLA. This is **not** given to me to use as bus/tube fares.

Anxiety and **panic-attacks** are truly terrifying. I can be **overwhelmed with fear** whilst out and about.

Despite this, I endeavour to overcome the **exceedingly strong desire** to hide away and to visit the Friends who are supportive to me.

To do this without a Freedom Pass - which I have had for 11 years - would not be possible and, thus, my condition would, without a doubt, worsen.

Suicidal Ideation is something I live with on almost a daily - sometimes hourly - basis. Being able to move around and distract myself, is paramount to achieving good Mental Health.

In other words, I have '**a severe long term mental health condition**', under Section B2 of your Guidance Notes - which I have had for **far** longer than the 11 years I had the use of the FP.

I hope you will now reconsider the re-assessment of 8 May 2008.

Thank you.

At the end of the working day I received the following from Theresa Itabor:

Thank you for your email which was received today by the Freedom Pass / Blue Badge team today.

Although your concerns have been noted, I have been unable to review your case because you have not included your address or date of birth. If you prefer that I discuss your case with you, please include your contact phone number.

On receipt of this information, I will check your case again and contact you.

Kind Regards

Teresa Itabor
Service Development

I responded: *(Date of birth has been removed)*

Thank you for your email Under 'normal' circumstances, I would always include such important information. I have reacted very badly to this decision, after all these years of having the FP. A 'good out of bad'.

I have to go out now and I appreciate that it is the end of the working day for you.

My GPs letter of support was finally posted, 1st class, after my appointment, this morning.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely

She responded, the same day:

Thank you for your email and information you provided.

I appreciate how distressing this must be for you which is why I have asked the team to review your case.

I contact you again later on this week and provide you with an update.

Regards

Teresa Itabor
Service Development

to which I responded:

Thank you. I now realise that I also omitted my telephone number, which you mentioned in your earlier email. It is: (number removed)

I have various medical appointments this week - but I will be in between 11.45am and 2.45pm tomorrow, Tuesday. I will also be in after 2pm on Wednesday.

What is really rubbing salt in the wound, is the knowledge that someone who has almost identical symptoms to me, and suffers from the same conditions, was sent her letter of acceptance by special delivery, last Saturday - after being part of the debacle at the One Stop Shop, last week.

She also receives the Lower Rate of DLA: Mobility and has no major physical problems - in fact, as she said to me, I have more physical problems.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Kind regards.

On 11 June, I then sent the following to Ms Itabor:

Can you please confirm that the letter from my Doctor has been received.

I have just been told [yesterday morning] that I require surgery on my right foot, to repair an osteopathic 'fused' joint. An appointment is now awaited, from Orthopaedics.

During the last 18 months or so, I have been experiencing pain, at times excruciating, in my right big toe, which slows walking - and sometimes prevents me going beyond the local shops. I do my very best to overcome it, as I do not like remaining indoors. Rather similarly to the Depression and Anxiety.

I also think it relevant that, because of my DLA, I am allowed to purchase a National Disabled Card for use on the train network. This allows me to visit family and friends outside London and, when necessary, take a companion with me.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Kind regards.

I received 2 emails on 18 June which are both in response to the ones I sent on 9 June:

Good Morning

Thank you for your email:

In response unfortunately we are unable to track your application by email you would need to contact the freedom pass department directly.

Sorry for any inconvenience

Rowena CSC

Disability services
Tel: 020 7525 2141/2306

Having heard nothing from Ms Itabor, I traced her, through Southwark Switchboard and we spoke on 18 June.

It was then she told me that my GP's report which had caused the initial rejection of my application. She said she had 'meant' to call me.

During the conversation I asked to have sight of the report. I asked her to email it to me, which she agreed, the following day.

Nothing was received.

On 23 June I then wrote:

Dear Ms Itabor

During our telephone conversation last Wednesday, 18 June, you informed me that my GP's initial report was responsible for my Freedom Pass being declined.

As I explained, I was unaware that he had provided a report. When we had to reapply for the first time, in March 2006, I was not aware of him being approached. I presumed that I was awarded it on discretionary grounds because of the '**enduring long term Mental Health condition**', which has plagued my life for over 30 years and prevented me leading a 'normal' life, despite my best efforts.

You said you would contact me the following day - I requested that you did so by email - but I have heard not a word.

When you contacted me, twice, on 9 June, you asked for my telephone number and said you would contact me later in the week, with an update - but you didn't.

As you rightly said in your email, this is a **very** distressing situation for me and it has completely thrown me from being in a 'reasonable' space, after almost 7 **very black** months. This has now been compounded by not receiving the promised call/email from you nor any acknowledgement to my Appeal, posted in the envelope provided on 15 May!

I have twice tried to obtain confirmation from the department, by email, that both my Appeal form and my GP's letter have been received - but I have been told to contact the department. When I did so, I spoke to a call centre!

This flies in the face of the letter of 14 December, from Susannah White that 'waiting times for entitlements will be reduced' and promising 'further service improvements'!

The process of renewal of the Freedom Pass, this year, commenced very late and caused *considerable* stress, to many people, but I had no reason to doubt that, after 11 years [and with less than a year to go before I qualify on age grounds], I would be successful.

Nor have I had sight of the initial GP's report, so I do not know what he stated in it. Indeed, I do not even know what opportunity there is on the form for the area of Mental Health to be adequately covered. It isn't simply a case of 'ticking a box', as all such problems are unique.

I am attaching my GP's letter of support, written on the 9 June and posted on that day, 1st Class, from Jamaica Road post office. As it is somewhat faint, I repeat what he has said:

'This man has been my NHS GP patient for many years.

Although ambulant and mostly physically fit, he has chronic complex depression and anxiety.

His condition has made employment impossible. Without the freedom pass he will become more isolated & his condition is likely to worsen.

His is an unusual case. I hope you can consider the above facts and help him with a freedom pass.

Yours sincerely

(Name Removed)

I am already declining invitations from the close friends who have supported me over the years; my desire to go out has been reduced by this; the reasons are both practical and directly related to my illness. I have already spent c£25 on essential travel, including appointments concerning my health.

Last Saturday found me at The Samaritans HQ, where I have not been this year, because I felt **so** 'distressed' and unable to obtain any pleasure from anything whatsoever. I could only think of one thing - bringing the inevitable forward.

If this all sounds somewhat bleak, and heavy, it is because it **is**. Writing this has taken several hours and is akin to climbing a very tall mountain, with no oxygen. Rather what I am feeling I have been asked to do in order to pursue the Appeal.

As if the illness itself isn't bad enough!

Yours sincerely

I received the following response:

Thank you for your email and attached information from your doctor

When an application is made for a new or renewal freedom pass, we may directly approach the medical professional stated in applicant's the claim form for an update on their medical condition.

The subsequent decision we made was based on the information provided in your medical report. In our last discussion, I did say I was going to phone you back with an update and I apologise that I have not been able to do.

I have forwarded the additional information you have provided to Heather Rodney, team leader of the Freedom Pass team and she will keep you informed on progress made on your Appeal.

I know this is distressing for you and I will endeavour to ensure your appeal is dealt with as quickly as possible.

Regards

Teresa Itabor

I wrote back, the same day:

Dear Ms Itabor

Thank you for your email.

I am still non the wiser as to whether or not my Appeal was received by the relevant department, almost 6 weeks ago and, if so, why it was not acknowledged within the 5 working day time-frame.

Even though my GP's report was sent separately and later than I had hoped, I would have expected some acknowledgement.

Might I ask what your role is in all of this and how you became involved when you wrote on 9 June. Was it because of my email to CSC or to the Chief Executive of Southwark?

Yours sincerely

I have not received a response of any kind.

The following day, 24 June, I wrote to Heather Rodney:

Dear Ms Rodney

I understand, from Theresa Itabor, that you now have a copy of the letter of support from my GP of over 20 years, which I sent her yesterday.

I originally posted this [first class] to your department on 9 June, from Jamaica Road post office.

On **15 May 2008**, I posted my Appeal form, using the envelope provided – but, to date, I have not received an acknowledgement that this has been received which, I understand, should be sent within 5 working days.

As Ms Itabor has possibly explained, this whole matter has caused me *considerable* distress. I was unaware that Dr **(Name Removed)** had been asked to supply a report, when I reapplied. He didn't mention it to me when I met with him on 9 June, or in any previous consultation.

Neither do I know exactly what information he was asked to provide. It is difficult for me to comprehend that he would have been anything other than supportive, knowing, as he does, just how badly my Depression and Anxiety can be and how it affects my day to day life – including my mobility.

As he has stated in his 2nd letter, the Depression and Anxiety are both complex. They often render me both helpless, 'frozen' and terrified.

Over the 11 years I have had the use of the Freedom Card, I have used it in a positive manner, to enable me to manage the D&A as best I can.

Some of these uses include:

- Attending regular sessions with my Psychotherapist [who I pay] every 3 – 4 weeks
- Attending therapeutic groups at the Maudlsey Hospital
- Attending the Gym, which helps the D&A **and** the chronic back and neck condition I have had for the last 15 years
- Attending the Osteopath for treatment of this condition and for the osteoarthritis on my big toe
- Attending Counselling
- Attending the Samaritans for 1:1 assistance in times of Crisis
- Visiting my only brother on the South Coast, used with the National Disabled Railcard
- Attending events directly or indirectly connected with managing my Mental Health, to improve the quality of my life
- Visiting Friends, when able, to prevent me becoming more reclusive
- Visiting and staying with Friends out of London, when able, for the same reasons
- Shopping, because I am no longer able to carry several bags and, thus, may have to make several journeys to a Supermarket, which is more cost-effective
- Taking my elderly Cat to the vets for necessary treatment
- Visiting a seriously ill friend in Hospital, every week for the last 5 months

'Lack of Mobility' is *not* always connected with a physical disability. Although there are **frequent** times when my back and neck pain prevent me from going far. I try not to take **pain killers** – which are *still* prescribed and sometimes I *have* to take them, despite the consequences.

Because of the D&A, simple day-to-day tasks can be *exceedingly* difficult for me due to the **lack of focus and concentration** and the **lack of energy**, both **mentally and physically** rendering me unable to leave my home, and even my chair, for long periods.

Dr (Name Removed) is fully aware of all these facts and has been for many years, which is why it is hard to understand that he would have been anything other than supportive of my application. He did not ask to see me, which surprises me even more.

I have to make the most **enormous** effort for much of the time, on a reduced income and **limited energy** and I feel that I am being penalised for doing so, which is now feeding back into my life and undermining all the hard work I have put in.

I am **not** a malingerer and endeavour to help other people who suffer from this insidious illness. To this end I was, for a number of years, a volunteer and Trustee of a National Charity, specifically for people with Depression.

My condition is *not* intermittent. I have a **severe, enduring long term mental health condition** which has made it impossible for me to work – following redundancy from

an extremely good, responsible and well paid position, which brought me to LB Southwark in 1987 - and for which I receive DLA, for the last 6 years.

The fact that I do not have a 'full Enhanced Care Programme Approach' – if I knew what that meant – is not my fault. It isn't for the want of trying to obtain help and being refused it because I 'appear' capable/present too well.

Under the circumstances, I do not think it unreasonable for me to have sight of Dr **(Name Removed)** original report, so that I know exactly what I am dealing with. Hopefully, his 2nd report has had a more positive effect. Will you please send me a copy.

Can I please ask that this matter is dealt with as expeditiously as possible as I am rapidly reaching the end of my tether.

Thank you

I received an automatic Out of Office reply [for one day] but no other response.

That was almost 3 weeks ago. There is no other correspondence between SC and myself, other than my letter of 15 May 2008, accompanying the Appeal. In any event, I have not had any acknowledgment to my Appeal - sent 8 weeks ago - or around 40 working days.

Letter of the 15th May

Senior Administration Officer
Disability Services
LB Southwark
PO Box 51504
LONDON
SE1 9ZU
May 2008

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Dear Sir/Madam

DISABLED PERSON'S FREEDOM CARD – APPEAL

I was extremely disappointed to receive your letter of 8 May 2008, today, refusing my re-application for the Freedom Pass. After waiting almost two months beyond the normal time, this was not what I had hoped for from my Local Authority.

When my then GP, Dr *(name removed)*, [part of the practice I have been with for 21 years] recommended me for one, approximately 10 years ago, I was delighted and grateful to have been awarded the Pass. Indeed, it has been a Godsend during these years, when I have lived on a limited income, due to many years of ill health.

I am unable to access my original letter, which I enclosed with my application at the beginning of March 2008, due to problems with my PC. However, I am sure I enclosed a copy of the DWP's decision to award me DLA for a *further* 6 years [two years ago]. This follows two periods of 2 years and 3 years, respectively. When I initially applied for the FP, I had not then been granted DLA: Higher Rate Care and Lower Rate Mobility. This is not granted without a fight, for *anyone* who gets it.

As you will see from the enclosed, the Mobility Award was because: 'I need someone to guide or supervise me when walking on routes that are unfamiliar'.

This is a very brief summary of how the Chronic Clinical Depression and Anxiety affects my life and often prevents me from venturing further than the local shops, for weeks at a time.

In almost exactly 12 month's time, I will be eligible for a Freedom Pass, because of my age. To take it away now will stop me from going much further than the immediate area – and erode the confidence that I have been trying, very hard, to build whilst having the FP.

Under **Section J** of the Appeals Information sheet, you state, under Other Medical Conditions: 'if walking may endanger the applicant's life or could cause serious deterioration to their health'.

The Discretionary Method covers 'someone with Mental Health problems who does not qualify under the automatic criteria'. I do remember stating in my covering letter, in March 2008, that I did not know what a 'multi-disciplinary enhanced care programme approach' is. All the help I have been given, during the 35 years I have **suffered** from this *hideous* illness, has been obtained from my GP, Psychologist and other NHS Professionals.

Other than a 6 month period, in 2004/5, I have received **no** support from Southwark Council [despite requesting it] – and, thus, I have not been a financial burden to the Community.

I know of two people, in two different London Boroughs, who have both had their FPs renewed, upon reapplication. One doesn't receive the mobility award and the other gets the lower rate, the latter of whom has long standing Mental Health problems too, very similar to mine.

My GP of 21 years, Dr (*name removed*), will be writing to you separately as soon as possible. I trust you will use all of this information to reassess this exceedingly upsetting decision.

Yours faithfully

Hopefully, the above will give as clear a picture as possible about the lack of communication, since I posted my Appeal form [in the envelope provided] on 15 May - 2 months ago.

Similarly, the original of my GP's supportive document was sent to the correct address - with my name and date of birth - but 'not received' according to Ms Itabor.

It came as a terrible shock to have my Freedom Pass application declined, after having had it for so long. Whilst I don't take things for granted, clearly I didn't make as much of an effort in my application as I should have done.

My Depression and Anxiety make simple tasks *extremely* difficult and, at times, impossible because of both the lack of mental and physical energy and concentration.

I was unaware they had contacted my GP, who didn't tell me he had filled in a report when I sought his help with my Appeal. Neither did he ask to see me, in order to do so. I feel unable to tackle him about it, until I have seen the report; he didn't keep a copy. Even then, it will be difficult.

Two years ago, my application was successful. This was the first time we actually had to apply - despite what Ms Itabor said, twice, when we spoke, when she said *this* year was the first time. She seems unclear of the facts.

There was also a delay then, although nowhere near as long. I recall that when I telephoned, in 2006, I was told, in a somewhat terse manner, that 'of course you can use the old pass beyond 31 March', as if I was a mind-reader!

This year, the application forms were not sent out until, I am sure, the 2nd week of March - for a 31 March deadline. There was no mention, at that point, about the passes being valid until 31 May - which meant the main switchboard was inundated by understandably concerned people, as time went by.

A friend of mine [who eventually *did* get her FP] was amongst those treated in a very unprofessional manner at Walworth Road - and was told, by the member of staff, that she had to work until 11pm the previous evening - hardly a professional response! [I am going to ask if she will contact you, because she was also extremely upset by this delay and the attitude of Southwark Council]

All this, after being told by Susanna White, in her letter of 14 December 2008, that the 'programme of planned improvements would reduce waiting times for entitlements' and 'hoping that we will notice the benefits of these changes'.

Her letter also spoke - in retrospect - of the move from Walworth Road to London Bridge on 26 November - and yet, when I called the switchboard in the last week of March, I was told they were still in the process of moving.

When Ms Itabor entered the picture - on 9 June - I felt a degree of hope; she acknowledged that it was a distressing situation for me - and then she promptly became part of the problem, not once but twice.

The CEO did not acknowledge my email - so much for her 'public apology'.

Whilst I have every sympathy with the physically disabled it would seem to me that no consideration has been given to the impact of poor Mental Health upon a person, which in this day and age, is inexcusable.

This has been an exceedingly dispiriting experience - and an expensive one. Over £50 in fares, so far, out of my fixed income.

To be constantly told that I 'present too well' by doctors and other 'health-professionals' - I am, evidently, not unkempt enough to be in need of help - makes me very angry; I can do nothing with this anger and, thus, it is turned back on myself and feeds into the Depression.

You mentioned that you would provide a car for me on to attend the meeting on 24 July. Will it also bring me home?

What can I expect to find at this meeting? I don't fancy being 'on trial' and having to 'prove' that I am ill - but I would like to try and help, on behalf of others who have been treated so badly, as well as for myself.

I was made to 'jump through flaming hoops' to get the DLA - many fail at the first hurdle. Oh, to be well and independent, working and not in need of this - or any other - 'Benefit'. I never thought I would reach the age of 59 and find myself in this position, after all my hard work.

Kind regards.

Submission Ten

Re:- Freedom Pass Review.

I would like to make the following statement for consideration by the Scrutiny Panel regarding the above subject. I believe that part of this statement will already have been made by other people, but I will use it as an illustration as to the apparent disarray that the Disabled Unit found itself with regards to the Renewal of Disabled Freedom Passes.

Firstly, my own experience which appears not to have been as bad as a lot of blind people I know. It could have been because I made several telephone calls or it could just have been plain good luck. When, in the middle of February my wife's attention was drawn to the fact that bus passes were due for renewal and they would expire on 31st March. On 15th February, I contacted the Disabled Unit and I was given to understand that the Letters of Authorisation had been sent out on Monday so I should receive it within the next 5 days. When I have not received it by 20th February, I contacted them again the following day, 21st February. Then I was told they had been sent out on the Monday and should receive it by the end of the week. So when I had still not received it on the Monday morning, I contacted them again and was told that TfL were very late in informing them of the alterations to the questionnaire and the documents should be sent out by the end of the week. On Friday 29th February I contacted them again and firstly, I was told that the letters had been sent out in batches over the last few weeks, when I questioned this I was put through to someone else and I was once again told about TfL and that the letters were on their way. I finally received my application pack on Saturday 1st March which I sent off at the start of the next week, and I received my Letter of Authorisation at the beginning of April.

During my conversation on Monday 25th February when I pointed out that, by the time people received their application forms and returned them, and they'd been processed and the Letter of Authorisation would not be carried out by the end of March, and I was informed that TfL had agreed to extend the life of the Pass until 31st May, however, I noted that there was no indication of this fact included in the information sent out with the Pack which I feel it should have done, because I know for a fact that people where I work, who, like me are blind were panicking when they'd heard nothing from the Council and when they had returned their Forms and not received their Letters by 31st March. So I believe the Unit could have done far more to publicise the extension of the Passes.

I would like give other evidence as to why I believe was in complete chaos over the Freedom Passes and it appears to be no logical system whatsoever. Firstly, one

friend of mine who received his Application Pack at the same time as me, sent his back within the first week the first week of March, did not receive his Letter of Authorisation until the end of April/beginning of May. A second experience was a married couple whom we know, who I believed they received their Application Packs, the husband received his Letter of Authorisation at the beginning of April whereas his wife did not receive hers until the last week of April, with her Letter of Authorisation she also received a duplication pack with a letter asking her to complete the enclosed form and return it and asked her not to contact them for at least a month.

Final piece of evidence: a pair of twins who live in the same block of flats, one of them received their Application Park early in March and their Letter of Authorisation early in April, the other twin, despite several telephone calls received his Application Pack towards the end of the last week of March and received his Letter of Authorisation on 21st May.

Finally, I think you should ask why, when other boroughs were contacting their disabled residents with regards to renewing their Freedom Passes as early as the end of January, was Southwark Council so late in sending theirs out. It appears that Southwark Council decided to implement TfLs' instructions whereas other boroughs had decided not to, or was it that they had already sent their Letters of Authorisation out before the new instructions were released to the boroughs?

I hope this evidence and questions will help the Scrutiny Panel to decide what happens in the Disability Unit and help them to make positive suggestions as to how procedures can be improved for the future.

Yours sincerely,

Submission Eleven *(From Janet Yatak)*

BACKGROUND

This is my account and evidence for the Freedom Pass Scrutiny. I want to just start some time back in November of 2007. The Disabilities office closed without any notice to the public, councillors, the Exec Member for Health and Social Care at the time and even Rod Craig who was the Head of Service. A note was put on the door simply telling service users to ring a number which would give information, Many disabled people were coming to the office to renew Blue badges like they had always done so, but obviously they could not do so. Many disabled people were without their badges. I got a service re-instated at the OSS for lost or stolen Blue Badges and urgent renewals, I was constantly raising issues ,to do with the blue badge and the new procedure, These ranged from staff attitude at the OSS and call centre, not complying with policy inconsistent and inaccurate information, lack of DDA compliance and disability awareness, and staff competence, and performance, a complete lack of assistance and help from the OSS staff, and a general lack of care and concern, I was constantly emailing the Exec Member for Social Care and others . Every time I raised an issue officers assured the Exec Member that everything was okay Social Care Committee but officers assured the committee again that everything was okay, I gave up in the end as it became clear officers did not want to know and I initiated a scrutiny into this, this year and again officers assured the committee that everything was okay.

PERIOD LEADING UP TO DEADLINE OF RENEWAL

Some months later I then got involved with the Freedom Pass as it was up for renewal. I was first alerted to this when a disabled person got their renewal letter in the second week

of March. We both then had concerns that this was not enough time to renew the pass before the end of March and that it had not given enough time to the disabled person to get the relevant documents that were needed and it would also require a lot of running around for the disabled people. Also no one had been notified of the new procedure and everyone thought they could still go to the OSS to renew it ,as they had other years,

I alerted Cllr Noakes to my concerns over this who again was told that this was ample time, and there would not be a problem; officers were confident they could meet the deadline, despite there being a Easter Bank Holiday weekend in between. Officers were telling service users as early as the second week in March that they did not need to worry as they had till the end of May, as there was an extension. Then the problems started, I was raising several issues constantly again around the same issues as the Blue Badge, inconsistent and inaccurate information, the call centre staff did not have any information the OSS did not have any information, When people rang the call centre number, their details were not checked; they all had a script saying it will be processed by the end of May or that they were waiting for GP details even when they did not have to contact the GP ie; someone on Higher Rate DLA etc, would not need a GP to be contacted. This was when I started to get concerned as many people were being told the same thing and many people should have just had their pass renewed without any delay, the weeks after the March deadline were becoming worrying I was getting a lot of calls and cases and again was always assured that everyone would get their pass by the end of May.

I was again constantly getting complaints about lack of information unhelpfulness from the OSS staff and call centre and that people could not get through to the call centre number sometimes for days, due to a busy tone all the time or no reply. When they did get through they could not get any information apart from wait and it will come or waiting for your GP to respond. I left this issue because I realised again that officers were not interested and did not address concerns or issues that I raised; they were always assuring the Exec Member and the Executive that everything will be okay although I was still getting many cases and many just before deadline. Even the week leading up to deadline officers were telling people that their pass will come by the end of the week .

On the Friday before that Monday where there were the queues I saw an email that had been sent by an officer giving the figures of how many had been processed and the breakdown . In this email It stated that the backlog had been cleared but that there that there still some outstanding. This had gone down from 300 and was now between 200 -250 . It also stated that they were opening up the OSS for on the spot renewals but this officer was confident that only a few people would use this service This officer also was confident that this would be turned into a success story. I also phoned this officer and again was told that everything was okay there was no backlog and only a few people would use the OSS but they were just putting this in as an extra service, I was confused as the email did say that 250 people had not got their renewal so I did think that they would be turning up on the Monday as the deadline had passed, The Call centre also were telling many callers of that week to come to the OSS on Monday and that it was for one day only, when it was in fact for as long as it was needed,

On the Thursday, and Friday of the week before just before the May deadline over 70 people were turning up, asking about their passes and they were treated this time with the same lack of care, there was not enough chairs and these people were all told to come back on the Monday. Staff did not alert management at that time to this problem.

AFTER DEADLINE:

On that Monday of the queues of shame, outside the OSS I got umpteen phone calls for assistance, People could not get their pass they could not get information they were told come back tomorrow. They were waiting for GP responses. I got many calls; one was from a woman who had spinal injuries, who had been in the OSS from early morning waited all day and needed to take her medication and had not eaten. It was only after another service users got a bit angry with it all that the Manager from the OSS went and got some biscuits for the woman to take her medication. After she had waited all day she got to the counter and was told that there had been something wrong with her application form, she did not have the right documents and that the letter had only just gone to her GP that day or the day before, after the form was rectified, and that she should come back the next day

She had put in her form in early Feb and whenever she chased it, she was told it was in the process. At no time was she told about any error in her form. After she contacted me, Cllr Noakes got involved and phoned the person who told her not to go to the OSS the next day, and asked officers to contact her before 12 pm the next day to tell her about her pass, Officers did not contact her and I emailed Cllr Noakes again who again phoned the person and apologised again, and officers contacted her the next day they told her that the letter would go out that day by recorded delivery, and she would get her pass the next day - she did not, I then emailed the Chief Executive and I got a response from the relevant officer saying that the letter was due to go out but had not done so but that an officer would visit her and deliver it, only because I pushed for it. Again the delivery was supposed to visit at 4pm and the lady contacted Cllr Noakes who called officers, who advised they were on their way, and then arrived at 6pm. Then at the end of this she was given a London Only pass when she was entitled to a full pass. This is probably the worst case I had but there are many other examples of the lack of care and consideration that was shown. Another concern is that a person was refused a pass earlier in the process. Cllr Noakes intervened and then the person was issued with their pass without going through the appeals procedure, I feel that many people that have been refused may have wrongly been so.

Then after a few days everyone that either went to the OSS or contacted myself etc, was then given a London Only pass, which is a discretionary pass with the cost borne solely to the council which is £90. This was so as no one went without a pass but they could not get the full benefits of a full pass ie national travel. People were told these London Only would be temporary and it was because the council were still waiting for GPs to respond and until they had and they could process the renewal they could have a London only, People that then went to the OSS were automatically given a London only, the details were not checked to see if any one's GP had responded or if the renewal could be processed, Many people therefore may have been able to get a full pass that week, and also it meant that some people that did not qualify for any free travel were given a pass, to do so I know of one person that had been refused earlier in the process but was then given a London Only pass, because they showed their old pass at the OSS. I raised this with officers and the Exec member and again it was ignored, 3 or 4 weeks later people were starting to ask for their upgrade of their full pass, People were told by the Call centre that they had to apply for one, and go through the whole process again, or they were told it was being processed again without checking to see if GPs had responded, I remain very concerned that many disabled people are going without their full pass and full benefits that that provides for them. All these London only will have to be discarded when upgraded therefore the whole amount of money has been wasted, it would have been cheaper for the council to have processed the forms and issues full passes, or at least look up to see if the GP had responded,

Then there was the problem with the Post Offices in that there was an issue with the Post Offices running out. I emailed officers and the Exec Member and still no action was taken. I asked officers to find out which PO had passes so as they were able to inform service users that attended the OSS, they did not do so for at least four days. People were leaving the OSS with their forms queuing up the Walworth Road PO only to be told they either had the wrong documents, they did not have photos which were needed after May 31st as there was a new policy about renewing and people had get a new pass rather than renewal again. Southwark did not tell anyone about this new policy. Then the Walworth Road PO had then run out of passes. The person had to attend, as Southwark had put on the letters, must attend in person to sign etc.

Carers therefore could not pick up passes as was the previous arrangement and this caused further distress, In this regard DDA compliance was not even thought of or considered. When the POs run out of passes, Disabled people were finally getting their letters, from Southwark but had to do a lot of running around to get their pass. One Partially sighted person who had waited over 2 weeks past the deadline, then got their letter after a lot of hassle and then had a complete run around to four different POs before they could get their pass, this was after I had alerted officers and the Exec Member about the PO problem. This partially sighted person was not informed by the OSS as to which PO had any passes, so they were able to go straight to it. Instead of finding out for themselves, Everything that happened over those weeks after deadline, I raised with officers and the Exec Member, so as to ensure that any further issues could be actioned to prevent any further delays to anyone, I never got any feedback about what action had been taken and still the same issues were occurring days after.

RESEARCH

I looked up the Transport Act 2000 and the Dept of Transport's Guidelines and 12 other London Councils. Southwark's processes were different to all of these. The Transport act states that GPs should not be used, as it compromises patient/doctor relationship, and that other independent professionals should be used, GPs should be used as a last resort, There are a number of proofs that can be provided none of which were told to our service users, 12 other London Councils do both Blue Badge and Freedom Pass differently. I raised all of these concerns to the Exec Member for Social Care and again was ignored and officers assured me everything was okay.

OPINION AND CONCLUSION

I and others knew all along that there would be some catastrophic error, although I have to say that I did not anticipate the scenes at the Walworth OSS, on that Monday. I knew even on the Friday before when I heard that many people were coming to the OSS to get their renewals over 70 attended over two days all being told to come back Monday the officer stated in their email on the Friday before that there were still 200-250 applications that had arrived and were being processed, so how the same officer thought that only a few people would be turning up the next week is mystifying. I was also told that officers had 100 letters of authorisation to give out at the OSS on that Monday, so those people must have been expected, as they had been told to come by the Call centre and the OSS staff the week before. This service at the OSS was only put in at the last minute, and as a safeguard and as a courtesy, but I did not even know about this service being provided until the Friday before. All these people that turned up at the OSS ,either were told to, as most of them were, and/or came like they always had done so in the past because they could not get the right information they needed from the Call Centre.

I believe that common sense has not been used. There has been a lack of judgement on occasions. There has been no flexibility; officers have never consulted with SDA or any disabilities professional around disabilities issues, or DDA compliance. I think that Southwark has contacted GPs unnecessarily; even for people with Higher Rate DLA and not followed the guidelines of the Dept of Transport and the Transport Act, 2000 or used models that other London Councils did. They have made something quite simple into rocket science. There has been a complete lack of consultation and co-operation between the council and the Post Office to manage the process more easier as this was the first time the Post office was used. The renewal forms are complicated and confusing, combining both Blue Badge and Freedom Pass whereas before it was separate. Officers left it far too late, for sending applications out and informing service users about the change of procedure, giving no consideration for service users to get the relevant documentation, Staff at the call centre are not trained in Freedom pass or Blue Badge processes, they have a script and can't look up any details, they take names and numbers and get someone to call back. There is a complete lack of information at the OSS all over the Borough. There is no on the spot replacement for lost or stolen freedom Passes when there was before. The service at the OSS is not promoted by the call centre staff. The staff providing this service are very junior. When the service transferred to Client Services, Social Services washed their hands of it when they should not have done. The Manager of the service remained in Social Care whilst the others transferred to Client Services, therefore losing social care input into it, There is to this day complete inconsistent and inaccurate information given by the call centre and the disabilities staff in the OSS, No other staff member at the OSS knows anything about it , only the staff from the old disabilities office.

There has been a lack of management throughout this whole process, in particular down at the OSS. The closure of the office in Walworth Road in November was at the wrong time, and a gross error, as the renewal process was coming up some 3 months later. The transition period was a shambles, and handled incompetently, with staff in that office being told of their transfer 3 days before moving, and the service users not at all. There was a lack of communication which was agreed in a letter by the Chief Executive and the CE apologised to service users at that time also, and to anyone that had gone without a Blue Badge which again was unacceptable, , Officers did not learn the lessons of that period . There seems to have been a complete lack of communication between officers at the Cotton Centre and the officers at the OSS in that different policies are implemented, Staff attitude and care has been constantly raised by many disabled people, groups etc, competence and performance has also been raised constantly by service users, and even some councillors, and Exec Members, both of these issues never been addressed or improved. I believe Southwark told service users about the extension too early. Because some people only starting renewing the passes in early March, to mid March officers then knew of the extension, and once the extension was announced to people many of them did not then put in their applications knowing they had longer and therefore the council only prolonged the backlog, to the end of May instead of the end of March and there was no cut off time for putting in applications so as to ensure that everyone got it by the end of May, I know someone who put theirs in two weeks before the end of May. Officers did guarantee that she would get it and she did not. Not even half the amount of applications had been processed by the end of March/mid April .leaving only four weeks then to process the rest,

There has been a complete lack of care, compassion, and sensitivity; disabled people have been interrogated about their illness by officers with no clinical experience. This has been the done in an open space at the OSS with no privacy or dignity. ,I was constantly raising concerns with the Exec member for Social Care and the Deputy Leader ever since the office was closed, back in November , I warned them both that something was wrong, both at the time of the Blue Badge and the recent Freedom Pass renewal. And constantly in between, Officers always assured them both that everything was okay I and others, knew that when they closed that office in November with no regard for people with disabilities and

with my and other service users, constant raising of issues which were all ignored and no action taken and a string of errors, it was obvious that it would all end in tears, and that the council would not provide the service which meets the standard that is required and that many disabled people would suffer as a consequence either by not getting their pass or by not getting a Blue Badge.. I am just surprised that officers and councillors did not know this.

(See following letter)