

Transport **North East**

Changes to the disabled person toll exemption
for vehicles using the Tyne Tunnels
February 2021



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Executive summary

We are consulting on changes to the disabled person exemption at the Tyne Tunnels. Change is necessary in order to implement the Tyne Pass barrier-less free flow scheme which is anticipated to come into operation in December 2021. This new free flow scheme will bring benefits to tunnel users as it will reduce journey times and will significantly reduce carbon emissions from vehicles using the tunnels.

The change to the disabled person exemption will affect all current Blue Badge holders and new applicants. This document sets out the details of what we are proposing, and our reasons for doing so.

The current scheme at the Tyne Tunnels allows two types of toll exemption for disabled people:

1. Vehicles registered with DVLA for a disabled person exemption from road tax
2. Any vehicle carrying a Blue Badge holder.

At the moment, disabled people travelling in vehicles that meet either of these conditions can apply for a Toll Exemption Account and receive a permit to use at the Tyne Tunnel barriers to prove the exemption. It is also possible for a Blue Badge holder in person to display the Blue Badge itself at the barriers, although this can cause unnecessary delays as it must be manually checked, and so holders are encouraged to apply for a Toll Exemption account.

With the introduction of the Tyne Pass barrierless free-flow scheme in late 2021, vehicles will no longer stop as they pass through the barrier area. All interactions with the tolling system will be through an Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) system and drivers will pay the toll due before or after their journey.

The Tyne Pass free-flow system will benefit exempt drivers as they will not need to stop and prove their exemption by way of a permit or by a visual inspection of a badge, they will pass through in exactly the same manner as other drivers without having to stop or show any proof of exemption in public.

The ANPR system means that the ability to display a Blue Badge at a toll booth to prove exemption will

not be possible. A change is therefore required for technical reasons to allow the barrierless free-flow scheme to operate.

There are two options being considered for this change:

Option 1: Remove Blue Badges exemption. Blue Badge holders would no longer be exempt from paying the Toll. Only tax-exempt DVLA registered disabled users would be able to register their vehicles for an exemption.

Option 2: Continue Blue Badges exemption with mandatory registration of a vehicle. Blue Badge holders would apply to register one vehicle number plate on TT2 systems and would therefore continue to be exempt from paying the Toll when using the registered vehicle.

Under all options the ability to present a Blue Badge in person at the barriers will no longer be possible.

Transport North East is consulting on the changes proposed to address this issue, on behalf of the North East Joint Transport Committee which is the authority responsible for implementing the change.

We are keen to hear your opinions on the proposed changes which will be considered before a final decision on this is made by the North East Joint Transport Committee.

The consultation period runs from 17 February 2021 and will run until 14 April 2021.

To share your views on the proposed changes, please complete the online survey transportnortheast.gov.uk/tunnelsconsultation before the closing date of 14 April 2021.

This consultation document is available in alternative formats including an audio version and easy read version. If you require an alternative format or have any questions on the proposed changes, please call or email us.

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1. Background – Tyne Tunnels (road)

The Tyne Tunnels are two traffic tunnels running under the River Tyne between Jarrow in South Tyneside and Howdon in North Tyneside. The first traffic tunnel was opened in 1967 and a modern second vehicle tunnel was constructed and opened fully in November 2011.

TT2 Ltd is the operator of the Tyne Tunnels under a Concession agreement which will run until 2037 after which all the tunnels will be handed back to the local authorities.

The Tyne Tunnels are jointly owned by the North East Combined Authority and the North of Tyne Combined Authority represented by the North East Joint Transport Committee. The Tunnels receive no government or local funding, and costs are fully met by toll charges. The current toll charges are:

Vehicle	Cash	Pre-paid Account
Motorbike Disabled	Free	N/A
Car, Van or Bus less than 3m high with 2 axles	£1.80	£1.62
LGV, Van or Bus more than 3m high or 3 axles or more	£3.70	£3.33

TT2 Ltd is responsible for the day-to-day management and operation of the Tunnels, monitored by Transport North East on behalf of the North East Joint Transport Committee.

2. Background to the proposed change

Modernisation of toll payment at the Tyne Tunnels by way of a barrierless free-flow system is proposed for 2021/2022. The project is known as the Tyne Pass Scheme and is being led by TT2 Ltd and is supported by the North East Joint Transport Committee.

The modernisation of the toll payment system at the Tyne Tunnels has been under consideration for some time, in order to upgrade from the largely coin based system to a more efficient barrierless free-flow system. The current outdated system requires customers to stop and make a payment at the toll barriers, causing delay for drivers and resulting in excess carbon emissions from traffic accelerating after leaving the barrier area. The Tyne Pass scheme has taken learning from other barrierless systems in operation across the country.

The Tyne Pass barrierless charging scheme is a means of modernising the payment system and providing other benefits for the area, including reduced carbon emissions. It has now been approved by the Joint Transport Committee and is being implemented in stages from 2020 through to 2022. The day-to-day operation of the scheme will be carried out by TT2 Ltd.

The Tyne Pass scheme will provide the following benefits:

- Modernisation of the toll payment system;
- Reduced journey times;
- Reduced carbon emissions; and
- Creation of up to 80 new local jobs, in the TT2 customer contact centre.

However, the move to a modern cashless free-flow system would involve a policy change in terms of the exemption for disabled people.

3. Disabled exemptions legislative background

The current exemptions for disabled persons are set out in the River Tyne Tunnels Order 2005 which states at Article 42:

Tolls and charges may not be charged in respect of a vehicle being driven by a disabled person, or being used for the carriage of one or more disabled persons, which displays a current disabled person's badge issued under—

- (i) section 21 of the Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Act 1970, or
- (ii) section 14 of the Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons (Northern Ireland) Act 1978,

or which has been issued with a token or permit to like effect by the undertaker.

4. Current position - Tyne Tunnels disability exemptions

There are currently two types of disabled person exemption at the Tyne Tunnels:

- i. **Registered Disabled person's vehicle (tax-exempt vehicles)** – this is an exemption for vehicles which are registered with the DVLA as belonging to a disabled person who qualifies for an exemption from vehicle tax.
To qualify for this a person needs to receive relevant payments including the higher rate mobility component of Disability Living Allowance (DLA) or the enhanced rate mobility component of Personal Independence Payment (PIP). The vehicle must be registered in the disabled person's name or their nominated driver's name and must be used for the disabled person's personal needs.
- ii. **Blue Badges exemption** – this is an exemption via the Blue Badges Scheme which is intended to provide a range of parking benefits for disabled people with severe walking or mobility difficulties who travel either as drivers or as passengers.
To qualify for this a person needs to apply to

their local authority and provide the requested evidence of mobility issues.

Once a Blue Badge is issued, the holder can register their vehicle with TT2 for an exemption permit or can carry the Blue Badge in the vehicle and show it to a TT2 staff member at the barrier.

5. Why is the change necessary?

The journey experience for a disabled person who qualifies for a toll exemption will change under the Tyne Pass free-flow barrierless system. There will be no toll booths or barriers and therefore no need to stop the vehicle. Disabled tunnel users will pass through in exactly the same manner as other drivers without having to stop or show any proof of exemption in public.

A change in policy and process for disabled exemptions is necessary for technical reasons, as a free-flow traffic system cannot operate using the current Blue Badge process. The current Blue Badge process allows the holder to personally show a badge or use a permit at the barriers to prove the exemption and to pass through the barrier.

Under the Tyne Pass free-flow system, automated number plate recognition (APNR) cameras will be used to implement tolling and classify vehicles which are exempt from tolling. ANPR cameras cannot register and classify a person inside a vehicle holding a Blue Badge at the window, so a change will be required.

A change to the Blue Badge exemption is required to enable the new Tyne Pass free-flow system to function in the future.

6. The Options

There are two options being considered by the North East Joint Transport Committee which we are seeking opinions on.

The first is to remove the Blue Badge exemption altogether, the second is to allow Blue Badge holders to continue to be exempt by registering their vehicle.

Option 1:

REMOVE BLUE BADGE EXEMPTION

Under Option 1 the exemption for vehicles used by a tax-exempt DVLA registered disabled person would continue in place as a toll-free exemption.

The Blue Badge holder's exemption however, would be removed completely.

This option is being considered because the Tyne Tunnels toll exemption does not accord with the purpose of the Blue Badge scheme. The Blue Badge scheme is non means tested and its aim is to help people with severe mobility problems caused by visible and non-visible disabilities to access goods and services, by allowing them to park close to their destination. The Blue Badge holder's exemption currently in place at the Tyne Tunnels provides no assistance with parking close any destination, it provides a financial benefit only, as a holder does not have to pay the toll.

Under Option 1 the Tyne Pass free-flow system could operate effectively. DVLA registered tax-exempt disabled users could register their vehicles as exempt and all other users would need to use a pre-paid account to pay the toll or pay after their journey online, by phone or at a Paypoint.

Option 2:

CONTINUE BLUE BADGE EXEMPTION WITH MANDATORY REGISTRATION OF A VEHICLE

An alternative solution under Option 2 would be to keep both types of disabled exemption in place at the Tyne Tunnels, both the DVLA registered tax-exempt disabled user's exemption and the Blue Badge exemption. This would provide a financial benefit to disabled people and would provide continuity, as both these exemptions have been in place at the Tyne Tunnels since 2005.

This option would mean each Blue Badge holder could apply to register their vehicle number plate on TT2 systems to enable the exemption to be processed as a Toll Exemption account under the new barrierless scheme.

The ANPR cameras would read the number plate and the system would link the registration plate to a Toll Exemption account on TT2's system. Each Blue Badge holder would be allowed to register one vehicle, which could be their own vehicle or a nominated vehicle which is regularly used to transport the Blue Badge holder.

7. Other UK toll operators

Various approaches are taken by UK toll operators, but the majority only allow tax-exempt DVLA registered disabled exemptions and do not allow a Blue Badge exemption. Some toll operators put in place their own 'Mobility Permit' with their own criteria to apply for an exemption. Some examples are:

- **Dartford Crossing** - no Blue Badge exemption, only exemption is for registered disabled tax-exempt vehicles.
- **Humber Bridge** - no Blue Badge exemption, only exemption is for registered disabled tax-exempt vehicles.
- **M6 Toll** - no Blue Badge exemption but a 'Mobility Permit' is available on application which relates to receipt of certain disability benefits.
- **Mersey Tunnels** - no Blue Badge exemption but a 'Mobility Permit' is available on application which relates to receipt of certain disability benefits and allows up to 40 journeys per year.
- **Mersey Gateway Bridge** – allows exemption for one registered Blue Badge vehicle per badge holder (£5 charge to register vehicle).
- **Tamar Bridge (Plymouth)** - no Blue Badge exemption but a 'Mobility Permit' is available on application which relates to receipt of certain disability benefits.

8. Consultation

The Joint Transport Committee has made the decision that the disabled exemption can be amended to allow for the new Tyne Pass scheme to operate, however the committee has yet to decide on the exact nature of the changes.

It is proposed that consultation takes place with the public and stakeholders including local disability groups on the recommended change of policy relating to Blue Badge exemption at the Tyne Tunnels, to ensure that the effects on Blue Badge

holders are fully understood before a final decision is made.

The final decision will be made on this issue at a committee meeting following the consultation period, taking into account the outcome of the consultation and the feedback received.

For further information and to share your views via the online survey, visit

transportnortheast.gov.uk/tunnelsconsultation

9. What will happen next?

- After the close of the eight-week consultation, responses will be considered and the output will be reported to the Joint Transport Committee (Tyne & Wear Sub Committee) at its next meeting.
- If the Committee is satisfied, it will make a decision on the amendment to the disability exemption at the Tyne Tunnels.
- Following that decision, legislative amendments will be required to the Tyne Tunnels byelaws and the Tyne Tunnels Order and an application made to the Secretary of State, therefore it will be several months before the changes can take effect.
- Once the Secretary of State has approved the amendments to the legislation, the changes will be advertised, and users will be given notice before the changes come into force.
- Transport North East, the Joint Transport Committee and TT2 will work to ensure that disruption to drivers is minimised and that customer service support required to facilitate any changes will be readily available.