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Well in Glasgow we're experiencing what I would describe as an epidemic of blue badge misuse and theft.

Alistair Watson is a local councillor in Glasgow.

It's a beginning of a niche trade for the criminal fraternity. So I think we're dealing with something here that quite frankly has got the potential of running out of control. In one day we inspected 90 vehicles along with the police and in that particular day a third of the vehicles were not entitled to use that badge.

Our survey of 12 local authorities revealed that over 4,000 badges were reported lost or stolen last year. At the top of the league comes the London borough of Tower Hamlets, where a total of 1200 had disappeared. So why is it so easy for stolen badges to be displayed by unauthorised users? Carl Powell is head of transport at Westminster Council. He explains that it's all down to a simple design cock-up.

We've recently had a new badge, one has to say fostered on us by Europe to an extent, which is European friendly and we've actually got a copy in front of us here and if I just show you what the front side looks like - it has a disabled image and it has an issue and expiry date but then other than a serial number it has no means of identification. And you might be a bit surprised to see, if I turn it over, that the photograph of the owner of that badge, their name and their signature, is actually on the backside, in other words it's on the side that will be face down on the dashboard, so if a parking attendant is trying to verify whether this is a fraudulent badge or whether it's a badge that's being used legitimately all of the key information is hidden from his view.

Well at least if a parking attendant comes across a person and their car they can ask to see the underside of the badge - right? Wrong. Jane Wilmoth advises the Government on transport issues affecting disabled people.

It's an amazing fact that currently there are no formal powers to inspect badges in England and Wales. Which is a different situation from that in Scotland.

So are you telling me Jane that officials can't actually check whether the badge is being misused or not?

That is the current position. They cannot ask a disabled person holding a badge to give it to them, to show them the photograph, because there are some misconceptions that this may be invading their privacy. Actually, more importantly, to make sure that the right person is using the badge to protect the blue badge scheme. It is not a fair and equitable scheme, it is administered differently across different parts of the country and many people think this is grossly unfair, in fact it is a postcode lottery.

Unfair, badly administered, misused - who's responsible? Ann Fry's a civil servant in charge of the Government's transport and mobility unit. I started by asking her why her department didn't even keep figures on how many badges are stolen each year.

The issuing of the badges is a matter for local authorities. We issue the advice on which they give out the badges but we don't have any control over what happens at a local level.

We have evidence that thousands of these badges are being stolen each year, surely that's a national issue?

Well it seems to me that's a matter for the police, it's a criminal offence so it's something that should be being dealt with at a local level where the crime occurs.

But one of the problems that we've come across is in the actual design of the badge - why did you adopt a system with such an obvious design flaw?

Essentially because that's what disabled people asked us to do because they were concerned for their own personal security. What people were frightened of was if a badge was displaying a photograph, details perhaps of a woman, that anyone passing in the street could see it actually makes disabled women, in particular, very vulnerable.

But in England and Wales authorities don't even have the power to inspect badges - isn't that correct?

They don't have the power to insist, they can certainly request to see the badge and that's how they mostly go on.

But somebody could just say no.

They can say no and that's why we're going to take powers, as soon as we can, to give authorities the powers to inspect. What we need to do, I think, is, as we're going to do, take the powers so that it's easier to inspect the badges, it's easier to enforce against abuse. We're also going to look at setting up a national database so we do have proper records nationally of how many badges are on issue and to whom, so that when they are being inspected it's easier to check up on has the badge been stolen that you're seeing in a vehicle?

Ann Fry ending that report by Poraic O'Brien.