

LICENSING COMMITTEE

Wheelchair Accessible Vehicles – Results of Mystery Shopping Exercise

21 November 2024

Report of Licensing Manager

PURPOSE OF REPORT

To update members of Licensing Committee on the outcomes of a mystery shopping exercise, whereby Lancaster City Council Officers tried to obtain the services of wheelchair accessible vehicles operating in the district.

The results of the report should be discussed with the overall purpose of highlighting action required to incentivise the uptake of suitable wheelchair accessible vehicles or shape vehicle specifications/policy (as necessary).

This report is public.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- (1) That the contents of the report are noted.
- (2) Members may wish to explore actions required to meet the needs of the local Community and encourage the uptake of suitable vehicles, by way of incentives, amendments to vehicle specification(s) and reviewing policy requirements.

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 Members may be aware that in recent years, the Licensing Service has received sporadic complaints regarding the availability of wheelchair accessible vehicles (WAVs). Members of the public have expressed concern and frustration at the current position locally.

Whilst complaints and reports of availability issues with WAVs are sporadic, it is important to highlight the impact the problem has on those who need them. Complaints suggest that wheelchair users are reluctant to travel, especially at night, unable to get to Doctor or Hospital appointments, as journeys cannot be pre-booked; essentially feeling trapped in their homes, unable to plan ahead and live independent of family members interventions.

Feedback suggests that such vehicles are not available at any time, whether pre-booked through a Private Hire Operator or if called directly from the list of 15 WAVs, highlighted on the Councils website. Additionally, suitable vehicles are not able to be pre-booked for future journeys and no assurances can be provided that a vehicle will be available for hire at the required time.

- 1.2 The Taxi and Private Hire Liaison Group have discussed the complaints and agree that action is required to increase the availability of WAVs. Possibly by incentivising their uptake by the local trade and looking at policy and/or vehicle specifications to explore possible barriers or opportunities.

2.0 Project Plan

- 2.1 As a first step, Licensing Officers completed an audit of the 15 mandatory Hackney Carriage WAVs. These licences have historically been introduced as part of the unmet demand survey findings to increase the number of accessible Hackney Carriages.
- 2.2 Licensing Officers inspected all 15 vehicles and held discussions with the vehicle proprietors and drivers, Officers observed use of safety equipment and passenger handling procedures. The public register was updated to include the direct line to the vehicle proprietor, this was implemented to ensure service users can contact a suitable vehicle directly, without having to contact Private Hire Operators in the first instance. (Available to view here [Wheelchair accessible vehicles - Lancaster City Council](#))
- 2.3 Once completed and proprietors informed of the changes, a mystery shopping exercise was planned; the trade were notified this would take place.

Licensing and Council Administration Officers were to contact all 15 vehicle proprietors over the course of a week and log responses and attitudes. A cross section of times and requests were planned, including immediate hire, future requirements for family members, weddings and hospital appointments.

It was intended that all 15 vehicle proprietors were to be contacted 4 times during a 6-week period, between Friday 11th October – Friday 22nd November 2024.

3.0 Outcomes

- 3.1 During the time period, Officers managed to call all 15 proprietors twice; it was felt that attempts to make a booking after those attempts received a response that was not authentic. (The caller felt the response was staged and the proprietor knew it was a mystery shopper).
- 3.2 The first calls were made over the course of the weekend 11-13 October of the 15 calls made, 14 were answered and 2 proprietors accepted an immediate hire booking for wheelchair accessible vehicle. Both gave 10–15-minute waiting times.
- 3.3 The second round of calls were undertaken between 22-28 October of the 15 calls, 3 were unanswered and 0 proprietors accepted a booking. The scenario was a job from Lancaster train station to a wedding, on a date mid-November on behalf of a family member who was required a wheelchair accessible vehicle.
- 3.4 During the interactions, callers noted responses, reasons and attitudes of vehicle proprietors. Many apologised, stated they couldn't fulfil the journey, to try a larger private hire operator who may have more vehicles available, that they didn't want to disappoint and advised to call back/would be called back (but never was).

4.0 Considerations

- 4.1 The Licensing Manager has discussed the situation with wheelchair accessible vehicles with service managers across Lancashire. They were asked for insight into potential incentives, policy changes or vehicle specifications that could help more wheelchair accessible vehicles be available throughout the district. Limited feedback was received, other than options already considered.
- 4.2 Members may wish to defer any decisions until further data can be provided, but considerations may include the following.
- a) Reducing specification of 2 available Hackney Carriage plates to wheelchair accessible only (remove zero emission requirement).
 - b) Deregulation of Hackney Carriage provision in favour of wheelchair accessible vehicles.
 - c) Amending vehicle specifications for wheelchair accessible vehicles and reducing emission standard aspirations.
 - d) Private Hire Operator Licence Conditions – Would it be reasonable to consider a condition that mandated a wheelchair accessible vehicle being made available 24/7 for operators over 2/10/25 vehicles.
 - e) When fee setting for 2025/26, members may consider a reduced fee for new wheelchair accessible vehicles joining the fleet.
 - f) Taking a zero-tolerance approach to those refusing fares and explore options for reporting/sanctions should proprietors consistently refuse fares.
- 4.3 Members are asked to consider the above and determine the course of action.

5.0 Conclusion

- 5.1 The Licensing Authority is receiving complaints regarding the availability and accessibility of wheelchair accessible vehicles operating in the district. Furthermore, complaints set out frustration at the refusal of some fares. It seems that whether journeys be for immediate hire or for a future date, proprietors are not forthcoming with accepting a booking.
- 5.2 Contact details have been updated on the Councils website; this will provide members of the public with a direct option rather than calling a Private Hire Operator. Hopefully this will allow members of the public to successfully source a suitable vehicle, in line with their needs.
- 5.3 The data provided as part of the mystery shopping exercise is limited, but early indications suggest responses were disappointing. Members may wish for Officers to continue with the exercise and present further data in the New Year.
- 5.4 Areas and actions for consideration have been provided and members are asked to discuss the merits of each suggestion and resolve as appropriate: with a view to improving the availability of wheelchair accessible vehicles in the district.

**CONCLUSION OF IMPACT ASSESSMENT
(including Health & Safety, Equality & Diversity, Human Rights, Community Safety,
Sustainability and Rural Proofing):**

It is important to highlight the impact of accessibility of wheelchair accessible vehicles has on those in the district who need them. Users have described feeling helpless and powerless in trying to get around, attend appointments, visit friends, get home late into the evening. This creates inequality and may compromise public safety.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

On 28 June, the Taxis and Private Hire Vehicles (Disabled Persons) Act 2022 took effect in England, Scotland, and Wales. It amended the Equality Act 2010 and introduced new and updated existing duties for local authorities and taxi and private hire vehicle (PHV) drivers and operators. The purpose of the 2022 Act aims to ensure that disabled people can use taxi and PHV services with confidence that they will not be discriminated against.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Licensing Fees will be updated as part of the digitalisation process, any decision to amend/reduce a fee must be considered, as others will be off set to accommodate any shortfall.

**OTHER RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS, such as Human Resources, Information Services,
Property, Open Spaces**

None

SECTION 151 OFFICER'S COMMENTS

None

MONITORING OFFICER'S COMMENTS

None

BACKGROUND PAPERS

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