

**LICENSING  
COMMITTEE**

17th December 2012

**ACCESS FOR DISABLED PEOPLE TASK GROUP – REFERRAL REPORT**

Relevant Portfolio Holders	Councillor Phil Mould, Portfolio Holder for Corporate Management and Councillor Rebecca Blake, Portfolio Holder for Community Safety and Regulatory Services
Portfolio Holders Consulted	The Portfolio Holder for Community Safety and Regulatory Services was present at the meeting of the Executive Committee on 21st August 2012 when Members endorsed the group's recommendations. There has been no direct consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Corporate Management.
Relevant Heads of Service	Head of Regulatory Services.
Ward(s) Affected	All wards
Non-Key Decision	

**1. SUMMARY OF PROPOSALS**

The report provides a summary of the findings and recommendations made by the Access for Disabled People Task Group on the subject of taxi licensing. This report should be considered alongside the Access for Disabled People Task Group's final report which provides a more detailed description of the review process, the evidence basis for the group's recommendations and the implications of proposed actions.

**2. RECOMMENDATIONS**

**We RECOMMEND that**

**TAXI SERVICES**

- 1) taxi companies should be offered licences to operate adapted vehicles for a longer period of time than standard vehicles to incentivise taxi firms to increase the number of adapted vehicles in their fleets. The vehicles should be permitted to operate for these lengthier periods of time subject to passing the three inspection tests and the MOT that the Council's licensing regime requires for each vehicle;**
  
- 2) taxi drivers should be offered disability awareness training, which would include information about manually assisting people with disabilities, by Redditch Borough Council;**

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**3. KEY ISSUES**

**Background**

- 3.1 The Access for Disabled People Task Group review was commissioned in September 2011 by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The group consisted of five elected Members: Councillor Mason (Chair) and Councillors Fry, Hartnett, Quinney and former Councillor A. Clayton. An initial report was presented for the consideration of the Committee in April when Members concluded that further work was required. Following the elections in May 2012 Councillor Fry was appointed to Chair the group. In addition Councillors M Chalk and Smith were appointed to replace Councillor Hartnett and former Councillor A. Clayton. The group was tasked with completing this additional work by September 2012.
- 3.2 The main focus of the review was on the accessibility of Redditch Town Centre for people with disabilities. In particular, the group was tasked with scrutinising accessibility of local taxi services and public transport as well as provision of disabled parking spaces in the town centre. Members considered the needs and requirements of people with different types of disabilities including, mobility impairments, sensory impairments and learning disabilities.
- 3.3 During the first stage of the review evidence was obtained from a variety of sources. This included face-to-face interviews with representatives of local taxi firms, interviews with relevant Officers from Redditch Borough Council and scrutiny of written reports. The group also obtained information through consultation with local residents, particularly residents with disabilities.
- 3.4 The Executive Committee received the group's report on 21st August 2012. During the course of this meeting the Committee endorsed the group's recommendations. As part of this process the Executive Committee agreed to make the two recommendations for the consideration of the Council's Licensing Committee.

**Recommendations**

**Recommendation 1: We RECOMMEND that taxi companies should be offered licences to operate adapted vehicles for a longer period of time than standard vehicles to incentivise taxi firms to increase the number of adapted vehicles in their fleets. The vehicles should be permitted to operate for these lengthier periods of time subject to passing the three inspection tests and the MOT that the Council's licensing regime requires for each vehicle**

- 3.5 There are currently a small number of adapted vehicles licensed to operate as taxis in Redditch. In November 2011, when Members gathered data on this subject, there were four adapted hackney carriages and 10 adapted private hire vehicles, representing approximately two per cent of the taxi fleet. This

compared favourably with Bromsgrove, Malvern Hills and Wychavon districts respectively where approximately one per cent of the local fleets consisted of adapted vehicles. However, it compared less favourably with Worcester City where 30 per cent of the fleet and Wyre Forest district where 50 per cent of the fleet consisted of adapted vehicles.

- 3.6 Licences are granted for both hackney carriage and private hire vehicles to operate until a vehicle is nine years old, though licences are not awarded to second hand vehicles that are more than six years old on the date of registration. New applications for licences must apply to vehicles that are accessible to wheelchairs. However, applications to renew existing licences do not currently require taxi drivers to purchase vehicles that are wheelchair accessible. Taxi firms can appeal to the Council's Licensing Committee to extend a licence for a further year once a vehicle reaches the age limit for a licence, though there is no guarantee that an extension to a licence will be granted.
- 3.7 The group were concerned about the relatively low number of adapted vehicles currently in the taxi fleets operating in Redditch and believed that action needed to be taken to increase provision to meet the needs of residents with disabilities. The number of adapted vehicles may gradually increase as new drivers apply for licences for new vehicles. However, this is likely to be a relatively slow process. Consequently the Councillors believe that incentives should be provided to encourage taxi firms to increase the number of adapted vehicles in local fleets.
- 3.8 A key incentive that the group believes would encourage an increase in the number of adapted vehicles would be to offer licences for an extended period of time for adapted vehicles. In this context, adapted vehicles would be awarded licences to operate for a number of years longer than standard vehicles.
- 3.9 The group has not specified the exact length that adapted vehicles should be licensed to operate. The Councillors believe that this should be determined by professional licensing practitioners and the Council's Licensing Committee as well as through consultation with taxi companies. The group would urge, though, consideration of a significant difference in the age range requirements to ensure that the licensing arrangement represents a viable incentive. A lengthier licence could enable a taxi company to justify the significant expenditure required to invest in an adapted vehicle, which costs more than a standard vehicle as the costs involved in purchasing the vehicle would be offset by the additional trade that could be attracted over an extended period of time.

**Recommendation 2: We RECOMMEND that taxi drivers should be offered disability awareness training, which would include information about manually assisting people with disabilities, by Redditch Borough Council**

- 3.10 The Councillors discovered during the review that Redditch Borough Council does not currently provide training to taxi drivers on the subject of disability awareness. A number of taxi companies based in Redditch have confirmed that

they do provide training to their employees on the subject. However, the content of this training is determined by the taxi firm and it is likely that there will be varying standards and levels of disability awareness throughout the sector. Furthermore, representatives of local taxi companies have confirmed that there are some drivers operating adapted vehicles within the Borough who do not understand the specific needs of passengers with disabilities or how to securely fasten equipment used by people with disabilities such as wheelchairs.

- 3.11 Trained drivers will recognise that passengers with disabilities, particularly mobility impairments, often require assistance with both access and egress from a vehicle. In cases where a passenger is travelling in a wheelchair or mobility scooter the wheelchair needs to be securely locked into position which can be achieved where the breaks are applied. Sometimes, passengers with disabilities also require assistance from the driver when applying their seatbelts. Drivers need to be prepared to provide a smooth drive, may need to drive more slowly than usual and might need to consider routes that avoid road features such as speed bumps as all of these elements impact on the comfort of a wheelchair user when travelling in a vehicle.
- 3.12 Passengers with other forms of disability also require particular assistance. Vehicles coated in bright colours, particularly yellow vehicles, are more likely to be recognised by visually impaired passengers, who may also require space for the use of a guide dog. In addition, instructions provided in a variety of formats, including Braille or clear print, can help passengers with sensory impairments and learning difficulties.
- 3.13 Disability awareness training is provided to licensed drivers by other local authorities in the country. In Worcestershire this training can be provided by local colleges as well as the Driver Safety Operative at Worcestershire County Council, which already undertakes driving standards tests on behalf of the Council. There are also a number of external training providers, such as the Vassall Centre Trust, which can provide disability awareness training.
- 3.14 Disability awareness training for taxi drivers costs approximately £40.00 per person at the majority of local authorities where training is currently provided, though costs are likely to vary according to the fees charged by the training provider. A number of local authorities provide disability awareness training to taxi drivers free of charge, though the group was advised that the majority of local authorities charge participants. Any fees charged for this training are used to cover the costs involved in delivering the training rather than to generate a profit. The group believes that if disability awareness training is made available to taxi drivers operating in Redditch the Council should not have to cover the costs for the training. However, the Councillors recognise that some taxi companies would struggle to pay for all drivers to participate in this training. For this reason, the group is not proposing that the training should be mandatory for licensed drivers.

- 3.15 The Councillors believe that taxi firms and drivers would benefit from participating in disability awareness training provided by the Council. The drivers would receive standard guidance on the particular needs of people with different types of disabilities. Participation in this training could also have a positive impact on the reputation of local taxi firms and help to increase business for those firms. The Councillors believe that drivers participating in this training should be provided with a qualification or certificate that proves they have been trained to achieve certain standards in service delivery to customers with disabilities.

**Financial Implications**

- 3.16 Redditch Borough Council currently charges £258.65 to renew a licence for both a Hackney Carriage Vehicle and a Private Hire Vehicle whilst new applications for both types of vehicles cost £323.65. In addition, drivers must purchase a driving licence at a cost of £56.85 for both types of vehicles each year, although a combined driving license covering both types of vehicles can also be purchased for £83.00. Further charges are levied for the Council's licensing inspection process. As part of this process each licensed vehicle is required to pass two inspections as well as an MOT every year. (Redditch Borough Council website, 'fees', 2012).
- 3.17 Adapted vehicles are currently expensive to purchase. A second-hand adapted vehicle can cost a minimum of £8,000. Taxi firms have advised that in practice adapted vehicles cost between £15,000 – 20,000 to purchase.

**Legal Implications**

- 3.18 There are a number of legal implications which are detailed, where relevant, in relation to each of the recommendations in the Access for Disabled People Task Group's final report.

**Service / Operational Implications**

- 3.19 The actions proposed in both of these recommendations would constitute a change to licensing policy in the Borough. Any changes within the licensing regime require consultation to be undertaken over a twelve week period. All interested parties would need to be consulted during this period including: taxi drivers, vehicle owners, taxi operator, West Mercia Police and groups representing people with disabilities.

**Customer / Equalities and Diversity Implications**

- 3.20 The Equality Act 2010 focused on the needs of people with protected characteristics, which includes disabilities. Public bodies, including local authorities, have a lawful duty of regard to: eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation; advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not; and foster good

relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not. The findings and actions detailed in the Access for Disabled People Task Group report should enable Redditch Borough Council to pay due regard to the needs of people with disabilities living in the Borough in line with these legislative requirements.

- 3.11 The group attempted to consult widely with local residents, particularly residents with disabilities, during the review. A variety of consultation methods were used which included issuing questionnaires to the public, consulting the Redditch Access for Disabled Group and meeting with members of the Redditch Older People's Forum. The information provided by residents through consultation was addressed further during interviews with expert witnesses and in the group's final recommendations.

**4. RISK MANAGEMENT**

The group's findings and recommendations need to be considered in detail. There is a risk that if this does not occur the extent to which Redditch Borough Council has paid due regard to the needs of people with disabilities may be open to question.

**5. APPENDICES**

Appendix A - Extract from the minutes of the Executive Committee meeting on 21st August 2012.

**6. BACKGROUND PAPERS**

Access for Disabled People Task Group - Final Report.

**AUTHOR OF REPORT**

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