

OPTIONS FOR INCREASING THE NUMBER OF HACKNEY CARRIAGE VEHICLES THAT ARE WHEELCHAIR ACCESSIBLE VEHICLES

Relevant Portfolio Holder	Councillor R Smith
Portfolio Holder Consulted	Yes
Relevant Head of Service	Head of Worcestershire Regulatory Services
Wards Affected	All Wards
Ward Councillor Consulted	N/A
Non-Key Decision	

1. SUMMARY OF PROPOSALS

Members have requested a report setting out options that could be considered with a view to increasing the number of hackney carriage vehicles licensed by Bromsgrove District Council that are wheelchair accessible vehicles.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

That the Licensing Committee consider the contents of the report and RESOLVE which option, if any, they would like to pursue with a view to increasing the number of hackney carriage vehicles licensed by Bromsgrove District Council that are wheelchair accessible vehicles.

3. KEY ISSUES

Financial Implications

- 3.1 Any decision to reduce or remove licence fees would lead to a drop in income that would leave a shortfall in the licensing budget that would need to be subsidised from the Council's general fund.

Legal Implications

- 3.2 The Council's policy in relation to the operation of Private Hire Licences and Hackney Carriage Licences are set out in the Taxi Handbook and associated guidance issued by the Council. Any amendments made to Policy by the Licensing Committee, following consultation, will be incorporated into the Policy and notified to the taxi trade. In the event that Members were to make changes to the existing fees and charges (as set out in Option 2), in addition to altering the Handbook and guidance, formal steps would need to be taken to amend the Council's fees and charges order.

Service / Operational Implications

- 3.3 Members have requested a report setting out options that could be considered with a view to increasing the number of hackney carriage vehicles licensed by Bromsgrove District Council that are wheelchair accessible vehicles.
- 3.4 At the time of preparing this report, Bromsgrove District Council has 124 vehicles that are licensed to be used as hackney carriages. Of these 124 vehicles there are currently only 7 vehicles that are wheelchair accessible vehicles.
- 3.5 In this context “wheelchair accessible vehicle” means a vehicle that is constructed or adapted to carry a wheelchair user whilst they remain seated in their wheelchair.
- 3.6 For some time Members have been concerned that the number of wheelchair accessible hackney carriage vehicles licensed by the Council is very low.
- 3.7 In March 2015 the Licensing Committee approved consultation on proposed amendments to the Council’s hackney carriage and private hire licensing policies. One of the proposals consulted upon was to introduce a requirement that, from a specified future date, all new vehicles being licensed as hackney carriage vehicles must be a wheelchair accessible vehicle. The effect of this policy change would have been to see the gradual phasing out of “saloon” type vehicles so eventually all vehicles licensed by the Council to be used as Hackney Carriages would be wheelchair accessible vehicles.
- 3.8 The results of the consultation were considered by the Licensing Committee in November 2015. In relation to the proposal above, Members felt that further consultation work was required in order to ascertain if there was currently an unmet demand for wheelchair accessible vehicles as hackney carriages within the district or if this was just a perception. The replies received from the trade during the consultation suggested that there was little demand for wheelchair accessible vehicles in the district.
- 3.9 It was agreed that WRS licensing officers would conduct a further comprehensive consultation with relevant agencies / organisations in order to ascertain if there was a demand and if that demand was being met, also taking into account visitors accessing Bromsgrove via the railway station.

3.10 This further consultation took place between January and April in 2016. The results of the further consultation were considered by the Licensing Committee in June 2016. A copy of the report that went to Licensing Committee at the June meeting is attached at Appendix 1.

3.11 Following lengthy discussions, Members were not satisfied that there was sufficiently robust evidence to support amending the Council's policies to require hackney carriage vehicles to be wheelchair accessible, but instead resolved

- (a) that Licensing Officers, WRS, explore other options to potentially increase the number of wheelchair accessible vehicles licensed as hackney carriages in the Bromsgrove district; and
- (b) that the findings be brought back to a future meeting of the Licensing Committee.

This report sets out some options that could be considered.

Option 1 – Relaxing Vehicle Age Policies in respect of Wheelchair Accessible Vehicles

3.12 Under the Council's current policies, a saloon-type vehicle being licensed to be used as a hackney carriage for the first time must be less than seven years of age. The vehicle licence can then be renewed annually until such time as the vehicle is more than 10 years of age when no further renewal applications will normally be accepted.

3.13 Where the vehicle being licensed to be used as a hackney carriage for the first time is wheelchair accessible it must be less than seven years of age. The vehicle licence can then be renewed annually until such time as the vehicle is more than 12 years of age when no further renewal applications will normally be accepted.

3.14 Once any licensed hackney carriage vehicle reaches 7 years of age, it must be tested twice per year at the Council's testing station. Vehicles under the age of 7 are tested once per year.

3.15 The Council could consider relaxation of the current vehicle age requirements in place with respect to the licensing of wheelchair accessible vehicles as hackney carriages. For example the Council could decide that a wheelchair accessible vehicle could continue to be licensed as a hackney carriage for more than 12 years or even indefinitely, subject to it passing the required tests twice per year.

- 3.16 Relaxing the current vehicle age requirements may make it more attractive to a hackney carriage proprietor to licence a wheelchair accessible vehicle as they would be able to use the vehicle for longer making their investment in a wheelchair accessible vehicle more worthwhile.

Option 2 – Reduce or Remove the Licence Fee in Respect of Wheelchair Accessible Vehicles licensed as Hackney Carriages

- 3.17 The current fee for a licence to use a vehicle as a hackney carriage is £243 for a licence that lasts one year. The fee payable is the same regardless of whether the vehicle concerned is a wheelchair accessible vehicle or not.
- 3.18 The Council could consider reducing the fee or removing the requirement to pay a fee altogether for a licence to use a wheelchair accessible vehicle as a hackney carriage. This would provide an obvious direct financial incentive for hackney carriage proprietors to licence wheelchair accessible vehicles.
- 3.19 The reduction or removal of the fee could be for the first licence in respect of the vehicle only, for a set number of years, or for every application in respect of the vehicle.
- 3.20 Members will be aware that the Council's licence fees are set on a cost recovery basis, and therefore any decision to reduce or remove licence fees would lead to a drop in income that would leave a shortfall in the licensing budget that would need to be subsidised from the Council's general fund.

Option 3 – Do nothing

- 3.21 A final option available is for the Council to take no further steps with a view to increasing the number of hackney carriage vehicles licensed by Bromsgrove District Council that are wheelchair accessible vehicles.
- 3.22 This option would leave the number of wheelchair accessible vehicles licensed by the Council to be determined by market forces.

4. RISK MANAGEMENT

- 4.1 It is difficult to identify any obvious risks arising from the subject matter for this report. If members do wish to make changes these will be the subject of consultation prior to implementation; on the other hand the evidence collated by officers for the June 2016 report did not indicate that there was any significant unmet demand amongst the travelling public for WAV vehicles.

5. APPENDICES

Appendix 1 - Copy of report to Licencing Committee title
"Results of additional consultation on Wheelchair
Accessible Hackney Carriages".

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