

Task and Finish Group

Draft Inclusive Service Plan (ISP)

Members of the Group considered some of the additional data and analysis of the availability and demand for wheelchair accessible taxis in North Yorkshire. Members acknowledged the need to take active steps to enhance the availability of wheelchair accessible vehicles (WAVs) in North Yorkshire. Members also noted that officers will evaluate the impact of the ISP within 12 months and therefore further recommendations may be made in due course to ensure that the ISP meets its objectives.

The Task and Finish Group agreed to make no recommendations to amend the Inclusive Service Plan, except where required to accommodate any amendments to the Draft Hackney Carriage and Private Hire Licensing Policy.

Wheelchair accessible hackney carriage vehicles

Members considered the proposal to limit the scope of suitable hackney carriage vehicles to WAVs and zero emission vehicles (ZEVs). Members were concerned that the scope was too narrow, which may have a significant impact on the trade both in terms of cost and in terms of their willingness to continue providing a hackney carriage service. The Group considered the obligations on the Council to support businesses by ensuring that each regulatory requirement is properly justified by the risk it seeks to address, balancing the cost of the requirement against the benefit to the public.

Members acknowledged the benefits of ZEVs in terms of the wider social benefits relating to air quality and climate change and, on that basis, considered it appropriate to include ZEVs within the scope of suitable vehicles alongside WAVs. However, Members were also satisfied that similar benefits could be derived from hybrid vehicles, albeit to a lesser extent.

Members acknowledged that widening the scope of suitable vehicles may impact on the number of additional WAVs that would become available. However, the Group recognised that, even with the inclusion of hybrids, it would still represent a significant limitation on vehicle suitability compared against the current arrangements. Members were therefore satisfied that such an amendment would still be likely to stimulate an increase in WAVs whilst affording more options to the hackney carriage trade, thereby mitigating the impact in terms of cost.

Members of the Group were not convinced that the proposed vehicle specification should apply to existing licensed vehicles from January 2030. Members noted that many proprietors would have purchased their vehicles with a reasonable expectation that they could be retained in accordance with the existing policy and therefore the Group considered the proposed implementation schedule to be disproportionate. Members were satisfied that the vehicle specification should be applied only to new applications and that existing licensed vehicles should retain grandfather rights until such time as they are no longer suitable (i.e. where the appearance, condition or mechanical fitness fails to reach the necessary standard).

The Task and Finish Group agreed to recommend that hybrid vehicles (as identified by the vehicle registration certificate or via a DVLA vehicle enquiry) be included within the scope of suitable hackney carriage vehicles.

The Task and Finish Group agreed to recommend that the revised hackney carriage vehicle specification should only apply to new applications submitted after implementation of the new policy.

Wheelchair accessible private hire vehicles

The Task and Finish Group acknowledged the likelihood that some proprietors may choose to operate a private hire service in future if new restrictions on vehicle suitability were only applied to hackney carriage vehicles. Members considered the possibility of applying a similar vehicle specification to private hire vehicles.

Members recognised that private hire vehicles must be booked in advance through an operator and therefore any accessibility needs can be discussed at the time of booking, which is not necessarily the case for hackney carriage vehicles. Although hackney carriage vehicles may be pre-booked, they can also be made available for immediate hire at taxi ranks, transport stations or at the roadside.

Members also recognised that a switch from a hackney carriage service to a private hire service is not entirely straightforward (due to the need for a private hire operator's licence, a private hire operator's base within North Yorkshire, comprehensive booking records and suitability checks on dispatch staff) and therefore the private hire option would not be viable for everyone. Furthermore, any hackney carriage drivers and proprietors switching to a private hire service would not be able to stand or ply for hire at any time (this includes waiting on a rank or responding to flag downs at the roadside or at train stations etc) and, for many, this would represent a fundamental business transformation.

It is therefore reasonable to conclude on the balance of probability that a significant number of hackney carriage drivers and proprietors would seek to retain their existing public hire service and continue to be available for immediate hire – Members noted that there is clearly a market for such activities, evidenced by the fact that hackney carriage services continue to thrive elsewhere (even where 100% wheelchair accessible taxi policies are in effect).

Members also noted common practices elsewhere in England Wales whereby 64.5% of all licensing authorities require all or part of their hackney carriage fleet to be wheelchair accessible while only 4.8% of licensing authorities require all or a part of their private hire fleet to be wheelchair accessible.

The Group acknowledged that the proposed approach would effectively give hackney carriage proprietors a third possible alternative to WAVs (along with ZEVs and hybrid vehicles) and, whilst this would inevitably lead to some hackney carriage vehicles being replaced by private hire vehicles, the number of wheelchair accessible taxis would still be expected to rise (along with the number of ZEVs and hybrid vehicles). Members noted that 82% of all licensed vehicles in England are private hire vehicles (and 18% hackney carriage). In contrast, 53% of all licensed vehicles in North Yorkshire are private hire vehicles (and 47% hackney carriage). On that basis, a shift to some extent from hackney carriage to private hire would not be problematic.

Members were therefore satisfied that the proposed vehicle specification for hackney carriage vehicles should not be extended to private hire vehicles. Members also acknowledged that this matter may be revisited in future if the objectives of the Inclusive Service Plan are not being met.

The Task and Finish Group agreed to make no recommendations to further limit the scope of suitable private hire vehicles.

Executive hire vehicles

Members of the Group considered the circumstances under which exemptions from displaying licence plates should be issued. At present, exemptions are applied in respect of executive vehicles, limousines and other novelty vehicles only in instances where the proprietor can demonstrate that a contract for hire is in place at least 24 hours prior to the commencement of the journey and the vehicle will not be used to undertake standard private hire work.

Members considered the possibility of allowing exemptions to be applied on an occasional basis in order to support businesses that undertake both executive hire work and standard private hire work. Members noted that these businesses are currently entitled to operate in this manner but they would not qualify for an exemption from displaying licence plates.

Members of the Group acknowledged the practical difficulties associated with temporary exemptions as many private hire operators will undertake occasional work that might be considered 'executive hire' but the requirement to display plates for all other types of journeys would be likely to lead to confusion and non-compliance.

Members also noted that the introduction of temporary exemptions would require the removal of the existing requirement for plates to be securely and permanently affixed to the vehicle and, again, this was considered a risk from both an enforcement and public safety perspective.

Members were, however, satisfied that the existing requirement for executive hire contracts to be in place at least 24 hours in advance of the journey was overly restrictive.

The Task and Finish Group agreed to recommend the removal of the requirement for executive hire contracts to be in place at least 24 hours before the commencement of a journey.

Vehicle testing frequency

Members of the Group considered the existing vehicle testing arrangements in light of the proposal to remove vehicle age limits.

Members noted that the existing policy requires vehicles to be tested once-a-year up to the age of 5 years, twice-a-year from 5 to 10 years and three-times-a-year for any vehicle over the age of 10 years. Members acknowledged that the triannual requirement was applied to ensure that vehicles licensed beyond the existing policy age limits were subject to additional control. However, the draft policy proposes to remove age limits altogether in favour of Euro emission standards and therefore the triannual testing requirements were considered overly burdensome in the context of the draft policy.

The Task and Finish Group agreed to recommend that vehicles remain subject to an annual test up to the age of 5 years and subject to biannual tests thereafter (with no additional requirement to be applied to vehicles over the age of 10 years).